

# Book 4

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## Prologue

*"If my allies were half as reliable as my enemies, I would have a different moniker."*

– King Henry Fairfax, the Landless, upon being told of the Praesi invasion of Principate-occupied Callow

It went against Iason's instincts, but Amelia had been right. She had a knack for these things, it came with her Name. They must keep a low profile, at least for now. The sooner they moved out of Dormer and into the countryside – rumour at the market was that large swaths of the south were still patrolled only irregularly by the Legions – the better, but as long as they stayed in the city they had to be quiet. It'd been most a day now since the three of them had left the river barge they'd stowed away on, and they'd split for the afternoon. Lergo had gone to have a look at what the locals called Summer Hill, the mound of melted stone where they said the Black Queen had tricked the Queen of Summer into returning to Arcadia. The Ashuran had whined like a child about having to abandon his flamboyant crimson clothes for something less attention-grabbing, but he'd given in anyways. And made eyes at Amelia all the while, the pretentious twit. The Red Mage had proved he was a force to reckon with in a fight, but Iason had not grown to like him in the months since their band first assembled. The Gallant Bandit herself had gone to find them accommodations for the night, so he'd been charged with obtaining foodstuffs for the journey ahead.

The marketplace in Dormer was thriving, for a city that'd been emptied and set aflame not even a year ago. It was Callowans running the shops and stalls, but there was a gaggle of foreign merchants as well. Iason found it difficult to tell apart the Taghreb and the men of the Free Cities, for they looked much alike in skin and faces, but the black-skinned Soninke stood out starkly. The hero bargained half-heartedly with a peddler for lentils and dried meat, rather certain he got robbed on the exchange. He was paying with silver *fidi* from Mercantis, one of the few coins no merchant in Calernia refused, and he was not certain how it compared to Imperial coinage. The merchant's smiling admission he had no scale to compare the weights did little to inspire trust, though the man was unmoved when Iason threatened to seek another peddler. Odd behaviour, from a merchant who could not even afford a stall.

"There," the peddler said, taking pity on him and giving back a few coppers.

Not a mintage he recognized, Iason noted. It could be worthless for all he knew.

"Don't look at me like that, son," the merchant snorted. "That's from the Royal Mint in Marchford, not Harrow trash like everyone else is trying to offload. Call it my kindness of the day."

"Callow has a mint?" Iason said in Lower Miezán, surprised. "I thought it used the Tower's coin."

"The Bastard Lord had one built," the peddler told him approvingly. "That's Taghreb for you. Vicious fuckers one and all, but they've a nose for business. Mind you, everyone still takes Praesi mintage. Have to, with all the gold coming south these days."

"There are a lot of foreigners," the hero agreed, casting a wary look at a nearby Soninke.

The peddler looked amused.

"You don't sound like no Callowan, boy," he said. "Delos?"

"Atalante," he replied. "My father was, anyway. I was raised west."

He'd grown to manhood in the principality of Creusens, but admitting as much in this city would have been the act of a fool.

"We got a lot of Wastelanders around nowadays," the peddler agreed. "Trying to get their hands on grain, you know. Mercantis caught on so the Consortium is gouging them on prices and buying up the reserves in the other cities to drive up the prices. They're used to this country being the greener pasture."

"Few of them are smiling," Iason said, only now noticing.

"That's 'cause the Bastard Lord restricted commerce in foodstuffs," the merchant grinned nastily. "They want more than scraps, they have to get a permit in Laure. The really desperate ones are ruining themselves emptying tavern larders one at a time, but already the court is clamping down on that."

"That seems like a loss of profit for you all," Iason said.

"Worth it, to have the crown's men around when some Wastelanders try to get nasty," the peddler said, spitting to the side. "Not that there's been a lot of those. I'll say this for the Black Queen – since she crucified all those pricks after Second Liesse, Praesi have been stepping *real* light around here."

The hero was almost nauseated. They said the villain ruling Callow had nailed hundreds to crosses after slaying her rival, made them grisly ornaments along the road. The merchant should

have been appalled, but if anything he sounded grudgingly approving. Iason had never been skilled at hiding his thoughts – it went against his Name to be less than Stalwart in anything he did – and the peddler picked up on it. The man spat to the side again, looking warier now.

“You with the House of Light, son?” he probed.

“A lay brother,” Iason said. “Never took the full vows. I don’t have the disposition for it.”

Full-fledged brothers had to vow pacifism, and it was in his nature to meet injustice sword in hand.

“Didn’t know that was a thing,” the peddler said, but he was mollified.

It wasn’t, not in Callow anyway. The House of Light in Procer tended to consider its equivalent in Callow to be a very... provincial cousin. Prone to eccentricities. That the Order of the White Hand, true anointed paladins, had been allowed to hold lands of its own in the old days was spoken of as impious back home. It was just history, now that the Order had been exterminated, but Iason had a personal interest in the matter. His Name had but few previous incarnations, and most of them had come to be in Callow. The hero did not linger after that, already uncomfortable with how much attention he’d drawn. He hoisted the sack over his shoulder and made his way to the quarter by the docks, where Amelia had said she’d find them an inn. He was wondering how to find her, when she found him instead. The Gallant Brigand was almost as tall as he was, lithe and graceful in a way he could not help but stare at. Dark hair kept in a ponytail was usually covered by a highwayman’s hat, though she’d stashed it away for the sake of discretion, and the notched scar on her cheek somehow only added to her beauty.

“There you are,” Amelia smiled. “Fruitful foray?”

Iason cleared his throat uncomfortably. The cloistered life in Aviliars had not taught him how to deal with beautiful women, and he was always on the backfoot around her. At least Lergo wasn’t there. The Red Mage always seemed to make it worse with his glib and cutting japes. As if the sorcerer himself didn’t hang on her every word.

“I have supplies,” Iason stiffly replied. “Have you secured accommodations?”

Amelia snorted and clapped his shoulder.

“Secured accommodations,” she repeated teasingly. “You need to loosen up, Iason. Though I suppose that would be against type.”

*I can be fun*, the Stalwart Paladin silently insisted. *Just because I can't set things on fire with a word doesn't mean I'm a bore*. Instead of saying that he ended up chewing on his tongue like a fool, to the woman's visible amusement.

"Come on," she said, withdrawing her hand. "I found us a place. Be warned, though. It was cheap for a reason."

Iason frowned when he first saw the inn, as the warning seemed inaccurate. It was not luxurious palace, but it was spacious and swift perusal of the common room revealed it to be scrupulously clean. Perhaps she'd meant the food would be horrid? It hardly be worse than the cooking they'd inflicted on themselves journeying from the countryside to Atalante after forming their band in Nicae. The Gallant – Iason did not like to think of the other part of her Name, no matter how much he liked her – shot him a toothy grin after he set down the sack, and a moment later a loud screaming match began in the kitchen adjoining the common room. The hero grimaced. Lergo strolled in an hour later, still looking put-out at wearing wool instead of blindingly red silk, and claimed a seat at the table where Iason had been sharing a drink with Amelia and failing miserably at small talk. The Red Mage stole his tankard and drank from it, wrinkling his nose at the taste. The sorcerer had been born to one of the high tiers of citizenship in Ashur, he was likely used to much better fare. Everything about him smacked of arrogant privilege, which had not become any less grating with time.

"Had a look at that hill," Lergo casually said in tradertalk. "That was a serious scrap. If our cousin up north can tangle that hard, we're in for quite a vigorous dance."

The cousin up north, they'd taken to calling her to be discreet. Catherine Foundling, Queen of Callow. The Squire, some said, though others implied she had another Name yet to be revealed. The breadth of the swirl of rumours around the villain that ruled Callow was staggering, for one so young. *Undefeated in battle. She murdered a god to steal his mantle and tricked two others into doom without ever unsheathing her blade. She has more lives than a cat, holds sway over dead and fae alike*. Her cohorts, the Woe, had been revealed to the wider world through the infamous massacre they called the Doom of Liesse back home. The Hierophant, a cold madman whose strange sorceries tamed demons and stilled miracles. The Thief, a fallen heroine said to have once stolen an entire fleet and even snatched the sun out of the sky. The Archer, the greatest pupil of the Lady of the Lake who had never lost in single combat. And the last, Hakram Deadhand. The Adjutant. They said he was unkillable, that he was large as an ogre and his hand of bones could wrest out your soul. The heirs to the Calamities had made a bloody debut, last year. Iason had paid close attention to the rumours, knowing even the slightest hint could make the difference between life and death.



The three of them had come, after all, to kill the Black Queen.

"That might have been the fae, not her," Amelia whispered in the same language, one of the few they all shared. "Her talent is supposed to be ice, not fire."

"And what a talent fire can be," Lergo said, grinning suggestively at the Gallant. "The element of passion, you know."

Iason's teeth clenched.

"We're still on the outskirts," Amelia said. "We'll hear more when we go deeper into the country. The south looks like very promising grounds to begin our work."

They would, to her. The Gallant Brigand had been vague about her activities before joining their band, but Iason had pieced together that she'd made her mark in the wake of the Tyrant of Helike's armies as they sowed chaos across the Free Cities. The southern parts of Callow were still feeling the aftermath of the last three wars, and so she would be moving on somewhat familiar territory. Robbing the powerful to help the powerless was a worthy cause, even if he disapproved of her methods. Banditry was a sin in the eyes of the Heavens, else why would so many bandit Names be sworn to the Hellgods? They had to delay the conversation after that, for the innkeepers came to offer their service. Callowans both, an old married couple. They offered stew on the house, though the ale was not, and to Iason's mild irritation lingered afterwards to chat with what seemed to be their only current patrons. Some matters were their own explanation.

"Dormer born and raised, the both of us," the old man – Albert, as he insisted on being called – told them proudly. "City's had a rough few years but we'll get back on our feet, you'll see."

"I heard Dormer was part of the Liesse Rebellion," Amelia said smilingly, "but the damage was all from the fae, I am told?"

"Good Anne dragged us into the mess, it's true," the old woman grudgingly admitted. "She cut a deal with the Black Queen after, though, spared us the worse. And she's moved up in the world since, eh? Governess-General. A balm on everyone's soul that."

"Her whelp of a nephew's governor now," Albert said. "He did fine getting people out before Summer came, but too many still died. His aunt he is not."

"That's not on the boy," the old woman sharply said. "That's because a villain is queen. Ma always said that makes you cursed. Just look at the Wasteland."

"Your mother also said a bowl of cream and bread crumbs would keep the fairies happy, Mary," the old man mocked. "How'd *that* go again?"

The three of them sat awkwardly as the old couple argued loudly, Iason deriving some satisfaction from the fact that Lergo looked as uncomfortable as he felt himself.

"I couldn't help but notice the portraits by the kitchen door," Amelia intervened. "You have children?"

Gods they had they been lucky to run into her, Iason thought. And not only because looking at her when they trekked through the countryside made the journey a great deal more pleasant. Neither he nor the Red Mage had a way with people.

"Only the one now," Mary soberly said. "Our youngest died at First Llesse. Them devils summoned by the Diabolist did it."

"Aye, and the Black Queen killed her dead," Albert grunted. "She's a hard one, make no mistake, but these are bad times. Hard is what we need. Even Jehan the Wise hung himself some princes. Seven and one, like in the song."

"It's ungodly is what it is," the old woman barked. "A villain queen? No good will come of it."

"She was crowned by a Sister all proper, Mary," the old man insisted. "What more can you ask?"

"Everyone knows the House up north went tame," she sniffed.

"We've heard a lot about the queen, down south," Iason said. "Some of it was less than pleasant."

"Never said she was a choir girl," Albert defended. "But Hells, it's still better than Procer ain't it? Kingdom's back and Praes is playing nice. If the rest of the world would just leave us alone we'd muddle on just fine."

"He has to say that," Mary told them. "Lily went and joined the army, the fool girl. Taking orders from an orc calling herself marshal of all things."

"If the orc pays her taxes and fights at the border, I say she's welcome here," the old man said stubbornly. "A whole goblin tribe settled at Marchford and that turned out all right. You have to forgive Mary, she's a country girl. I'm a learned man, me. Went to Laure once when I was a boy."

"Not the Laure story again," the old woman sighed.

Lergo spoke up, sparing them the Laure story, and Iason had never before been so close to feeling fondness for the man.

"We intend on travelling north," the Red Mage said. "Are the roads safe?"

"Sure, if-" Albert began, but he paused.

In the distance, bells were ringing. Four times, Iason counted.

"Again?" the old man said.

"Last one went straight to the Blessed Isle, made it far inland after," Mary said. "Guess that was the last of the clever bunch."

"That's thrice now," Albert complained. "Last time it took all day to clean up the docks after. No wonder we never get clients, with all them foreigners mucking up the city."

He paused, then glanced at the three heroes.

"No offence," he assured them.

"None taken," the Gallant Brigand lied. "We're new to town, so I'm at a bit of a loss. What did the bells mean?"

"Oh, you dears don't need to worry," the old woman said. "Just stay indoors, it was the curfew bells. It'll be foggy out soon anyway."

"Curfew?" Iason said. "What for?"

"Heroes," Albert said. "Some must have come. Streets have to be cleared until that's done with."

The Stalwart Paladin's blood ran cold. Already? How could the Empire possibly have known? It hadn't even been a whole day. The three heroes shared a look and excused themselves to their rooms, telling their hosts of travel weariness, and made council in Iason's own.

"We can't stay here," Amelia began. "We can't risk putting those two in the middle of a fight between Named."

"They must have scried us, it's the only explanation," the Red Mage whispered. "That shouldn't be possible, not with the Paladin bearing Heaven's touch. Unless you screwed up, Iason."

"I don't *use* the touch, mage," the Paladin coldly replied. "It is there. Always. There is no intent needed."

"I used to hunt for Helike supply caches, back in the day," the Gallant Brigand said quietly. "Easy work, good loot. The way I'd find them was by watching the roads the Tyrant's men used most, then doubling back."

"I don't follow," Iason admitted.

"That is because you're a sword-waving simpleton," the Red Mage drawled, and the Paladin resisted the urge to punch that twinkle out of his eye. "The touch, it blocks actual scrying but the spell would still register failure. They moment it did they must have known we were coming, and they tracked us with the same. That's impressively clever, I'll admit."

"Then they might be able to track us to here," Amelia urgently said. "We need to move now."

Neither of them argued. Iason left silver by his bed to pay for both the night and the trouble, as his companions grabbed their personal affairs. The Mage took longer, and returned decked in red silks.

"We are trying to be *discreet*," the Paladin hissed, his accent thickening.

"Discreet is over," the man shrugged. "Now is the time for panache."

"Well, I hope you can run in those," the Gallant amusedly said, adjusting her hat. "Out the window, boys."

Heroic work, Iason thought, involved a lot more jumping down windowsills than he'd anticipated. He'd not needed to change, as he'd never taken off the chain mail under his coat and rarely wore a helmet. The Heavens provided armour when he required it. He landed as silently as a man wearing over twenty pounds of steel could, which was not very. The Gallant landed smoothly as a cat, and the Red Mage nearly broke his ankle landing. The Paladin smothered a smile, as it was unkind to take enjoyment from the misfortune of others. However richly deserved.

"Well," Amelia said, lowering the brim of her hat. "There's that fog Mary was talking about."

It'd been late afternoon and the winters in southern Callow were mild this late in the year – spring would not come for months yet but there was no snow in sight – which made the sudden appearance of thick fog rather jarring. There was nothing natural about this.

"Might I suggest we leave the city before a full legion comes after us?" Lergo suggested drily. "Blood doesn't show on these robes but it *does* smell."

"Keep an eye out," Iason said, for the first since he'd come ashore back in his element. "As an opening move, this only makes sense if only our vision is restricted."

Otherwise the enemy was simply helping them escape. As the moved quietly through the streets, the Paladin wondered how many of the

Woe would have come. The full five? That might be more than they could handle. Two or three, he was confident they could deal with. Four they could flee. Five with a sorcerer as reportedly powerful as the Hierophant among them would be too many. Best that they never encounter the enemy at all, and disappear into the countryside where they would be harder to track. Amelia suddenly stopped.

"We're being watched," the Gallant Brigand said.

He did not question her: she has an aspect relating to this, though he knew not the word. Iason could see no one so he sharpened his hearing. Scuttling above, on the rooftops.

"Goblin," he said, and unsheathed his longsword. "Roof to the left."

The Gallant followed suit with her sabre and the Red Mage fell behind them. Eyes watching above, Iason saw a leering green face pop out from thatching. Yellow eyes shone bright in the fog, above a grin of needle-like fangs.

"Don't you think it was a little racist to assume I was a goblin?" the creature mused. "Plenty of people use rooftops, you know. They're like streets that make it easier to murder."

The Stalwart Paladin blinked, then opened his mouth. Had he – but the goblin had just said... He closed his mouth.

"You're quite brave, to seek out three heroes on your own," the Red Mage said.

"Well, we don't live old as a rule," the greenskin said. "But hey, that's why there's a lot of us."

Iason's hearing was still sharpened and that was why he heard them move. Not one but dozens, and they'd all struck at once. He'd expected crossbows but instead what came tumbling down was balls of clay with lit fuses, and without missing a beat he called on the protection of the Heavens. A halo of light wreathed him and his allies as well, but he'd miscalculated. The munitions exploded into blinding brightness with a deafening clap – he had to blink it away and force the Light into his eyes. The Red Mage cursed, and when Iason's vision returned there was no sign of any goblins. All they had left behind was a red trail of burning powder in the sky. *They marked our position*, he thought. He glanced at the others. Amelia had covered her eyes with the brim of her hat, but by the looks of it the noise had still affected her.

"Run," he said, not sure how loud he was being.

The roar of the munitions was still sounding in his ears. The others understood him well enough to obey, and they headed for the closets gate without even the pretence of discretion. Dormer had turned into a ghost town, every door and window closed. In the fog, he could barely make out the shape of the houses unless he empowered his eyes with his Name. It began clearing out close to the gate. Whoever had done this, he thought, must have relied on the river to provide the water. Lucky them, they'd chosen the gate opposite. Providence. The gate was unguarded, and that was when he began doubting his last thought. No, he mused. Not unguarded. There were two people by the guardhouse. One seated on a bench, the other standing by it. Iason squinted. It was a woman, seated. Tan skin and high cheekbones, long hair in a practical leather binding behind her. Her legs were crossed and she was pulling at a pipe. The man at her side was almost inhumanly slender, a whip of a body in a long black tunic. At his hip was a sheathless sword, and one of his eyes was covered by a dark silken blindfold with silvery lettering. It was the hair that attracted his attention, though. It must have been a trick of the light, but for an instant it had seemed made of crow's feathers.

"Iason," the Gallant Brigand urgently said. "The woman's cloak."

He looked. It must have once been entirely black, he thought, but it was no longer. A patchwork of colourful strips had been woven over it, and even some matter he did not recognized. It looked like rippling wind. The collar, though, what laid woven into it felt like a sin. That made this the Mantle of Woe, and the woman wearing it...

"Catherine Foundling," he said. "The Black Queen."

The woman spewed out a stream of smoke, still sitting. Iason met her eyes. For one of her reputation, he was distinctly unimpressed. There was no pressure there, only a young woman looking vaguely exhausted.

"Afternoon," the Black Queen said. "Welcome to the Kingdom of Callow, folks. Evidently you know who I am, so that saves us some tediousness."

"Your trap will avail you nothing," Iason said harshly.

"This isn't a trap," the villain mused. "Not unless you make it one. If I wanted you dead, Robber wouldn't have tumbled you a warning shot. It would have been goblinfire instead of brightsticks, and already it'd all be over but the screaming."

"How civilized of you," the Gallant Brigand said, her tone slightly mocking. "Since we're all being so friendly, might I venture as to ask what you want from us?"

The Black Queen spewed out a stream of smoke, studying them calmly.

"That's my line," she said. "Setting aside that you passed the border illegally, having three heavily-armed Named wandering the countryside without so much as a by-your-leave just isn't in the cards. What are you here for?"

"Introductions first," the Gallant demurred. "I am-"

"Amelia of Helike, daughter of Lasarn," the one-eyed man at her side smiled, teeth like ivory. "You are known to us."

Amelia blanched. The way he'd spoken that last sentence... Iason was not one to frighten easily, yet it had sent a shiver down his spine.

"That's Larat," the Black Queen cheerfully said. "Or at least that's what I call him. It pisses him off a lot, but why even have a treacherous lieutenant if you're not going to taunt them at every opportunity?"

"We have come to study the aftermath of the fae incursion, Your Majesty," Lergo said. "Purely academic curiosity in my part, I assure you."

The lie sat ill with Iason, but he kept his mouth shut. Informing the woman that they had come to slay her and release Callow from her grasp would lead to a struggle he was not certain they could win. Not yet. The Black Queen pulled at her pipe, then sighed.

"Red Mage, was it?" she said. "A warning for you. Of all the shit decisions you've made today, trying to lie to me is close to the top of the list. Don't do it again. I take it you're here to kill me, then."

It was a little insulting, Iason thought, that she sounded more irritated than threatened by that deduction. Arrogance was ever the downfall of Evil, he reminded himself. She spewed out another mouthful of smoke.

"Then what?" she asked.

"Pardon," Lergo replied, sounding baffled.

"You kill me, glory to the Heavens and all that good stuff," she waved. "Then what?"

"The people of Callow are freed," Iason said. "They rise against the wicked Praesi and-"

"This," the Black Queen sighed as she interrupted, "is why I have to keep killing you people. Look, I understand better than anyone how easy it is to start thinking you can just stab your way out

of a mess, but you haven't *thought this through*. Putting my head on a pike just makes a different sort of mess."

"That's what tyrants always say," the Gallant quietly said. "That they may be a plague, but the world would be worse without them. You have to lance a wound for it to be able heal."

"You're not lancing anything, kid," the villain said. "You're just bleeding the body. And it's been a long time since anyone thought *that* helped. Look, I'm not barring Callow to heroes. You want to wander the south healing and rebuilding? Fine by me. You get a Legion escort, but they'll stay out of your way. You want to have a swing at Black? Not my problem, but you'll have to get to the Vales through Procer. You want to actually have a look at the fae marks, or even Liesse? I'll need oaths as assurance, but we can deal. This doesn't *have* to be a fight."

She paused.

"But," she murmured. "Since I know what you're thinking. Larat."

The one-eyed man's grin broadened, and power rippled across the street. The air cooled, and Iason almost summoned his Heavenly Armaments in answer. There was might in that creature's frame, and nothing human about it.

"We've been tracking you since Mercantis," the Queen said. "We've had long enough we could have hit you still in the river. Do you know why you were allowed to make shore?"

"I assume some form of sadism is involved," the Red Made drawled.

"In a manner of speaking," the villain smiled. "See, I learned from a man that would have had you corpses at the bottom of the Hwaerte before you even noticed. But I'm trying, I guess, not to be him. Or worse."

Slowly she rose to her feet, and emptied the pipe before stewing it away in her cloak. The smile and the easy manners went away. Idly she rested her hand on the pommel of her sword, and Iason felt fear. There was iron in that woman's gaze that had not been there before.

"You've seen I'm prepared," Catherine Foundling said. "You've seen I have the muscle to put you down. But I didn't put on the fancy hat to kill kids. So *please*, I beg you – don't make me."

It sounded genuine enough that the Paladin hesitated. The sentiment that they were kids to her was insulting, but what lay behind it... *The wiles of devils are many and varied. Trust not the words of those sworn to Below, for deception is their truest tongue*. He would not balk at his duty.



"Go home," the Black Queen said tiredly. "Or Hells, join up if you want to. I'll find something for you to do, this country's still half a wreck and it's not like I don't take in heroes. But if you force this, it only ends one way. And once we start, I might not be able to stop."

"You are a blight upon Creation," the Stalwart Paladin said, almost regretfully. "An instrument of the Hellgods, carrying within the seed of damnation. May the Heavens grant you mercy in the afterlife, but for the sake of Creation you must be removed from this earthly shell."

"What he said," the Gallant Brigand agreed. "Only, you know, less priestly. Fuck you and your offer and your entire evil legions."

"Yes yes, praise the Heavens and much defiance. That aside, out of curiosity," the Red Mage smirked, "has that speech ever actually *worked*?"

The Black Queen breathed out, and in a moment she went from tired girl only a few years older than them to razor-sharp killer. It was in the eyes, in the way she held herself. She had the poise of someone used to taking lives.

"No," she said. "But I'll try with the next batch anyway. Sixth time's the charm, right?"

The one-eyed creature laughed.

"They never listen," he said, sounding pleased. "I do believe offering mercy might actually make it worse. Fascinating."

Six. Iason felt a trickle of fear go down his spine. How many heroes had she killed? No, it didn't matter. She only needed to fail once. The hero folded into himself, and let his aspect reverberate within his soul. **Arm.** Plate of pure Light formed around him, a full suit topped by a winged helmet. His sword shone radiantly and as Lergo began to incant he advanced. The villain did not move, eyes still on him, but the Paladin felt the shifting currents of power. To their side a gate opened out of thin air, and as he glanced there Iason saw two things. The first was two score goblins, bright-eyed and eager in their furs as they occupied a frozen wasteland. The second was six scorpion-like contraptions of wood and metal, and as that sunk in they began to fire. The bolt hit him in the chest, then two others, yet it might as well have been children throwing mud at a stone wall. The steel bent, the wood shattered and he barely even felt the impact. He had no moment to spare enjoying the small victory, however. The Red Mage was most endangered by this sort of assault. Though gifted with a particularly strong talent for destruction, Lergo had confessed he was incapable of even the most basic of shieldings. The sorcerer managed to save his own

hide by turning to ash the handful of projectiles aimed at him, but he would not be able to keep this up forever.

The Stalwart Paladin moved between his companion and the volleys of steel-tipped bolts, letting them strike impotently at the armaments bestowed upon him by the Heavens. The Gallant had been the most unruffled among them, dancing out of the way and somehow even parrying a projectile with a casual flick of the wrist.

"I'll break the machines," Iason said, and his voice thundered. "Keep the villains busy."

Though the Black Queen had caught them by surprise, she'd been arrogant. With only one creature and mundane soldiers at her disposal, it might be feasible to slay her here and now. To free Callow of tyranny within a day of coming to its shore would be a grand deed, worthy of hymns and remembrance. Yet if the tide turned against them, the Paladin would rather see them defeated before they fled. It would be the beginning of a Pattern of Three, he suspected, and that would greatly enhance the swiftness of their growth. Indeed, they might even encounter another hero after they fled. Providence had a way of rewarding the righteous. To Iason's mild irritation, the goblins manning the siege engines proved passingly clever. Seeing that their bolts had no effect on his armour as he advanced, they turned their fire to his companions. Some sorcery must be behind the machines, he thought, for there could be no other explanation for how swiftly they kept firing. No matter. He was quick enough on his feet that only the odd bolt made it through. Clever as the goblins were, they'd not been quite clever enough to flee his approach.

Iason crossed the gate into the frozen landscape and raised his sword the moment he felt the bite of urgency near his shoulder. It was not quite enough, the angle too awkward. A blade shattered his pauldron of Light and ripped into the chain mail below, though not deep enough to wound, and the Paladin breathed in sharply. A tall orc decked in burnt plate discarded a broken axe and spun out another, face grim. The hand of bare bones gave away the name of the greenskin that had struck him. The orc spat to the side.

"Masego will be pissed," he said. "Half a day's work and it kept for a single blow. At least you're not reforming."

Iason grit his teeth. The Heavenly Armaments did have that weakness – they could only be used once a day, and could not be forged anew while in use.

"You will not land another," the Paladin promised.

The orc's eyes were on his mail, not his blade, and they narrowed. The heraldry, Iason realized. It'd been made visible by the rip.

"Half-House, le Miroir Verdant," the greenskin said in lightly accented Chantant. "Proceran, then. Good, I've been meaning to try one of you out before the big Names come."

"I am the Stalwart Paladin," Iason thundered. "And you will lose more than a hand today, orc."

"I'm the Adjutant," Hakram Deadhand replied, baring his teeth. "I had a light meal this morning."

They both moved with the swiftness of Named, tangling halfway there. Iason managed to hammer down on the orc's wrist, loosening the greenskin's grip on the axe, but the dead hand closed around his throat. The bones blackened as the Light furiously bit into them, but they did not give and Iason struggled in vain before the Adjutant tossed him back out the portal. He landed in a crouch, shifting his weight as his fighting-master had taught him. The orc rolled his shoulders and strolled out of the gate unhurriedly.

"*Iason*," the Gallant screamed.

It felt like being kicked by a horse. The entire left side of his armaments shattered under the blow and as he flew he felt the Black Queen following with impossible swiftness. She arrived at the end of the arc before he did, snatching his foot and smashing him into the pavement. He saw her change her grip as she stood above him, ready to plunge down the point into his throat even as he tried to rise, but salvation came in time: a streak of red lightning had the villain ducking away in a hurry. The sorcerer had come through, thank the Gods. The Paladin got to his feet and took a swift look around as the Black Queen circled him slowly. Deadhand was now tangling with Amelia, and though he'd yet to land one of his brutal blows she was on the backfoot. Looking for an opening, he decided. It was not a bad match. The other conflict was. Lergo was weaving spells into one another admirably, flame and lightning and hexes flowing into the next seamlessly, but the one-eyed fae was toying with him. There were three cuts on the Red Mage's cheek, perfectly parallel and scabbed black. Iason suspected they might have been killing blows, if the fae wished it so. He needed to lose Foundling soon and come to the sorcerer's aid, or he was going to get run through when the creature bored of the game. This was no time to hold back.

"**Smite**," the Stalwart Paladin said.

The Black Queen attempted to avoid the aspect, but she was too slow. Light came down from above a perfect a perfect heptagon of seven feet on every stroke. For a moment the shape seemed almost solid, the wrath of the Heavens shattering the paving stones and even the ground beneath. A heartbeat later it was gone, leaving the half-kneeling form of a smoking villain. Her face was a

tapestry of burned flesh, her hair gone up in smoke and her bare hands crushed. Her eyes were unseeing, struck blind by righteous retribution. The villain spat out a gob of black blood that steamed and ate away at the earth.

"You have William beat when it comes to impact," the woman noted, her voice a croak yet somehow cold.

She rose, and as she did the air cooled and her flesh knitted back. She shed the burnt skin like a snake, and her pupils broke as fresh ones forced themselves forward.

"As a general rule, striking aspects tend to go one of two ways," the Black Queen said, voice empty of emotion. "Broad but shallow, small but deep. I would not have walked off Swing so easily. A nice trick, but ultimately-"

**"Smite,"** he interrupted.

She was standing again, which meant resuming the fight was not longer unchivalrous. There was a heartbeat between the Light striking and the word being spoken, and it was enough for her to evade.

"Ultimately still a trick," she finished, as the smiting struck the empty pavement.

Only once more could he call on the aspect. He would have to get in close, prevent her from evading and... *No*, he thought. He was being baited. She was keeping him busy while her minions killed the others. Though it grated, Iason turned and without a word ran for the Red Mage.

"Hakram," the Black Queen said, voice echoing strangely. "Switch."

The orc moved away from Amelia without missing a beat, barrelling towards the Paladin immediately. From the corner of his eye he saw the human villain pass them both in a streak, blade sounding against the Gallant Brigand's own. Lergo cried out in pain, his incantation interrupted, and Iason's fingers clenched around his sword. It was not all lost, he thought. The Adjutant was much slower than his mistress. The axehead came whistling down but Iason's blade shifted angle, the combination of years of training and what he'd learned since coming into his Name. The Heavens-touched steel cut straight through the haft of wood and into the steel pauldron behind it. The orc began to retreat, and then the Paladin spoke.

**"Smite."**

Light filled his vision, but it was no harm to him. He felt the orc's body flinch but somehow it remained standing. Though the

greenskin's footing was shot, so was his, and aside from smoking skin and amour the orc seemed unharmed when the aspect ebbed. And aspect of his own had been used, the Paladin suspected. There was the taste of power in the air. It was not enough. Iason ripped his blade free and smashed the guard in the orc's face, knocking him clear of his feet. His Light-girded boot came down and broke the villain's knee. That should cripple him for the rest of the fight. The greenskin struck out with a knife but Iason fluidly stepped back. Leaf Stirred By Hand, his master had called it, and when the knife withdrew he stepped forward following it. The blade whistled down, the orc bared his fangs and another blade knocked the killing blow away.

"You will not have him," the Black Queen said, something sharp and heavy in her tone.

She frowned, and shook her head. Something in her eyes thawed measurably as she grimaced.

"Ever grasping is the tyrant's lot," Iason replied in Chantant.

"What's he saying?" the woman asked. "My Chantant's shit, and his accent is horrible."

"He called you a tyrant," the orc said.

"Wouldn't be the first," the Black Queen grimly said, parrying his blow and landing a riposte that failed to break through the Armaments.

He was pushed back, to his fury. Years he had trained for this, gruelling hours spent in the cloister's courtyard being worked to exhaustion by his fighting-master. He'd learned the Five Ways and the Verdant Stances, been taught how to dismantle the foremost styles of every nation under the Calernian sun. But the Queen wasn't fighting like a swordswoman. Whatever she had learned, it was no proper swordsmanship. She ignored his feint and pivoted around his back, her elbow hitting his flank and breaking his footing. He pivoted to face her but she'd moved with him and he had to give ground to avoid an oblique blow that would have carved through his throat. Iason gave further ground. Staying close, he would only get caught in her pace. It was then he realized that he could no longer hear the Red Mage fighting. He looked back and saw no sign of Lergo, or of his opponent. The air where they'd been fighting reeked of power and darkness. Gods, this was turning out too much for them. They had not been heroes long enough, none of them even had their full aspects.

"**Cut**," the Gallant Brigand coldly announced.

She emerged out of thin air behind the Black Queen, aspect howling as her blade carved clean through the villain's abdomen. She'd... done it? Then the woman's silhouette dispersed, and Iason

realized they'd been had. *Glamour*, he realized with a shiver of fear. *That was glamour*. He rushed forward but it was too late. Amelia almost managed to avoid the blow out of sheer instinct, but goblin steel ripped through her coat and muscles. Her left arm fell down limply, and even as she caught her sabre with the other one the Black Queen caught her by the back of the neck and squeezed. There was a sickening crack, and just like that Amelia was dead. There was not so much as a flicker of emotion on the villain's face, he saw. Not a speck of humanity to be found. Just ice and hatred wearing a body. Her silhouette blurred for what must not even have been a heartbeat, and Iason pushed through the grief. Glamour again, and he could not see through it. He stepped back warily, and the impotence of it burned. Sharpening his ears found nothing, she was stepping lightly and her illusion advancing towards him. He needed to see, he needed to find her, he needed to...

### **Discern.**

Power rippled through the Paladin's frame washing him clear of tiredness and pain and the weakness of the flesh. This was more than mere sight, he knew instinctively. It would tell truth from lies, read the movements of the flesh before they came to fruition. He could see her now, wreathed in mirror-like mist. She was stalking his side, eyes patient.

"Enough," he snarled. "You will not get away with this, *butcher*."

He caught her by surprise, striking without warning. He glimpsed the parry before it ever rose, flicked his blade to the side and cut into her shoulder. She wove back, her footing swift, but his Light-gauntleted hand struck her across the mouth. He headbutted his winged helmet but came off the loser for it, forehead bleeding as he returned in kind and she rocked back in pain. His fist caught her in the stomach and she gasped. His blade shone radiantly as it scored a deep cut across her upper leg, but somehow the cutting of her muscles was not enough to make her fall. Fingers coated in frost and shadow slugged into his cheek, shattering the Light, and the two of them fell to the ground struggling. Using his weight to come atop her, he caught her wrist and dug his finger into her eye. She bit him, down to the bloody bone, and he snatched his hand back before he could lose the finger. She struggled under him but he was much heavier, and his fist broke her chin before she could wrestle away his arm. He'd felt teeth loosen. Forcing her arm aside his fingers closed around her throat, and suddenly she smiled.

The knife went ripped through the mail as Adjutant struck into his flank. Iason was thrown off the Black Queen by hundreds of pounds of angry orc, as as he hit the ground the world slowed. Light wreathed him, but still soft fingers touched his forehead.

The Stalwart Paladin closed his eyes, and opened them in an endless spread of pale blankness.

**You will bleed, a chorus of voices whispered into his ear. You will suffer. You will weep, yet find no relief. Though your soul is young and your weight feeble, you will take on the burden of many. Iason, son of Idrim, We offer you the misery of Endurance. We would embrace you one of our own, to blood and tears and bitter end. Iason Brightsword, Son of Tears, will you withstand horror so that others do not?**

"Yes," Iason whispered into the void.

The blankness rippled, and he was no longer alone. Two silhouettes with burning eyes and unspeakable shapes stood before him. And another, between him and them.

"There will be none of that," Catherine Foundling sharply said.

**You do not belong here.**

The weight of their wrath was crushing, almost enough that Iason fell to his knees and it was not him they gaze upon in anger. Yet the Black Queen stood undaunted, cloaked in ice and shadows. And more. There was a silhouette riding her back, arms laced around her shoulders. A beautiful and dark-skinned woman.

"I already told the Hashmallim to walk it off," she said. "Am I really going to have to revisit this with every fucking Choir?"

**Arrogance. Your doom comes.**

"Might be," she said. "But not today, and not through this weak instrument. Fuck off, you bottom feeders. This one's been claimed fair and square."

"You can't fight angels," Iason hissed.

"Who said anything about fighting *them*?" Catherine Foundling said, and then she rammed a knife in his belly.

The blankness fled, Iason's eyes opened and the last thing he ever felt was a spike of frost going through his forehead.

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[erraticerrata](#)

And so Book IV starts!

As this is the first update since I returned, the monthly extra

chapter comes out tonight as well. Titled "Prosecution II", it's the continuation of the last.

*Mingdao*

Hey there!

I love your stories and was wondering if I could help as your editor, helping you clean up any typos or errors after/before you had posted. I would love to be able to hear from you if you're up for such a thing to further discuss the details.

Cheers!

[BartHumphries](#)

Typo thread it is then:

they headed for the closets gate  
Change closets to closest

Mingdao, I think erraticerrata doesn't care so much about typos – generally post post them in the comments and sometimes they get fixed. \*shrug\*

There's usually not too many.

*Sitxar*

Typos:

Yet if the tide turned against them, the Paladin would rather see them defeated before THE fled.

Indeed, THE might even encounter another hero after they fled.

they

they could only be used once\_day

once per day

HE headbutted his winged helmet

she

*Nairne .01*

Thank you.

[stevenneiman](#)

I can see why it would get frustrating dealing with this kind of bullshit every other week. On the other hand, I have a definite guess as to what Cat's ultimate plan is. She's made it so that she already has a strong precedent for dealing with Heroes and with making it feel like all that's happening is the Heroes being annoying and irresponsible and inconveniencing everyone. At the same time, she's also trying to make sure that if the Heavens ever throw anyone smart enough to pose a serious



threat against her, there's a good chance they'll recognize that she's being more reasonable than their own bosses. I'm curious to see whether it works.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Wow. Great opening fight scene, it's interesting to see the Woe's new role. They've really replaced the Calamities

*morrogin*

dude, u put a paragraph twice....

aside from that, nice to have you back

[glassgirlceci](#)

I've been on pins and needles the whole month waiting, and it was certainly worth it! That was FANTASTIC.

*Zarquon*

YAY!

*Naeddyr*

Off to a great start!

I wonder what the specter on Catherine's shoulders is. The Empress? Feels unlikely.

*Naeddyr*

OH SHIT NO IT'S UBUA

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

I'm guessing it's part of her Role as the Diabolist, to rule over things foreign and to manipulate/cross/break boundaries, allowed her to cross into the dimensional space the Angels were contacting the Hero in due to the fact their intervention brought them close enough to Catherine.

[glassgirlceci](#)

Ubuu? Is that a fan nickname for Akua I've never seen? That can't be a typo. 0\_o

[Hiccup](#)

In an interlude(?) where Masego was the viewpoint, it showed when he was young and at a meeting. He met then immediately mis-remembered Akua's name, much to the delight of the Calamities listening on.

*letouriste*

you have to read the extra chapters!:) they are so great:)  
ubua comes from the chapter Prodigy which is my personal  
farourite to date, this is a story about young masego

*sheer\_falacy*

Ubua was what Masego called Akua in his interlude because he  
didn't remember her name. It's a pretty great name for her.

*Snoogle*

I laughed really hard

*AVR*

Akua's woven into that cloak? Figures.

*antonin*

Six groups of heroes dead, that's got to be some good XP for the  
Woe to level up. I like how Catherine's name to be had her arms  
around her neck its really cute

*oldschoolvillain*

That wasn't her name, that was Akua's soul

*RandomFan*

Five, I believe. "Sixth time's the charm, right?" – the sixth  
speech, cat's hoping, will finally succeed. Unless there's  
other heroes who haven't gotten the speech?

*Nairne .01*

She probably started suffering from diminishing returns around  
the second or third group. A shame.

*Zarquon*

'Yet the Black Queen stood undaunted, cloaked in ice and shadows.  
And more. There was a silhouette riding her back, arms laced  
around her shoulders. A beautiful and dark-skinned woman.'

I am so confused. Who is that?

*oldschoolvillain*

That's Akua's soul.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

This ship is sailing to the moon.

[taliesinskye](#)

I forget, was the Diabolist dark skinned? I suspect Catherine worked her soul into the collar of her cloak.

*danh3107*

She was literally Soninke, the dark skinned peoples from the northern part of the empire.

*oldschoolvillain*

Oh, shit – Catherine can raise the dead and retain their power. Does she have five parties of Heroes raised and held in thrall to her?

*RoflCat*

Would make sense with the “this one’s been claimed”

*Nairne .01*

So she will literally become a god and steal creation from under the eternal conflict between good and evil. And she will be worshipped by everyone who wants to make a difference and not just continue the pointless slaughter.

*Raved Thrad*

“Instead of a Dark Lord, you would have a queen, not dark but beautiful and terrible as the dawn! Tempestuous as the sea, and stronger than the foundations of the earth! All shall love me and despair!” 😊

*burguulkodar*

haha, it reminded me of Galadriel as well, although she wasn’t really of the freezing aspect.

*NerfContessa*

Sadly, no.

Though I would have loved that,  
A light necromancer queen to the dead king.

*Matthew Wells*

Don’t post about future events.

*Nairne .01*

P.S That’s just an unlikely prediction of the future xD

I think the idea of her keeping the Names bound to the heroes that she brings back that way the God's Above slowly run out of Names they can use.

*grzecho2222*

Given that Cordelia's "Staircase" sound like something to bring army of heroes from heavens and Dead King's crush is coming from hells where are tons of villains that would make great pawns for her, I think accumulating undead heroes and villains to repel them is not a bad plan

*letouriste*

a shit plan you mean. you forgot cat is a villain right? the same kind of villain which has done things like that in the past and each times that blow up in their face? imagine a crowd of ex-named freeing themselves^^

*grzecho2222*

Dead King done this and this and somehow he is still kicking around, but also for unknown reason Cordelia is not a hero and Cat is Named and we seen how fights like that end

*grzecho2222*

Cat has way to drop people into places with gates and after she lets say drops the in Procer cities with order to kill all leaders what it matters if one of two break free. And versus Evil what they gonna do? Not smite it?

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Oh let's hope not. Seems like exactly the way she gets killed. Some corpse whispering hero "reminds" them what they are and they turn on her at the pivot. Black surely taught her better.

*oldschoolvillain*

The dead King has been doing it for centuries, and no crusade has even touched his true seat of power.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

For every Dead King there is every other villain who tried something zany and promptly failed.

[shieldredblog](#)

It's not quite an invisible werewolf army though. Besides that more if villains depend on their schemes too

much. Cat is more likely to use them as a carefully deployed shock troop than a hail mary.

*BroadAxe*

that wouldn't work, when ranger goes to visit the dead king he too has 2 former named under his command, but they are just that former named, that retained small bits of their power but they are not longer named or with the full power of that station, doubt cathrine would be able to do better than the dead king 😊

*Aeon*

The Black Queen returns! This was an awesome chapter to come back with. Can't wait to see where the story goes from here. I might just reread the whole thing now. Nice work!

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

To your right, you'll see crucified traitors and to your left, we have the graves of every hero that tried to assassinate me.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

And behind me are the undead thralls of the heroes who've tried to kill me. She says the Paladin's been \*claimed\*.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Graves in the symbolic sense.

[tyizor](#)

"And occasionally if they're impressive enough, we do mark their graves... with a number."

*Nairne .01*

If they warrant a rating to be remembered by.

[hoyboy](#)

Well, then. Who else wants to see Callow burn now?

The Bard did nothing wrong.

*Mr. Nobody*

Yep, I guess it's only you. Really funny how you seem to be rooting for the main character to die and the story to end. Well, it's not like there's anyone forcing you to read it, right?

*letouriste*

the bard promote stillness in this big chessboard...and stillness is the most boring part of any games of chess, any player try to disturb that to their advantage.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Host of Embers destroyed.  
"Git gud u scrub!"

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

\*points down\*

[cardboardsuperhero](#)

I like to think that some children sneak out when the bells ring to try and see the battle, and that one of them grabbed Hakrams broken axe that he discarded, then grow up to repair and use it.

*thespaceinvader*

I'm pretty sure he was still in Arcadia when he discarded the axe, so that would be a trick.

*naturalnuke*

Kids a changeling obviously 🤪

[cardboardsuperhero](#)

I like to think that he threw it out of the portal when discarding it

*Draconius Sinister*

Exciting read! How do you manage to put in just enough fluff with new information that should mean absolutely nothing to us (Proceran sword-arts that are basically blade kung-fu? Sure!) and use it to make a throwaway character so meaningful?

I hope to see some Heroes being at least vaguely reasonable and take Catherine up on her offer somewhere down the line, or at least in repairing Callow before killing and deposing her. Would be nice to see Stupid Good go the way of the dinosaurs sometime soon.

[hoyboy](#)

Overthrowing and killing Catherine outright without attempt at negotiation and driving the occupying Praesi into the sea isn't the stupid good part. It's the not having a massive army at their back while they do it that's the stupid good part.

*Rook*

I don't think it has to do with the amount of power they're wielding to be honest. It's Stupid Good because they think about as far ahead as an ostrich burying its head in the dirt.

What happens if they win anyway? You killed the monarch of a country that just went through several wars and a genocide, with no clear line of succession as well as being sandwiched between two superpowers on the eve of a crusade. On top of that the remaining leadership is a patchwork blanket only barely held together by ties to said villainous tyrant – the one you just beheaded – and would likely be at each other's necks if left to their own devices. The standing army? You'd be lucky if they aligned with one of the factions sprouting up instead of just turning to banditry or abandoning the place to return to Praes.

So they kill the big bad villain for their hymns and ballads and five minutes of fame, while the newly liberated people of Callow get to starve or be killed by a major power struggle in their newfound 'freedom'.

It's stupid good because they're basically glorified butchers that know how to swing swords and hurl fireballs at whatever target they get pointed at, but as far as actually helping people or changing the big picture for the better they're useless. Sometimes worse than useless. Cordelia makes a better hero than they do and she doesn't even have a Name.

*Jago*

None of them was Callowan, so they have little reason to care for the nation.  
They see Good as superior to the good of Callow.

[hoyboy](#)

Is this supposed to be a problem?

Countries being shitholes caught up in politics isn't a problem that can be solved by people. Expecting the heroes to save Callow, change it's diaper and tuck it into bed is setting them up to fail. Whereas Callow becoming a police state led by an inhuman maniac is definitely a problem that can be solved by them. The world is most likely better off with Callow either smashed to pieces or reduced to an impotent client state rather than it being allowed to become the weapon of a Catherine or a Black.

The big picture isn't actually Callow. Callow is already fucked and there's not much that can be done about it, and the best that can be done is making sure that Callow doesn't

give rise to the next insane monster tyrant that Cat is blatantly becoming.

It's about bloody time for Practical Good to take the field.

[shieldredblog](#)

I would say that the Bard is Practical Good. That's how she's stayed alive so long by spending other heroes' lives like pennies. I imagine if it's even possible for other heroes to be practical she murders them to retain her edge.

And why does everyone forget what a terrible terrible country Procer is? They have like the worst quality of life on the continent and live under squabbling nobles that consider them fodder for the fields and power struggles. For all her civic pride, even Cordelia herself has stated that she considers the average Proceran to be little more than an animal to be exploited to death.

*Nairne .01*

Spending other heroes' lives like pennies kind of strikes the "good" out of "Practical good".

[shieldredblog](#)

Meh, they all just go to heaven anyway. It's what they signed up for.

*TeK*

>Countries being shitholes caught up in politics isn't a problem that can be solved by people.  
Wait, what? So we're screwed then? What's your answer then?  
Give yourself to Jesus?

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Looking back at this, I wonder how you felt when in fact Catherine did at last encounter practical good. Not how you imagined I'm sure.

*Nostradamus*

"The world is most likely better off with Callow either smashed to pieces or reduced to an impotent client state rather than it being allowed to become the weapon of a Catherine or a Black."

Were I a Callowan, I'd be absolutely livid at this sort of mentality. You don't seem overly concerned about the fate of Callow or her people. Willing to condemn them to a life of



endless war and destitution to achieve some "greater good" that you openly admit won't benefit them in the slightest.

Were I a Callowan, I'd say fuck the world and your greater good. Who are you bloody foreigners to invade my country, assassinate my leader, and blight my land with ever more war? For the everyday Callowan, Callow very much is the big picture. And it's because places like Procer share your opinion that they have grown to hate them as much as Praes. More so now that the Black Queen has curbed the bulk of Praesi bullshit.

No one's expecting the heroes to save Callow, change it's diaper, and tuck them into bed. But if they're gonna waltz into land that isn't theirs to stir up shit without giving a damn about the locals whose lives they'll be destroying then they can bugger off back to Procer or Ashur or wherever they bloody came from.

Viva Callow. Viva la Reina Negra.

*grzecho2222*

All hail Queen of Positivism!

*Mr. Nobody*

@hoyboy

I find it quite difficult for there to be a "Practical Good" when the Heavens give their names only to idiots. Not impossible, but it's kinda unlikely. Cordelia has much more chance than them and she is apparently having some talks with Catherine through Thief. And I don't think Cat will really play fair with the older heroes like she played with new ones who tried to assassinate her.

*Author Unknown*

I think the practical part comes from experience. Good seems to have a handicap there, without their colleges trying to kill them. Left with nothing but dogma as guidance they throw themselves at the nearest big bad, and we can all see how that ends.

*werafdsaew*

I think it has to do with the asymmetry between Good and Evil. Good cares about order and tradition, while Evil cares about freedom. So a Hero, especially one sworn to an angelic choir, have much less freedom to deviate than a Villain. You can see this in this chapter, when the Stalwart Paladin is

seriously considering Catherine's words, his Name/choir intervened to set him towards conflict.

*Zach*

The problem is that the sort of heroes who would show up to kill her in the first place are going to be the ones who became Named due to some set of desires that would lead them to that in the first place. Named generally aren't the types of people who change their minds about things after they've set out to do them.

*SMHF*

There was a silhouette riding her back, arms laced around her shoulders. A beautiful and dark-skinned woman.

that u Triumphant?

Great to have this story back btw! 😊

*Taichi22*

No it's Patrick.

As Argentorum said – It's Akua, wrapped in her cloak.

*Argentorum*

"Seven and one, just like the stories."  
Well. I think we know why Nightfall picked that number. Now I just wonder what he plans to do with the significance of those crowns. This entire story is just circles within circles.

Also AkuaxCat 4 lyfe.

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There's an entire list of ways for Catherine to shortchange him: [https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/8ajro7/seven\\_crowns\\_and\\_one/](https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/8ajro7/seven_crowns_and_one/)

*thespaceinvader*

Easy enough: you just name your freshly minted currency Crowns, and give him eight of them.

:V

[\*boballab\*](#)

She doesn't have to short change him, the answer was probably given in the opening to Interlude: Commanders

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/08/30/interlude-commanders/>

Notice the name of the battle is the plural possessive of Prince, that means more than one Prince dies on that battlefield. The Principate is formed of multiple countries each ruled by a prince and each one is it's own crown. If Cat crushes the Principate and that is where the name of the battle comes from, then Cat can pay off real easy since their are enough Princes and their crowns in Procer for it.

---

Problem is that an ordinary fullfilment of the bargain would lead to the outcome that had Sulia so terrified. I meant the kind of options that would leave him with no subjects, nor any lands in Creation belonging to him.

*Cayle*

She just needs to scalp them.

*Snowfire1224*

But if he is sworn to her, then she benefits from that? Assuming that gives him a power up. Not sure.

*Nairne .01*

What if she first kills the Prince of Nightfall and then places his "crown" at his feet? Or better yet his whole head. Viola! We have Fae Dullahan.

[shieldredblog](#)

The problem with that plan is that he comes back. He has been dying and being reborn longer than Creation has been a thing.

Even if you SPENT him, like was alluded could actually kill Faerie, I would guess Winter/Arcadia would just create a new Prince of Nighfall. Way too many unknowns for that to be an actual plan.

*quite possibly a cat*

Giving one of the fae your crown eight times? The crown of your kingdom? I'm sure that won't backfire unpleasantly.

*Soronel Haetir*

I thought Nightfall's plan went down the drain with the unification of Summer and Winter. Isn't that why all the Fae swore themselves to Cat's banner at the end of the last book?

## *Metalshop*

Welcome back. The new book is off to a great start.

## *Type*

Well Akua is certainly has cat's back now. Just how she wanted it, though the situation may have been turned around a little.

## *d\_o\_l*

Do we know what Choir that was? We've already done Contrition, and I'm guessing it wasn't Judgement since Hanno is their champion.

## *Ren*

## Endurance

---

Bard said that Judgement is the only Choir that follows a "one hero per Choir" rule. That was Endurance (which is supposed to be different from Fortitude? I know those are different virtues, but the attributes look too similar, if Bard mistaking William for a Fortitude hero is any indication).

## [\*boballab\*](#)

William was Hero for the Choir of Contrition. that was why they called on Cat to Repent when they offered her the Crown to Callow,

---

And the first typo thread is a go!

> Everything about him smacked of arrogant privilege  
Not sure if the word "smack" can be used like that.

> They would, to her.  
Maybe better "it would", since the subject in the previous sentence is "the south".

> As the moved quietly through the streets  
As they moved quietly through the streets

> Lucky them, they'd chosen the gate opposite.  
Maybe the better order would be "Lucky them, they'd chosen the opposite gate."

> For one of her reputation, he was distinctly unimpressed.  
The structure of this sentence only barely allows to notice that it's Iason being unimpressed and not Catherine.

> Purely academic curiosity in my part  
Isn't it "on my part"?

> emptied the pipe before stewing it away in her cloak  
emptied the pipe before stowing it away in her cloak

> Yes yes, praise the Heavens and much defiance.  
Yes, yes, praise the Heavens and much defiance.

>The first was two score goblins  
Probably "The first was two score of goblins"

> The Red Mage was most endangered by this sort of assault.  
A clearer wording would be "The Red Mage was the one most  
endangered by this sort of assault"

> Yet if the tide turned against them, the Paladin would rather  
see them defeated before they fled.  
Yet if the tide turned against them, the Paladin would rather see  
them defeated before they fled.

> Indeed, they might even encounter another hero after they fled.  
Indeed, they might even encounter another hero after they fled.

> Some sorcery must be behind the machines  
Maybe better to use another tense: "Some sorcery must have been  
behind the machines"

> or he was going to get run through when the creature bored of  
the game  
Perhaps "or he was going to get run through when the creature got  
bored of the game"?

> Light came down from above a perfect a perfect heptagon of  
seven feet on every stroke  
Light came down from above, a perfect a perfect heptagon of seven  
feet on every stroke

> she was stepping lightly and her illusion advancing towards him  
she was stepping lightly and her illusion was advancing towards  
him

> He headbutted his winged helmet but came off the loser for it  
She headbutted his winged helmet but came off the loser for it

> He glimpsed the parry before it ever rose  
Did you mean "He glimpsed the parry before it even rose"? English  
isn't my first language, I'm not sure whether that's a valid use  
of the word.

> as as he hit the ground the world slowed  
and as he hit the ground the world slowed

> an opened them in an endless spread of pale blankness  
and opened them in an endless spread of pale blankness

---

I initially misread Akua's description as sitting on Catherine's shoulders to wear the mantle that is too big for either of them alone.

*Rook*

Misread or not I think it's kind of accurate. Really the mantle of queen isn't one Cat has the skill set to handle anyway. Hierarch wasn't wrong when he described her as ill suited for a throne.

Cat means well and has the right idea – cutting out the rot – but she's always been more of a breaker than a builder. She might become the sharpest scalpel in creation and do her job well, but it isn't enough alone. You need to stitch that wound up and let it heal after the disease is removed, and a scalpel is hardly a needle.

I honestly want to see Cordelia be to Cat what Malicia is to Black. She absolutely needs a counterpart that can navigate peacetime and a political battlefield in the long term, one that has the average people in mind rather than seeing them a sacrificial chaff to be ground up in a millstone between Good and Evil. As practical as the methods might be, none of the old guard are suitable. The Bard, Black, Malicia, all of them have that same flaw. The people are just a footnote for whatever bigger issue they think is the most important.

*Nairne .01*

Cordelia also sees the common people as little more than sidewalk shit (please excuse the expression).

---

Technically, in interlude Riposte where she said that, she was referring to how the warring princes saw their subjects. It's unclear whether she includes herself into that, or sees herself above such neglect.

*Nairne .01*

We will hopefully see in this book.

*Mr. Nobody*

I thought Anne Kendal was the one assigned to this kind of job when Cat made Anne her Governess-General.

*Rook*

Totally just my opinion on this one but I'm not sure Kendall will be enough considering the power imbalance. Malicia and Black are more or less partners on even footing, whereas Cat chose Kendall because she could be bent to her will if needed.

[keldernael](#)

The Lily daughter of the innkeepers must be the same that in the chapter 28 of the Book 2. She was seven years old there, if she recently engaged in the army of Callow, ten to twelve years must have passed. And Cat herself is thirty years old.

*Mr. Nobody*

"The marketplace in Dormer was thriving, for a city that'd been emptied and set aflame not even a year ago."

I'm pretty sure that the line above implies the time skip is not that long. I don't remember the 7 years old girl you mentioned having a brother.

Cordelia was in a hurry to assemble the rulers to make the Crusade against Praes, so it's hard to believe they waited ten years or more for that.

*letouriste*

lili is a pretty commun name,that doesn't ring a bell to be

*Gunslinger*

Seven hells, is this a welcome return. Quite an explosive start there. I kinda hoped the heroes would accept her deal but as the other commenters speculated they might be more amenable dead.

Highlight of the chapter was Cat giving no respect to the Choir.  
> I already told the Hashmallim to walk it off," she said. "Am I really going to have to revisit this with every fucking Choir?"

Beautiful

*Nairne .01*

I love how this chapter shows how brain-dead the heroes are. Simple butchers and glory hounds.

[boballab](#)

That is because the fantasy trope has always been to end the Hero's story right after he kills the Villain, unless it's a serial then a new Villain arises to fight, so you basically never see what happens afterwards. Keep in mind the Hero's are

nothing but tools to the Gods above to fill a spot in a story and it is never that person's story, it is the NAME's story. It was part of the rant Black had long ago about how some idiot farmer picks up a magic sword and the story lets him defeat a villain that trained for 25 years at swordsmanship (Though in this case Cat turned around on the Paladin, who had all those years of formal instruction where Cat didn't).

*Nairne .01*

That's why I love it :).

*letouriste*

of course she is better, the guy looked sheltered while her has been on several warground and is full of experience against other heroes.

in the first place, the pretty dance people call swordsmanship is useless in a real fight. every fighter learn the basics of their style and then use their surrounding and their fists/knees/head/whatever.

*beleester*

Or, you know, just people who don't take a tyrant at face value when they say that they're a necessary evil.

\*Every tyrant a hero has ever toppled\* has said that they're working for the greater good, and that they had perfectly good reasons for burning down cities, crucifying the resistance, and binding their enemies' souls into objects. Cat just happens to be correct when she says that.

*beleester*

Well, the heroes are certainly brain-dead for not getting their full Aspects before they came to pick a fight with the Woe, but I don't think they're wrong simply for disagreeing with Cat when she says she's a necessary evil.

---

I'll have to remind you that figuring out all his aspects and then going to fight Cat was how William limited his story to the rivalry with Cat, which automatically made it a tragedy. What the heroes did wrong was stuff like saying "alright, there's too many of them, we have to lose and flee to start the Pattern of Three", and then immediately charging in.

*werafdsaew*

Not true. The current Tyrant of Helike certainly won't say that he's a necessary evil.



LM

Hey all! Please remember to vote for A Practical Guide to Evil on topwebfiction so more people can find and read this awesome story! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*nimelennar*

Come on, Cat, you need to offer a carrot with the stick.

Something like, "And then, when this country is strong enough to attend on its own again against Procer and Praes, THEN you can come into my house and we can discuss my leadership choices. Violently, if you prefer. Until then, start fixing things and stop trying to break the people who are already doing so."

*Mr. Nobody*

Well, I guess it's easier to just stab them and make them her Royal Guard.

*Shoddi*

My question is: How will she name them?

"First Volunteer", "Should Have Ducked", "A Dress Is Not Armour" and "Surprisingly A Bleeder" are descriptive, but kind of a mouthful when you need to quickly order them to do something.

Will she number them, or use a short one-word descriptor? For the Stalwart Paladin, I'd go with "Spike". Since that's the last thing running through his head.

*Nairne .01*

Smite or Smythe might be some good choices. But Wallie seems like the best bet since he had the choir of Endurance behind him.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Barrendur*

Love from a verbose reader

*Captain Amazing*

After Catherine tries to convince the heroes I think their Names stopped them from listening with the abrupt dogmatic change in thoughts seen from the Paladen.

Nairne .01

I have been wondering about that as well. The hell gods seem like the sort to give free reins to people. The gods above though feel like they would love to enforce their vision through whatever means necessary, as shown with the way the choir of contrition tried to enslave people to a crusade.

grzecho2222

Below seems like "Imma gonna punch you until you punch back" type of people

---

The issue with the Gods Below, on the other hand, is the kind of people they give Names to. The core requirement to be a villain instead of a hero is to be willing to force one's will upon the others instead of supporting them, and that is reinforced later in all aspects of a villain's path, from the claimants' murderfests to the eventual violent demise. Where the Heavens seem to like a more hands-on approach (those thoughts in cursive seemed almost like somebody picking memories from Iason's mind to sway his decision), villains create their doom all by themselves.

[shieldredblog](#)

Also seen in Good nations love of rigid hierarchies. Evil nations are all "The crown belongs to he who takes it." Good nations are all "The Crown belongs to he who is divinely mandated, by arbitrary and complex system enforced by laws and blood."

[hoyboy](#)

I'll give you three guesses as to what mentality leads to stable civilization, and which does not.

[shieldredblog](#)

Stability has its pros and cons. Western civilization is very purposely unstable in some ways. It reduces corruption and abuse of power, It encourages innovation and efficiency.

[hoyboy](#)

The reductions of corruption and abuse of power in wester civilization are not the result of instability. Checks and balances on power, social safety nets, and massively more complicated legal systems represent the further cleansing of instability in our systems. If you want to see the results of what you think is healthy

instability, look no further than the erosion of political systems by business interests, destruction of the environment and climate through corporate negligence, and ideologies that allow us to ignore massive inequalities in the name of "free markets".

There's no period in human history where people have benefitted from an unstable social order, all the modern things that you call freedom and assume are the result of instability are actually the result of a massive web of laws, systems, and institutions that protect you from being exploited or violated by people like Catherine or Black.

[shieldredblog](#)

By instability I meant different political parties working against each other (and theoretically new ones being created.) not lawlessness, which is obviously bad.

Vs China's one party system. Their government is entirely stable and becoming more so as they move closer to a direct dictatorship. Despite their stability they still have massive corruption and environmental problems.

[taliesinskye](#)

China's system isn't stable, much of the regime's policy has to be oriented around forestalling revolt. Buying off the public with very high rates of economic growth and organizing the world's largest secret police and censorship apparatus are necessary just to keep their own people from giving them the brutal deaths they so richly deserve. It's only a matter of time until there's a revolution or some sort of coup.

[shieldredblog](#)

The Communist Party is doing fine and will continue to do so as long as they can provide a decent life for the majority of their population. Politically there is no credible threat to the Communist party. None. The real danger is economic instability.

[taliesinskye](#)

Yes, if the communist party falls it won't be in one of their rigged elections where nobody else is

allowed to run, it'll be because they've all been killed.

[papapok13](#)

Finally, up to date with the course! It was a long binge reading session, but all seconds worth it. Thrilled to join you for the rest of the journey!

[papapok13](#)

"why even have a treacherous lieutenant if you're not going to taunt them at every opportunity?"

I can't believe, this bit wasn't said by a Dread Emperor/Empress. So villainous, it'd easily pass as a chapter opening quote.

*grzecho2222*

Who said it isn't being said by Empress?

*Nairne .01*

Actually, I vaguely remember something similar in one of the quotes. My memory might be playing tricks on me though.

*Darkening*

There's a bit about not offering to make the hero your new lieutenant while your lieutenant is in the room? Not sure about other mentions.

*Sieral*

Surprising how even newbie heroes can take swings at the big players and hold their own for a time. I was astonished this wasn't a complete curbstomp.

*Parker*

That's because creation is ALWAYS stacked on the side of good. Nothing major, just that anything that is left to chance tends to swing in favor of "good". That's why Black is so good at killing heroes, he leaves nothing to chance and places them in certain death traps.

[Nikith Veluru](#)

Sweet, I guess Cat has a stand now.

*rdk*

Well, she is a Killer Queen.

『  
『

』  
』

*burdi*

still waiting for cat new Name

*Raved Thrad*

I'm starting to think Catherine's new Name should be "Trap," as in "It's a trap!" It's like everyone who encounters her somehow underestimates her in one way or another. I still remember the Duchess of Daoine thinking of her as a monstrous child – monster, sure, but child still, nonetheless, despite all her accomplishments. Even here, faced with goblins and a fae, the Paladin couldn't stop to think of her as "girl" or "woman just slightly older than me."

I'm really hoping Robber manages to get (or steal or usurp?) a Name for himself. He's one of my favorite characters, and I'd hate for the maniacal little shit to die just because he bit off more than he could chew alone.

*Snowfire1224*

Yes! It's back. I can't wait for the first chapter

*Cap'n Smurfy*

I love how arrogant Paladin is in his thoughts without ever realising it. He accuses Catherine of conceit and thinks about how villains are always arrogant, but simultaneously thinks they could take 3 or 4 of the World. None of them even have full aspects and they know at least 4 hero parties have already lost.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Been thinking about something, I don't necessarily think that Catherine is "better" in her mechanical modus operandi than Black, simply less experienced. Black's the pragmatic sort. I can absolutely see him doing the "I'd really rather not slaughter your merry band. Why don't you all go do something heroic for the common folks and just let us be?" speech Cat just gave when he'd only been the Black Knight for a eighteen months.

As Nightfall observed "I think offering mercy actually makes things worse. Fascinating." Around about the tenth band of small fry, it's going to occur to Cat (As it likely did to Black long ago) that NO Hero is EVER going to be talked down. It's like trying to talk down a true believer of a suicide bomber. It doesn't work, so your plan needs to be about containing the blast.

I also think that Black having seen what a “Big Name” Hero or band of Heroes can do when they build momentum is a tremendous part of his “Give them absolutely no chance for conflict. Just end their lives with extreme prejudice in whatever manner possible” methodology.

Cat’s going to get there. Then turn around and realize just how much her life forces her to continue being like Black in a LOT of ways. They may have some interesting differences, but the mechanics of their reality will only allow so much deviation.

[shieldredblog](#)

Well, she did turn Thief. So it may take awhile before she becomes too callous.

[vuthuha912](#)

And Black is a Praesi, giving any highborn mercy means you are expecting a knife in the back at the end of the tunnel. Black can negotiate – like when Captain thinks she can convince him to drop the conflict if the hero goes home. He negotiates with the rebels just fine. He even negotiated with Malicia in regard to Trueblood when they clearly deserve to get their power taken away. Letting them live for another day means they can build their bases, and plot their way to the destruction of both sides. How many times have they fuck the Empress and Black over just for some short-term power grab? See how well sparing them turns out for everybody 40 years later. You can only try so many times before you stop.

[DroughtBringer](#)

I mean, Thief was a Hero, and it worked. I hope that Cat never reaches the level where she gives up on it. She can always work with the heroes that show up, or attempt to, and it really doesn’t cost her much (as of yet) so I would like to see Cat keep up with the talking.

[Hiccup](#)

Does anyone remember what Larat’s official title is as a Fae Noble? I forgot.

[shieldredblog](#)

Prince of Nightfall

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Prince of Nightfall, AKA Ranger’s Source of Finger Bling.

[taliesinskye](#)

I really want to read a letter written by Cat to Ranger asking for her to return her retainer's eye, please, he could really use it back and has probably suffered enough.

*Snowfire1224*

You know what would be interesting, a chapter, possibly an extra chapter or interlude, from the perspective of Larat. I think seeing something through the eyes of the Fae might be interesting, although I can see where it would be a challenge to pull off too.

*SMHF*

"I think seeing something through the eyes of the Fae might be interesting"

You spelled eye wrong!

I let myself out!

*Snowfire1224*

Eye. Of course. That is my mistake.

[Antony444](#)

Three heroes are dying from the start...that promises a lot of pain and suffering for the forces of Good in this book 4. Nicely done! If Catherine has not lied (and I see no reason for her to) this was the fifth group of heroes she killed. If on average there has been three heroes per group, it's fifteen heroic figures which have bitten the dust.

It's far less than the record of the Calamities, but it's beginning to leave a bloody mark in the history of Creation...

Otherwise, this prologue was very interesting in that it allowed us to see the big changes the new Queen is implementing thorough Callow. A new money, goblins invited at Marchford, a large military mobilisation and the recovery of Dormer and the rest of the South...looks like the Woe and the Fifteenth Legion are very busy.

And of course, there's always Robber to accuse the heroes of racism...very well done.

I'm in love with this story and I see no reason it is going to change in the months to come...

*JackbeThimble*

Don't worry, they'll be back.

*TeK*

"Gods, I've even heard of Choirs stepping in to settle a losing fight. The sheer fucking arrogance of it."

Huh.

*Raved Thrad*

It was only after reading later chapters (notably, the part with Catherine's conversation with the Grey Pilgrim) that it really crystallized for me what I dislike so much about these heroes: their sheer arrogance, bordering on hubris. This band had absolutely no ties to Callow, no reason to strive and train and cross borders to kill Catherine other than the desire for glory. They throw her attempt to live and let live right back in her teeth, and when she murders them for it the Stalwart Paladin actually has the gall to be angry about it. First he resents her because she's not fighting the way he wants her to fight, and then when the girl he's crushing on is killed he's all hissy-spitty and calling her names, completely overlooking the fact that they basically accepted a red-colored quest to go assassinate someone who hadn't done anything against any of them personally. "How dare you fight back and kill us and not let us win or let us get away to get stronger when all we're doing is trying to murder you! We're the good guys and you're supposed to take this lying down!"

*Isa Lumitus*

I remember, when I was a kid, I felt the same way about how people got up in arms over criminals killing cops. Now? I'm numb to hypocrisy.

*Isa Lumitus*

You know, for most of this chapter, I was only planning to type one sentence as a comment, "Let the Befriending begin!" Then the chapter continued...

DENIED.

*Aotrs Commander*

Well, if the Choirs are getting that desperate, maybe Cat's doing something right.

Frankly, the best thing to happen to creation would be someone assassinating their entire pantheon of Pretend Good and Evil deities...

Satisfying as that would be, though, I suspect we won't see that. But one can dream, right?

*Alex Mirabella*



“Curfew?” Iason said. “What for?”

“Heroes,”

And immediately I knew they were done for. Chilling. This was literally the perfect way to start this book, I’m ridiculously impressed.

*Josh Brooks*

Oh yea more dead heroes. At this point I think I’m reading more to celebrate the day Cat dies, for good, then anything else.

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## Interlude: Stairway

*“Though official records state that the Principate fought a mere score civil wars, it should be noted that this does not include wars fought between less than five principalities. Should the definition be amended, Procer has on average fought a civil war every decade since the year of its founding. No single nation has ever spilled so much Proceran blood as the Principate itself.”*

– Extract from ‘The Labyrinth Empire, or, A Short History of Procer’, by Princess Eliza of Salamans

The trouble with this war, Prince Klaus Papenheim had told his niece since the first day, wasn’t that it wasn’t going to be a war. It was going to be half a dozen of them, fought all across Calernia more or less simultaneously. That was the great danger looming within the Tenth Crusade, that once all the forces had been put in motion there was no adjusting the blows. Cordelia, bless her soul, had taken his warnings seriously. The face of warfare had changed while the Principate clawed itself bloody, and now Procer had to change with it or be left behind. He’d never asked how his niece had gotten her hands on the Praesi. It was for the best, he’d decided. The Prince of Hannover had been raised with death as mother’s milk, but the fight against the Plague was clean in a way the games in the south weren’t. They made sport of men’s lives, down here, and he’d never had the stomach for that. Regardless, the ten Wastelanders had offered up the most precious secret of the East: the rituals of scrying, that old Praesi trick turned into a lethal tool of war by the Carrion Lord. The spells that allowed armies with entire kingdoms between them to move as one, taking apart hosts twice their size with surgical precision.

Gathering wizards to learn them had been costly, he suspected, and it must have been more so to keep the magelings in the Principate's service after. Though in Lycaonese lands spellcasters were prized, for their sorcery was a mighty thing wielded from walls against the rattling hordes, the southerners had a more complicated relationship with spellslingers. Wizards and witches had once owned a seat on the Highest Assembly, in recognition of their great contributions in easing the alliance between Arlesites and Alamans that first founded the Principate. Yet in the centuries since they had fallen out of favour. Their great influence, often second only to the rulers of principalities, had been seen as a threat by the royals of the south. Meddling in an election had turned on them when the candidate they opposed, Louis Merovins, managed a narrow victory. The man had spent most his reign suppressing them after revoking their Assembly seat in retaliation, a struggle finally brought to an end two rulers down the line when the mage association known as L'Oeuil D'Or was forcefully disbanded.

Since then the casters had become tradesmen like any other, offering charms and potions for coin – though never healing, as the House of Light frowned upon any infringing upon their hold in that domain. Some cities in the south still had informal assemblies, he'd been told, but they were toothless things and kept that way by ancient decrees banning the collection of dues while still imposing heavy taxes. Until now. First Prince Cordelia Hasenbach of Procer had, in the wake of her speech announcing the Tenth Crusade, founded the Order of the Red Lion. A congregation of wizards and witches exempted from the old decrees, in exchange for sworn service to the crown. Hundreds of them, who might be passable war casters at best but all knew how to scry with a degree of skill. Klaus had a hard laugh, when he learned the charter binding the Grand Alliance together had specific provisions for such an order without ever naming it. His niece had been moving her pieces into place for near a decade now.

The Prince of Hannover was pleased with the addition of the mages to his war council, though not because of their pleasant personalities. Near all of them were strutting Alamans pups, drunk on the shiny new heraldry and fresh importance. None of them seemed to understand they were not the sudden dawn of wizardly resurgence but instead a glorified pack of messengers. They had no say in where they were deployed, Klaus having decided the arrangements himself after consulting some of his own – much more trustworthy – Lycaonese mages. Dozens had been sent south to the Dominion, to keep the mustering armies of Levant pointed in the right direction, and near a hundred sent in little linked clusters his wizards called 'relays' to make it possible to keep the lines open to the Ashuran fleets even as they sailed. The rest had been spread with measured weighing of priorities, linking first to Salia where his niece ruled but also to the

forces that Prince Amadis had schemed his way to leading. The Iserran weasel needed a close eye kept on him, and Klaus would have preferred to lead those armies himself if he could. He knew why he could not, though.

In the Red Flower Vales awaited the two men he considered to be the greatest field commanders of this era: Marshal Grem One-Eye and the Carrion Lord.

Sending the likes of Amadis against them would have been like throwing oil at a fire, and Cordelia had reluctantly told him that the man had intrigued too well to be entirely side-lined from command. The Prince of Iserre, however, had been too clever for his own good. With him were the armies of the remainder of his pack of intriguing malcontents, and every unruly fantassin his niece had been able to scrape together. Nearly fifty thousand in total, a host almost as large as the one Klaus was commanding. But it would be the Queen of Callow that Amadis tangled with, and the Prince of Hannover had heard much about that one of late. He'd once dismissed her as a nobody, during the Liesse Rebellion, but he'd been made to eat that dismissal raw since. She'd gone from victory to victory in the last few years, and if half the rumours about what her pack of villains was doing to heroes making their way into Callow were true... Well, there was one in every generation. Klaus' had borne the Black Knight that awaited him in the Vales, and the great monster of Cordelia's own looked to be the murderous orphan who'd set her throne atop a sea of corpses.

Prince Amadis would win, he suspected. The shit had more than a dozen heroes at his back, and two old forces of nature among them. It'd been a pleasant surprise to find out that Laurence was still alive, old sack of piss and vinegar that she was. The Saint of Swords was an army unto herself, and the Grey Pilgrim that went with her was supposed to be some kind of legend in Levant. No, Amadis would come out ahead. But the villains would bloody him and wreck the armies of his allies – and as the commander of that host, all the blame would fall on his shoulders afterwards. There'd be no more agitating the Highest Assembly for the Prince of Iserre, after that disgrace. Klaus spat to the side in disapproval, alone in his tent with the latest correspondence. It was sinful that good, honest soldiers would die in that mess but that was the nature of war. The Veiled Lady not discern between deserving and not when she claimed the butcher's bill. Enough of Amadis' backers knew their way around a battlefield that a real debacle would be avoided, at least. There was noise outside the prince's tent and he set down the latest supply census – Brabant had cut corners on what they brought, the fucking cheapskates – to rise to his feet.

"What's the racket, men?" he called out.

"Your Grace, I have-"

The voice yelped instead of finishing, preceded by the sound of a spear's butt hitting a foot none too gently. Klaus passed a hand through greying hair and sighed. That was one of his wizards, he was certain. The eager shits were still under the impression that military protocol did not apply to them since they served under the First Prince instead of the army itself.

"Victoria, let him in," the Prince of Hannoven said.

"Bertrand de Guison, officer of the Order of the Red Lion," his guard announced, her tone darkly amused as she parted the tent's folds.

Klaus would need to have a talk with her. Her dislike for southerners was well-earned – her two sons had died on Alamans fields fighting to put Cordelia on the throne – but the magelings were too useful to be roughed up over petty offenses. The wizard entered limping, his heavy robes emblazoned with a rampant red lion on pale. He couldn't have been more than thirty, Klaus thought, and that he believed that to be young suddenly reminded him how old he'd gotten. Even his niece was closer to thirty than twenty, now. *A Papenheim hold vigil until death relieves them*, his father had always told him, but the Veiled Lady had seen fit to spare Klaus longer than he'd believed possible. So few of his time were left, save for enemies.

"Your Grace," the mage bowed. "I herald news of great import."

He'd called out in Reitz when he was outside the tent, but now the boy was speaking Chantant. The Prince of Hannoven squinted. He'd had lessons as a child and spoke the Alamans tongue well enough, but never quite managed to shed his Lycaonese accent. It made him sound like an ignorant brute, he was well aware. Just for that, the mage got to stand throughout the conversation.

"I'm listening," Klaus said.

"The chapter of the Order assigned to the *Rightful Due* has contacted us," Bertrand eagerly said. "Admiral Hadast has struck the first blow of the Tenth Crusade."

That would be Magon Hadast's son, Klaus noted, not the Ashuran ruler himself. The head of the Thalassocracy was too old and fragile to campaign himself. The 'Rightful Due' – Gods, the fucking Ashurans and their ship names – was the flagship of the Thalassocracy's first war fleet. It'd set sail more than a month ago, and true to their reputation the Ashuran ships and their wind mages were striking with impossible haste.

"A victory, is it?" Klaus asked.

The mage nodded.

"One for the ages, Your Grace," he said. "The Tideless Isles were seized with but a handful of Ashuran ships sunk, and ten times as many prize hulls seized from the corsairs. What few are not dead or in chains fled for the Wasteland."

And so the first battle of the Tenth Crusade was fought hundreds of miles away from the Empire, Ashur snatching anchorage for its fleets before it began attacking Praes from the coast. It was beginning, Klaus thought. Now the Praesi would have to move troops to protect their coastal cities, denying reinforcements to the western front even as Ashur burned and looted everything within earshot of waves. Now that Hadast was in place, armies could finally begin to march.

"Contact your fellows in the Northern Army," Klaus told the mage. "Pass this message to Prince Amadis: the seal is broken, climb the stairs."

"By your will, Your Grace," the man bowed elaborately.

Gods, Alamans. They turned every conversation into a bloody play.

"That aside," Bertrand continued, "your guard-"

"I didn't see anything," Klaus grunted. "There's a war on, boy. Get moving."

The wizard looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, but learning some humility would do him good. The prince waited until the mage was gone before speaking again.

"Victoria," he called out. "Get yourself relieved and come in to pour yourself a drink."

Prince Klaus Papenheim frowned.

"And find the White Knight and his gaggle too, while you're at it," he said. "I'll want a word with them before we march on the Vales."

—

Prince Amadis Milenan's fingers drummed the table lightly. The sound of it was soothing, and well worth the expense of having brought the furniture from his summer palace in Iserre. Amadis had ruled his principality for more than twenty years now, and steered it unfailingly through troubles and civil war largely because he had a knack for telling which way the wind was blowing. At the peak of the civil war, he'd been considered a key supporter of Princess Aenor of Aquitan while secretly corresponding with both Princess Constance of Aisne and Prince Dagobert of Lange – before the latter's grisly demise at the

hands of Hasenbach's northern savages, anyway. No matter who triumphed he had been positioned to become one of the most influential princes in the Highest Assembly. By refraining from pressing his own claim while keeping close ties with neighbouring principalities, he'd ensured that Iserre would come out of the strife wealthy and pristine: from there, it would have been child's play to trade marriages for concessions and arrange for his kin to rule Procer when the time came. Then the Battle of Aisne happened, and Cordelia Hasenbach broke the board.

He'd not been there himself, preferring to send one of his many cousins to command the levies he had sent to aid the coalition. But he'd heard stories. Of entire allied armies turning against princesses he'd considered among the most cunning and dangerous alive halfway through the battle. Of the brutal slaughter the Lycaonese had visited upon the flower of the south's manhood. That defeat sounded across all of Procer, and in the wake of that sound Amadis found his careful plans lay shattered on the ground. Still, he'd come out of the disaster better than any of his former allies and set to work leveraging that sudden prominence. His ties in Orne and Cantal served him well, soon bolstered by generously termed loans to Creusens and wedding his youngest daughter to the heir to Segovia. The aging Princess Luisa has sided with Hasenbach after she broke Prince Dagobert and remained a close ally after, reaping the benefits of her early support, but her son had greater ambitions than being the loyal dog of a northerner First Prince. Princess Aenor's successor, Princess Rozala, eventually joined his alignment as well after she found her mother's old supporters closing their doors to her in an attempt to curry favour with Hasenbach.

Six principalities stood behind him, out of the twenty-three that formed Procer. Twenty-four, counting Salia, but as it was the seat and personal domain of whoever claimed the crown its officials avoided partisanship. It was a greater portion of the realm than it seemed. The four Lycaonese principalities to the north were ardent Hasenbach supporters, but estranged from the courts of the south and forced to spend what little coin they had seeing to their borders with the Chain of Hunger. Cleves and Hainault had turned inwards after their disastrous adventures in the civil war, fearing the Kingdom of the Dead would catch scent of their weakness and begin raiding their shores again. Over a third of the principalities still relevant to rule of Procer stood behind him. Amadis did not have the votes in the Highest Assembly to dismantle Hasenbach's position, not unless she blundered and angered rulers keeping aloft. But he was now widely considered the second most powerful ruler in the Principate, and even the hint of his displeasure gave other princes pause.

Not that the First Prince had been idle all this time. She was, Amadis would concede, a much defter hand at the Ebb and the Flow than any Lycaonese should be. That clever bit of diplomacy with

Levant had tied Orense to her with a debt of gratitude, and his own admittedly lacklustre military record meant that Salamans and Tenerife preferred looking for protection against Helike with the First Prince than his own faction. Their support had borne fruit, with twenty thousand men being sent south to guard the border even as the rest of the Principate gathered for war. Yet for all her cleverness, Hasenbach was not beloved. Her heavy-handed reforms of the bureaucracy in Salia had won her no friends among the highborn who had once enjoyed lucrative sinecures close to the heart of Procer's power. The decrees she had passed through the Highest Assembly to disburse funds for the upkeep of fortresses guarding the borders with the Chain of Hunger and the Dead King's realm were similarly unpopular with the impoverished south, though she'd had the votes to force them through regardless.

Still, Amadis had never considered the woman a true threat to his rising ascendance. Watching the massive undertaking she had apparently managed to prepare under his nose without a single soul noticing, however, he was coming to reconsider that assessment.

There must have been at least five hundred mages involved, he thought as he left his tent and came to stand in the field. That meant easily thrice that number in servants and tradesmen supporting them, the sum of it making a sizeable town on its own. And there must have been soldiers, to ward off anyone curious even in this distant stretch of the Principate. The Prince of Arans must have been involved as well, for all this was taking place amidst his lands, and never had Amadis unearthed so much as a hint that the man was one of Hasenbach's. Neither had his people in the treasury found trace of the sizeable amount of coin that must have been allocated in seeing such an undertaking through. Had the gold come through the Lycaonese principalities? Fielding their armies south in the civil war should have nearly beggared them, it should not have been possible. Unless, of course, Hasenbach had falsified the books in Salia. The Prince of Iserre hummed. He could have her censured for that. The measure was mostly symbolic, and required simple majority to pass. Would it be worth it to call in the favours? It would certainly blacken her name, but to make such a play as a crusade unfolded might do the same for his own.

Someone came to stand by his side, and a low whistle was let out.

"She plays a deeper game than we thought," Princess Rozala of Aequitan said.

Barely twenty, Amadis thought, with all her mother's beauty yet none of the grace. Being raised in a time of war had done nothing for her manners, a shame given the past glories of her hallowed line. Iserre and Aequitan had been foes as often as they were

allies, over the centuries, a complicated dance of love and hate that saw the lines between rivalry and alliance ever blurred. No one understood better than his people that a skilled enemy could serve as better ally than a friend.

"I discern the Prince of Hannover's hand in this," Amadis said. "It is too... martial a measure to be the First Prince's own thought."

"It certainly explains why she had us getting drunk near the border with Bayeux instead of mustering with the Iron Prince in Orne, anyway," Princess Rozala mused. "And here I thought she merely wanted to keep you from getting your grubby paws all over her allies."

"A mark of weakness, that she would find it needful to do so," Amadis said with a thin smile. "Too many of her backers see the sense in what I say."

"There's no great brilliance in pointing out that Callow is ripe for the taking, Amadis," the Princess of Aquitan snorted. "Anyone with eyes can see it. It's the division of the spoils that's going to set tongues wagging. Assuming we can even wrest the right to dispose of them."

"Enough of the Highest Assembly took command of their armies we can convoke a session in Callow without her," the Prince of Iserre murmured. "With the right promises we could circumvent her entirely."

Neither needed to say that if this took place, Hasenbach's reign would never recover from the blow. It was one thing for a decree to be defeated in the Assembly – not even the most beloved of First Princes had avoided that indignity at least once – but for a ruling First Prince's known intent to be defied that openly? She would barely even qualify as a figurehead, after. The disgrace might be enough for her to abdicate and flee back north with her tail between her legs. There were other ways to chance the face of the Principate's rule than mere warfare. The two of them stood in uneasy silence afterwards, looking at the work of the mages. The ritual had begun with dawn yet was not even half-done by his reckoning. The harsh slopes of the mountains separating Procer from Callow burned away under constant sorcerous fire, leaving behind smoking steps of stone stretching ever further. Now that the Prince of Hannover had given his leave, Amadis had been filled in on the full details of this little scheme of the First Prince's. Though no great commander himself, the Prince of Iserre knew enough of martial endeavours to be aware that the Kingdom of Callow's great advantage in war had always been that the only path of entry from the west was the Red Flower Vales. Narrow passes and valleys, whose fortifications had only grown more expansive since the Wastelanders had annexed Callow.



This was no longer true.

The Stairway, as Hasenbach's lieutenant among the mages called it, was the work of years in ritual preparation and planning: an exhausting labour that would carve a way through the mountains between the principality of Arans and northern Callow at the narrowest point in the mountains. The planned point of emergence was to the north of the city of Harrow – which was, he'd been assured, essentially undefended. Amadis had been ordered to take his host through the Stairway and begin a march south, shattering every army in his path until he took the defences of the Red Flower Vales from behind while the host of Prince Klaus Papenheim assaulted them from the front. He'd also been mandated to establish negotiations with the Duchy of Daoine, though it had been made clear to him treating with Duchess Kegan would be handled by one of the First Prince's personal envoys. In this, he was not worried. Callow was such a lawless place, these days. Envoys could meet with all sorts of accidents as they journeyed. And if they did, well, was it not his duty as a loyal subject of Procer to fill that void? A diplomatic victory with the Deoraithe would do much to solidify his position before he convoked the Highest Assembly within Callow. The higher his fortunes rose, the lower Hasenbach's fell.

"The wizards tell me the ritual will be completed within two days," Prince Amadis of Iserre told his accomplice. "We must swiftly steal a march afterwards."

"Steal a march," Princess Rozala repeated mockingly. "My, how commandingly you speak to me. One would almost believe you to be the leader of this glorious host of ours."

Amadis smiled at her.

"How *is* your brother these days?" he asked. "I hear his talents as an orator have thawed even the First Prince's disposition."

The woman's face turned dark, and she looked away. Rozala did need the occasional reminder of how flimsy her position in Aquitan truly was, with her younger brother currying favour at court. Hasenbach was unlikely to be so gauche as to directly intervene in a principality's affairs of succession, but she could do a great deal to help the boy's cause without tipping her hand.

"Let us not quarrel, Your Grace," Amadis said. "Can you not feel it? We are going to make history, you and I."

The Prince of Iserre's smile broadened as he watched the Stairway grow. The world, he knew, was on the eve of great changes. And Amadis Milenan would be at the heart of them.

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[DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter! It is so amazing to be able to read these again.

There's one thing that I've missed the past month, not as much as actually being able to read Practical Guide, but I've missed the little email notifications that I get from this; specifically from when Gunslinger likes my comment.

It seems like such a small thing, and it really is, but it normally puts a smile on my face when it happens. Beyond that Gunslinger has been pushing for Practical Guide to be voted for on Top Web Fiction, and has just generally been an amazing part of the community. Thank you, Gunslinger, for all you do.

There is also the amazing community, reading the comments and the thoughts is what gets me through the days between chapters; thank you all for your thoughts and ideas, as they're always fun to read through.

And... if I'm going to be thanking a member of the community I should also thank the author; Erratic thank you so much for this world that you are sharing with us and letting us go on this amazing adventure. I've missed this the past month, and I'm very happy it is back. As we continue on this adventure know that I really appreciate all you do. Thank you.

As we head into book 4... you guys are just all awesome! Thank you!

*Gunslinger*

Thanks for your kind words 😊

Speaking of topwebfiction.com the Guide is only 20 votes or so behind Ward. Vote and you can take it to the top (tion.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil)

[DroughtBringer](#)

Awesome news right now! Practical Guide to Evil has overtaken Ward! Practical Guide is currently 45 votes ahead! Make it further ahead everyone! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[stevenneiman](#)

Hey, we're actually at #1. It's been so long that I forgot what it looks like to have a non-Wildbow series in first place. Thank you to everyone else who voted to help put us

there, especially to Gunslinger for reminding us to vote and putting up the handy links, and thank you to EE for writing such an awesome story. I look forward to reading the last book, and anything you put out afterwards.

---

Isn't Amadis the prince that tried to push for the Principate directly leading the Liesse Rebellion? Looks like Cordelia is dumping political opponents in the first wave.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Could be part of the negotiations between Cordelia & Catherine too. Cat thins out her political opponents, whom she gathers and sends to the Stairway. I suspect Cat & Black have known about this already; that's another reason why Cat talked to Duchess Keagen at the end of Book 3. I think Daoine will be part of the army attacking the Stairway Princes. Let say 25% of them passes through, then Cat ambushes them and split the army apart. The splinter group goes ahead to Daoine thinking they'll get reinforcements where they'll get slaughtered. Cat then defends Callow at the Harrow, where the most of the Princes Graveyard will take place.

Then the Dead King attacks from the North, Ranger comes in for fun with the legendary Heroes, Klaus shifts his direction from the Vales to Harrow to attack Cat from the South, Malicia betrays her and many more things go wrong for Cat because with the exception of Hakram and her Rainbow Cloak, things never really go right for our Queen of the Hunt.

*Kazenos*

They dont know about the Stairway. Agnes said she didn't foresee it being found before it was used

*Nash Equilibrium*

I can't find the specific chapter the line is spoken right now, but I'm pretty sure that the augur specified that the empress wouldn't find out. So it's possible that this is backroom dealing with Cat.

Of course, it's also possible that negotiations between Callow and Procer failed, so this could be exactly what it appears to be.

*usernamesbco*

I think negotiations between Callow and Procer were a nonstarter. Cordy can't afford to call off the crusade, she needs a war. She'll stick with the pretext of "free

Callow from the Evil Queen" so they have a pretext to invade.

If Cat loses they get to divide Callow up as spoils of war. If Cat wins, Cory will have gotten rid of her political opponents and weakened Callow enough that the crusade can continue. Either way Cordy bleeds off the troublesome soldiers/bandits left over from her civil war and consolidates her political position under the banner of "Good vs. Evil"

Cat needs to spank Procer hard enough that they'll reconsider.

*werafdsaew*

I doubt the Black Queen and the First Prince trust each other well enough to have agreed to anything. I think Thief's visit was just to scope each other out and to establish diplomatic relationships for future negotiations.

*David Casort*

minor correction. "Klaus' had borne the Black Knight that awaited him in the Vales, and the great monster of Cordelia's own looked to be the murderous orphan who'd forged set her throne atop a sea of corpses." I suspect you meant either "forged her throne" or "set her throne" not both. personally I prefer forged.

*Darkening*

I find it rather amazing that some people are so self-important that they continue to underestimate Catherine. I mean, sure, Klaus is right that a dozen heroes is a rough time for the Woe to contest, but this Amadis fellow doesn't seem to even have the slightest thought that anything might cause him a problem.

*ALKATYN*

He also thinks he's going to overthrow Cordelia despite all evidence to the contrary.

I don't think he has a long life expectancy.

*Matthew*

Also, I think that we as readers overestimate how much the heroes know about Black's hero killing methodology. He's been mostly successful so what they have to go on is survivor tales from his least effective methods.

*Adra*

Especially because of the Name-lore mislead that's inherent in him being the Black Knight: It's part of his name to be a Hero Killer, the name is traditionally the 'Dragon' to the Dread Empress/Emperor. So heroes are prepared for a traditional, hero-killing villain, who'll chase them down, overwhelm them with dark power and start monologuing. Without first hand knowledge of what Black is, it's very easy for heroes to operate under the assumption that they're dealing with a very powerful but traditional Black Knight.

So all the heroes who come for him are prepped for the completely wrong type of engagement, and that's even before Black's actual plans come into play.

---

The heroes who come for him are the ones at the Vales with Papenheim, the White Knight and his band, and they fought him to more or less a stalemate twice. They'll know what to expect, especially with Hanno's ability to google with his brain, and with Raphaella being a monster killer set against a legion of undead with a dragon at its head.

### *Highwayman*

The Stairway... if training in CQB has taught me anything, its that stairwells are a horrible death trap. Might not be as bad here as in a real stairwell, but if there's any time to hit them, it'll be when they're marching half-way through it.

### *naturalnuke*

And then Hierophant dropped a demon on them. The end.

---

Isn't Harrow where Warlock built wards around a standard with a demon of Absence and a company of devils, mentioned in chapter 22 of the second book (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/05/11/chapter-22-rescue/>)?

### *Gunslinger*

This is a really good catch. A Chekov's demon if there ever was one.

### *Nairne .01*

And so the 50k host and the heroes and all of Cordelia's opponents become literally absent. It sounds so funny xD

### *1shot4living*

"You're telling me that an entire army, 12 heroes and an assortment of princes just vanished once the Black Queen dropped the standard and just walked away without looking back?"

"I believe her exact words were 'Oops, it slipped.' "

[BarthHumphries](#)

If you read the link, HIEROPHANT actually think it's a demon of corruption, "Given that we remember why we need to have this conversation." I'm betting that the army finds the wards, figures it's Squire or someone hiding to have wards that strong, tears them down, gets corrupted, and then Squire has a corrupted army coming up her backside, spreading corruption wherever they go.

d\_o\_l

Nah, the demon of corruption was the one that already got released near Marchford. The only one still unaccounted for is the demon of absence.

[BarthHumphries](#)

If you read the link, HIEROPHANT actually think it's a demon of corruption, "Given that we remember why we need to have this conversation." I'm betting that the army finds the wards, figures it's Squire or someone hiding to have wards that strong, tears them down, gets corrupted, and then Squire has a corrupted army coming up her backside, spreading corruption wherever they go.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Have faith. He'd do something far more creative with portals. Still – The End. xD

grzecho2222

Why not roll giant rock or avalanche on them? They got 12 heroes, not sure if demon can take it

---

Alternatively, if anyone does catch the wind of the ongoing ritual, Cat can call on the mandated host of no less than ten thousand soldiers from Daoine. Maybe even take some of the Watch's garrisons in it, to harass the invaders and scout for heroes while she's gating north.

*SpeckofStardust*

They will take the city and enter the Callow heartlands, preventing Cat from doing anything else without first beating that army.

### HappyNap

Or Cat will be ready for them... I mean, she and Hasenback \*did\* make a deal

### *Nairne .01*

It would be very nice if Catherine and Cordelia decided that the Crusade is simply a ruse, to eliminate some of the filth that can't be reformed.

### *Decius*

How much thought and strategic planning went into considering that the stairway is also going to be a way to invade Procer? If it isn't useful as a way to invade Procer, it's a great place for a couple of active volcanoes to appear when the army is mostly through.

How effective was the information security intended to keep the Eyes from knowing about a large and labor-intensive ritual?

And is it even remotely possible that the scrying rituals and scrying mages are secure against interception and spoofing?

If Black hasn't already won at least ten percent of the war, he hasn't been doing his job correctly.

### *SpeckofStardust*

The stairway is unknown, it was Stated by a Hero that it would remain so until after it's first use.  
So yes the Security of it was top notch.

### *Nairne .01*

Except Catherine made a deal and the wasteland mages had to come from somewhere.

### *beleester*

The wasteland mages were for Cordelia's scrying network, not for this. The Stairway was mentioned to have been years in the making, which means they started planning it before Catherine was in charge of anything.

### *TeK*

The funny thing is, countries borders have to go along natural geographically defended position. The Empire had sea and

Hwaerte, the Callow had the Hwaerte to the east, Vales to west, elves to the north (practically a wasteland to any invading army), and to the south dat lake, as well as fae-ridden Refuge. Now, with part of mountains protecting borders between Praes and Procer gone, it is a strategic imperative to hold as big buffer zone between said mountain pass and actual borders of country. As an example take the Wall between Daoine (which is much more like a march, but anyway) and Nortern steppes. Because there were no obstacles along the borders (aside from marches, I suppose), it was a point of constant raids and fighting. The same is here. Procer just ensured constant wars between itself and whoever behind those mountains.

*Iris*

Wait, didn't literal giants live in those mountains?

*The Quietist*

Saint of Blades sounds just like something that might attract Ranger...

*Nairne .01*

When I imagine what she fights like the image that I get is a whirlwind of blades closing on an opponent from all sides.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

I immediately think of Unlimited Blade Works here.

*Thea*

Well, the Saint of Blades does have a domain... though it's questionable whether it's filled with all the swords they've ever seen.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Well Reality Marbles is pretty much personal demesnes like the Champion's Exalt aspect or Cat's Moonless Night.

*Rook*

Killing the Saint of Blades seems like a good way to make the old Queen of Blades a proper Name, especially with the previous precedent already set

.. which would still catch Ranger's attention, but that conflict seems more or less inevitable anyway, more of a when question than an if question

*Baggy0z*



I smell multiple traps. What's the bet that Hierophant notices a massive days long ritual powerful enough to melt mountains? And then there's the scrying, no way that secret got loose unintentionally. Either it was deliberately leaked by the Empire or part of any deal between Cat and the Prince. There's no way a back door or flaw was left in the ritual to make sure that communications are insecure.

---

Typo thread:

> wasn't that it wasn't going to be a war  
was that it wasn't going to be a war

> An congregation of wizards and witches  
A congregation of wizards and witches

> who'd forged set her throne atop a sea of corpses  
Maybe "who'd set her throne atop a sea of corpses"?

> There were other ways to chance the face of the Principate's rule than mere warfare.  
There were other ways to change the face of the Principate's rule than mere warfare.

[Barthumphries](#)

Some more typos 😊

The Veiled Lady not discern between deserving and not when she claimed the butcher's bill.  
Add "did" after "Lady"

The aging Princess Luisa has sided with Hasenbach after  
Change has to had

not unless she blundered and angered rulers keeping aloft  
Add "her" after "rulers"

The higher is fortunes rose  
Change is to his

[frolamiz](#)

I don't think we are heading into the graveyard of princes right away, because there seem to only be two of them taking the stairway, but the life expectancy of this prince seem really low. His point of view doesn't even consider Catherine once =)

[Euodiachloris](#)

The only question here is: will he actually get time to have Cat loom in his thoughts for nights of dread before he becomes a patch? Or, will it be restricted to after? ;P

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Amadis mentioned that there were enough princes available to convene a Highest Assembly once they arrive in Callow. Even if they aren't all there now, who wants to bet that Catherine hits them as they're convening their little coup?

*Mr. Nobody*

Wow, the time skip was longer than I thought. Well, Catherine must have increased the numbers of the Army of Callow quite a lot.

Something tells me that the downfall of the Principate will be its fragile alliance and constant infighting. Look, this Amadis guy is so focused on Cordelia that he can't even concentrate on the fight to come.

*grzecho2222*

Funny thing is that they are more Praes than Praes at the moment. Let's see: giant ritual that can easily backfire, attacking Callow with hordes of soldiers, nobles already backstabbing each other and paraphrasing Akua "No one understood better than his people that a skilled enemy could serve as better ally than a friend". Did Black Knight switched their patterns when no one was looking? He talked about transcending them.

*Snowfire1224*

Interesting idea. I like it.

[sengachi](#)

That would be a hell of a gotcha from the Black Knight.

*Antonin*

Catherine does have one big advantage however, the aspect TAKE can work the Dread Empress's mind control of the Legion of Terror if she knows about it and it just so happens she was checking for mind control when dealing with the Diabolist.

*Mr. Nobody*

I think Catherine lost Take when she lost her Name. Unless she found a way to keep it.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

You have it backwards. Take was the first NEW aspect she got upon regaining her name. The other two new ones are Fall and Break.

The aspects she lost were Seek (removed because of demon corruption), Learn, and Struggle.

[ashandlp](#)

Chapter 68: Coda

Even my Name was stripped bare, its power dimmed and dull. I had no aspect left but one, and that one was gone far beyond what an aspect should be. Squire, I thought, but the name rang hollow. Tied to me only by the barest thread. Transition loomed ahead, patiently awaiting the right fulcrum.

Cat lost 2 of her 3 aspects when she broke the scaffold around her title as Duchess, retaining only Fall.

Also from Coda:

"Call," Akua Sahelian said.

A bundle of power inside her unfolded under my patient eye and I flicked my wrist. Ice spread through it, cracks spreading as she flinched. Ah, I thought. Devoured but not gone. The corpse of her aspect I took for my own, let the winds and the snow bury it. It would await my purposes there.

Cat ate Call. She didn't Take it.

*JackbeThimble*

I think Mr. Nobody is referring to the second time she lost her name after Second Liesse. We don't really know what her name is now but I think it was stated that she isn't the Squire no more and her actual capital N Name probably isn't The Black Queen either, it's currently not clear whether she still has her old aspects.

*Nairne .01*

She still has "Take". Though it evolved into something a little different when she broke her name and became the incarnation of winter. It might not be an actual aspect but she still can "Take".

I think "Take" was very compatible with Winter on a conceptual level.

*Ashen Shugar*

I would have thought that the one aspect that remained was "Fall". From the quote in the comment above, her remaining one was far beyond what a normal aspect should be, and Fall was her aspect that had gotten supercharged/corrupted by winter power.

*samshadar*

Wait what? When did the mind control thing turn up? I totally missed this...

*Soronel Haetir*

Malicia can embed commands directly in people she speaks to face-to-face, I'm not sure if it works through her flesh puppets or only meeting the real Malicia in person.

And I thought Malicia and Black did know of the stairway, I thought that was the one message they managed to intercept (while the Auger steered most clear of getting caught).

*Mr. Nobody*

I think he misunderstood the Empress' Speaking. It's powerful, but it's more like suggestion than mind control. Though I don't remember any mention of the Empress using something like that on the Legions. If she had mind control, the High Lords wouldn't have needed to die.

---

Closure (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/closure/>) explicitly mentions that it's Aspect-assisted Speaking, and that everyone above the rank of a legate has commands implanted in their heads.

*Mr. Nobody*

Oh, that's right. I am the one who underestimated her power.

Hmm... Now I'm suspecting the Empress of killing Juniper's mom and the rest of the commanders even more.

*Fern*

OH FUCK

Man I never even considered the commands when Juniper's mom died. It would have taken almost no effort for her to plant a command with a poison coated dagger on one of the other officers. Even then, I still don't think the Empress had a clear motive to do it; she thought she could rely on Black to trust her until he blew her magic

portal nuke to shit, after all. The only reason she would kill Juniper is if she thought Black would try to kill her, and well... I don't think she did, until Black crossed that line.

It'd be different if she assumed that Juniper would use family ties to bring her into the fold, of course, but that's unlikely. Still, a masterstroke of a plan. Personally? I still think one of the goblins did it, either the Legion ones we know about or an Eye of the Matrons.

Shit, but I do love this whole story. Every time i look at it there's a new detail I didn't notice before.

### [oldschoolvillain](#)

I suspect it was Cordelia, honestly. We know she had agents in the Legions – their presence at the battle of Liesse and their ability to secure a Wight for study is more than enough proof of that. Ranker and Sacker seemed to be unaware of the treachery, even when we were reading from Ranker's PoV. If Ranker had been planning or party to knifing the other Legion commanders, she wouldn't have been getting desperate and bemoaning the damage it did to Legion morale.

### *Rook*

I'm not sure about the whole stealthy massive sorcerous ritual thing to be honest. Aren't the woe using blanket scrying to detect heroes and narrow down where they are? Unless Hierophant is out of commission with an experiment, you'd think one of the greatest sorcerers of the age would probably be able to spot a magical bonfire while scrying for needles in a haystack.

Also pretty interesting that no one in the principiate – not even Cordelia's own right hand – has any minor inkling about her being in contact with the Black Queen.

On top of that, they suddenly got a hold of apparently secret Praesi scrying rituals just in time for the war? The same kind that would be rather useful for two rulers secretly conspiring? Also coincidentally the stairs for the principiate's first strike happen to be hitting harrow. The essentially in defended and foreshadowed to be destitute city that would minimize damage to Callow (last chapter – with the trader calling harrow coin 'trash')

Question would be, is Cat actually hard enough to do what this would imply? Set up Harrow far ahead of time as a sacrificial lamb to avoid suspicion from Praes, and narrowly 'lose' the first battle; shattering most of the host aiming at Callow in the

process but being ultimately 'unable' to stop them from opening the red flower Vales. Very conveniently bypasses the biggest principiate-callow conflict as the crusade marches toward heart of Praes, without giving any strong grounds for public suspicion.

---

It's implied that proceran mages mostly couldn't scry before at all, otherwise Klaus would describe it differently. Praesi are likely listening in on the Red Lions' communications, and Cat used a more confidential way of delivering her messages to Cordelia (a stealthy Named messenger).

First Prince can't openly deal with the Black Queen, since she's a certified abomination in the eyes of the Heavens. My bet is that Cat either is going to abuse the deal she set up with Cordelia (destroying her rival princes, with a very broad definition of "destroy", for crusaders concentrating on the Vales) or trick her into unknowingly breaking it, starting a story about a deal with a fairy gone wrong.

#### *Darkening*

i believe it's probably not that they couldn't scry at all, but that they didn't have Warlock's Cheap Reliable Long-Range Pebble Scrying, so it wasn't as useful.

#### *Fern*

Oh, it's absolutely going that way. Making a deal with the fae is way too rich of a trope for it not to happen. I'd almost be inclined to say Cat may break their deal without even meaning to, what with how her name is starting to rule how she acts after getting all that sweet winter goo.

#### *Rook*

I wonder if her name would even let her break the deals/promises/oaths. There was the whole question about whether Cat chose to sew Akua into the cloak or if she simply couldn't break the oath she previously made anymore. She's not even too sure herself, by her own admission.

If anything it would have to be something that screws them in practice while strictly adhering to the technical wording of the deal

#### *nerferf*

So does anyone else smell a deal was made by cat and cord? Cord arranges for all her internal enemies armies to go by this plain suicidal route and cat forces will fight them thus giving cat an excuse to not send troops to aid black or empress, keeping callow

which is now again a independent kingdom out of the war and the empire's best generals trapped in the vale while the real invasion enters from the coast into the vastly understaffed empire heartland?

I mean cat and cord are obvious going to back-stab each other, cord using these monster heros to try to off cat, and cat can easily attack uncle klaus in the back and trapping him between her and black if she decides to destroy this army in the pass

*Oshi*

I suppose I see it a little differently. I think the endgame will be the Dead King. Cat will be the fulcrum that turns the Crusade against the Hunger. In the end Callow and Praes both die so that a new empire is born while the Crusade will spend itself to kill/contain the Dead King. It's about the only way the Kingdoms in the South will survive what the Crusades are planning for the next few generations. Good gets to defeat a Greater Evil while the lesser survives and grows to challenge them later. If the pattern holds then that is how it will end.

*TeK*

I think the narrative has to change, and the change will be to something like "Practical Good and Practical evil cooperate to defeat Greater Evil, while Stupid Good and Stupid Evil die ugly death".

[hoyboy](#)

Only if the step immediately after is Practical Evil getting hung from trees.

*Big Brother*

Hoy, I've only seen your comments on the most recent chapters, and I'm already tired of your 'goody two-shoes' attitude. You seem like part of the Stupid Good category that only sees eliminating Evil as the proper course, never working with it.

[hoyboy](#)

First off I don't recall seeing a big sign on the top of the page saying "You must be this deep in the Protagonist bias Kool-Aid to ride" so I suppose you'll just have to deal with it.

Second. Evil blatantly has nothing beneficial to offer the world, even the Practical kind only gets vaguely less dystopic and murderous results on a societal level. Complaining that Good doesn't work with Evil on more

than a momentary basis is like complaining that the police don't work with the damn mafia.

*Fern*

The police did work with the mafia, though. It was a whole thing.

I'm getting ahead of myself. I don't buy into it too much either, but as far as choices Cat's got shit besides Practical Evil. Further than that, it looks like the only real gold end for all these characters is if they flip the middle finger to the Gods and make their own path, which is impossible with the Gods still in the picture.

Practical Evil isn't as bad as you're making it out to be, i think. The only difference between fair government because it's right and fair government as a stable way to keep the masses in line is intent, and we're about to get real Kantian if we stop worrying about that.

Never go full Kant. Down that path lies darkness and semantics.

*TeK*

Why? As far as I'm concerned, the only real difference between Practical Good and Evil is that former are hypocrites. I hope you are not gonna protect Stupid Good ala "let's mindcontrol hundred thousand civilians, elders, women and children included, into a mindless army of slaughtering everything on it's way", but the biggest move team Practical Good has going for itself is "let's invade a war-ridden country to distract everyone from our inner problems and kill any unstable elements that can potentially cause unrest". Yeah, mighty Good, all of them.

[hoyboy](#)

Because the countries ruled by evil are frighteningly dystopic hellholes ruled by insane despots. The good nations, despite massive flaws and inequality, are not.

*Oshi*

This is not an attack but lets not forget the whole constant civil war and slavery levels of serfdom in the Principate. Not to mention the caste based system that crushes people in Ashur?

*lennymaster*



It was stated several times, by several different characters, that the standard of living for the commoners (which means pretty much 85 to 95 percent of the population, depending on the efficiency of farming methods in Callow) has risen substantially since Black took over.

Society these days puts such an overinflated stock in morality, that feelings are valued higher than reason or facts, that well meant intent is praised no matter the actual outcome.

[Barth Humphries](#)

"Because the countries ruled by evil are frighteningly dystopic hellholes ruled by insane despots. The good nations, despite massive flaws and inequality, are not."

Callow, which has been ruled by the Practical Evil Black Knight has been as decent as any of the Good nations with their constant "civil wars" (or internal conflicts). Praes, although nominally under Empress Malicia, has been under the Truebloods (who were only recently all wiped out) and they were all Really Evil. Some of the Goodish nations, like Bellerephon, are literal 1984 dystopian hell holes with rocks implanted in your head that monitor your thoughts and blow you up if you think the wrong thing.

TeK

Well, you do have a point, living under Traitorous, while hilarious, would be quite taxing. But the whole point is that it's not Practical Evil. Practical Evil is more like Benevolent, you dig?

[Barth Humphries](#)

Practical Evil is, "if you kill the goose that laid golden eggs, you don't get any more eggs. So for greatest long-term personal money earning potential, you have to be a benevolent overlord and help your subjects get super rich so that they can afford to pay the higher taxes that you later want to levy on them."

I.e. the Reaganomics approach. 😏

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Then by definition, Practical is just what it means, doing the most suitable thing, no need to label Good or Evil on top of it there.

TeK

I would gladly, but we're talking about universe in which Good and Evil are very, very real. I acknowledge the reality by labeling them such. But yes, I would prefer if Practical would be more of the side, than Good or Evil. Let's see.

### [oldschoolvillain](#)

About a third of the Legions of Terror and at least one Marshall are still stationed in the Wastelands. With the High Lords dealt with, Malicia can absolutely send them to manage the threat from the coastline (and considering the mention of the Legions having a dragon enrolled, possibly wipe out the force on the Tideless Isles). Plus, as Cat mentioned, the Wasteland itself is "death on invaders" what with the lack of useful scrounging available and the eldritch horrors still tucked away behind the walls of their cities. Sure, Ashur can raid the coastline, but the cities are where the wealth is, and attacking one of those with anything less than a band of Heroes is going to end in some serious damage to the attackers.

TeK

Ashur can not just raid the cost, but land an actual army. With actual heroes, why not? To detter and counter that, at least some portion of military need to stay in Wasteland. Plus, nobility, while toothless, is not toothless enough to leave unsupervised.

### [vuthuha912](#)

Unlikely, landing an army means you are going to commit to the invasion – which means fighting long-term – means they need a supply line. Praesi can't farm for shit and their climate is as hostile as it can get. Any invasion force will need a long supply line that bogged down the army movement and in war, movement is key. Even if they manage to land horses in Praes, the climate and terrain are not favorable conditions to be using horses in. The Praesi force can easily turn this into a Napoleon Invasion of Russia but with sand and they won't even have to wait for general Winter.

Ashur's greatest strength is their navy, why would they want to ditch it for a land invasion. They are more likely to help transport the fighting force of other nations to Praes. How long will the enemy last in Praes is a different question?

And if I think about this correctly, the ship for transporting the invader will likely be massive warships as they carried more people and resources. The English fought this type of fight with the Spanish once. So is The Korean

vs Japanese – the one where Yi Sun Sin happened. And Vietnam and the Mongol/Chinese. All of the victors in these conflicts are the ones who are outnumbered and are fighting in their homeland. The story is writing itself with this conflict. Go Praes – the underdog!

I mean they could poison the water supply near the coast, burn the ports down after luring the invader in, evacuate the entire area, etc. We got a load of tactics to deal with war like this irl. I believe in the power of pride and spite. There is no way that the Praesi are going to take it lying down. This is the time for them to pull out all the nasty tricks.

### *Trupo*

Did Malicia just feed Proceans an unsafe comms measure that Warlock and Masego can tap into at will?

Every time someone was scrying in the past, notion of Akua being possibly able to listen was rised, safety discussed, protocols changed. And now, on eve of war, Proceans get access to " the most precious secret of the East", don't seem aware of liabilities of crying and put it in hands of inexperienced mages who won't be able to spot weak points.

Are they going to be broadcasting their positions and plans for everyone to hear, while Cat can move the armies through Arcadia to react?

Also, Klaus seems to thing Amadis is going to fight Cat, while Amadis thinks he's moving to flank the Vales. With Masego tapping into Procean scrying the stairs look like a planned death trap.

### *Skraeling*

Terribly sorry but... when was there contact between catherine and the first prince? I don't recall reading that.

### *Nif*

I believe that was in the epilogue, where theif is sent as a messenger.

### *Gunslinger*

Well RIP Amadis. A clearer sacrificial pawn cannot be found and I'd consider it easy for Cat to demolish them even with the presence of the old heroes. One of the visions she had in Akua's 4 fold crossing trap had the Bumbling Conjuror drop a mountain on Proceran armies to stop them in the Red Vales. The same thing could be easily done here.

Also it's interesting that the White Knight is going to be fighting Black instead of Cat. Aiming for a pattern of 3 there? Or maybe gaining practice until he's ready for his true opponent

---

Catherine is a more likely end opponent for Hanno: the Fate builds her up as an equal to him, just like it did with her and Akua:

"Justifications only matter to the just" vs "I do not judge".

Googling through the dead heroes' memories and absorbing their skills vs literally collecting undead heroes.

Artifact that calls on otherworldly creatures to punish the evildoers vs an evildoer calling on otherworldly creatures, made part of a magical artifact as a punishment.

Time will show whether the Fate will also equalize them in power, like it was with "deals with devils vs deals with fairies", "unlimited Greater Breaches vs unlimited gates to Arcadia" etc.

*grzecho2222*

I think that the most important detail is that Hanno is driven by absolut of justice and Bard is the entity with the most of blood of innocents on her hands.

*werafdsaew*

But the White Knight does not judge. He has surrendered his free will to the choir of judgement, so he won't act against the Wandering Bard until the choir judges her.

*grzecho2222*

That's the point, if White uses his coin on Bard you think absolut of justice will look kindly on everything she had done?

*Ashen Shugar*

The tricky thing about that though, is that it's heavenly justice, not absolute justice. Going by the riddle that Hanno solved by stating the King was in the wrong for not leaving justice up to the heavens, it's quite possible that anything that gets the Good Gods closer to winning may be seen as "justice" by the Choir. In fact, while humans may see it as Just things are what the Angels do, it may be the other way around and it's whatever the Angels do that is Just. Even if it's

killing every single first born in the land that isn't behind a door with splashes of blood on the frame.

### BarthHumphries

"Even if it's killing every single first born in the land that isn't behind a door with splashes of blood on the frame."

To be fair, things slowly ramped up. I mean, the very first plague was that an immediate drought happened and that all water turned to blood. Then frogs, lice, and either scorpions/snake or flies. And all of those animals crawling on them and in their homes wasn't enough. And then all of their livestock was stricken with disease, and everyone had boils on their skin (or giant ingrown pimples all over). And then the worst storm happened that Egypt had ever seen – hail falling and damaging buildings while lightning started fires. Then clouds of locusts that devoured every food source that was still left, and then complete darkness for the space of three days so that nobody could even leave what was left of their buildings. And I don't know about you, but after all that other stuff I would have been more afraid of what might have been in the darkness than I would have been of anything else.

And all of that still wasn't enough. So it became personal. We've seen similar things happen in this story – things slowly get ramped up because the smaller measures sometimes just aren't enough to change people's minds.

The way the Koran describes it, things also got really really bad and it still wasn't enough. So it became personal.

### Antony444

Wow, Cordelia First Prince of Procer has been very busy the last decade. Armies, mages, the Stairway...it is a very rational and well-executed plan. Too bad those rarely survives contact with the enemy.

The first problem I see with this plan is that at no way she's ready to fight the Dead King now. She has mustered around 120 000 soldiers of Procer, and none can be deployed north to Cleves and Hainault in time if the Kingdom of the Dead invades this way. Should the undead abomination attacks as the first phase is unfolding, her nothern army will be on the other side of the mountains, the Vale army of Hannover will be locked in a death struggle against the Black Knight and the southern one has to fight against the Tyrant of Helike. Sure, Cordelia must have

planned for reserves, but when the Dead King attacks, Procer is going to be hurt...

The second problem being of course that apparently they have no idea Catherine can use portals at will now, and transport the armies of Callow in time to stop this offensive.

Still, it is delicious to see even the side of Good is dealing with its betrayals, plots and nasty politics as much as the Evil Side does. The Tenth Crusade is on its way, and the Uncivil Wars are going to be a terrifying bloodbath...

[wyaldriddler](#)

My oh my. This is already shaping up to be a massive clusterfuck. I'll just go from the top on what I noticed:

The ten Wastelanders with scrying. Where this even came from is going to be a mystery for some time. Immediate guesses is that this is a play from Cat or Malicia or potentially defectors from Diabolist. However, we already know that Heirophant can send Corruption along demonic control links from another fucking dimension, so sending bad juju along all those convenient scrying links may also be in his bailiwick.

Klaus Papenheim's disregard for the south, his provincialism. It is a hole in his mind, a lack of trust which makes things shaky.

Brabant being cheap skates is probably going to bite them as a Chekov Oops later.

Sending that many heroes through the Stairway to Cat will make Harrow and the Stairway a pivot, by the very Laws of Creation. Whoever wins there, makes truly massive gains in the Tenth Crusade. Cat is good at harnessing pivots, and so is Black. And Prince Amadis is too caught in his own plays to be any kind of good thing for the army. A story of an army led by a foolish conniving prince through a pivot? He will die ignominiously. Conservation of Narrative also indicates that all of these heroes will through some means not be as effective as they should be I'd wager.

The way Ashur is stretching Praes. That isn't going to end well for someone.

Cat and Cordelia's deal, whatever that is. That's going to come out in the worst way, for somebody. Like someone commented, Cat's nature makes it so that any bargain she makes, if broken will \*wreck\* the other side. There are far too many stories of bargains with the Fey going sideways for something wacky not to happen. And no one knows she's Fey natured yet, or doesn't understand it yet.

Prince Amadis' casual disregard for the Chain of Hunger and Dead King.

The strangeness with the finances, where did that come from? Cat? Or did something else happen? Then there is the convoking of the Highest Assembly planned. The \*arrogance\* in there means its all going to go to shit, in this narratively driven universe. Put together, something is going to blow up for someone.

Does anyone remember which Hell it is that Demons start showing up in? The Twenty Sixth? For a second I thought Procer had the same number of provinces as the start of the Demon Hells. \*shrug\*

Harrow also has a Demon of Absence and devil Doom Standard in it(can't remember what they are actually called). That's going to be an unfun surprise for someone.

Black's recent philosophical conundrum is changing what is happening with him, and may well be confirming that he will die as the evil, but in some way redeemed Mentor Figure. Name business is going on there basically.

There are so \*many\* holes and plots and just \*stuff\* going on in the background. My God it's glorious. I have no idea who \*will\* win, but I'd guess it will be Cat.

*grzecho2222*

I think it was hell number 23, 24 being first with devils also "No," I agreed. "But Ratface's staff now has a representative from the Guild of Assassins attached. Those mages will be heading back to Praes through cities I control."

---

My pet theory is that, as a state forged in the wake of Triumphant's defeat, Principate's pattern is to stay at 23 principalities. Each time they try to add another one, the Fate turns against them.

*TeK*

On the contrary, I think when formed, Procer included some of Free Cities, as well as some of Levant. They just slowly lost those territories, otherwise those wouldn't be known as "former Proceran principalities".

*TeK*

"I did not think it a coincidence that the Twenty-Fourth Hell marked the transition from demons to devils."  
I do not think it's a coincidence either.

*BungieONI*

Oh.

WELL.

That has \*implications\*.

[BarthHumphries](#)

I don't see that quote on this page.

*TeK*

Cause it isn't. It's from book 2 chapter 22, I think, where Masego wants to protect machford from devils.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

No, it was from the chapter where Catherine was first introduced to the Imperial Court. The one where Akua trapped her in the wager on the Grand Melee for command of the 15th Legion. She made the thought when she heard that official court sessions are held on the 24th floor.

*TeK*

Well, dunno about that, I copied it from the chapter 25 of book 2, in which they plan defence of matchford, I was mistaken earlier, drew it from the memory. If you look up the chapter you suggesting, you'll see that there wasn't outright mentioned, exactly why 24 is an important number, other than that it has something to do with demons.

*taovkool*

Lots of Prince and Princesses involved. The fight this time is gonna be that one about the Prince's Grave wasn't it?

*Th3saint*

The fact that cat armies can ignore space and have easy logistics due to Cats Arcadia Highways is a complete unknown to the Crusaders, that in the hands of Hellhound is a force multiplier in the order of a couple of Names at least.

*Ward*

Love from a dumbphone

*dusting*

well this has been a colossal set up for massive failure if I ever saw one.



Im very sure he's going to make history, just not in the way he expected...

*TeK*

One thing irking me, is the fact, that all those princes are no better then most imperial governors, yet they get to fight for the good guys, cause they crawled up on the right side of the mountains. And yes, the worst of them going to die, but it wouldn't change the same tendency. Exactly why many Heroes for generations ignore the unjust feudal system, which spares peasant blood like sand is beyond me.

*Darkening*

Well, it probably doesn't help that the only example of democracy seen in setting is the madness that is bellerophon. Might sour people a bit to the idea to the point where they just figure, "Well, putting someone actually good on the throne will fix everything!" instead of actually trying to change the system.

*TeK*

Technically, Ashur has some form of democracy, Free Cities are essentially a confederacy, HRE, oops, Procer even has a parlament, and as far as I'm concerned, the only authocratic state in Free League is Helike and maybe Penthes. The Atalante is most likely some take on theocracy, perhaps bishopic, or like a Papal state. Everything else? Some degree of democracy. So it is not like democracy is not existing or misrepresented. The root of the problem lies probably with the whole Named system, and for lesser part, stagnating technological progress. The only ones who can change the system are Named, and they tend to be arrogant and consider themselves better then plebs, or at least more important and suited for ruling. If they see the problem, they don't tend to think, that the problem is with the system, so they take reign, fix the problem, and then everything slowly regresses back.

Still, this is not an excuse for outright ignoring countless victims of everlasting squabbles between Heroes and Villains. No matter who wins, Good or Evil, the ones who pay the corpse price and suffer are simple, Nameless people on both sides. Like seriously, if you are so righteous, don't drag other people in your phylosophical debates on what kind of metaphysical bullshit tastes better. Part of the reason why Anaxares is my favorite character after best girl is that he, finally, represents those who don't have a name.

P.S. It's not that I root for democracy as the best form of goverment, period, but it pisses me off when thousand die on

background, sometimes without any mention. It's even worse than what Black said: "One half of world, turn into a prop for the glory of the other half". It's the whole world, turned into a background to glorify butchers and murderers. I mean, let us be fair, did anyone even heard of the names like Architector, Compositor, Artist, Statesman, Farmer, Philosopher, Blacksmith, Woodcutter, Lumberjack? Inherently peacefull Names, I mean? Even Bards and Scribes are turned into the weapons and fighters. It's like the world propagates that the only way to live is to war.

grzecho2222

It's like in real life, everybody is right from their perspective. But if it will go as it went in reality then fact that absolute monarchy (Black) and positivims (Cat) are making waves than feudal nobles don't have much time left.

TeK

Well, what dissappoints is the fact that most of those views are heavily underrepresented. Black's absolutism is derailed curtesy of Malicia, and I think Cat doesn't have enough administrating capability and savviness to implement such reforms. Scrying will tilt the balance if only a little, but unless some really big threat comes and stays, everything will return as it were. Anyway, I'd wager Callow and Praes turned into centralised administrative monarchy not unlike european governments after Renaissance, Procer uniting in face of this and Dead King threat going up to eleven, as well is at loss of most of the princes, with some principalities adding to Free Cities, which turns more united and centralized, Switzerland style. Don't know what to expect from Levant, certainly not an Inquisition.

The biggest problem is timeframe. The meanigful changes implemented and the Crusade fought needs to be done over the course of last two books, which gives us from two to five years of action, and this is practically nothing in the bigger picture. Moreover, the seafaring, warfare and agriculture, as far as I can tell, really lacking for any meaningfull govermental changes. And Names are a wild card too. Still, it's fun to debate politics in a made up fantasyverse.

[hoyboy](#)

Black is not an absolute monarch, nor is Cat a... positivist, whatever the hell that means. The ideology they represent is pretty blatantly militant proto-fascism.

d\_o\_l

Man, why are you even reading this story?

*Forrest*

Are we even reading the same story? Since when has cat been even remotely fascist?

*grzecho2222*

Political positivism is at it simplest the idea that when one want to change country for better they should start down and not give a heck about whinning of elites

*Ryan DD Durnell*

Yeah...I get that most Good can't actually be "good" because that would create a world of absolutes that's essentially unlivable. Still, these jackasses are really pushing the limits. I patiently await severe karmic backlash.

Also, welcome back! Get published, dawg, I'll push some dollars into your pockets!

*Letouriste*

Making history he say 😊

Pretty sure his defeat will be so total he will really be in history^^

I expect these praesis to be given by cat and that whole « surprise » attack to have been in the negocation.

Cat win will boost moral and defeat several heroes in the process and hasenbach get the removal of an annoying party trying to hurt her.

So funny to read the POV of a fodder in a story so out of his capacities to deal with

*Letouriste*

What are the odds these scrying spells are actually a huge trap mean to kill the mages involved and removing all communication between armies at critical timing?

[boballab](#)

I get the feeling that the Stairway is the backstab to the deal between Cat and Cordelia. Too bad that an invasion route one way can easily turn into one the other way when the incompetent Prince gets his army wiped out. Got 10 Quataloos that he doesn't listen to the Hero's with him.

*Ryan DD Durnell*

I actually hope Amadis DOESN'T fold like a cheap deck of cards. It would be refreshing to see someone neither Named nor non-human exercise some relevance and present a serious challenge.

The discussion about democracy, the little people, etc is not new to fiction. It's why there are people who say "the Jedi are as bad as the Sith." When really thought over, the average person in almost any system can get by, maybe even prosper and enjoy life, regardless of whether or not they have a vote (and most people don't vote anyway).

That cannot be said for Praes (evil) with its nightmarish idiocy or Procer (good) with its institutionalized backbiting. So they both suck and should die in a fire.

*TeK*

It's not really about the equality of power, rather an equality of opportunity. The changes of world are reserved solely for Named, which is, given that Named are heavily influenced by their names, turns to chronically stagnating world. Same stories repeat, over and over, just new people die in them. And nothing really changes. Same borders, same Names, same technology, crap, same demographic situation.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Cordelia isn't named, and she's been going round for round against Malicia in a shadow war across the continent since before the story began. She's also been the driving force behind three threats – that we know of – those being this Crusade, William/The Liesse Rebellion, and Tasia Sahelian. And she's had her hands in the war for the Free Cities in which the Hierarch was elected, as well. AND the Epilogue of Book Three revealed that she has agents in the Legions of Terror. She has been involved in literally every major conflict so far, and she doesn't have a Name at all.

*TeK*

Or does she? Tum-tum-tuuuum.

*SMHF*

Well it's nice to know the Good side's gonna have its fair share of backstabbing in the crusade!

Also Congrats! The guide's finally first in topwebfiction!

Don't forget to vote guys! that's how I find this story in the first place!

<http://topwebfiction.com/?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

TeK

It's actually fifth.

Adra

Looks like, at least from a stylistic standpoint, Queen of Blades is out of the running for Cat. Wouldn't make sense from an aesthetic standpoint to line Queen of Blades up vs. Saint of Blades, doesn't sound good on paper, er, screen.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

It actually sounds like an amazing matchup. Just not sure who would win.

d\_o\_l

I noticed in chapter 37 of book 3, the name is called "Saint of Swords" instead. Seems like a minor continuity error. Also, Queen of Blades vs Saint of Swords would be a fucking awesome match up.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Few things \*I\* noticed,  
If the timeskip is truly as large as it appears, that goblin tribe Cat allowed to settle near Marchford is ENORMOUS by now. The factors we've been told contribute to goblin mortality are nearly ALL absent outside the Gray Eyries. (Competition for resources. Schemes of Matron Vs. Matron. Breaking into Dwarven tunnels accidentally etc.) Any species whose members possess lifespans as short as goblins undoubtedly breed like cockroaches. If twenty is pretty much unreachable without blood magic, FIVE might be sexual maturity!

Heroes don't get the cool no-aging-until-killed that villains do. Meaning if this Saint of Blades and Grey Pilgrim are really all that old, skilled and badass, they are also likely reasonable frail and vulnerable when not actively wielding Named power. They may well be simply on the north side of middle-aged...but I suspect they possess some significant, if fairly well-hidden, weakness rooted in their biology. (I'm still irked by Ranger's half-elven heritage. It makes deciding whether she's a metaphysical Villain or Heroine impossible to confirm. I lean towards the latter, but that's just me. I would not at all put it past her to lie about the fact, and have found a convincing way to lie about it to all Creation)

Cordelia's Crusade is riddled with metaphysical problems. For one, she's called it for reasons I doubt the Heavens would even approve of. She cares more about creating a Good super-state than actually defeating the targeted Evil. Nearly all her internal

musings center on building the groundwork for what will become her envisioned super-state generations from now. Quite covetous of her. Not to mention deceitful and treacherous (As she's essentially plotting the dissolution of all the ruling mechanisms of all her allies, to be carried out at a time convenient for her descendants.) For another, she lacks WEIGHT in the way Akua declares Malicia and Black do. She connives, she deceives...she's basically a 2nd-rate Malicia without a Name, who deludes herself into believing she's good. All while considering her own commoners "animals to be exploited." Disposing of "unruly Fantassins?" How Stalinist of you, Cordelia.

Lastly, this Crusade has too many moving parts for even the Providence-heavy Hand of the Heavens to protect from Murphy's Law. There is a REASON Black uses such extreme security measures when utilizing scrying while abroad. Remember him burning out mage-relays? Remember his rule about one message to a given location inside a LARGE area? Remember his unwillingness to even consider using a line of scrying he'd previously utilized? All speak to the fact that hacking a scrying channel is probably actually easier than maintaining a legit scrying channel in the first place.

In fact, I'm almost CERTAIN of that fact. Remember, one of the most fundamental elements of magic in this universe is, according to Warlock "Sorcery is Usurpation." Kinda implies that usurping a scrying attempt is easier than scrying, eh? Would also explain why Black was so rabid about time limits, and circumstances under which he'd utilize it.

### *Forrest*

To be fair about the crusade... since when does the Good of the Heavens actually seem 'good'? The heavens are all for brainwashing normal everyday people into being cannon fodder against evil. Not to mention, a Good empire being created in the long term would probably be all up in that greater good bs.

### *MetruX*

This reminds me of a theory I've had since the second book, now. You see, there is a saying that, in the beginning, the Gods disagreed on what to do about creation: some wanted to set it free, some wanted to control it, and thus Good and Evil were made. They are NOT the supreme good or evil, they are facets of reality embodied, through the vision of those Gods. And my theory is that the one who wanted to control is not the Evil, but the Good side, while the Evil is all about leaving them for themselves. Surely none of the sides are good for us, but even though some parts of this theory make alot of sense, it's hard to imagine that the Evil side is guiding people, which is whate is stated to be the side of Good... Though it could also be that we don't understand how it

is guiding or that it was a plain lie, since the books tell that Good is about guiding and Evil about controlling..

[wyaldriddler](#)

The whole distinction is supposed to be ambiguous. However, given that the Angels are basically "Yoho! Your brain is mine nao!" in every incarnation of them we've seen, or otherwise basically brainwash you into doing what they want and even more damningly don't try to improve mortal's lots it seems like the "Good" side described in the books is all about control and absolute order.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Thinking about it, it's actually plausible Evil and Good share qualities of control and guidance, and the ratio shifts depending on context.

*BBM*

Getting some serious SMT vibes from this.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Rip this dude. I don't think Duchess Kegan would like to betray Cat.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Nope. Not after whatever deal she made with Catherine. Especially not after Catherine sent Masego to help rework the Gestalt and increase the security on it to prevent another Akua.

*Author Unknown*

I'm surprised no one asked if they brought any elephants.

*JackbeThimble*

'Lord Papenheim- Magon Hadast writes to report that his fleet has descended on Praes like, quote 'A wolf on the Fold' endquote. He requests resupply of purple paint for his newly raised cohorts.'  
'Excellent Bertrand, send word to the wives of Ashur that they have nothing to worry about and their menfolk should be home by christmas.'

*Onos*

Ha! Never noticed old Klaus refers to a collective of Heroes the same as Cat! It really is the little things, well played EE.

[vuthuha912](#)

The Crusaders are going to lose this or they won't get much from this entire ordeal.

Firstly, Cordelia isn't fighting to win – it is just a secondary goal for her. She wants to unite the Good nations, deal with her political opponents, and maybe stop Black and Malicia. Her fighting force also does not have the strongest will to win, either. In war, one of the crucial elements for victory especially between two closely matched opponents is the will. Obviously, people who fight for survival, for their own country are going to be more willing to fight and push the extra mile. This is why having a superweapon is a huge blow to Praes/Callow – it hampers the feeling of urgency for their fighting forces and it bolsters the fighting will of their opponent. It is simpler to justify a war to destroy a superweapon than a war to ... do whatever ... to your fighting force. Now that Black has destroyed the weapon, and the thing never shot at any Good nation, the morale is weakened. But, with the massive casualty of the Praesi force, their own morale is also weakened. I expect a boost while fighting on home turf for Praes and Callow.

Secondly, Procer is not ready. My dearest Cordelia just drags her country out of a civil war, The population needs time to recover, they need to replenish their granary and prepare the supply for the war. During the war, agriculture production will suffer as the working forces get drafted into the army. That is why you need to prepare for 10 years before you wage war for 1 year – to store enough food, have enough kids, train enough troops, stomp enough political dissidents, make enough propaganda, and build enough shelters. The moment the war drags out, you have a war on two fronts – Chain of Hunger and Praes. Procer economy is fucked regardless. If you can't guarantee a decisive victory, it is not worth fighting at all.

Thirdly, Procer and its allies have different motives. Sure, they are fighting against the same enemies but they are fighting for completely different reasons. Uniting everyone for a common enemy usually work if you are facing an overwhelming enemy and you are fighting for mutual survival. Alliances like this are as likely to fall apart as staying together. Just look at the Coalition vs Dong Zhou or the 5 nations vs Qin. All of these alliances fell apart. The Coalition outnumbered Dong Zhuo, they even have a righteous cause – rescuing the Emperor and the nation. It fell apart the moment they get their first victory. Qin was an overwhelming enemy. Yet, the fight for survival did not stop these countries from infighting, corruption, and backstabbing each other. They handed the Qin half the victory of that conflict. Sure the Allies won against the Axis in WWII but we all remember how shit the Allies did at the beginning of the war. They were too busy burying their head in the sand and only started being serious after it was clear that Germany was not going to stop. Germany fought entire Europe to a standstill.



Praes did stop. It doesn't encroach on Procer and Callow even gains its independence. The Allies betrayed each other the moment the War was over – USSR vs USA. Haizz... Cordelia is working on a beautiful dream but it is just that – a dream.

Finally, the infighting of Procer nobility. There is nothing more detrimental to your odd in war than infighting among the administration. Remember Gaozong and Yue Fei. Remember Joseon court vs Yi Sun Si. Remember Li Mu and King of Zhao. Gaozong killed Yue Fei, his best general due to political conflicts, in a middle of a war. The Joseon court imprisoned Yi Sun Sin twice DURING the Japanese invasion. Li Mu got killed by his King when he was fighting the Qin. The possibility of human stupidity across time and distance is astonishing.

To be fair, Praes is just as likely to fall for this problem as Procer. With Malicia and Black in a cold war right now, it is possible that she will stab him before the Crusaders get to him. However, they obviously love each other so maybe they won't. Callow is still an ally of convenience at the moment. As long as they survive the Crusade, they can talk it out with each other.

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## Chapter 1: Observatory

*"Those who withstood the sword, I laid low with ink."*

– Words carved into the tomb of Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

I rarely used the council room these days. Under the Fairfaxes the King's Council had been the greatest organ of power in the realm, closer to the crown than any and wielding influence far beyond that of the titles of the men and women having been appointed to it. I'd retained only parts of it, though, the ones I found useful. I had no need for a Chamberlain to see to the 'royal household', when mine was essentially me and whatever part of the Woe happened to be in Laure at the time. And even then I doubted Thief had slept in her chambers more than twice. She preferred prowling the city when she was there. Masego disdained his rooms as well, though for reasons somewhat more worrying. No, broadening the authority of the palace's seneschal had been quite sufficient. Not that all old roles had been so easily disposed of. With Anne Kendall in the seat of Governess-General, Juniper as my Marshal and Ratface as my Lord Treasurer there'd been only one seat left worth filling: Keeper of the Seals. In the old kingdom, those had been tasked with overseeing courts of law and making sure the decrees of the crown were upheld across Callow.

That seemed a glorified clerk's position, until one remembered the way the kingdom had functioned under the Fairfaxes.

Though laws decreed in Laure held sway across the realm in theory, in practice the hair-raising labyrinth of ancient privileges and prerogatives held by most highborn houses made it a nightmare for any single decree to be uniformly observed. I'd been amused to learn that House Talbot, whose old demesne was now my own, had for several centuries been allowed to trade in lands directly held by the crown without tariffs as part of an old deal that saw a generous loan offered to a king so he could build a summer palace by the Silver Lake. I'd been even more amused to learn that said palace had been wrecked by Praesi within the decade when they attempted to invade the heartlands of Callow through an underwater invasion – orcs with gills, apparently – down the Pening river. One of the Malignants, that'd been, I was pretty sure. A Dread Emperor of the worst mould, incompetent at everything but murderously ensuring his rivals didn't overthrow him. Regardless of historical curiosities, the Empire had actually allowed me to inherit a significantly more centralized realm in many ways. With Baron Darlington of Hedges and Baroness Morley of Harrow the only two remaining landed nobles in Callow, I didn't have nearly as many powerful people barking about privileges and prerogatives.

What I did end up having, however, was my court's first real power struggle. Now that the governors across Callow all answered to the crown through the Governess-General the office of Keeper of the Seals held a lot more direct power than it'd used to, with a lot less pushback to boot. Crown decrees had a lot more teeth, these days, and the Keeper had a great deal of latitude in ensuring they were upheld. Everyone and their sister had gone after the appointment, beginning the charm offensive the moment I was crowned. The only ones who'd stayed out of the fray were the Deoraithe, and I'd almost asked Kegan to send me a competent cousin just for that. Brandon Talbot and his tribe of old aristocrats had been the most ferocious, though the northern baronies had tried to muscle his people out – the fight between the powers in Laure and the distant northern nobles was an old one. A few elders in Laure had actually tried to bribe Ratface into putting in a good word for their candidate, banking on the Taghreb reputation for venality, and instead found themselves fined for the exact same sum and unceremoniously drummed out of office.

I picked a southerner, in the end, after tasking Baroness Kendall to find me a suitable one. After the massacre at Second Liesse, what had once been the duchy of the same name and even the region as a whole had been on the brink of collapse. It'd only been the reparations I obtained from the Empress and Hakram's feverish work that kept the place from eating itself alive, and even now it was the most unstable part of my realm. A major city and over

a hundred thousand people were gone from the heart of the south, it wasn't something that could be healed in a year. Or even a decade. Binding whatever powers remained down there to the crown had been necessary, and my Governess-General managed to dig up a candidate that wouldn't fuck up the duties that came with the appointment. Edith Westmore had once been a lady in her own right, before her liege lord took up arms in the Liesse Rebellion, and even after had remained a wealthy landowner. She had the reputation and the connections to be a capable Keeper of Seals, and though I wasn't particularly fond of her as a person neither did she grate my nerves. It was no lifetime appointment, regardless.

Lady Edith was not here in my solar, not this afternoon anyway. I'd had the richly-panelled room furnished more to my tastes – which largely meant removing all the more ostentatious stuff and filling the new liquor cabinet to the brim – and these days I conducted most royal business in here. The comfortable surroundings helped allay the inevitable bouts of tediousness that seemed to accompany the work of making Callow into a halfway-functioning nation. My two companions at the table bathed by afternoon sun were the two members of my council I saw most often: Governess-General Anne Kendall and Lord Treasurer Hasan Qara. Who still insisted on being called Ratface, though he'd come to embrace the sobriquet of Bastard Lord as well. He got a kick out of how much it horrified Praesi envoys.

"We've another petition from Hedges," Anne said, shuffling parchments. "On the subject of tariffs in Laure and Southpool."

The silver-haired woman glanced delicately at my treasurer after speaking. Ratface seemed distinctly unamused, though the irritation was not directed at Kendall.

"They're trying to flood the markets with wool," the Taghreb told me. "They have entire warehouses going to waste, the Jacks confirmed it."

'The Jacks' was a very fancy title for my ever-growing web of thieves, smugglers, spies and sundry informants. It was nowhere as unified and well-organized as the appellation implied, with Aisha's network of kinsmen in Praes, Ratface's guildsmen and Thief's *friends* being different organizations entirely. Adjutant oversaw the whole mess of disparate reports and pieced it together into a coherent picture before bringing it to me. As for the name, well, it was known in some circles that the Guild of Thieves was now in my pay. Mutterings at my court about *lowly knaves* entering the crown's service had been frequent in early days, and Vivienne had amused herself by picking a fucking pun she knew I'd despise but still have to use frequently – knave was another name for a jack, in Callowan card decks. Of all my

companions, Thief was the one whose sense of humour always ended up screwing me some way or another.

"They would eat at their own profits if they did," Kendall frowned. "Compared to selling to the crown they would be making a loss."

"We're not buying as much anymore," I noted. "South's mostly settled, all the notable tent cities are clothed and fed."

"It's a farsighted ploy," Ratface told us. "They're not after immediate profit here, they're trying to put the local guilds out of business. After they've cornered the market, they can start slowly raising prices. Thalassina tried the same thing with the spice trade under Nefarious, it nearly started a war with Nok."

"If they spent half as much time seeing to their own as they do thinking up ways to fuck with me, the north would be a godsdamned paradise," I said through gritted teeth.

Baroness Kendall cleared her throat.

"Though I cannot speak as to the mercantile effects," she said, "from a diplomatic perspective we have already done much to antagonize Hedges. A concession might be in order."

"I prevented them from fleecing desperate refugees, Anne," I flatly replied. "I didn't exactly piss in their morning porridge."

"All they see is expected gold never reaching their coffers," my Governess-General said. "And I must remind you that our grasp on the region is still feeble. Fear will only get us so far."

Fear was what had gotten us anything at all, I thought. I had no illusions about the loyalty of those two holdout baronies. I doubted they'd truly join the fold within my lifetime. Even confirming nearly all their old privileges – the right to mint their own coin being the largest abolished – and leaving their holdings untouched they still wanted more. *Aristocrats*. My growing exposure to the lot of them had done nothing to improve my opinion of the breed, save for a few exceptions.

"Quotas," I finally said. "Enough they can get a foothold, not enough they can eat the whole cake. And make it clear to the right people that I expect positions on having observing Legion officers attached to their armies to... change accordingly."

Kendall inclined her head, the touch of the sun on her locks rather fetching as she did. For a woman her age she remained strikingly beautiful.

"I'll have a proposal drafted," Ratface said. "Now, I know we've spoken of this before but..."

I grimaced, fairly sure I knew what was coming.

"There is too much Imperial coinage circulating in Callow, Catherine," he said. "We need to start buying it up."

Were I not Named, I might never have noticed the slight crease on the Governess-General's brow when she heard Ratface refer to me by my given name. She and I had once been more familiar as well, but that had gone up in smoke since my coronation. Anne Kendall was a patriot to the bone: it didn't matter how I'd gotten my crown, now that I wore it I was to be treated as loftily as any Fairfax.

"You're my treasurer," I sighed. "You know damn well we don't have the funds for that. And the Empress might see it as provocation, which we *really* can't afford at the moment."

A year of regular reports had made it painfully clear to me that while Praesi troops might no longer garrison my cities or Praesi lords rule them, Praesi influence was far from gone. I'd spent so much time paying attentions to borders and armies that I'd never considered the Wasteland would still have a leash in the form of coin and commerce. Trade with Procer had pretty much ended after the Conquest, and trade to Mercantis had been dominated by Imperial governors. The wealth came from the east, these days, and there was precious little I could do about that at the moment. Not when it was the Tower's gold that had rebuilt an entire third of my realm. I'd had to make concessions to ensure that materialized, too. We'd been keeping Callow afloat for the last year by gouging the High Lords scrabbling for grain through trade permits and set prices, but the Tower had been exempted from both. To an extent, anyway. I'd insisted on keeping large reserves in anticipation of the crusade.

"So long as nearly half the coinage in Callow is from the Imperial Mint, the Tower can break the realm's coffers at will," Ratface said. "All the Empress needs to do is devalue her currency and the south goes up in flames. It's a knife at our throat, Catherine. I understand the Hellhound is riding you about funding for the army, but another thousand men will make no difference if we can't *pay* those soldiers."

"Our own coin is slowly displacing the others," Baroness Kendall pointed out. "Patience might be the wisest answer."

The Taghreb shook his head.

"We're replacing old Callowan coinages," he said. "We barely touched the Wasteland portion. The Carrion Lord spent decades making certain Callow was dependent on Imperial coin for trade,

it is not work that can be undone in a few years' span. Not unless we plan and invest."

"There has to be an alternative to just taking the Empress' gold off the streets by emptying our coffers, Ratface," I said.

"That'd be as good as raising a banner in her eyes. There would be immediate retaliation."

The handsome man wrinkled his nose, rather unbecomingly.

"Using Mercantis as a third party, perhaps," he finally said. "It would be slower and costlier, and still have us vulnerable to foreign influence."

I sighed.

"Draft-"

"A proposal, yes," he finished amusedly. "Ah, the joys of queenship."

"Don't you fucking start," I muttered. "Between this and learning all those godsdamned Proceran languages my eyes are going to fall off."

Baroness Kendall delicately cleared her throat.

"Not to add undue burden, but there is one last petition," she said.

"Go on," I grunted. "As long as it's not our man in Vale whining about granary distribution again."

"Officials have presented a formal request that the court return to the use of the Alban calendar," she told me.

I snorted.

"Yeah, that's not happening," I said. "The Legions all use -"

I heard the movement behind the door before the knock sounded. My ears pricked. Man, late thirties, fine health. He smelled of anxiousness, though well short of fear.

"Enter," I called out before he'd finished knocking.

I felt the gaze of the other two on me. Ah. I really needed to stop doing that. It did tend to make people uncomfortable. It was a servant, who I did not recognize though the livery made it clear he was one of the palace staff.

"Your Majesty," he greeted me, bowing low before offering shallower bows to the others.

He'd been slightly reluctant when it came to Ratface's turn, I noted. There'd been a lot of that since the moment I first appointed the Taghreb. I raised an expectant eyebrow at him.

"There is word from, uh, the Observatory," the man said. "Your presence has been requested. The Lord Hierophant allegedly spoke of a 'major phenomenon'."

Translation: Masego had summoned me while, again, forgetting you weren't actually supposed to summon queens. I didn't really mind, but his brutal lack of regard for etiquette did seem to unsettle the servants whenever they came in contact with it. I rose to my feet, pushing my seat back.

"We'll reconvene in an hour to finish this," I told the other two.

"You speak so queenly, these days," Ratface grinned. "I haven't seen you spit on the ground in months."

"Yeah, well, I own all the carpets now," I muttered.

We made our courtesies, some more courteously than others, and then I dismissed the servant who seemed intent on accompanying me. I knew the way to the Observatory: I'd paid for the damned thing to be built out of an uninhabited wing of the palace. I wasn't keeping a mistress, or a husband for that matter, so luxurious rooms reserved for one had been more than a little unnecessary. It wasn't a long walk, but I lengthened my stride out of impatience. Still took the time to greet the servants and officials I came across, though. Actually learning all the names was a daydream given their sheer number, but if I could get at least half right it'd be a start. Better than Archer, anyway, who just called them whatever she felt like at the time. Getting this damned thing built had been strolling right into a series of rows with most my closest advisors, Juniper and Ratface the worst of them. My former Supply Tribune had been appalled at the costs involved, especially since some materials had to be brought directly from the Wasteland, while the Hellhound had bluntly told me that for the same amount of coin we could arm and armour over a thousand men and that'd be a lot more useful in the long run. It was rare enough for the two of them to agree on anything that I'd seriously reconsidered my commitment.

It'd still been built, in the end, and Masego had proved that his work had value beyond gold or steel. Without the Observatory at least three heroes would have slipped into Callow unseen, and the results of that could have been disastrous.

I felt the outer wards long before I arrived at the end of the corridor. As the only way in or out of the Observatory, it was now the most scrupulously protected part of the palace. The full line of legionaries guarding the corridor saluted as I went by,

and I nodded back. Hakram's people, these. The amount of soldiers and bureaucrats under Adjutant's direct command had steadily increased along with his responsibilities. My blood was keyed into the outer wards, which were more trap than boundary, and so I got to the bronze gates with only a mild headache to show for it. I rapped my knuckles against the metal, careful to moderate my strength. There was still a dent left from the one time I'd forgotten. The bronze doors opened after a few heartbeats, and behind them stood a dark-skinned woman. She hastily knelt. Fadila Mbafeno had been one of Akua's minions once, before I spared her at Hierophant's request. She'd since served as an assistant in his mage's tower, and now effectively ran the Observatory. On parchment Masego's word was law here, so long as I did not contradict him, but his utter disinterest in the logistics of the place meant all the responsibilities were in the Soninke mage's hands.

I disliked her, though not enough to do anything about it, but I would not deny she was extremely competent. Diabolist had always picked the cream of the crop, when it came to minions. Not that it'd ever stopped her from sacrificing them at the drop of a hat.

"Your Majesty," Fadila said. "I invite you within."

Nothing changed, visibly at least. There was a subtle current of power beneath her words, but even trying to feel it out would disperse it. I knew better than to think that'd been an empty sentence, though. I still vividly remembered the searing pain that had followed trying to pass the threshold without explicit permission.

"Rise," I said, and strode by her.

Passing the threshold was not painful, per se. It was more like being squeezed through a very narrow gap, a temporary constriction of my being. Once inside the room proper there was a sense of relief, but I knew from experience it would be short-lasting. A bigger cage was still a cage. The inner Observatory was warded up something fierce, some of those defences specifically against fae. They were deeply unpleasant for me, but I'd deal with the discomfort if it meant Larat couldn't ever set foot in here. Falida rose as bid, and followed three full steps behind me a little to the left. Wasteland etiquette, I thought sardonically, though in all fairness Callow had its fair share of little quirks as well. What had once been a full wing of the royal palace had been ripped out of even load-bearing walls, discreet arcs instead supporting the weight of the domed ceiling now. It was a single massive room and awake with quiet activity. Circling at the feet of the walls a boardwalk of granite made an outer ring, linked to pebbled paths that made up the spokes of a giant wheel from a bird's eye view. Within those spaces pools of



dark water lay still, save for when mages stirred them to life with whispered spells. Scrying pools, particularly powerful ones.

Getting the mages to keep them manned had been difficult, since the Army of Callow was already short on spellcasters, and ultimately I'd had to draft a few competent officers then draw heavily upon the now-disbanded Guild of Hedges. Getting Masego to teach those middling sorcerers how to scry properly had been a rough conversation, but he'd ultimately conceded that an empty Observatory would rather defeat the point of raising it in the first place. The legal status of the sorcerers had been a thorny matter to handle even after they were trained. They could not part of the Army of Callow or the Legions of Terror, as Juniper was still a general in the Empress' employ as well as my marshal and that would give Malicia a degree of influence over them. I'd not wanted to give the court any sway over them either, but placing them under my direct authority would mean the moment Hakram and I went on campaign they fell in a legal morass. I had to be careful about things like that, these days. Taking the crown had brought nearly as many complications as it had solutions. As an awkward compromise they'd been made into a guild, approved by my seal, the head of which was Masego. In his absence it was Fadila who ran things as his appointed second, with just enough independence she could do whatever needed to be done while the fact that the Observatory was the crown's property meant Anne Kendall had enough authority to step in if things got out of hand.

I pushed aside the thoughts as I tread one of the pebbled paths to the centre of the room, where Masego awaited. A second smaller ring of granite had been laid there, but it could hardly be seen. From the dark waters grew a massive alder tree whose roots spread into every pool and whose summit rose to touch the ceiling of painted runes and night sky. There was nothing natural about it, from the overly pale bark to the almost crimson leaves. Growing from the trunk a handful of branches formed a structure halfway between a bed and a seat, and before it a depression in the trunk made room for an item pulsing with power. It didn't look like much to the naked eye, a wide bowl of baked clay whose supports were shaped like men and devils supporting the rim. It'd taken Archer the better part of a month to find it and get it out of the ruins of Liesse, but I'd never seriously considered leaving the scrying artefact of the Sahelians among the wreck no matter the difficulties. Once Akua's discreet trump card, it was now the heart of the Observatory. In the wooden seat before it, Masego was laying down and looking half-asleep. I could see his pupils moving beneath the black eyecloth, but aside from that Hierophant was eerily still.

He'd lost weight again, I saw as I got closer. Even now that Fadila was under strict instructions to make sure he ate he still spent most hours of the days and night in that seat and rarely

moved unless he was forced to. I almost hesitated to touch him, for he tended to be confused for a bit when wrenched out of his scrying. The decision was made for me, in the end. The branches above rustled, and someone casually tossed a sloppily sculpted wooden duck at his forehead. He wrenched back to Creation with a yelp as Archer emerged from the foliage dangling upside down.

"Evening, Cat," she grinned. "Congratulations, you're getting invaded."

I considered this, then smiled back.

"Evening, Indrani," I said, and wrenched her down to splash noisily in a pool.

Eyes turning to Masego, who looked only half-here even now, I sighed.

"Tell me everything," I ordered.

---

*d\_o\_l*

Damn, another set-up chapter. I'm dying to see Cat's reaction to the Stairway and her plan to deal with it. Guess I'll have to wait until Monday.

*Author Unknown*

Everyone else, when they invent time travel, wants to go kill Hitler. Me, I'm going to be a whole lot of reading.

*letouriste*

killing hitler is a bad idea anyway, what he and his crownies did,others would have done too.they set a precedent and humanity got a little better as a result...maybe.

*Snowfire1224*

Actually I think it isn't as bad idea to kill Hitler as many people make it out to be, although it certainly would change history.

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Analysis/HitlersTimeTravelExemptionAct>

[\*boballab\*](#)

Bah Hitler was minor league, I say go big or go home: Go after Stalin or Mao people that killed somewhere 6 to 10 times as many people.

N/A

Nah, Stalin didn't actually kill as many people as Hitler. Probably crippled a lot more, but the gulags were legitimately work camps, not death camps.

[boballab](#)

Hitler racked up 6-10 million deaths, Stalin killed as many as Hitler did in 1932-33 alone during what is called the Holodomor. He racked up another 30 million minimum between the dissidents, the German prisoners they never returned to Germany after the war and forcing out people of German descent from Eastern European countries. Most credible historians range the total number of deaths under Stalin from between 25 – 60 million placing him as number two on the all time mass murder list only behind Mao.

TeK

Highly offtopic, but Holodomor was a starvation that occurred on most of USSR territory, for legitimate and natural reasons. Also, blaming one person for all of this is stupid. Also also, the count ranges from 8 millions to 61. Also also also, can we all please stop?

*therealgridlock*

No.

Communism is bad in all its forms. So is socialism. So is fascism. So is every kind of totalitarianism.

To argue otherwise is to spit in the face of hundreds of millions of dead that go before us.

*jflb96*

Neither communism nor socialism are inherently totalitarian, neither have killed hundreds of millions of people, and neither have killed more than capitalism does every decade. Keep drinking your CIA-approved Kool Aid, though, they'll be very pleased that they've successfully turned you against true democracy and equality.

*letouriste*

never heard of the hitler paradoxe? you can't kill him or everything is destroyed, the man is too important in our history=> every person in the world right now has been at least a little influenced by him (indirectly).  
also, this is not a matter of how many people died^^ but more of why they have been killed and how.  
i agree staline was no better though

[stevenneiman](#)

Personally, I think it would be a bad idea because I consider it possible that he would be replaced by someone who would harness the anger and frustration of the German people as effectively and then not prove to be such an inept warleader. Not saying it was a guarantee or even super likely, but people like Hitler get ignored or treated in a functional and happy society, and for all that WWII was horrific it only killed about 2% of the world population and the survivors didn't end up ruled by a world-spanning tyranny. Even a small chance of an actual victory for Hitler doesn't seem acceptable to me in exchange for possibly preventing WWII from happening at all. Especially since without the lessons of WWII it's possible that preventing it would still just lead to an even more horrific war a few decades down the line.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

If lots of Jews went back in time to try to kill Hitler (and all failed because of paradoxes and such), then from Hitler's perspective, Jews have been trying to kill him since his birth, and suddenly the Holocaust seems like a pretty reasonable reaction...

*Amoonymous*

I'd be too afraid to change history to go back in time. I'd save up as much money as I could, throw it in as long term/high interest assets as possible, then jump into the future.

Not to mention, like you said, all the novel updates.

*Levi Kalden*

Honestly, I had the same thought

*SpeckofStardust*

welp now the question is how fast she counters this.

[Euodiachloris](#)

If it gets her out of the palace? Warp speed may be achieved.  
Followed very closely by snail's pace, if only to put off going back . 😊

*Stormblessed*

I like the kind of quiet chapter this is. Too many explosive intense chapters isn't the best thing.

*Bell Towers*

Woot. So excited for the 10th Crusade!

[wirelessgrapes](#)

I really do get a good sense of desperation from this chapter, and it really builds the atmosphere well. I can't wait to see the crazy plays that Cat's gonna run to buy time.

*Rook*

Although, half the desperation seems to be patching the country back together while the other half is desperation to get away from the ink and bureaucracy. A problem that's solvable by shoving steel into it until it stops moving is probably a welcome diversion at this point, especially considering most of the time skip was spent trying to forge callow into said sharp piece of steel.

[userans22](#)

Which character from the beginning of the series do you think Cat is most similar to now?

[Dana Moore](#)

To me. She is still Cat. Her view point has not changed. She just got where she wanted to be decades ahead of where she had planned. And two orders of magnitude more powerful than when she began. But she is still the smart, doing what is necessary, pit fighter from the first.

*Highwayman*

Good touch with the issue of money, EE; really drives it home that Callow is on shaky ground. All the Tower has to do to wreck them is it print more cash, slowly squeezing Callow with increasing interest rates and inflation. Yay to macroeconomics!  
\*grumbles\*

*JackbeThimble*

I'm not sure how realistic this is. Prior to the widespread adoption of paper money the value of coinage would mostly have

been based on the metal content rather than the backing of a government. I'm not an expert but most of what I've read indicates that medieval traders probably didn't care very much about the provenance of their coinage.

---

The issue is that one side has reserves of gold and precious gems for a rainy day, while the other is already minting coin at its maximum capacity to overtake the markets. If Empress starts changing the amount of gold in her coinage now, she can shake everyone else something fierce.

*Decius*

If the value of the coin is based on the metal in it, then it shouldn't be catastrophically expensive to melt the coinage down and remint it.

*Hombre del Sur*

To remint it, you still need to own it. Hence the problem of having to acquire it first, which also costs money that they don't have yet.

[BarthHumphries](#)

You could always do what "ancient" England did. All coins have a date stamped on them and are only good for three years. All coins could only be reminted at licensed "minting stations" (I don't remember the name, but I believe they had three gold balls above the door). Out of every 10 coins reminted, 1 was sent on to the king – this was how taxes were collected. If a goldsmith was ever found to be shaving coins or cheating the king, the goldsmith's arm was taken and the license to remint was lost.

Something like this would turn "your coins" into "my coins" by the value of the metal, and if they aren't going by the value of the coin anyway then someone could melt down one set into the other type and make the arbitrage value, so it's best to go by the metal value anyway.

[boballab](#)

Except that the Empress would consider that war. While the story is set in sword based combat that evokes the middle ages, the political aspects are not middle age. Remember the Tower has been around for thousands of years something no IRL kingdom or empire ever enjoyed, not even in China. They have learned a thing or two over that span and if

just buying up their coin gets the Empress coming down on you, just imagine what happens when just start melting it down and re-minting it. Oh btw yes the country it does come from matter, because a country that is sound will not debase the coin and this was lightly touched on in the Prologue from Monday . If you go back and re-read it where the Stalwart Paladin was buying supplies the cost was based on the which country's coin it was, especially since the merchant didn't have a scale to weight the coins.

He was paying with silver fidi from Mercantis, one of the few coins no merchant in Calernia refused, and he was not certain how it compared to Imperial coinage. The merchant's smiling admission **he had no scale to compare the weights** did little to inspire trust...

Not a mintage he recognized, Iason noted. It could be worthless for all he knew.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/04/09/prologue-4/>

As can be logically deduced from those paragraphs, debasing currency is not unheard of and in day to day transactions not everyone is going to be running around with scales and carrying their own set of weights to compare with. Never trust the other guys weights they are easy to fake, you have to have your own known good set to compare to his. With that being the case the reputation of the mint it comes from is your only source of how sound the coin is as seen in the quote.

### *Big Brother*

ArcherxHeiropant is still my favorite ship in this story. They work so well together, even if they bicker a lot.

(I'm still hoping for Akua to become Cat's next follower, bound by Masego to some manner of construct designed by Pickler. Maybe something humanoid if she's lucky.)

### [oldschoolvillain](#)

If you read the last few chapters closely, you will find that Akua has been bound into the collar of Catherine's murder cloak. Now known as the Cloak of Woe. The ramifications and uses of this are so far unclear, but she was at the very least on hand for the most recent "Catherine tells angels to shove it" debacle.

### *Big Brother*

I am aware of this. Cat had Hakram sew Akua's soul into the cloak after the events of Liesse. I'm just sitting here hoping she makes some sort of comeback.

*d\_o\_l*

I'm guessing she will, probably as an evil spirit advisor type deal.

---

Well, another commenter already pointed out that she's depicted more or less as a Stand. "In Dread Crowned" grants power over otherworldly entities.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Right idea, but we need a proper stand name Since somehow "in Dread Crowned" is not a name of a western band or song that I can find, I'd propose based on her power's sphere of influence we name her Beyond Creation

---

I was using an in-universe song, the one written by Nauk (who we'll hopefully see as Cat assembles her armies).

*oldschoolvillain*

So this is the way that Cat keeps Heroes out of Callow. Interesting. Does Masego basically have a birds-eye view over all of Callow while he's sitting in that spot? It would certainly explain his lack of eating recently. This Observatory is pretty sweet, though. Forget needing the army of spies – with an artifact capable of peering through dimensions, I'd be shocked if anywhere in Calernia was beyond Hierophant's gaze. I do worry about what that might do to his health, though . . .

*Euodiachloris*

Somebody had better invent protein shakes to prevent the onset of Angry Dads Syndrome. 😞

*Nairne .01*

I think he can see more than Callow. It would warrant why he keeps sitting in the chair.

SMHF



After dealing with all this bureaucratic crap for a year, Cat's probably happy, hearing about the invasion! At least now she's in her element.

Remember to vote for the guide in 'topwebfiction.com' guys.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*maresther23*

We are number one!

*Random anon*

Cat has become a supervillain number one

*grzecho2222*

Black: Are you a real viilain?

Cat: Well technically...

Black: Have you ever killed a Good guy, like a real Hero?

Hakram: "Shakes head"

Black: Have you ever tried a disguise?

Masego: Nah...

Black: O right. I can see that I will have to teach you how to be villains!

Woe: We are Villians!

Hanno: "Does cartwheel in background"

*Daemion*

I have the feeling the invasion was expected and planned for. Archer wouldn't be quite so happy about it and Cat wouldn't smile otherwise.

---

I theink Catherine smiled because she was about to throw Indrani in a scrying pool, and Archer is understandably happy to finally get some action.

*Oshi*

Yes they would.

*Ishot4living*

It is begun.

*Snowfire1224*

Marching with the 15 can't get Masego to lose weight, but it turns out his own obcession with magic can.

[wyaldriddler](#)

To be expected!

[Euodiachloris](#)

The way of the Mad Scientist! It's tradition! XD

[Antony444](#)

Well, there's some good news for Catherine. The Stairway is directly facing the lands of the two problematic nobles which have given her so much problems lately...a Proceran invasion on their door is a certain way to tell them they should better obey her royal orders. Unfortunately, them not having many men to Legion standards is guaranteed to screw Callow somewhat...

The restored kingdom has big money problems, this is not a surprise. At least the Empress subsidies meant they had the money to rebuild the kingdom...but now they're deeply in the Tower's debt.

I wonder if most of the Procer Princes have considered this little problem. Should they triumph, the Principate will have to invest huge sums of silver in the economy if they want to administer the region...

And of course there's the revelation of the Observatory – aka the anti-hero's device – and the revelation the invasion has begun. We have the confirmation the Dread Empress and Black have certainly now warned the Woe of the onslaught coming this way...now the big question is what forces Callow has which can answer in time.

*Cicero*

You are running under assumption they care. My feeling is that much of the principate cares about Callow as much as the average wasteland noble.

*Rook*

Well if the stairway interlude was any indication they care a hell of a lot about looting it at least. That's a pretty major problem when your economy is about as healthy as a skydiver that had their parachute fail

*nerferf*

So Masego is getting the holy man look now to match his name? Cause named looks are influenced off there internal thoughts about them selves right?

*nick012000*

Fixing the money problem is easy. Seize the Praesi coin in exchange for issuing government debt, melt down the coins, cast the metal into Callowan coins in her new mint, then use the shiny new Callowan coins to pay off the debt she got buying them in the first place.

*Gunslinger*

It would work true. Still would piss Malicia off

*Highwayman*

That would totally work, but what if it was some kind of fiat money though

*TeK*

Coins should cost more than their metal, should they not? If denarii cost more then you'll be losing whatever difference there is in cost, plus as you seize more coin, the deflation kicks in, and you end up with empty coffers. Or am I missing something? The new coin will be nowhere as reliable as praesi one, given that they got trade only with praesi now, and Tower can easilly flood the markets with now highly valued coin again, putting situation to relatively same position, except you are broke and your coins worth shit. I really don't know economics, so would like a heads up.

*burdi*

still waiting cat new Name

*Nivek*

"Those who withstood the sword, I laid low with ink."  
Did you mean legislation or drowning? It's kind of an important question with Dread Emperors.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Bit of both, probably

*Gunslinger*

You speak so queenly, these days," >Ratface grinned. "I haven't seen you spit on the ground in months."

"Yeah, well, I own all the carpets now," I muttered

I love this series

*naturalnuke*

"and followed three full steps behind me a little to the left."

Omg being a minion has proper etiquette, that's villain posse position right there.

*Snowfire1224*

So when do you think we are going to find out her Name?

*letouriste*

she didn't use a single aspect in her last fight, maybe she still doesn't have a Name.

*Snowfire1224*

Yes, but it's possible, and would be smart of her, to not use aspects unless she absolutely needs to, that way no one knows what her aspects are.

*letouriste*

exept the gods kind of do and so the bard too...probably

[DroughtBringer](#)

Never 😊

I agree that she probably doesn't have one, though

*a23fG6e123*

"You speak so queenly, these days," Ratface grinned. "I haven't seen you spit on the ground in months."

"Yeah, well, I own all the carpets now," I muttered.

Priceless. And here I go cleaning my screen again.

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread:

They could not part of the Army of Callow or the Legions of Terror

Add "be" after "could"

*SilentLurker*

That is incorrect. Proper grammar requires the addition of "be" after "not", instead of after "could".

In other words it should read, "They could not be part of the Army of Callow or the Legions of Terror".

[Barthumphries](#)

You're right. My bad. 😊

## [BarthHumphries](#)

I don't know what I did right, but I actually got an email notification of this post! 😊

That's never happened before.

*Reveen*

What the fuck are you doing? STOP!

You've gone from wine and now this... Muthafucka I'm not a teetotaler but you've been drinking two years tops and you're already at the point where people need to keep you isolated from flammable objects.

Like, this had better be a subplot of how bad an idea regular drinking is or the writer is seriously fucking naive.

*Digitize27*

She's a Named, different standards apply. They basically can't get ill/die via normal means, and villainous Named don't even age. Cat can drink as much as she likes, and as long as it doesn't become narratively relevant (See: Wandering Bard) it will never negatively impact her.

*TeK*

Actually Named can get drunk, earlier chapters imply as much. I think the truth is burried somewhere along the fact that Cat is not a human.

*Metrux*

Drunk, yes, but it is alot harder than with common man, and she can burn a little juice to take all the alcohol (and most poisons) out of her body, remember that Black teached that? So, in truth, compulsory drinking will only bring problems to her, or any Named who knows what he is doing, if the let it or if the Story has a place for it.

*TeK*

Well, it's still shows that she is under much stress with all this governing, she goes further and further into drug abuse. Alcohol, wakeleaf, I shudder to think what next.

*Reveen*

Negatively impact her? Like spending an entire day getting shitfaced on wine alone in her tent instead of dealing with a bad situation? Because that was her first response to the trashfire at Liesse. Drinking isn't just a matter of health

of physical addiction, but of bad habits and self medication. That she responds to stress and bad situations by reaching for a bottle is not a good sign even if it doesn't really effect her because it says bad things about her priorities, her sense of responsibility, and her vulnerability to indulgences.

### BartHumphries

Keep her isolated from flammable objects? "Ostentatious" doesn't mean flammable. They removed all the gold-covered and lacy frilly things. They made her room more Spartan. And if that wasn't what you were referring to then you quoted the wrong part.

Anastas

I don't think that was a misinterpretation of the word "ostentatious"; I think it was a hyperbolic joke about Catherine's blood and breath now containing so much alcohol that she's become an enormous fire hazard.

### erraticerrata

First strike.

You've been walking the line of flaming and trolling for a while now, and that one was over it. Be civil or don't comment. I'm honestly puzzled as to why you keep reading a story you've been quite vocal about despising, considering there's quite literally hundreds of other free access works out there.

### don

I'm most curious about the trip Thief took to meet Cordelia. There has to be a play there – Callow is still being invaded, so what did Cat negotiate for?

### Kevin Blandin

Feel like I should point out something, Someone mentioned awhile back that Cat essentially only had Fall as a sort-of Aspect now. Which was claimed to be more about her Fae title/magic than Named stuff.

One, when Ratface called Catherine by name, Cat's PoV stated "If I hadn't been Named, I wouldn't have noticed the slight crease in (Anne Kendell, I forget what part or how she actually used Anne's name) brow." So, Cat herself still at least believes she's Named in some way.

Two, when Cat confronted Akua, her PoV said "I had no Aspect left but one, and that one had gone far beyond what an Aspect should

be.” Then Akua used \*Call\* and the result after Cat responded/countered was:

“A bundle of power inside her unfolded under my patient eye and I flicked my wrist. Ice spread through it, cracks spreading as she flinched. Ah, I thought. Devoured but not gone. The corpse of her aspect I took for my own, let the winds and the snow bury it. It would await my purposes there.”

\*Fall\* has completely INCORPORATED \*Take\* into itself. Which makes complete sense, given the nature of Winter and the narrative of Winter. The hunger of Winter always lead them to take, and take roughly from Summer, which had always lead to Summer reacting violently to the taking. As the last true scion of Winter, to Take is basically Cat’s inherent “right” in a story sense.

I think this also relates to what Cat said to the Angels of the Choir of Endurance concerning the Stalwart Paladin. About his having been “CLAIMED fair and square.” Supporting this IMHO is the fact that while Cat drove a knife into his belly, she drove a spike of frost into his skull to kill him. With the knife already in hand, why change to a weapon made of her power for the deathblow when she could as easily have driven a blade through the Paladin’s forehead with her Fae strength?

I believe that something of power was taken from the dying/dead Paladin in that moment. Either, as others have speculated, that Cat is going all Dead King and it’s essentially a powerful “echo” of the Paladin himself in his dead entirety buried beneath the ice and snow to await Cat’s purposes...OR, Cat was essentially doing an upgraded version of what she’d once done to the Lone Swordsman and her Fall-Take essentially scooped out the Aspect she felt like devouring as the Stalwart Paladin’s Name left his dying body.

Ultimately, whatever Cat’s Named-status, Fall and the rest of Cat’s Winter power is at least as varied as the three Aspects of a conventional Hero or Villain.

Personally, I hope Cat snagged the Stalwart Paladin’s \*Discern.\* It would make such beautiful narrative. The Paladin had only developed Discern moments before falling, due to the pressure he was experiencing. Providence/The Heavens had tried to cheat as they always do with a last-second power-up for the Hero to try and eke out a win for Stupid Good. Only to have the 2.0 version of Practical Evil defile and devour their power-up, and repurpose it to serve Cat’s cause.

As for the Stairway, we’ve finally seen an example of the Augur not being 100% accurate. Wasn’t the Stairway gambit supposed to go undetected according to that Named?

---

I don't think it was as simple as incorporating Take into her Winter powers. The domain, previously activated by Fall, is still here, and changing Names hopefully means that it will evolve (my bet is that it will remain a moonless night, but will gain stars to represent the people she has to protect in her duties as the Queen of Callow).

But the devouring of Call may just be a thing related to her high rank as a Winter fae. Remember, fairies can make objects out of people's souls, like the invitation to Skade in the extra chapter Fletched, or the barrier in the citadel of Dormer. Given that she's now a queen forged of Winter, she may have made the absolute ownership that this Aspect used to grant a part of her authority over her otherworldly subjects.

*Blue*

Great to see this story back.

Catherine is essentially Fae now and she offered the heroes a deal when they entered her domain. A deal they rejected, which I assume has all sorts of consequences for them related to 'claim'.

I have a feeling anyone entering Callow is going to be subject to consequences given it is now the domain of the Winter Queen.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*SilentLurker*

"Were I not Named, I might never have noticed the slight crease on the Governess-General's brow when she heard Ratface refer to me by my given name."

Is this authorial confirmation that Cat has a new Name, Erraticerrata? It was never made clear, and while we have seen people refer to her as Named still, what that is if it exists hasn't been said.

[Barthumphries](#)

No, he referred to her as Catherine instead of Your Majesty.

*SilentLurker*

"Were I not Named, I"

I am referencing this part which is from Cat's perspective. See the capitalization of Named, not just her having a name but a Name.



Jonathan Rodriguez

"Yeah, well, I own all the carpets now," I muttered.

I really did LOL at this. I love how Catherine's sense of humor is written so consistently deadpan and sarcastic.

[vuthuha912](#)

You know money and trade are the things that Black wants from this Conquest in the first place. He wants a reliable trading partner and he did it in the only way he knows – and possibly at the time, invading.

Still, messing with your own coinage will likely fuck over Praes economy as much as Callow economy. Now is not the time for these kinds of things people.

---

## Chapter 2: Alarm

*"In conclusion, the court recognizes the desertion of the sentient tiger army raised by Dread Emperor Sorcerous as sufficient precedent to rule that tapirs can, in fact, commit treason but that lack of sentience bars them from laying claim to the Tower by right of usurpation."*

– Official transcript from the Trial of Unexpected Teeth, which resulted in the execution of the man-eating tapirs that devoured Dread Empress Atrocious

The mist had come out of the clay pot and formed a mirror-like surface in front of us without any need for visible prompting. Even as Archer loudly cussed me out and dragged herself out of the pool like a hissing wet cat, my eyes went to the images that had bloomed across solidified mist. Massive was the first word that came to mind. Masego had somehow raised the perspective to high up in the sky, above the still-unfolding ritual, and only vague memories of how large that mountain range stood otherwise allowed to grasp the scale of what was being done. It was deceptively simple, at first look. Some kind of white fire was being used to carve a passage across the Whitecaps from the Principate to Callow. It was difficult to put a finger on the exact size of the passage from this perspective, but I'd gauge as broad enough for two large carriages to pass simultaneously without getting too close. Hierophant had taken the moments I spent looking at his scrying to gather himself. I could tell from the way his breath was steadying and his heartbeat calming.

"I will begin by clarifying this is a ritual and not the making of an artefact," the blind mage said.

"Afternoon, Masego," I said. "How are you doing? I'm doing great myself, thanks for asking."

He cast me a dubious look.

"I would have thought that the obvious precursor to an invasion would spoil your mood," he said.

"She's being sarcastic, Zeze," Archer said.

She got close enough to me before shaking off the wet that my entire left side was made dripping. She was a charmer, our Indrani.

"Ah," Hierophant said. "Is that entirely necessary?"

I sighed, if only to prevent my sharpening worry from showing. A few months ago he would have caught that. Spending his days strapped to the Observatory's central device looked like it might be unmaking years of progress. I needed to keep a closer eye on him, force him to talk with actual people once in a while. I knew Archer broke the wards protecting this place with chagrining regularity to come pester him, but that alone obviously wasn't enough.

"Not an artefact, you said," I said. "I thought those were pretty small by definition."

"Liesse as rebuilt by Diabolist would be considered an artefact under most accepted definitions," he noted. "It certainly served a sorcerous purpose."

Mildly interesting, but not the kind of edification I was currently after.

"Ritual," I repeated. "I was under the impression Procer doesn't usually have the chops for those. You've been pretty dismissive about their mages whenever we discuss threat assessments."

"Eh, the Lady says the same thing," Archer said. "She always told us Proceran wizards are nothing to worry about unless they're Named. Apparently their kind's not real popular with the powers that be in the west."

"The Principate has been consistently at least a generation behind the Empire in matters of sorcery for centuries," Masego said, almost sneering. "No other nation has even half their number of hedge practitioners and even their 'finest' still ascribe to the Jaquinite theory of magic. It tells in their work here, Catherine. It is amateurish in everything but scale."

I wrinkled my nose at the sight of the white flame burning through rock. It hadn't moved in a while, I noted. Was something messing with our scrying?

"I was going to ask you when they'd be done, but they don't seem to be moving," I said.

"Performance issues," Archer suggested. "I mean, if they're going to wave around a big fire dick it's only fitting."

Oh Gods, now that she'd put the image in my head I couldn't unsee it. Fucking Hells, Indrani.

"That is planned," Masego said vaguely. "And the reason is... ah, there we are."

I raised an eyebrow and it kept rising when I saw half a mountain's worth of snow and stone collapse into the flame. Avalanche. *They'll only start moving when they're sure the passage won't be clogged*, I thought.

"It is not fire," Hierophant suddenly said. "They are... um, the structure seems based on a miracle? *Fascinating.*"

I whistled sharply.

"Focus, Zeze," I said. "We're at war."

"And I have another wooden duck," Archer added cheerfully.

He seemed a lot more concerned by Indrani's announcement than mine, but then she'd been spending a lot of time with him. I doubted it was the first time a shitty wooden carving ended up bouncing off his forehead, knowing them both as I did.

"Dispersal of matter," Hierophant said. "That is the nature of the working employed."

"The passage smokes after they clear it," I pointed out.

"Because they are sloppy," he disdainfully said. "Their spell formula is inexact, thus the dispersal causes the release of heat. Had they done it properly their army could be walking behind the front but they're *Jaquinites*, Catherine. The man was a priest. I'm pleasantly surprised they didn't just kneel down to *pray* the passage would happen on its own."

"Let's not even speak about that," I grimaced. "With the amount of heroes they've assembled, I wouldn't call that too much of a stretch to take place."

"Praying," Archer drawled. "By far the least interesting thing that can follow someone getting on their knees."

I shot her a look. Indrani really needed a roll in the hay, didn't she? My court was packed with attractive men and women around my eye these days – and Gods Below, that Talbot thought he was being subtle really was the most insulting part of that – so the fact that she hadn't dragged anyone into her rooms yet was starting to warrant a conversation.

"They've mastered the basics of scrying, at least," Masego conceded. "It's why they're forging a pass instead of a tunnel even if it risks avalanches."

"Wait, I know that one," I said. "Scrying doesn't work underground. Or across tall obstacles."

"An oversimplification on both counts," Hierophant told me. "The Greyfang Range-"

"The Whitecaps," I corrected him.

The glass orbs that were his eyes shifted under the cloth in what was likely the reflex of a blink without the physical ability to do one.

"That is not their name in Imperial atlases," he said.

"The Empire doesn't have a city next to them either," I replied.

"That is not how atlases work, Catherine," he plaintively said.

"I thought they were called the Parish," Archer contributed, because never once in her life had she seen a fire without reaching for a jug of oil.

"That's the Proceran name for them," I grunted. One of them, anyway. "Whitecaps. Moving on."

"There's mushrooms called that," Hierophant mutinously said under his breath.

"But not capitalized," I pointed out.

If there was one thing to love about Masego, it was that he could easily be side tracked by technicalities. I was getting fairly good at that, these days. His expression brightened and he nodded. From the corner of my eye I saw Archer looking at me amusedly.

"The Whitecaps are a too broad a range to penetrate through blindly," Hierophant said, picking up where I'd interrupted.

"Yeah, penetrating blindly never helps," Indrani agreed, voice choked up.

"You're bargaining for another visit to the pond," I whispered at her.

"I'll be good," Archer whispered back, hands raised and her vulpine grin immediately betraying the lie.

"They're adjusting with scrying," Masgeo said, blithely unaware of the background chatter. "The entire array is a backwards mess, however. They likely have to communicate adjustments by *voice*."

I consciously refrained from asking what the alternative to speaking was.

"Can you tell me when the ritual will be done?" I asked, then winced. "Never mind, don't answer that. Can you tell me when you *think* the ritual will be done?"

Hierophant's mouth closed over this initial answer, then he took a moment to consider.

"Assuming there are fewer than five avalanches," he said. "And that the pool of accumulated power they're using does not run out... Two days. Going into three. It depends on the amount of practitioners they've gathered. Serving as guide for so large a working will be exhausting. If they've fewer than three hundred mages some will begin to die or birth derangements before nightfall."

I worried my lip. Worst case, two days. Actually crossing the passage would take them longer. A week before the first troops were in Callow? No, shorter if they used cavalry for the vanguard. Which I would, in their place. The Order of Broken Bells had swelled, but it was still just a fraction of the horse the Principate could bring to bear. Imperial spy reports and what the Jacks had managed to compile had the host waiting in Arans around fifty thousand strong. The commanders weren't supposed to be anything too worrying, a Prince Milenan and his allies none of who had notable military achievements under their belt from the civil war. They were the First Prince's primary opposition within Procer, though, so I suspected she would not be shy about spending their lives to damage my position. Even if I pulled together every part of my armies in Callow – which I couldn't, not without leaving my borders with Praes and the Free Cities dangerously bare – the invaders still outnumber me a little less than two to one. I'd have what Juniper called a qualitative edge, considering most my soldiers were professionals while a lot of theirs would be levies, but the core of that army was principality troops. Varying shades of light cavalry and professional heavy infantry. Those would be a hard nut to crack, and that was without even considering the fucking battalion of heroes reports placed in the war camp. It would take me at least two days to have the Army of Callow ready for a march, and that was just the part in the permanent camps near Laure. Taking them

through Arcadia was spinning the wheel, but we'd made tests. For that kind of distance, the average was eight days. Going as low as six and high as fifteen.

"I don't suppose you could shut down the ritual?" I asked Masego.

He shook his head.

"They are not using their own sorcery to do this, Catherine," he elaborated. "A receptacle was forged and what must be hundreds of practitioners poured their own magic into for years to create the reservoir they are now employing. It would be like trying to put out a bonfire by spitting on it."

"And if I gave you every mage in Laure to work on a ritual?" I pressed.

He considered it seriously.

"No," he finally said. "If we had caught their ritual before it began in earnest, perhaps, but no longer. Considering the distance it would be insufficient to do anything but slow it a few hours. And even that would come at great cost."

"You're going at this wrong," Archer said. "Let them make their hole. After they're spent, prevent them from using it."

I looked at her suspiciously.

"You're not usually this helpful," I said.

"I'm a woman of many layers," Indrani haughtily replied.

I had a fairly scathing comment to offer involving onions and how she should perhaps bathe more often but the grass was cut under my feet.

"You mean attacking them as they pass," Hierophant said, tone musing. "That is a possibility. Triggering further avalanches from Laure is possible, with sufficient preparations."

"You don't sound enthused," I said.

"While their practitioners are a backwards lot, I do not believe them to be actual imbeciles," Masego said. "At least one of them was clever enough to conceive of this ritual."

I frowned.

"You think they'll have protections," I guessed.

"If they do not disperse the wizards they have massed to carry this out, they have the ability to resist anything I would seriously consider using against them," Hierophant said. "Three

hundred blunderers with a heavy club are dangerous even to someone of my proficiency."

Throwing bodies at the problem, huh. Well, the Principate had no lack of those to swear into service. It wasn't an elegant solution, but I was living proof that sometimes hitting things really hard could be enough to pull through.

"They'll have priests, too," Archer said. "The robed rats are everywhere in Procer."

Brothers and Sisters of the House of Light swore oaths that prevented them from taking lives, but there'd always been a lot of wiggling room left to interpret how that should be carried out. Priests were a historical staple of Callowan hosts, to shut down sorceries and heal wounded soldiers. And there were always a few to be found who were willing to make an exception about that whole no killing thing and repent afterwards. Turning miracles against an avalanche sent down by an Evil mage wouldn't even require them to do some rhetorical footwork afterwards. *And let's not forget the House of Light in Procer is a different creature than the Callowan one.* The Fairfaxes had always kept the House out of the crown's affairs, but in Procer the priests were influential power brokers. It would be safe to assume they'd be involved, and that was the final nail in the coffin of considered magical intervention. If we couldn't head them off at the pass, it'd have to be in the field. And odds were they'd get close to Harrow before I could get my army up north.

"Masego," I said quietly, pitching my voice so none of the guild mages would overhear. "The Hell Egg up north, have you managed to find it?"

"I am still awaiting answer from the Tower about consulting the private histories," the blind man replied.

My lips thinned. The Empress had been quite willing to share reports from the Eyes about the unfolding situation on Procer and beyond, but my people were being given polite brush-offs and non-answers when it came to pretty much everything else. I couldn't tell whether that was pressure she was applying to bring me back under her thumb or that in her eyes I now only counted as something to be tossed at the crusade to blunt its advance. The former gave me room to deal, especially now that the invasion had begun. The latter would mean my situation was even more precarious than I currently believed it to be. Her people would be in touch soon enough, I reflected. Cold as the diplomatic exchanges had become, a Proceran offensive would thaw them a great deal. Especially since I doubted that the northern crusader army would be moving alone. Odds were the host in the south under Prince Papenheim was preparing for a run at the Vales. Black wouldn't be easy meat, especially not with Scribe and Warlock at his side. But he was starkly outnumbered, and he'd be in no

position to do anything but hold the valleys for months to come. At the moment, the Empress needed me.

"I thought Ratface was supposed to be some kind of bureaucratic wizard," Archer said, eyeing me sideways.

She was sharper than Masego about these things, regardless of her vocal disinterest in matters of intrigue. I nodded discreetly and she grimaced. Yeah, I wasn't happy either that it was quite possible instructions had come down from Malicia to make it much harder for me to locate the fucking demon that was supposed to be bound somewhere in northern Callow.

"Have you narrowed down what kind of a demon it is?" I tried.

"It cannot be Corruption," Hierophant said. "That was my initial theory, when we last spoke of the subject in Marchford, but that particular entity has since been found and fought. It might very well be Absence, Catherine. That would be..."

"Balls," Archer helpfully provided.

Masego frowned.

"Genitalia has nothing to--"

"Bad, it'd be bad," I interrupted before this could turn into a full-blown squabble.

I clenched my fingers.

"I don't like the shape of it," I admitted. "That many Named, near a threat unaccounted for?"

It wasn't a guarantee that a brawl with heroes would end up letting it loose, but the odds were high enough it couldn't be discounted. But if catching the crusaders before they reached Harrow wasn't an option, then the alternative was ceding most the barony before giving battle. I would much prefer not doing that, and not only because of the military implications of giving the enemy a fortified city to operate from. It wouldn't look good within Callow either. People had been willing to tighten their belts if it was for rebuilding the kingdom and raising armies to defend it. If I was seen to have failed in either regard, there would be consequences. *But if the choice is between that and rolling the dice with a demon...* I needed to talk with Juniper. Archer and Hierophant were here with me in Laure and the last time I'd spoken with Thief she'd said she should be back within a few days, but Hakram was still in Vale trying to coax the refugees out of the tent cities and back behind stone walls. I might have to leave him behind when marching.



"Tell Fadila to keep a full roster tonight," I told Masego. "I'll need to speak to the baronies up north."

And half a dozen other people, since Adjutant wasn't there to do it for me.

"We getting ready for war, then?" Archer asked, and there was a pleased glint in her eyes.

"I'd prefer not to," I said. "But the choice is out of my hands. Wrap up anything you have going on, Masego. When we go on the offensive you're coming with us."

He pouted. I blamed Indrani for teaching him that, it was surprisingly effective even now that his face had lost most of the baby fat.

"I'm not hearing anything otherwise," I firmly told him. "Look on the bright side, Hierophant. Odds are you'll be taking a close look at that passage soon enough."

"There is that," he conceded, but it was half-hearted.

I cast a look at Archer, who smiled back and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. It was telling that I barely even noticed when she did that nowadays.

"If you run into Thief, send her my way," I told her.

She waved in a manner that could vaguely be interpreted as agreement. About as good as I could expect. I clapped her on the shoulder, reminded Masego we were nearing supper time and made my exit. I had one last thing to do before mustering for war, after all. Tonight was the night for my little monthly chat with the enemy.

Cordelia Hasenbach had just begun her invasion of Callow, so we should have a few things to talk about.

---

*danh3107*

It Starts...

[ClickPause](#)

Real question here: Has Catherine not thought about, you know, opening a portal and goblinfirebombing the place?

*Jonnnney*

Nice to see the act between Archer and Heirophant is still in full swing. Looks like Cat's envoy to Procter was more of a baseline level of communication rather than a betrayal of the tower or even an offer to work together. Curious to see what happens when the demon of absence gets released, night before fun to see a thousand year old demon run roughshod over a dozen newbie heroes. It does make sense to have the tower keep the location in the dark though. Might not want to give Masengo another demon bound to a standard.

*Amoonymous*

Yeah, in before the Hell Egg happens to be right in the path they're cutting through the mountains. "Whoops, our ritual accidentally destroyed the bindings of a thousand year old demon! What a wacky happenstance!"

*naturalnuke*

Demons. The biggest hammer to any nail you may have.

*haihappen*

More like a sledgehammer to a rice paper wall.

Or a herd of elephants in a market square for bone china tableware.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Ere We Go Ere We Go Ere We Go!

So Thief gave Cordelia a means to scry with Cat. Interesting, and it makes sense too.

*Kingbob12*

"But not capitalized," I pointed out.

This is adorable and makes me realize just how much I've missed Cat and Masego's friendship

[NZPIEFACE](#)

It's like the difference between black and Black.

*haza18*

Dun dun dah, a demon of absence gives me chills

*Decius*

Demon of Absence? No, none of those here.  
Finding a Demon of Absence must be a matter of looking where it isn't the most.

*TeK*

What are we talking about, again?

*Valkyria*

And so it begins. Is this the first real great battle Cat isn't on the offense for once? Up until now she was the one moving and taking cities... let's see where this is going!

---

There were also Three Hills, Marchford and arguably Four Armies and One.

*edrey*

great, it's starting

this is "the prince's tomb" right? looking at the circumstances, the number of troops and time, i think the best is guerrilla warfare through arcadia, masego using new scrying rituals to see the enemy and using demons as baits. but that is just my opinion ps. archer's funny scenes are extra or foreshadowing?

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

The Prince's Graveyard actually, also no mention about the fae remnant?

*letouriste*

both i think.

Looks to me Archer is badly attracted to masego (she stopped bedding every pretty boy/girl around) so this is probably foreshadowing of a future relationship.

her being funny is also a good way to survive the next few battles;) (given how loud she is, she gets plot armor and same for masego indirectly).

this is also a good way to boost a chapter^^

*Paxton Johnson*

masego? i was thinking cat

*SMHF*

So people on parahumans.net reaaaaaaally didn't like it when Guide got first on topwebfiction and gave all the upvotes Ward! XD

But as a wise and very evil man once said: "The lasting victories are always the quiet ones".

So lets see if we can hit 700 this week! 😊

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*letouriste*

already did^^ try 1000 votes

*Gunslinger*

Cat's right, Archer's currently behaving like a teen who just hit puberty. If this keeps on she'll be going "That's what she said wink wink" to everything.

The doors through Arcadia seem a bit nerfed to me. I thought after letting winter lose and having Larat open them meant they could function like instantaneous portals.

Quite excited to see the first on screen interaction between Cordelia and Cat next chapter.

On a side note I wonder why Harrow needed to be a fortified city if it was isolated and sheltered by the mountains. It's a good thing now, but armies that would March through the Vale would make for Laure rather than that dead end

*1shot4living*

They may seem nerfed, but instead of taking 3 months to get somewhere it can now only take half a month. Still a huge advantage, just not on the level of a instantly teleporting army.

*Rook*

Also depends less on the laws of physics and more on the narrative

The actual distance or time you're there seems to make very little actual difference. from what we've seen so far. Larger groups will likely take longer than a few people just because that's how stories tend to go. Lone heroes and small bands in typical stories always travel more swiftly than the lumbering army, even if said band is physically crippled and the army is full of cavalry or elites on a forced march.

If you set up a very standard last minute rescue story, I wouldn't be surprised if Arcadia dropped you back into Creation literally in the nick of time, completely independent of whether you were a mile away or ten thousand miles away.

*Dany*

Cavalry is pretty slow, though. Faster than infantry tactically but not strategically.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Guarding a confluence of mountain passes and vaguely flat farmland (or, you know, carefully terraced, southern-facing mountainside it's taken generations to get right) , I presume. /has lived in Switzerland.

*Author Unknown*

Did you miss the part where Harrow is the seat of a barony? Not all enemies come from outside ones borders.

*nick012000*

> I wonder why Harrow needed to be a fortified city if it was isolated and sheltered by the mountains.

Because sometimes you'll get water-breathing orcs swimming up the rivers.

*Metrux*

The way I see it this is a very old but still maintained fortification, as in older than the kingdom, from the time where each part of Callow fought each other. In this manner it makes sense for a fortification up there, since it was some lord's only fortification and base of power.

[shyntar](#)

In the beginning quote with the tapirs, you want 'they lack sapience'. Animals are sentient, people are sapient.

Though admittedly a minor thing since no one seems to remember that and common usage beats everything. =/

*Rook*

Hitting them at the pass pretty much needs to be done regardless what the deal with Cordelia is. It's such a good way to put pressure on the big league heroes Procer is starting to bring out, force them to act and get a sense of what they can do and

how they work so you don't get blindsided. The information means as much as any damage you can actually do to the army.

A Black sort of move would probably be to take the tactical advantage at the pass to whittle down the invaders and safely suffer a loss against the Heroes to start a pattern of three, play the long game so you have an extra card in hand when things get critical. With the right maneuvering it could be a chance to try fully forming her new Name and get the first aspect popped out.

Not sure what Cat will do though, since she isn't always one to operate along the same lines as her mentor.

*BaggyOz*

I think the whole point of this chapter was that there is no way for Cat alone to head them off at the pass with any significant force.

*Rook*

That's the point, the tactical advantage of a chokepoint is that you don't need equal numbers to defend it. A thousand men and some scorpions are sufficiently threatening when the opponent is fighting a literal uphill battle through a pass barely wide enough to fit two carts side by side

The best way to punch through that when you can't use your numbers is quality instead of quantity. One of the easiest ways to force their Named to act directly, without committing a massive amount of resources

*Theoretically\_human*

that is versus an army withoutt heroes, they can cut through almost any defence not manned by villains. they are cheaters

*Shequi*

With Heroes in the mix choke points don't necessarily mean as much. Heroes (and Villains) are all about massive personal power at a very small locality.

Fighting in a choke point means that they can deploy all their available lethality against whatever you put in front of them. That would neutralise the Legion's advantage in better quality regular troops. It may be better to let the enemy spread out so as to leverage the Legion's superior quality without simply making them Hero-bait.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Seems like they'll move mountains to get a stab at her.

*JackbeThimble*

Erratic you know I love your stuff man but you've gotta cut down on the clutter. These last two chapters are easily twice as long as they need to be. I love your Worldbuilding and characters but adding this level of unnecessary detail and cluttered dialogue doesn't just clog up the plot it's actually starting to detract from the texture a bit, character moments that could be better expressed by a single line of dialogue get restated 3 or 4 times and while I get the impression that Callowan monetary policy is going to be relevant to the plot somehow it didn't need to be restated 3 or 4 times in one week. This is half of what made so much of book 3 so hard to get through, it really improved in the last arc but it's showing up again.

[DroughtBringer](#)

I've actually enjoyed this...but to each his own.

*Blue Dragon*

I concur. The chapter was fun, and I like the additional flavor and details.

*Sparsebeard*

I don't agree with you for what it's worth.

[sengachi](#)

I think this was perfect for a book introduction. This is exactly how you want to start off an epic book, slow and steady, with plenty of extraneous detail and reminders to let people get resituated and find their feet again.

*Metrux*

I think this is less a flaw and more a flavour, as in there are plenty of great books, but it's very rare for cultured people to agree on which they are. It's very much like flavours of food, there is good food and bad food, and then there is food you like and food you don't like, and not everything you dislike is bad, it's just a flavour you don't appreciate. Me and the guys who wrote before do appreciate this flavour of the story, while you don't. Not trully a problem, just remember that different people likes different things ;3

*Snowfire1224*

I greatly enjoy the fact that even though the story has gotten more serious over time, there's still great bits of humor in there.

I'm curious as to what Cat and Hasenbach talk about. Guess we'll see in the next chapter.

*burdi*

cat is more queenly i think, she is thinking more than just force her way out or that just because she is not in position of power her body is a construct not a body, made not born, so i think her body cant be hurt but can be damage. not healing but repair, since her body is made so i think she can change it. like when stalwart paladin smite her, she just repair her body and lalala, new body.

so cat like almost immortal, whatever damage her body received it can be repair as long as she have the energy when stalwart paladin cutting deep in her leg, her leg still fuction normaly

i really wonder how much damage cat's body can received before it can't be repaired

*burdi*

i mean her body is a construct, i think it is made according to cat's image about her own body, if she can change the image about her body in her mind, maybe she can alter her body permanently and that's i think how she repair her body when fighting starwart paladin...by manipulating her body image in her mind and recreated her body

*blari*

So The Principate is attacking Callow with a large amount of expendable troops lead by corrupt and treacherous nobles, powerful named all enabled due the the use of a huge magical ritual. When is the last time that sort of thing actually worked? I wonder if anyone on the good side has thought though the narrative implications of this attack?

[sengachi](#)

Well I mean, this could be a very well thought out (and cold-blooded) political maneuver to get rid of some of Hasenbach's political enemies while simultaneously weakening Callow to make it less of a threat.

*Metrux*

The heroes are actually not enabled by the ritual, they came from far and wide to help in the crusade. The ritual bit is just the making of the stairway, though the rest is pretty accurate and probably means they will loose, heroes or no heroes xD

[DroughtBringer](#)



Monthly chat? I'm curious...

Also great chapter! Thanks for it!

*bobthebuilder*

with a set up like this a fight at the mouth of the new pass has to happen. really jacked men wearing next to nothing (cus what is armor??) fighting the enemy in slow motion is required. someone must scream a variation of "This is Spartaaaa"

*Wolfkit*

I'm most of the way through a reread, and I found an interesting line about Archer's father in the Fletched bonus chapter:  
>Her father had been sold in Ashur and died in a mine collapse as a 'free' member of its lowest citizenship tier. The questor told her that was a committee's fault, higher tier citizens debating for a week on whether it was worth digging out the people in the collapsed shaft or not.

Now compare that to Prosecution I

Erratic, are Archer and White Knight half siblings?

[erraticerrata](#)

Read Prosecution II closely and you'll have a better idea of what happened to Archer's father.

[Aaron Wagner](#)

So, Hanno is approximately of an age with Archer's father?

=====

I thought the author referred to the boy in the memory the angels showed him, whose father worked in the mines for foreign prisoners.

*savadrin*

no, hanno is most likely archer's half brother

*MetruX*

My guess is that she will be his personal enemy in a way, so maybe he has to defeat her before Cat kills him? Don't know...

*Dylan Tullos*

Now might be a good time to simply make terms.

Cordelia Hassenbach is a reasonable woman. Procer can't accept a Villain as ruler of Callow, but Baroness Kendall isn't Named.

Appoint her as Catherine's heir, abdicate in Kendall's favor, and offer the Crusading armies safe passage through Callow.

No cities have to burn. No Callowans have to die. Simply backstab the Praesi, open the Vales, and watch the Crusaders fight it out with Malicia and Black.

Catherine has already lost Liesse, and the south of Callow is one big refugee camp. The best way to save the rest of the country is to ensure that the Crusade is fought somewhere else. If the war takes place in Callow, the difference between "winning" and "losing" won't matter much to the common people who pay the price.

### *Gunslinger*

Procer only wants a crusade cause she can get all the unpleasant elements to kill themselves while she stabilizes her home again. The problem is one can only get to Praes through Callow. And Praes is the only legitimate target, nobody's dumb enough to fight all the way to Keter. Which is why things are going to get tricky when the Dead King finally rises again

### *Dylan Tullos*

Gunslinger:

If Catherine lets the Crusade march through Callow unimpeded, there's no reason why they can't go straight into Praes and settle things there. At this stage there's no way to avoid the Crusade; the main issue for Callowans is whether their country is going to be the battlefield.

Callow has a fairly large and well-trained army, and a proper backstab would bring Proceran troops south too fast for Praes to stop them short of the border. The first battles of the Crusade could be fought on Praesi territory, allowing Callow to avoid the worst of the fighting.

The alternative is for Catherine to run around fighting multiple armies, while the forces she isn't able to stop rob the countryside, set fire to towns, and wreck Callow for a generation. Since Ashur is a major naval power, she has absolutely no way of stopping the Crusaders from burning every Callowan port and fishing village. A best-case scenario would be similar to the "Good" option in the Fourfold Crossing, where Callow is reduced to a graveyard with an army, and Foundling stands as queen of the ashes. That's not what Catherine wants.

Catherine worked with the Dread Empire to spare Callow from destruction. That approach has failed. Practical Evil couldn't stop Diabolist from destroying Liesse, and they

can't stop the Crusade from wrecking Callow. It's time to seek a new partner, one that can help Callow escape from being caught in the middle of a major war.

The point of Catherine's actions hasn't been to stand up to the Heavens. It's about protecting Callowans. Black can't do that, but maybe Cordelia can.

---

> If Catherine lets the Crusade march through Callow unimpeded, there's no reason why they can't go straight into Praes and settle things there. The first battles of the Crusade could be fought on Praesi territory, allowing Callow to avoid the worst of the fighting.

Not going to work. Unless she takes them through Arcadia, marching through Callow will take months of tension with the locals, spy interference and plummeting morale of the legionaries. Aside from having to work with untrustworthy jerks like Amadis, she'd be heading straight towards Larat calling in his debt, Malicia cutting off any kind of supply for her army and Black unleashing whatever he thinks would stop the crusaders.

> The alternative is for Catherine to run around fighting multiple armies

From where? The main advantage of Callow against Procer is that the Vales allow for a difference despite large difference in numbers (like Black was going to do with his twelve thousand soldiers against Papenheim's fifty), and Stairway is a one-time ritual that carves an even narrower passageway for an army that would have nowhere to go but south. Add to that the fact that Amadis inevitably will fuck up the negotiations with Daoine, and it's the kind of conflict that can end in a well-placed Princes' Graveyard.

> Since Ashur is a major naval power, she has absolutely no way of stopping the Crusaders from burning every Callowan port and fishing village.

Gee, good thing then that Callow is nearly entirely landlocked! While the Free Cities are bound to make some kind of move, Ashur is the problem that Malicia will (and is equipped to) solve by herself.

> It's time to seek a new partner, one that can help Callow escape from being caught in the middle of a major war. The point of Catherine's actions hasn't been to stand up to the Heavens. It's about protecting Callowans. Black can't do that, but maybe Cordelia can.

Then looking for somebody who wants to do that would be a good start. Black wants a granary and a strong buffer state,

so he's digging in at the border. Cordelia's main objective is to remove the unruly soldiers and rival princes from the Principate, hence lumping the all into one host and kicking them down the Stairway. Catherine not killing them would actually hinder her.

Remember that Amadis was going to convoke a session of the Highest Assembly while still in Callow, and that Cordelia before meeting Thief had planned for the most of the war to be waged in Praes; in other words, he plans to pull the Crusade from under her as soon as the campaign in Callow makes any kind of headway. He doesn't want to negotiate with Cat, he wants to divide the spoils in Callow between his allies. No way he's going to settle for marching straight to Wasteland.

*Dylan Tulllos*

\_\_\_\_\_:

Callow is "landlocked" in the sense that it isn't next to the ocean, but it has navigable rivers. There's nothing stopping Ashur from sailing up the Hwaerte and wrecking everything they find. In fact, that strategy makes more sense than attacking Praes, which has heavily fortified cities but a limited ability to feed its own people. If Ashur is indifferent to human suffering, they can simply sink the grain ships and burn the crops, then sit back to watch their enemies starve.

I agree that moving a Proceran army through Callow would be a mess. However, the alternative is fighting a Proceran army in Callow, which would be considerably worse. It would be simple enough to backstab Black and let Pappenheim through the Vales, and once that happens it's a simple matter of getting them south as fast as possible.

Amadis is an idiot. Cordelia is going to destroy him before his stupidity ruins her Crusade; I suspect that she's set him up to die at Catherine's hand. His foolishness doesn't change the fact that the Crusade controls the seas, allowing them to move forces through Callow's rivers freely. Malicia has no navy, so she can't stop them.

In the long term, Praes was always going to unite most of Calernia against them. They've annexed Callow, and now everyone else has to worry about who's next. That would be troublesome enough if we were talking about a Good nation, rather than an evil Empire that just murdered an entire city so they could raise their people as zombies. That's not good public relations.

Catherine can fight with the big alliance against one nation, or with one nation against the rest of the continent. The Crusade has more Named, more armies, and absolute control of the sea. Which side would you like to be on in a major war?

---

> There's nothing stopping Ashur from sailing up the Hwaerte and wrecking everything they find. Save for the fact that Ashuran fleet is for sea and not for sailing rivers upstream. Seriously, while Free Cities like Atalante could be a problem, have they not been freshly sacked, Ashur isn't going to bother Catherine any time soon.

> It would be simple enough to backstab Black and let Pappenheim through the Vales, and once that happens it's a simple matter of getting them south as fast as possible.

That's a good way to get the Empress to switch to Dark Day protocol. I agree that fighting heroes would be hard, but Catherine has recently seen what happens when you corner Praesi. Do you seriously think she'll just sit and pray that the Heavens send her a miracle to unmake all the devastation that would follow? All her commentary and strategical moves point otherwise so far.

> His foolishness doesn't change the fact that the Crusade controls the seas, allowing them to move forces through Callow's rivers freely.

I'm not sure you understand the logistics of moving fifty thousand people by river.

> Catherine can fight with the big alliance against one nation, or with one nation against the rest of the continent. The Crusade has more Named, more armies, and absolute control of the sea. Which side would you like to be on in a major war?

The side that doesn't want to depose me, divide my country in the fiefs for themselves and plunder it. Praesi provide soldiers, weapons and riches to Callow. What has the Principate to offer?

*Dylan Tullos*

\_\_\_\_\_:

Your strategy is to hope that the greatest sea power in all of Calernia will be stopped by a river. The Ashuran strategy is to build ships that can sail on a river, then burn everything within sight of the water. I think their strategy has the advantage.

If your allies are the kind of cold-blooded monsters who develop plans to murder entire cities, that sounds like a good reason to backstab them and burn their empire to the ground. Otherwise, it's just a matter of time before someone less reasonable than Malicia takes over and unleashes the Dark Day protocols for fun.

Ashur doesn't need to move fifty thousand people by river. They can take five thousand marines on ships, sail up the Hwaerte, and start destroying undefended towns. Catherine has no navy, so she can't stop them.

What did the Praesi provide to the people of Liesse? I think you're overlooking the fact that all of Procer's crimes took place a long time ago, while Praesi scheming led to the death of a hundred thousand people in the very recent past.

Procer has occupied Callow once. The Dread Empire invaded Callow once every generation. Which group is really more untrustworthy?

#### [erraticerrata](#)

Ashur can't enter League territorial waters without starting a war with the League, which the crusaders would much prefer avoiding – and could, if it happens, feasibly become a reason for the political collapse of the crusade. Particularly if that decision is made with Proceran and Levantine backing. Aside from that, your assessment of Ashuran sea power is pretty accurate. The only power even remotely in their wheelhouse when it comes to war fleets is Nicae, and it's lost all four wars it fought against the Thalassocracy.

#### *MetruX*

Just to remember what happened last time a Proceran army passed through Callow in a Crusade: they tried to annex it. That's what Procer do. They are in a crusade, besides, which means no Villain will be left standing in their way. Cordelia is practical, her allies are not, if she simply let's Cat be the rest of the Crusade will not only go to kill Cat, but to at the very least depose Cordelia as well. Besides what has been said already, you seem to think war is fought with numbers, but that is REALLY not the truth of it, especially when you are defending. If you don't have a good numerical advantage you simply CAN'T take a fortified position, unless heroes, of course, but heroes are here to fight villains, and there are plenty of villains to divide the heroes, both the Woe and the Calamities, Malicia and our

twitchy friend on the free cities, also soon enough the Dead King. If you actually account for the other villainous sides, treachery amongst the Good side and the benefits of defense, she is in a BETTER position than Procer. Now, you're asking her to leave an enemy army in her recently bloodied lands, while betraying her only allies, for the chance to be maybe left alone? Even if her position was terrible, this would be a worse idea.

*Dylan Tullos*

MetruX:

Catherine should abdicate and make Baroness Kendall Queen in her place. Kendall will have a large, powerful army to convince the Crusaders that Callow is not ripe for annexation. Cordelia will accept the deal because it means that her Crusade gets free passage through Callow, giving her an enormous military advantage. Without a Villain in charge of Callow, there is no righteous justification for a coup, and there will be plenty of Callowan soldiers around to convince ambitious princes that they should keep going south.

Numbers mean that you can suffer a serious defeat and come back for another try. If Catherine loses a battle, she can't replenish her losses as easily as the Crusaders can. Since the Crusade has command of the sea, Callow's defensive advantage won't stop them from raiding up and down the Hwaerte.

Malicia stopped being an ally when she let Diabolist build a superweapon in the middle of Liesse. Black stopped being an ally when he ignored Catherine and destroyed the superweapon they could have used to deter an invasion. Catherine stabbed him in the stomach to let him know that their trusting relationship was over. There are no "allies" among Villains, only interests, and Malicia and Black have both shown that they don't have Callow's best interests at heart.

Cordelia is not interested in conquering Callow. Black and Malicia can't stop Villains from murdering Callowans. When Malicia let Liesse happen, and Black failed to stop it, they broke their part of the contract. Why should Catherine feel bound to allies who are unwilling or unable to hold up their end of the deal?

*lennymaster*

Little problem there. Cat does not believe that Kendal is actually COMPETENT enough to properly lead Callow. That is why she is a Named, because she is inherently convinced that Creation is not as it should be and if nobody is willing and or capable to change that fact, than Cat will do it.

Cat is convinced that she is the only one with the intrest, power AND the necessary ruthlessness to get the job done. Abdicating and letting someone else take her place would, rightfully so, be seen by the Heroes as a way to put a puppet in place, for Cat would never accept anyone taking her place without proving that they are more capable.

[vuthuha912](#)

Malicia can seriously fuck Cat up but Black is not destroying the fortress for anything other than to save both of his allies from doom. After what happened to Sabah, you think he would let both his best friend and his heir fall to some story as obvious as the Flying Fortress of Doom. While I agree that Black totally disrespects their opinions, it is still better than letting them die because he was not decisive enough to act for wanting to spare their feelings. Heaven won't be cheated of their due, the moment the Flying Fortress was in some Villain's hand, the death of the Villain is something mandated by Heaven. The Bard can work on less than that. Besides, the Fortress is pretty good at motivating the opponents in trying to invade you harder.

Aside from that, I do think that Praes is a shitty ally and honestly, Black should have washed his hand from them a long time ago. He tried for 40 years and the situation barely changes. His reforms are too fragile. He fails to put the new generation in a secure position and he lets the danger (Trueblood) survive. And the problem is that all the decisions he made are perfectly reasonable. Honestly, he did the best that he could for Praes. Maybe, he should have let the entire country destroy itself with its infighting, crazy schemes, and treacherous behaviors. Like Anaxares said it was easier to just let the current take you away. But, he just can't since his family lived in Praes, they can't go anywhere aside Praes so he just gonna keep fighting until the water drowned him. Praes aren't meant for good things. Half of their problems are self-inflicted. Even when they are handed the tool to get out of their problems, they can still stab themself with it.



Still, I totally disagree with you on your assessment of an Ashur invasion. A powerful Navy will win shit if the condition is against them. Our history books are filled with victories against an overwhelming force, especially on rivers. Our favorite tactic is always to lure them deep enough into a river to limit their maneuverability, pin them down with a wooden spike that was covered by the tide, then use a smaller boat to finish off the opponent. I am from Vietnam btw, we know a thing or two about river battles. Yi Sun Sin of Joseon, who was never trained in naval battle before his appointment to the Navy, got the same idea when facing the Japanese. Guess what, he became the most successful naval commander of his time, successful sweep the floor with an enemy force 10 times his size. And the most famous victory was the British vs Spanish. The underdog can win the conflict through pure military tactics. If Callow can harness the home turf advantage, be willing to play balls, and choose the ground of the conflict then it is completely possible. The conditions in the real-life examples are different from the story but it is close enough. To even think that you have no chance of winning before the war begins is just unacceptable for any sovereigns of our country. Like Sun Tzu said, you have to believe in yourself.

Cat can just save her country by abdicating and letting the Crusaders fight in Praes but the problems would lie in Cordelia. Will Cordelia trust Cat enough to let her be responsible for transporting the entire army and the supply to Praes? Even someone like me sees it as risky. Her own allies are waiting for a chance to backstab her and you expect her to trust the word of a Villainess she never met. It will be nearly impossible for Cordelia to ally with Callow. If you are on the opposite side of Good and Evil then the ability to trust just plummet to near 0. Cat can abdicate but Cordelia has no way of knowing if it is genuine. There is too much trust required so it can only happen if the situation is dried enough that Cordelia has to negotiate.

When I follow the story, I notice how each side keeps to its own. Alliances happened between 2 Evil or 2 Good. No Good ever try to trade with Evil and Evil never try Good before. They can totally betray the alliances but the fact that alliances are only initiated between nations of the same side is quite alarming. Black forced an alliance on Callow with his Conquest – the biggest benefit that came out of the entire ordeal is a reliable trading partner for

Praes. If Praes and Procer can ally with each other then it is a game changer isn't it. Praes will not be as dependent on Callow for food and Callows probably appreciate not having to fight Praes every decade. Procer can end the entire conflict and extend its influence on a foreign power like how America gained massive influence in Japan after WWII. But Procer never entertains the idea, Praes never entertain the idea and Callow never entertains the idea so all three get trapped in this cycle of war.

Seriously, I am still bitter that Malicia and Black never consider just putting some old cot or cowardly guys in charge of Procer. Just turn Procer into America at the beginning of WWII. As long as they don't have the will to fight then everything can be negotiated. Cowardly does not mean that they are stupid, it just means that they are less likely to resort to waging war to deal with their political problems. Still, if war is unavoidable as Black said then measures like fanning the civil war will surely ravage the resources Procer have for war, distract them from you and give you a headstart in the conflict. A 1-for-3 kind of deal.

*savadrin*

you seem to forget how much callow proper absolutely adores Catherine. because at the end of the day, they know with absolute certainty that she's got their back. remember way back in the story... "yesterday, i saw a little girl give an orc a necklace of flowers"

for as far back as callow can remember, their lands have been the battlegrounds for crusade after invasion after crusade after invasion, and they likely would not settle for letting Procer, the nation that has invaded them just as often as praes, just tromp through their lands

*Dylan Tullos*

Savadrin:

Callow's love for Catherine may have taken a hit when she failed to prevent everyone in Liesse from being murdered by Praesi.

Procer has not invaded Callow just as often as the Praesi. The Praesi invade every generation, while Procer is often distracted by its own internal squabbles or problems. Procer and Callow are not friends, but it's not the Procerans sending flying fortresses or "sentient tiger

armies" to attack their cities every twenty or thirty years.

*Shequi*

But then she did the absolutely most Callowan thing of turning Akua's soul into an ornament on her cloak in Revenge. If there's a Callowan trait that villains embody and Callow will respond to, it's Revenge.

*Antoninjohn*

Yes because Cat will totally not be backstabbed by the country just about to have it's High Assembly dissolve Callow and enslave it to themselves

*Dylan Tullos*

Antoninjohn:

If Catherine has an intact army, the Procerans are a lot less likely to backstab her. If the Proceran army is weakened from fighting Black's Legions, while her own forces are intact, treachery becomes impractical.

Foundling's abdication would leave Procer without any excuse to annex Callow, and the rest of the Crusaders aren't going to support a land grab by the Principate when they're supposed to be fighting the Dread Empire. Since Cordelia doesn't want to occupy Callow anyway, it would only be a matter of defeating an overambitious group of princes. That's a lot more manageable than fighting the entire Crusade.

It's also worth noting that Catherine's Praesi allies have already backstabbed her; Malicia let Diabolist go forward with her plan, and that ended up killing everyone in Liesse. However untrustworthy they are, the Principate are still a lot nicer than the Dread Empire.

*MetruX*

Actually the principate has been seen by Callowans through the generations as just as bad as Praes, hated just as much. And before you were talking about how they couldn't stop Diabolist, now you're saying they didn't, so which of those points is wrong?

The principate is KNOWN to backstab and land grab on every opportunity, the reason why it was so hard for Cordelia to get a Crusade going in the first place, and they don't even need to have an excuse, it's a land under the thumb of a villain, what more reason would a crusade need to attack Cat?

If she simply let them enter, they will ignore civilians, sure, but it'll just be making it harder for Cat to defend.

*Dylan Tullos*

The Dread Empire invades Callow every generation. However little Callowans like the Principate, they're still better than the people who are attacking them constantly.

Also, the Principate has never murdered the entire population of a Callowan city and raised them as zombies. That's a big difference.

Black couldn't stop Diabolist. Malicia didn't try to stop her because she wanted Akua to finish her superweapon. Don't you remember the conversation at the end of the last book where Black revealed that Malicia knew about her plans?

The deal was for Catherine to keep Callow in line, while Black and Malicia prevented the Wasteland's Traditional Evil from getting loose in Callow. Catherine upheld her end of the bargain; Black and Malicia failed to keep theirs. What's the point of having allies who can't do what they promised?

The entire point for Catherine has been defending Callowan citizens. If letting the Procerans in means that Callowan fields won't burn and Callowan cities won't be sacked, then having to abdicate and flee the country is a very small price to pay. Put Baroness Kendall in charge, tell Cordelia that the Crusade gets free passage as long as they don't try any land grabs, and rely on Callow's substantial army and Cordelia's good sense to keep the Crusaders moving south to the Dread Empire.

*Ashen Shugar*

One point that seems to have been missed, is that there's a *\*story\** rut in reality about Callow being invaded and Praes being an invader. Black pointed it out as what they were trying to get out of in their practical ruling of Callow instead of just looting it for all the food they could carry.

Cat abdicating *\*might\** make it a little bit harder for Procer to justify invading but only a little, and it just drops them right back in the rut of Callow being invaded regularly. If Praes isn't in a condition to do it, then Procer will.

My guess for the best way out of that story, is for Cat to eventually take over rule of Praes as a queen of Callow because that turns the story right over on its head. If Callow is in charge, then it's not going to invade itself. As long as Praes are technically top dog, there's still the chance for that story to start up again the moment a

Hero pops up in Callow, feels the call of the heavens and isn't squashed back down quickly enough.

*Dylan Tullos*

Ashen Shugar:

You make good points. I had forgotten about the story rut.

A Callowan ruler of the Dread Empire would decisively break the current Story, which focuses on Praes invading and Callow being invaded. I'm not sure how the Story would adapt, but it would have to be something different.

*Shequi*

There's a story rut of Callow being invaded by Procer, too.

*Dylan Tullos*

Shequi:

The Princes make bad neighbors, but they spend too much time being bad neighbors to each other to invade Callow constantly. Also, the only invasion route Procer used to have was through the Red Flower Vales, where a relatively small army can stop a much larger force of invaders.

A Proceran Prince can't easily invade Callow, so he's more likely to fight his neighbors or attack the Free Cities. The Dread Empire has a land border with Callow, but not any other countries, so the Kingdom is going to be on the receiving end of practically every Praesi invasion.

*RanVor*

Archer really needs to get laid.

I have a question to you, Erratic: reading the fruit of your tireless labors, I got the impression that you're reading the comments under every chapter as they are posted, and whenever an issue is raised, you address it immediately in the next chapter. Is that what you do? Also, you're amazing and I want to throw money at you, but unfortunately I don't have much to donate right now.

Cheers to everyone from the first-time commenter.

[erraticerrata](#)

I do read the comments, but the interval varies for when. I'm usually around for an hour or two after posting a chapter.

I don't usually address what you're calling issues, no. Mostly because I already know what I want to write and I'm not interested in changing what that is, in part because it would be impossible to please everyone who comments (not to mention significantly lower the quality of the books).

*letouriste*

pretty sure this is the most healthy way to go for a writer;) so many stories lose their edge because the autor listen too much to the fanbase:/ glad you are mature enough for taking care of that.

*letouriste*

hum...i was concerned about cat mental state after her transformation but she seem to be the same:) the fact she still smoke and drink is pretty telling her winter modified feelings are not permanent and probably only felt when she use her Name actively

*Author Unknown*

"tapirs can, in fact, commit treason but that lack of sentience bars them from laying claim to the Tower by right of usurpation"

All hail Dread Emperor Meow!

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"we'd made tests. For that kind of distance, the average was eight days. Going as low as six and high as fifteen."

That's an extremely strange distribution. How many trials did they do? Technically four is enough:  $(6+6+6+15) \div 4 = 8.25$ , but obviously that isn't what happened. There would reasonably need to be twice that many at least, and probably a lot more. Obviously Cat can't afford to waste weeks at a time playing little Arcadia games like that. Can she create a portal and send a squadron on through by themselves and trust they'll find the exit, then also return the long, slow way? She must have had dozens of squads/scouts/whatevers going at any given time. How much of her forces are spread out all over the place still?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

When is Malicia going to reveal that she intentionally had mages "defect" to Procer to teach them scrying? Presumably without teaching them that Praes knows how to eavesdrop on their scrying sessions...

*Komploding*

Is it just me or has Archer stopped sending signals to Masego and is now literally hitting on him? I don't think she's can get much clearer than that

*blub01*

so would it take too much time to take either thief to steal the stored power or a trebuchet with goblinfire munitions to set the ritual on fire through arcadia, or is there another reason cat isn't doing that?

[vuthuha912](#)

Okay, digging a tunnel through a mountain. Can't say I have never seen this before? Would this be like Napoleon crossing the Alps or Hannibal? It is a dangerous thing if the ritual were to succeed but what can we do about this? Should we just blow up the entire thing? Maybe start the evacuation process and just start building fortifications around the area. I wonder if we can just fight them in the Stairway and let them win so that they drain their narrative weights for the fight then drop a mountain on the passages after the fight to stop them from establishing a supply line then finished them off. Without supply they will need to plunder the countryside, evacuating the surroundings well enough and you can probably stop this invasion.

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## Chapter 3: Chat

*"I must say, Chancellor, you've become quite the conversationalist."*

– Dread Empress Maledicta II

The room had been a gaol, once upon a time. Not one the Fairfaxes ever owned up to having, but the ruling dynasty of Callow had not remained on the throne by being faint-hearted. Unlike the luxurious prison that was the Songbird's Cage, this was a dark and ugly pit. Not the kind of place you sent someone if you ever expected them to come out. The late and unlamented Governor Mazus had apparently used it as dumping grounds for people he believed would cause more terror by being disappeared than known dead, and expanded what had once been a single pair of rooms to a large underground complex of seven. I'd had it sealed off before my coronation, and not a soul was allowed here now. Bare stone walls surrounded me, cleared of manacles, and the only ornament was the

seat I'd brought down here myself. I closed the steel door behind me and froze it shut before taking a deep breath. Winter came easy.

It always did.

Ice crept across the walls hungrily, gaping maws of frost that devoured every nook and cranny until all that was left was a hall of glittering mirrors. It'd been as difficult as snapping a finger, and there was a part of me that delighted in using the might of my mantle. But then the world sharpened. Grew jagged. I could feel, with dim horror, everything that I was begin to calcify. To set in immovable stones. That would have been dangerous enough, but I was not merely fae. My title was Winter's and Winter knew nothing as intimately as darkness and hunger. I sat down on the chair and forced myself to think as little as I could. It was almost cowardly, but I'd rather not have to confront the kind of thoughts that would surface if I pondered anything too deeply in this state. Gods, I could use a drink. The alcohol was one of the few things that blunted the edges of this. That made me feel like I was still human. But even if I'd been willing to embrace that crutch right now, I could not. Hakram had, before he left, exacted an oath from me.

*Never while on campaign, or attending affairs of state.* The oath was to end with our reunion, whenever that may be. Adjutant had expressed... worries to me in private, twice now. I'd been irritated, considering Indrani drank like a fish and no one ever lectured *her*, but he was right in that Archer wasn't wearing a crown. Unlike me. The sharpness of the ache for a cup in my hand was whispering to me that Hakram might just have been right. He did have that nasty habit, didn't he? I breathed in and out slowly, then reached for the power again. This had been an aspect, once. Fall. Now it was just a part of me, true as hair or toes. When it'd been crystallized into a single word it'd been stronger – no perhaps not that, simply more *rigid* – but whatever had been lost was more than made up by the breadth of what I could now achieve with this power. Before, I would never have been able to forge this half-world I was now painting over the room with brushstrokes of night. The threshold of my domain, the thought came, forged of instinct and inhuman certainty. I bit my lip, strong enough to draw blood.

Pain, that most human of sensations. It cleared out some of the ice and I let out a relieved breath. I had to see to myself before the First Prince graced me with her presence. That and play the card up my sleeve.

"I grant you leash," I said, voice echoing. "I grant you eyes and ears, tongue and feet, at my sufferance."

With a throaty chuckle Akua Sahelian's shade stepped out of the Mantle of Woe. Even in this half-death, she remained beautiful.



High cheekbones and perfectly styled eyebrows, her dress of red and gold tightly clinging to curves I could only envy. The only thing marring that beauty was the gaping bloody hole in her chest where I'd ripped out her heart.

"Freedom," the Diabolist mused. "Limited, but then is that not true of all freedoms?"

"Now that I've let you out of the lamp," I said, "for the first of my three wishes I would like peace for Calernia."

She cast me a disapproving looks.

"You know very well that djinn do not grant wishes," she said. "That is mere Callowan ignorance."

"You make a terrible genie, Akua," I told her. "I'm going to trade you for a lantern one of these days, you know? They're about as useful and *they* don't talk back."

"Your insistence on levity is a mark of poor breeding, dearest," she said. "You must overcome it."

I had a few less than polite things to reply to that with, including a reminder that if she was so clever she wouldn't have ended up sown into my collar, but it would have to wait. I could feel my guest arriving. The darkness shivered, and just like that the First Prince sat across from me. I'd not been sure that she'd bite when I sent Thief with the amulet I'd woven strands of my domain into, but to my pleasure she had. She was covered with so many miracles she almost glowed and she was very careful never to leave her seat, but she was here anyway. Hasenbach was not a reckless woman by nature, by my reckoning, but I knew exactly why she'd taken the risk to venture into even the outskirts of my domain: the Augur. How deeply that woman's visions ran was still a subject of much speculation across the whole Empire, but I'd banked on her being able to tell I genuinely had no intention of turning this into a trap. I needed the First Prince too badly to ever consider taking her life, even if it'd been possible. There was a moment of silence, as the Proceran gathered her bearings. I said nothing, patiently waiting.

Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Prince of Rhenia and Princess of Salia, Warden of the West and Protector of the Realms of Man. Quite a mouthful of titles for a woman who was only twenty-six years old and had become the sovereign ruler of the largest – and arguably most powerful – nation on Calernia before the age of twenty. This was likely as close to meeting in person as we'd ever come, so as always I took a moment to study her. She was impeccably clothed in dark blue I'd been told was part of the heraldry of her home principality Rhenia, the dress rather conservative but still flattering to her frame. It made her shoulders look slimmer, I

thought. Hasenbach was best known for her skill as a diplomat, but she'd been born with a warrior's frame. Her long golden hair cascaded down her neck in perfect ringlets, needing no ornament but their own richness, but there was a discreet touch of golden eye shadow that made her blue eyes stand out even more vividly. On her brow was a circlet of white gold, tastefully understated considering the power it represented. I'd seen beautiful women in my day, some hauntingly so, and honestly would not count the First Prince among them. She was not plain, not exactly, but all the most striking parts of her appearance were careful artifice.

That did nothing to detract from her presence, even in this half-realm of mine. Though seated on a mere cushioned and sculpted chair, she radiated that... something. The unspoken pull that surrounded people like Black and Malicia, or even Juniper. That spark that made the weight they bore into something that dragged others into their orbit. No, she was not someone to ever underestimate. The more I learned about her ascension to the throne and the years that had followed, the warier I was becoming of her. The pit of vipers she ruled was as deadly as the Imperial court in many ways, and she'd retained rule of it without having a cudgel like Black to call on. She met my eyes, but did not speak. Akua softly laughed, walking around the First Prince's silhouette with the grace of a cat before leaning her head over the Proceran's shoulder.

"She will never speak first, my heart," the shade of my most hated enemy said. "It would be improper, you see. Her people believe that First Prince is the greatest of all titles, and so she must never be first to offer courtesy."

I inclined my head towards Hasenbach.

"Your Most Serene Highness," I said, voice calm.

"Your Grace," Cordelia Hasenbach replied.

The proper address was 'Your Majesty', though never once had she referred to me as such. The etiquette she employed recognized me as noble, though at best one of equal standing with any of the many princes of the Procer.

"Look at how her lip curls around the words, Catherine," Akua laughed, moving around the unseeing First Prince to better study her. "She would prefer not to grant you them at all, but she must – and *how* it displeases her. To call you queen would be recognition of your legitimacy, and end to her crusade's own. But to deny you any title at all would make any negotiation between you worthless."

Akua rose, stretching languidly.

"And she needs you to keep speaking to her, my lovely," the monster said silkily. "Oh yes. Even should you never come to terms, to be able to gauge you with her own eyes is priceless advantage."

Diabolist had grown increasingly fond of using endearments with me, since I'd ripped out her heart and stolen her soul. Fucking Praesi. Fucking highborn, really.

"Let's begin with the usual," I said. "Terms?"

"Unchanged," the First Prince replied. "Immediate abdication and disbanding of your armies. Your soldiery to undergo fair trial after the crusade. Yourself and no more than five of your comrades allowed exile without pursuit, under condition of never returning to Callow."

I hummed, and idly reached for my pipe. I used the process of stuffing it with wakeleaf and striking a match as a deferral of answer to allow me to gather my thoughts. I'd half-expected Hasenbach to offer starker terms now that she'd struck the first blow and begun crossing into Callow catching me flat-footed.

"Do you feel that?" Akua murmured. "That is *caution*, dearest. She does not harden terms of surrender because she fears you. What you might do if cornered. Use that fear, Catherine. It is the sharpest prick of the mantle you claimed."

I puffed at my pipe and let out a stream of smoke, making myself more comfortable in my seat.

"I'll have to decline, for now," I said.

Akua was useful, too useful to shove back into the box right now, but more for her perceptiveness than her advice. The terms remained unacceptable. Abdication would be a relief, to be honest, and something that was going to happen regardless if my plans came to fruition. But not like this. I couldn't trust a crusader tribunal to pass sentence on the Praesi under my command, much less the greenskins. And that the First Prince and her allies would be deciding Callow's fate without a single check on their decisions was the least acceptable part of it all.

"You are calmer than I expected," Hasenbach said. "The dossiers we have of you led me to expect conversation of a harsher tone."

Akua clucked her tongue.

"Do not let her turn this towards you, my heart," she advised. "Any answer at all will be revealing in ways you cannot control. That is too dangerous a woman to be given the lay of your thoughts."

I inclined my head, agreeing with Akua while masquerading it as acquiescence with the First Prince's sentence.

"I've been reading about the Principate, lately," I said. "About how it functions in practice."

The First Prince smiled, as if she were sharing a drink with an old friend.

"Interesting," she said. "And have you come to any conclusions?"

"It doesn't," I bluntly said. "Function, that is. The fault line in Procer's foundation has been made exceedingly clear over the last twenty years."

Not so much as a speck of emotion crossed the First Prince's face. Akua laughed delightedly.

"See how her brow stiffened, Catherine?" she said. "That is anger, my lovely. The recognition that the Empress' game was no great plot. That all her people ever needed to claw each other bloody was means and excuse. Feed that wrath. That is the only way for you to glimpse truth behind the mask."

Praesi diplomacy, I was learning, was more like a pit fight with slightly pulled punches than anything I'd recognize. It was all about testing the other side, making them blink and then capitalizing on that weakness. That Akua could not recognize tussling like that with Cordelia godsdamned Hasenbach was a bad idea was a good reminder that for all her cleverness the Diabolist had heavy blinders. That was the rotten heart that always made the designs of the High Lords collapse: they could not ever conceive that they were sometimes in the inferior bargaining position. Fortunately, I'd learned that lesson early when I grew up with the Tower's boot over my throat. *No doubt I have blinders of my own, I thought. But if I knew they'd hardly be blinders, would they?*

"Not overly surprising conclusion, given the manner in which you have ruled," the First Prince said. "For all that your throne is in Laure, you have adopted many of the manners of the East."

Ruled, I noted, not reigned. How carefully she always picked her words.

"Don't misunderstand me," I said. "I'm not touting the Tower as an alternative, or even how I've been running things. I just grafted Praesi bureaucracy to the court, and it's a clunky solution. But I've gotten my hands on a history of the League Wars, and it's not a pretty story."

Akua clucked her tongue disapprovingly.

"This is the chorus of the losing side, dearest," she chided me. "Beneath the dignity of one who triumphed over me."

It was a small shift, but I saw Hasenbach's eyes brighten with interest after I spoke. I'd been careful, during our little talks, to try to find common grounds. Something we could discuss and disagree over without it getting personal. So far, what had worked best was Proceran history. I wasn't reading those books solely because I no longer needed to sleep, or even to get an idea of my opponent's weaknesses.

"You refer to the Right of Iron," she said. "I would, in fact, tend to agree with you in this matter. The prerogative of waging war without the agreement of the First Prince has been the source of much trouble over the centuries."

"So why haven't you tried to revoke it?" I asked, genuinely curious. "I know that'd have to go through the Highest Assembly and that means a vote, but just after your civil war people were sick enough of the killing you would have had a decent chance of pushing it through."

"I considered this," the First Prince admitted. "Yet in doing so, I would have created cohesive opposition to any further reform. Many of which are, as you have said, direly needed."

"That opposition you're talking about," I said. "They're the exact same people that spent nearly twenty years ravaging the Principate on Malicia's pay."

"A generalization," Hasenbach said. "One with some shade of accuracy, I will concede, yet there is important difference in having been funded by the Empress and having sought to do her bidding."

I acknowledged the point with a nod. From the corner of my eye I saw Akua meandering away from the First Prince, coming to stand at my back. Even knowing she was powerless, utterly at my mercy, having her behind me was raising the hair on my neck.

"What I'm wondering is – why listen to them at all?" I asked. "I saw the Imperial estimates for the remaining armies after the Battle of Aisne. There wasn't a force in the Principate that could have stood against you, if you'd twisted their arms into backing your reforms. And I don't mean the small ones, I mean *everything*."

"You were taught," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "by two of the most brutal tyrants in living memory. That is not your fault, though your embrace of their methods remains your sole responsibility. That is why your perspective on the subject is tainted. I did not attempt to make myself an absolute monarch because I believe such a manner of ruling to be dangerously flawed."

"If you count civil wars, Procer's been on the field more often than any other nation on Calernia," I pointed. "That includes *Praes*, Your Highness."

"You blame this on lack of centralized authority," the First Prince said. "That is not entirely inaccurate, yet you miss the central tenet of the Principate: it is, unlike *Praes*, a nation built on consensus. The Highest Assembly is prone to squabbles, and inefficient. This I will not deny. That is because it is not an institution meant to empower the office of the First Prince, it is meant to *check* it. No single man or woman should ever be able to wield the full, unrestricted might of the Principate."

"Now," Akua whispered into my ear. "Now is when you slide the knife."

I smiled pleasantly.

"Then why," I asked, "is the host crossing into Callow made up almost entirely by your opposition in the Assembly?"

The shutters went down on the First Prince's face, even as I pulled at my pipe and allowed smoke to stream out of my nostrils. *This*, I thought, *moments like this. They're why I let you out of the box, Akua.* I had much to learn from Diabolist, when it came to this kind of game.

"She did not expect you to understand her intent," Akua said, still at my side. "Watch the eyes, how she reconsiders the kind of threat you pose. She thought you a dull thug, a brute of a child with a stolen crown. Now she wonders if you've taken as much from these talks as she has, and it *worries* her."

The shade laughed.

"Do not talk," she said. "Let her silence damn her more the longer it stretches."

I spat out another mouthful of smoke, studying the First Prince. When she finally spoke, her tone was perfectly calm.

"I am forced to wonder," Hasenbach said, "what game it is you truly play, Catherine Foundling."

"The only game I've ever ever played," I said. "Keeping my people's head above the waterline."

"Yet you ally with monsters and murderers," the First Prince said. "The very same whose fellows committed the single greatest massacre of Callowans since the days of Dread Empress Triumphant."

"May she never return," Akua murmured.

"I'm also talking with you," I said. "The thing is, Your Highness, that right now the Tower's my only possible bedfellow. I can't take your crusade on my own."

Not entirely true. Juniper was the opinion that if I was willing to let most of Callow burn while I struck deep in crusader territory, I might be able to force a draw by sheer dint of massacre. She'd played out the theory with her general staff. No part of that path was acceptable to me, though. I was not willing to pile up the bodies until no one was able to keep going. If I was ever forced to that, well... Better to abdicate. And to backstab Praes as brutally as I could beforehand, so that the crusade ended quickly and not in Callow.

"A villain ruling over Callow is not an acceptable outcome for this war," the First Prince said.

"People I don't trust in the slightest deciding what happens to Callow isn't either," I frankly replied. "If I have to cut a deal, I'd rather do it with you than Malicia. After Liesse... Well, if this is the best I can expect from the Empire, the Empire's not an entity I can trust to uphold their part of a deal."

"Trust has nothing do with it," Akua dismissed. "You have power enough that the Empress cannot cross you lightly. Treaties are only ever gilding added to the deeper truth of power, dearest. This one does not consider you of sufficient might to treat with."

"Trust," Hasenbach said, her tone almost amused.

"Trust," I echoed.

The First Prince smiled.

"Did you never pause to wonder, Your Grace, why the only powers willing to deal with you are monstrous?" she asked softly.

My jaw clenched.

"Did you never wonder if you *belong* amongst that number?"

My fingers tightened.

"Careful now," Diabolist warned. "She goads you not by accident."

The urge was there to lash out. To remind that sanctimonious fucking Proceran that her own hands were far from clean. She'd sent out her enemies for me to savage, and her reasons for starting this crusade weren't nearly as squeaky clean as she'd like her allies to believe. She'd played the shadow game with Malicia for over a decade, too, and there's wasn't a person in Creation who'd manage to get through that without some mud on their shoes. Why were her killings less a sin than mine? Because

she went to the House of Light for sermons and paid her alms? Because her intentions were some kind of nebulous greater good? Hells, so were mine. Instead I took a deep breath. Slowly, I raised my pipe and pulled at the dragonbone shaft. The wakeleaf no longer brought the sharp focus it once had, but the act itself was soothing.

"I have," I admitted quietly, "utterly failed Callow."

Whatever answer she'd expected, it had not been that. The flicker of surprise in her eyes did not lie. I felt Akua begin to speak, but I no longer had need of her services. All it took was an exertion of will and back into the collar she went. Blind and deaf and furious.

"After First Liesse, when the Ruling Council was formed," I said. "No, even before that. When I did not answer Akua Sahelian being named governess with gathering an army and hanging her from the nearest tree. I betrayed everything I had set out to do the moment I allowed a woman I knew a cold butcher to be the steward of Callowan lives for the sake of political expediency."

I'd had months, now, of sleepless nights. Of going back over everything I'd done. Thinking of the paths I could have taken that didn't result in a hundred thousand of my people dead. And there had been so very many of them, hadn't there?

"I fucked up the Ruling Council," I acknowledged. "I had the leverage to make real changes, the same kind I've been saying I want to achieve since I was a girl, and instead I let a council stacked with High Lord cronies run Callow for me. And then got furious when they acted the same way Praesi always have, the moment I wasn't there to make them afraid. I've been complicit through inaction or ignorance in every catastrophe that struck Callow since the moment I got power and did absolutely nothing with it."

The First Prince watched me in silence, her face unreadable.

"I could make excuses," I said. "That I was ill-prepared for that kind of authority. That I spent so much time and spilled so much blood getting on top I forgot *why* I wanted to be there in the first place. But that'd be hypocritical, wouldn't it? I was given exactly what I clamoured for, and when I got it a city was turned into a graveyard. Hells, it's on my fucking standard: justifications matter only to the just. I started out with the intention of burying anyone who tossed around sentences like that in a shallow grave, but now I'm the one having them sown on battle flags. Second Liesse made it clear that I've slowly crawled into being the kind of person I swore I was going to remove."



"And yet," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "you still wear the crown and muster your armies for war. Sentiment is only meaningful if followed by action. If your grief at all the woe you have caused changes nothing, it is merely self-pity."

"I know exactly what I have to do, Hasenbach," I said. "And letting you carve up Callow like side of pork isn't part of it. Not when the people doing the carving have no real incentive to care for the realm under the knife."

"Self-pity, then," Hasenbach said. "You still believe you can win this war."

"War," I said, "is the very opposite of what I'm after."

My pipe had finally gone out, I saw.

"We'll talk again," I told her, and the darkness collapsed.

I stayed in my seat for a long time, alone with my thoughts. *When does a lesser evil simply become an evil?* That was the line I needed to find, the one that could not be crossed. The moment where I became a greater wound than the one I was trying to prevent. I rose as the ice receded around me. It was going to be a long night.

They always were.

---

Joel

Nice to see that she's taken a long, hard look in the mirror.

*Dainpdf*

I wish we could have gotten some of that look, instead of a time skip and the end result.

danh3107

Everything everything everything Akua did and said this chapter was flawless, beautiful even. I ship it.

Seeing the First Prince out of her own perspective was really interesting, I hope we get the chance again.

*RoflCat*

I find it interesting that for all that Akua did to try to make Cat into her monster, now Akua is Cat's monster, ever tempting her into going deeper into Evil.

Admittedly Cat's got a VERY tight leash on her monster....  
That leash better not be tortoise shell bondage though....

*Rook*

Bondage might actually be the only effective leash for Akua ghost to be honest, considering her most dangerous weapon is her treacherous gods damned tongue. Nothing short of a permanent gag is really going to make her stop being a double edged sword with a handle made of razors.

*d\_o\_l*

( ˘ ˘ )

*caoimhinh*

( ˘ ˘ )

*kelioez*

( ˘ ˘ )

*Dainpdf*

I actually want to see this from the First Prince's perspective. What is this new and... I was going to say improved but that's debatable, Cat like from the outside?

*d\_o\_l*

Haha, totally called Akua becoming an evil spirit advisor.

*naturalnuke*

Abua the Cloak Ghost, truly a fabulous idea.

If only this could be trusted not to backfire...

*Rook*

It's a Foundling weapon, of course it's going to backfire. She doesn't have a weapon in her entire damned arsenal that doesn't take a chunk out of her own hide for using it.

If Names were granted based on character traits, it would probably be Queen of Mutilating-Herself-Almost-As-Badly-As-Her-Enemies. Doesn't exactly roll off the tongue though.

*Naeddyr*

The Flagellant.

*haihappen*

Hmm, the Flagellant could easily be a Name.  
An Ascetic Monk like non-priest that does the wrong things for the right reasons, and finds absolution afterwards in self-flagellation. Or he/she could take on the sins of others for absolution?

An entire Name/Character based upon absolution of sins by means of pain suffered willingly. Is a Choir of Absolution Canon? Or does this fit with Mercy?

Alternatively, the sins are not absolved, merely transferred, making the Flagellant a vessel for every sin known to Man. The goal: deny the hells a great deal of souls, at the cost of one live.

*nipi*

Now, now! She hasn't climbed to the top of The Tower yet.  
Give it time.

ALKATYN

The Pyrrhic Queen

[sengachi](#)

Oh damn. That's a hell of a name.

*Dainpdf*

Took the words right out of my mouth.

[onedollargum](#)

"Cloak Ghost" is an amazing character title or magic object name.

*Gunslinger*

Holy cow, this was another fascinating chapter.

The revelation of Cat's alcoholism is both logical and sensible. Those winter powers don't come without any cost sadly. It also makes sense, Named can easily burn away alcohol but Cat wouldn't want to as it reminds her she's human and alive. You know like our friend, the Wandering Bard.

I was dumbfounded when Akua came out and started giving her fantastic diplomatic advice. Quite a whammer of a scene but there's no way that ends well for Cat right? Though it does explain how she could break into the Hashmallim's domain. (Also so much fuel for the shippers)

Once again plenty of great lines but I burst into laughter at this one

> "May she never return," Akua murmured

Not you too Akua.

Finally if you can vote for the Guide on topwebfiction.com

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

You can also support the author via his patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>)

Donations there make 3 chapters a week possible for all of us

[Euodiachloris](#)

I swear, the more people tack "may she never return" on to her name, the more likely they make Triumphant's return.

It's like seeing Taylor and going "eh, I can take her" or Baam and being all "you and what army?".

Narrative Causality, bitches! 😊

*Trupo*

I half-expected Triumphant coming during Second Llesse, either posessing Ubuu or marching out of Greater Breach with an army.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Never thought I'd see a ToG reference here on the Guide of all places. Upvote for you Euo.

[glassgirlceci](#)

Honestly, I'm glad Cat was called out on the budding alcoholism. Having an alcoholic protagonist brings up a few too many unpleasant childhood memories; it was actually starting to impact my enjoyment of the story 😞

[NZPIEFACE](#)

What I like most about EE writing is probably the use of short impactful sentences, such as "They always were." at the end and "It always did." near the start. The ability to send chills down my spine with such short sentences to imply that so much more is something I consider pretty amazing.

Keep it up man, I'm loving this arc.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Aaaaaaand we can't edit messages. Reading it one day later hurts me physically.

*mavant*

Ship tease!

*Stormblessed*

Interestingly, the only reason the "shipping" is being advertised is because Akua's gone mad and started referring to Kat affectionately. Otherwise it wouldn't be shipped at all. Of course, without affection there are no romantic relationships in real life.

But I certainly can't see Kat getting romantically involved with Akua Ghost. Yet. Maybe at the end of the book or if she becomes more and more Fae and the story draws her in. (Perhaps by accidentally reciprocating terms once or twice by accident or sarcasm and getting stuck in the story)

*danh3107*

I can't speak for everyone, but I was joking. I don't see it happening it's just a fun thing to say.

*TideofKhatanga*

It's a Praesi thing, treating your worst enemy the way you would your dearest lover. "Iron sharpens Iron" and all that shit, the Praesi love no one more than their strongest rival. Malicia did the same thing with Tasia Sahelian and now with Cordelia Hasenbach.

Much like a crocodile's smile only shows teeth, a Highborn's love only shows obsessive hatred.

*haihappen*

Maybe its just Stockholm's Syndrome.

Another reasonable explanation is that the Praesi mindset dictates that power is something that you need to bring yourself close to, by any means possible, to eventually seize it for yourself.

Akua's soul-ghost probably has a dozen plans in the making to get out of her current predicament and seizing Cat's power for herself. Being a helpful little tool is part of that, since it helps ensure the continued existence of her current ... soullord(?) and potential future vessel. Also, it tempts Cat to rely on Akua, which creates dependence, which is a potential opening later.

I wouldn't put it past Akua to try to (for a lack of a better word) seduce Cat, so Cat is tempted to give Akua a physical body so she can ... indulge. I sense Cat will be craving desperately for anything that can make her feel human again in the future.

*Dainpdf*

Do you really think that? Two girls, one of them described as hot, the other being the MC, confirmed into girls and quite a badass? Of course people will ship. Especially with Akua's whole "you'll be mine yet" shtick. Shippers care not for logic or the presence of actual chemistry of the fact that one is a cold blooded mass murderer and the other is Akua freaking Sahelian.

*Antoninjohn*

Well it looks like Cat has a great politics and magic tutor now, and a pet ritualist to make new rituals

*Dainpdf*

I don't think she's trusting Akua anywhere near magic, any time soon. That's just asking for trouble.

*Aeon*

Everything about this chapter is awesome. I loved Akua and Cat's sheer honesty was great. The only bad thing about this story is that now I'm stuck waiting for more. Thanks for the great chapter.

*letouriste*

this is a good thing, little tidbit like that motivate you to see another day.  
find enough life stories and fiction stories and you will never stop living:)

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

To be fair though, from the outset Praes and Principate would always clash with each others simply via beliefs and ways of life, without name and story weight both countries would devolve to ruin with each other long ago.  
Also talking about just and fair. Hanno would like to have a word about that.

*Dainpdf*

Hanno would like to have a sword about that.

Fixed that for you.

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Akua's pretty shady.

*Yardaze*

oh you.

(excellent pun, I approve)

*Rook*

Pretty slim as well

A real slim shady that one

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

I'd just noticed there's technically two puns here, "pretty" as in, Akua's hot, and "shady" referring to how she might poison Cat's ears and the fact that she's a shade.

### *Trupo*

Interesting... In Praes, nobility is kept in check by promise of one day reaching for the Tower or becoming Chancellor, preventing them from rampaging over "lesser" goals. Thus the Tyrant is a check on nobles power by existing and not being proactive enough to unite them (good work, Malicia!).

In Procer, nobles are supposed to be check on First Prince and it somewhat works – they have anarchy, but no tyranny ;).

What's was the force that kept Callow functional? Being stuck between Procer and Praes, perhaps.

*letouriste*

true loyauty toward what the kindgom represent maybe. loyauty doesn't seem to exist in praes and procer but that could in callow given how talbot think

*Rook*

Praes is all about the best coming out on top though, generally no hard feelings at the end of it all. Malicia and Tasia, Cat and Akua, the goblin matrons, etc.... they've got a different sort of incredibly twisted loyalty.

Akua, in typical Praesi fashion, seems to hate Cat much less now that Cat forced Akua to acknowledge her by tearing out her heart and binding her to a cloak. No defeated Callowan enemy would be this proud of you for beating them and wearing their immortal soul as a fashion statement. Definitely

wouldn't be this helpful either, treacherous intentions aside.

*Dainpdf*

Akua was one of the most patriotic characters in the whole story. She saw her country being changed and decided to make a stand for what she believed was the soul of her homeland. Oh, and also if she can't she's bringing everyone down with her.

*Naeddyr*

> Oh, and also if she can't she's bringing everyone down with her.

\*sniff\*

I always tear up at the national anthem of Praes.

*Dainpdf*

I will award one internet to whoever actually composes original lyrics for that. EE, you do not count. I mean, feel free, but I've already awarded you too many internets.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Callow already got "Down in the line" so I think there will a equivalent for Principate and Praes too. Even the Orc got the "To the West"

*thespaceinvader*

Straight-up feudalism, by the sound of things.

*Frommerman*

Down here in the mud it's us who hold the line...

*beleester*

I think it's that, along with the Heroes. Callow's story is always about getting occupied and kicking the occupiers out. They don't have a real "royal dynasty" – any Callowan king probably has a 50-50 chance of getting usurped, exiled, or killed in battle against an invading army. What they have is a series of Heroic leaders who use the throne as a rallying flag.

Callow works because whenever there's an external threat, everyone from the king down to the peasants is willing to pitch in to give the occupiers the boot, and there's always an external threat.



The only times I can think of the ruler causing problems for Callow is when Callow is stable enough to go on the offensive. "The classic Callowan blunder: Never send an army into the Wasteland that you can't handle if it comes back as undead."

*ALazyMonster*

They mentioned in one of the heroic interludes (riposte I think) that Callow has only been occupied twice, triumphant and the conquest, so I think it was they were just constantly being invaded and defeating the invaders but your point about everyone pitching in seems solid though.

*Dainpdf*

A point was made, ages ago, that random Callowans would have weapons stashed and would contribute to a revolution against conquerors.

Also, Procer has take Callow before, as well. They were kicked out.

*McBob*

And by Procer after the Crusades.

*Dainpdf*

In both (Praes and Procter) cases, there is a sort of idea that there can be as much infighting as necessary, but that there should be some respect to unity.

Partly due to fear, partly due to loyalty, partly due to greed... Callow had a divide between north and south, but fact was that they could only avoid conquer by their neighbors by sticking together.

*SMHF*

Well Akua's back a lot sooner than I was expecting! 😞

BTW don't forget to vote for Guide on topwebfiction, someone might find the story and write that CatxAkua fanfic u always wanted! :p

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Flameburst*

Who is Akua? Is she related to Ubua?

*Dainpdf*

Where did that meme come from again? I remember there was a chapter when it started, but I don't recall how...

*Ezreon*

Its from Masego's interlude, where he gloriously REMEMBERED name of the girl he encountered much to Captain's delight.

*Dainpdf*

Oh, right! That was awesome.

*Author Unknown*

I think Cordelia is going to make a much more interesting opponent than Akua; she may even survive the experience. The fight with Akua was great and all, but she was way too much of a classical villain to have any hope of victory. Cordelia has all of the benefits of Akua's diplomatic cunning without the downside of being bat shit insane; something EE highlighted in the chapter.

Can't wait to see how it all plays out.

[Not a robot](#)

[quote]She may even survive the experience[/quote]  
I love this story

*TeK*

Here's the kicker: centralization is propotionate for bordering threats. England had the leasure of constant civil wars and parlament bickering, because it was nigh impossible to invade. HRE, which pursued similar goverment, was a passing ground for any nearby force, France, Poland, Denmark, you name it. And was roghtfully dismatled in the end. My point is, the Procer can't afford being split, if it is to serve it's purpose as bulwark against Evil. Amazing example is the fate of Kievan Rus, which existed as constant collaboration of bickering princes, with great prince at head no less. It was promptly trampled by mongols, and stayed under it's yoke for centuries, until it was centralized.

On the side note: what is the side of Calernia? I mean, having fice (six) nations covering pretty much the whole surface of comtinent, given their level of technology, streches my suspension of disbelief. It can't be larger than Australia, for one, what with third of continent spanning empires and what not.

*grzecho2222*

Noble Democratic Republic also went for having checks for goverment and could not do anything outside of throwing armies at outside threats like Russia, HRE or Ottoman Empire. It also had stupid amount of infighting, Too much anarchy forces nations into stagnacy.

*TeK*

Yeah, forgot about Commonwealth. No wonder they got partitioned by absolutist monarchies. Letting other nations choose your ruler is a bad idea.

*grzecho2222*

That whole century was full of stupidity. The whole "We attack Poland so we may have better defences against Russia, we fail, we ally with Russia to attack Poland, we win, we got attacked by Russia, we fail" situation happening twice is just sad.

*nipi*

There is magic. Scrying would do much to alleviate the problem of the nations being too large to manage. Sure armies still take a long time to move but by having an instantaneous communication system reaction times are effectively cut in half.

Its size might be one reason why Procer is so decentralized. They had no scrying and thus maintaining centralized control of all the Principates would have been unfeasible.

*Dainpdf*

Named make this somewhat easier, since they can move things along more efficiently than any mortal ever could. The Principate can be somewhat disorganized because Named tie it together. Even more so for Praes.

*Ward*

Great chapter 😊

[Antony444](#)

This 'Right of Iron' looks like a fantastic bad idea and is in all likelihood the underlying reason why Procer was such a pariah state before Cordelia entered the stage. By everything which is holy, we have seen how nasty, self-serving and treacherous the Princes can be. And now we learn each and every one can go to war with each other or against foreign entities without the First Prince's approval?

This right is an awful privilege, no matter how centralised or decentralised a state you have to rule.

I will admit it will not made a lot of difference for the Chain of Hunger or the Dead King, the traditional evil entities, but I really wonder how many wars were fought with Levant and the League because an ambitious Prince decided to begin a few skirmishes and forced the rest of the Principate in the flames of

war when it got out of control.

Apart from this, a very good conversation between Cordelia and Catherine. Might be the foundation for more, when the Dead King launches his invasion and the Northern forces get their 'Woe time'...

*Dainpdf*

I'm just waiting for both the League and the Kingdom of the Dead to start stirring and then Cordelia to have to call this whole thing off because two new fronts just opened at her rear.

*nipi*

Anyone else wondering if the Praesi mages Procer got were "sent" by Malicia? Surely the inferior version can be listened in on, shut down or perhaps even faked by more skilled Tower mages.

I wonder if Procer has created a code book in anticipation of such things? If so then Praesi spies will be trying to copy it.

Malicia might have even known about "The Stairs" ritual and decided to give the First Prince the option to split her armies to invade Callow.

*nipi*

Im talking about scrying.

*nipi*

From ch2 we have:

"They've mastered the basics of scrying, at least," Masego conceded. "It's why they're forging a pass instead of a tunnel even if it risks avalanches."

The Stairway could just be a modification to a previous plan. Likely needs less accumulated magic energy and is faster (can be made in one go) than tunneling.

As for the Crusade. Im pretty sure Malicia has been trying to delay/prevent one since she rose to power.

Sure instant communication is huge provided that it works. Id imagine that Praesi mages can pinpoint the communications and shut the very basic version Procer now has down in a rather large area. Maybe even kill the scrying mages. If Procer comes to rely on it (and I think we have already seen a change in military organization due to it), that can be a huge blow. Its also an avenue for intelligence gathering and it certainly could be worth it if communications can be forged. (The last one could be something that might not have been done in surviving history – meaning a complete surprise.)

Also note that the fact that it is inefficient against Praesi but not so much against others would create internal pressures to wage war somewhere else.

As for Procean modifications to it. I think Masegos attitude towards Procean mages applies to the whole of Praes, including the Empress.

Malicia considers a fight with Procer unwinnable. So I can see her making some calculated gambles.

### *beleester*

The Stairway was apparently years in the planning, which makes that unlikely, since nobody knew a Crusade was on the way at the time.

And it would be foolish for Malicia to give away one of Praes's best weapons just for the \*chance\* to use it against them. Even if you \*know\* the enemy is listening in, the ability to communicate instantly at long range is huge. For instance, if you send advance warning of a surprise attack, then sure, the enemy knows they were spotted, but you've still stopped the surprise attack.

Also, we've seen Good mages jam and redirect scrying before, so I don't think they're strangers to info-war, they just didn't know the exact details of scrying. Once the ritual is in the hands of Proceran mages, who knows how they'll modify or improve it?

This is a permanent increase in power for the Procerans, while the advantage it gives Malicia is temporary at best.

### *nipi*

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As for the Crusade. Im pretty sure Malicia has been trying to delay/prevent one since she rose to power.

Sure instant communication is huge provided that it works. Id imagine that Praesi mages can pinpoint the communications and shut the very basic version Procer now has down in a rather large area. Maybe even kill the scrying mages. If Procer comes to rely on it (and I think we have already seen a

change in military organization due to it), that can be a huge blow. Its also an avenue for intelligence gathering and it certainly could be worth it if communications can be forged. (The last one could be something that might not have been done in surviving history – meaning a complete surprise.)

Also note that the fact that it is inefficient against Praesi but not so much against others would create internal pressures to wage war somewhere else.

As for Procean modifications to it. I think Masegos attitude towards Procean mages applies to the whole of Praes, including the Empress.

Malicia considers a fight with Procer unwinnable. So I can see her making some calculated gambles.

*grzecho2222*

Cat disappeared line of mages that attacked Masego, wonder where they ended up.

*letouriste*

well my theory was about cat and not malicia but after this chapter i think you are right

[nineran](#)

The world is going gray: Good adopting mages and magic more broadly, Evil aping good actions to be successful. I wonder if the clear split between good and evil that exists in the Book of Light is really how the world is? Or if that'll change as times change?

Our friend the Wandering Bard is (very) old, and so perhaps her worldview reflects her earliest crystallized self (because all Named have a moment that forges them) – or maybe it does reflect the world beyond this one?

*grzecho2222*

It seems more and more that Praes and Procer swapped paterns (fact that in Epilogue there is mention of Black grinning, so there is definitely something going on)

*Abrakadabra*

That is the official stance of China too actually. Communism and capitalism is in convergence, they set up similar institutions to manage the economy, the Both use more and more machines in the industry and agriculture and so on. Convergence is a thing.

*RanVor*

Yet another excellent chapter.

But seriously, what was the point of killing Akua and binding her soul to a cloak if she's still around to piss Cat off?

[sengachi](#)

She's no longer ravaging Callow and trying to take over the world?

*Dainpdf*

She's still trying to ravage Callow and take over the world. Vicariously.

[sengachi](#)

... huh. Good point.

[frolamiz](#)

Okay, Akua is just perfect as an evil adviser.

[Kevin Blandin](#)

I yearn for Cordelia's death, Along with most of Procer being swallowed by the Dead King, or something truly apocalyptic. The sanctimonious hypocrisy of Cordelia is all the more cloying after reading the PoVs and dialog of Calamities.

The very fact Cordelia can muster a picosecond's belief that she isn't \*at least\* as bad as Malicia, and that everything she's doing is monstrous makes her worthy of being added to the Murder Cloak after a long, thorough execution.

*grzecho2222*

Procer will most likely fall apart by itself after Cordelia demise along with Crusade, so I'm afraid that your bloodlast will go for at least one book.

*Dainpdf*

Oh, come on. Did you miss the part where Malicia aided and abetted Akua freaking Sahelian just so she could get a neat gun? And she hangs out with Black and GLad0S – I mean, the Warlock.

*Forrest*

Isn't Cordelia being a little aggressive against Cat for somebody who is a masterful diplomatist/negotiator/politician? Yeah, I get that Akua said she wasn't 'taking her seriously' but even so she seemed closed to trying to leverage Cat towards anything. Especially when she started up with the 'self-pity' talk. Cat literally just made herself more vulnerable to Cordelia, and the masterful negotiator didn't even latch onto that weakness, instead acting disappointed like the other side of the conversation was a kid throwing a fit. This being after she had already been taken aback by Cat being a lot smarter about this than she had anticipated.

*Dainpdf*

But she is trying to exploit the weakness. She prodded Cat in her insecurities. She just couldn't have done it too openly – manipulating someone tends to not work as well when you're blunt about it, especially with someone as stubborn as Cat.

*Dylan Tullos*

It's good to know that Catherine is seriously considering the abdication offer I suggested last chapter, and that she's entirely willing to backstab the Dread Empire under the right circumstances.

Cordelia isn't negotiating in good faith because she wants Catherine to murder the worst of the Princes and kill off the horde of mercenary soldiers she sent with them. Since those Princes are also the most enthusiastic about dividing Callow up, they have a shared interest in seeing them dead. If Catherine defeats the would-be conquerors of Callow badly enough, Cordelia will have the political support she needs to offer more agreeable terms.

Catherine wants peace for Callow. Cordelia wants the Crusade to focus on the Dread Empire, not to get sidetracked stealing Callowan lands for Proceran princes. They're never going to be friends, but they have shared interests.

In the long term, Procer is a better negotiating partner than the Dread Empire. They're usually too caught up in their own domestic problems to threaten Callow, while the Empire invades every generation. As Catherine points out, Liesse proved that Practical Evil can't deliver on their end of the social contract, so it's time for Callow to look for alternatives.

*MetruX*

1. The abdication has been mentioned since half the last book, it's not a new idea that appeared now.
2. Cordelia will never bring in better terms, she may accept better terms if she is obliged to, but it's not that she



doesn't hate Evil like Cat, she just thinks being practical at it brings more chance of vanquishing said Evil, mabe even with their help.

3. Procer has no need to be out of internal problems to attack Callow, it did so before, and conquered them before, the Empire only invaded because heavens MADE them, if you remember well everyone who tries to make the empire sustainable dies early, and they have to attack to get food unless they start dying.

All in all I don't want to restart on last chapters discussion about why they can't ally with Procer, but do take notice you are ignoring alot just to push your ideas upfront, and this will make you feel bad when it doesn't happen as you want in the story.

[vuthuha912](#)

While I do agree that Procer is subjectively a better partner than Praes, we also have to understand that Praes need to be dealt with permanently. 2 things that will likely deal with Praes: foods and reforms

=> Starving did a lot of things to your mind. When the only options are to invade and survive or stay and die then they are going to invade. Black has constantly emphasized this issue over and over in the story and everyone who closely monitors the Praesi situation knows it. So they need to give Praes a choice other than invade to gain food – reliably so that a new option can be opened. Look at history, every person who tried the third option died before it can be implemented. It almost feels like divine intervention at this point. No wonder Black is bitter toward Heaven, they are pushing his country into making the same self-destructing decision yet and his people just have to take it. Though he does agree that Praes's situation is something of its own making – constant backstabbing means no one is willing to trade with you, and infighting killed arguably more people than any invaders. However, even the backstabbing is sometimes felt like divine intervention. Remember Maleficent I – the gals who united the entire country and got betrayed by a highborn. When Elenor Fairfax united her country, she got to reign and establish a dynasty and when Maleficent did it, she got betrayed by her own countrymen – the people she unified. Worse, the backstabbing got so ingrained into the culture to the point that 2 best friends ultimately betrayed each other, and they both love each other as much as they possibly can. That culture ruins any of its citizen's ability to trust and actually cooperate.

=> Giving them food is not enough because the problem has grown to have a life of its own. Now that the dog eats dog world view has been re-enforced enough time into Creation, it is even harder to escape. Black tried to limit their ability to damage by taking away their privilege, building the army to counter

their power, creating a new type of culture through the military, and trying to fill the court with bureaucrats. He tried for 40 years and failed utterly. Akua proves that as much mercy and time as he gives them, they can't ever change to the point that they can stand on their own. Malicia proves that as much as he likes thinks that someone shared his vision for Praes, he is utterly alone in this fight. Cat proves that as much as he plans for a replacement, they need to be a Praesi – someone who actually has the stake in this fight for the soul of Praes.

=> His works are too fragile just like any progress in the real world, changes can always be reversed. Maybe, it is arrogance, that he feels secure enough in the eventuality of the outcome that he stops fighting as hard, stops being vigilant, and lets Akua get that far. He is arrogant when he believes that Malicia will be dealt with the problems and ignore the signs that she is compromised until it is too late. Just like how white supremacy continues to linger and strike back the moment we let our guard down. Changes are fragile and need to be fought for constantly. You think after WWII, people will cut that shit out.

Haizz... Praes is the most difficult case to crack. It is too destructive, too set in stone, and too stubborn for 1 person to make a difference. I really want Black to succeed because I like the idea that as long as someone keeps fighting, eventually, it gonna gets better. He is the only one actually trying and continues to try even when most of his comrades have given up.

*Alegio*

Yay Akua is back! I may utterly hate her as a person but as a character she is simply and amazingly fabulous. And looking at her working so... happily with Cat is actually pretty fun.

*Exec*

I see a lot of people joking about shipping Ghost Ubua with Catherine, but I'm just hoping for Cat to pull a "King of Winter" and marry Cordelia!

"A realm cannot be at war with itself."

*Jago*

Procer just had a 20 years civil war. A realm can be at war with itself very much.

*Aotrs Commander*

I am, somehow, not surprised Akua is Stockholming Cat, or at least pretending to, just do be a dick.

Cordelia: further proof that no-one is actually the good guys...

*caoimhinh*

A piece of trivia here:

Dread Empress Maledicta II was the same that in book 1 chapter 3's epigraph was shown to have the tongues of her entire Imperial Court ripped out "to ensure intelligent conversation". So the Chancellor that has "become quite the conversationalist" is actually mute.

Dread Emperors really were Praesi humor at its finest.

*Shaequil*

I wonder is it weird to have the question of whether or not she can 'get together' with the cloak ghost. I kinda ship that already with all the lovelies and dearest and if they can be together in some semblance of synergy or symbiosis I'd be happy.

[Jakku](#)

Missed opportunity for Cat. She could have asked the First Prince who the greater monster is. The one who is always RESPONDING to the actions by people who seek a fight for one reason or another to push 10's if not 100's of thousands of people to their deaths or harms way, in order to achieve a misguided goal? Or the people are actually COMMITTING those actions that the first person has to respond to.

From the onset, Cat has been responding to aggressive actions made by others. A hero trying to drum up rebellion, which would have killed 10's of thousands and not improved quality of life even if they were successful. Corrupt bureaucrats and high born using their authority and power to hovel the commoners in order to increase their own power and wealth. Rivals using their power to thwart her progress and overtures to stabilize the territory she is overseeing and usurp power for their own. And beings outside of Creation being opportunists.

So far, I have yet to see Cat ACTUALLY instigating any of the issues that she is blamed for, for having to deal with it. I can almost taste the frustration and anger she has over how people perceive her, which really shines when she met the young hero party with the Stalwart Paladin.

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## Chapter 4: Warpath

*"I'm not saying all your closest friends are shapeshifting devils I sent to spy on you after having the originals murdered, but I'm certainly implying it very heavily."*

– Dread Emperor Traitorous, making small talk

"I think I might hate your people," Juniper growled.

The Hellhound was sprawled in her seat instead of sitting ramrod straight, a visible mark of how exhausted her duties had left her. A cup of orcish brew in hand – which I'd been oath-bound to decline when offered – she looked like a particularly grumpy green cat. Normally I'd be alarmed by the highest military officer in the kingdom professing hatred of its inhabitants, but I'd learned to read Juniper in our years together. That was a 'I can't believe I have to deal with this shit' growl, not a 'I won't need supper after I'm done with you' growl.

"Not even a month ago you were praising the quality of the foot you've been drilling," I pointed out.

"The soldiers are fine," the Marshal of Callow said. "Better than fine, even. They're taking to the formations better than I'd hoped, and they've got fire in the belly. But your *fucking* nobles, Catherine. Now was a bad time to pick to stop answering backtalk with gallows."

"Talbot can't be crawling up your ass," I frowned. "We sent him on manoeuvre out of the city specifically so he wouldn't be able to have his little meetings."

"His Regals are still knocking at my door," the orc said.

"Foundling, if a single more hints at favours in exchange for an officer's commission there's going to be blood on the ground."

Grandmaster Brandon Talbot was more than just the head of the Order of Broken Bells, these days: he was also one of the founders of the tight-knight group of former aristocrats that had formed into one of my court's two major power blocs. They'd called themselves the Patriots, at first, but I'd made an idle comment to Talbot about how that reminded me of the Truebloods and that name had died an early death. Considering the most infamous member of the Truebloods now had her soul sown into my collar, I could see why he'd taken that as a pointed hint. The Queen's Men were the counterweight, centred around Anne Kendall, but they had much fewer connections. A consequence of the fact that were made up mostly of guildsmen and aldermen.

The Regals weren't nearly as much of a nuisance as the people the northern baronies had sent to Laure, but they were also much smarter about how they were going about gaining influence. Instead of naked power grabs through trade they were placing men in the bureaucracy that had grown out of the court centred in Laure. The problem was that, often, their candidate was the most competent to be had. None of the Regals still had noble titles or privileges, Black had seen to that after the Liesse Rebellion, but several were still wealthy landowners. And their kinsmen were *educated*, which I was coming to prize most of all. Keeping their influence in check while making sure the cogs of the bureaucracy didn't get clogged with incompetence was like walking a tightrope. And it wasn't like I could hand every appointment to Anne's men instead, they were barely more trustworthy and they tended to heavily favour the interests of Laure and the guilds.

"They're still under the impression they can just buy commands?" I asked, surprised.

Juniper bared her teeth savagely.

"Of course not," she mocked. "They're simply recommending candidates for fast-tracked officer training. Every one of them above the cut. Every one of them someone's cousin or aunt."

My frown deepened. That was still overstepping.

"You know you have my full backing in this," I told her. "If there's anyone being too insistent..."

"They don't repeat, Catherine," Juniper sighed. "They always send another envoy, another candidate. And they're just important enough I can't foist them off on Aisha."

I grit my teeth. We were at war, now, the same war Juniper had been trying to prepare the kingdom for since she first got her baton. That she'd had to spend hours fending off ambitious Regals while trying to scrape together enough force to resist Procer was getting on my nerves more than a little bit. A measured expression of displeasure to these fine men and women was in order.

"I'll take care of it," I said. "But you know that's not what I'm here for."

She nodded soberly.

"We'll be ready to march half a day before predicted," the Hellhound said. "All we're waiting on is the Broken Bells. Hakram's provision office delivered the goods smooth as silk."

"Twenty thousand in whole then," I said, leaning back into my seat. "We're still outnumbered raw, Juniper."

Her lips split into a fanged grimace.

"If you'd not spent coin on shit like the Observatory--"

"We'd have heroes in the heartlands," I interrupted flatly.

"Consider it an investment to ensure we didn't have to fight this war on more than one front."

She conceded the argument with an ill-humoured grunt.

"I can't answer for the heroes with the host, we don't have a clear enough assessment of what they can do," Juniper began.

"Thief should be back soon with what the Jacks managed to put together," I said. "But the army?"

"We can take them," the Hellhound said. "Don't get me wrong, it'll be bloody. But our army's in a much better shape than theirs. As long as we can bring them to battle on an open field, I believe we can beat them. Which is why I wish you'd reconsider Harrow. I can't promise anything for two to one and walls."

"Orders already went out," I reminded her. "Baroness Morley is emptying her stores and evacuating towards Hedges."

"The Proceran supply chain will be a nightmare when they've crossed," Juniper noted. "And without granaries and cattle to plunder they can't live off the land. So, all things aside, I agree with you there's a decent chance they'll be forced to continue pushing south or start eating faster than they can bring food. But if they don't everything goes out the window. I don't like that our plan is centred around the enemy doing what we want them to."

"There's too much of a risk involved in fighting them near Harrow, Juniper," I sighed. "Even if we could manage to get there in time, I won't engage when there's a Hell Egg unaccounted for in the region."

The north was one of the few parts of Callow that hadn't been devastated by the latest round of wars to hit the country. Not even a better strategic position was enough to have me take the risk of changing that.

"There's too much politics in this war, Foundling," my Marshal said. "Careful you miss the defeat in front of you for staring at the treaties on the horizon."

"We can't slaughter fifty thousand Procerans," I flatly said. "Aside from the brutal bounding our manpower would take in achieving that, it'd be impossible to make peace with Hasenbach afterwards."

"Hasenbach's invading us," the Hellhound retorted. "The high horse stops being that when you ride it to war. If she doesn't want dead soldiers, she has no business sending them to the field."

I knew that in speaking that she spoke as an orc. She had the bone-deep conviction that no one with a sword in hand had the right of complaining about death. And there was a lot about that way of looking at the world that appealed to me even now. But that was a seductive simplicity that'd become the kind of luxury I could no longer afford. If I offered half a hundred thousand Procerans, the Principate would be fighting this to the bitter end. The First Prince might very well get deposed if she suggested otherwise. I had to defeat the crusaders, force them out of Callow, but it couldn't be a massacre. Assuming I could even deliver one of those, which was quite an assumption given the number of Named on the other side.

"I still think we should have gone ahead with Bonfire," the orc spoke into the silence. "I understand why you refused, but--"

"Juniper," I said quietly. "I love you like a sister. You're one of the smartest women I've ever met. But trust me when I say that Bonfire would have been the end of us."

It'd begun as an exercise for her general staff. How to win against the crusade without Callow ever seeing combat? The answer had been crude, vicious, and horrifyingly popular among my high-ranking officers. Even Callowans. Only greenskins had been more vocal in their approval than my people. It was simple enough: instead of waiting for Procer to muster, I was to take twenty thousand men and a full siege train through Arcadia and emerge on the upper northern edge of Procer's coast. Then I'd burn my way south, city by city, until the Principate mustered an army to force me out. At which point I'd pass through Arcadia again, and emerge on the other side of the Principate. Rinse, repeat. Again and again until Procer collapsed from the inside. The death toll would have been... It didn't bear thinking about. It'd been the support the plan had found that surprised me. Hells, *Talbot* had spoken in favour. He'd 'mourned the loss of innocent lives, but if losses must be had better Proceran than Callowan.' I'd stomped the notion out of high command and not been gentle about it. Aside from the sickening mass slaughters Bonfire entailed, it would have made Callow the foremost enemy of every Calernian nation. It had not escaped my notice that my ability to take hosts through Arcadia might be seen as as dangerous a weapon as the Diabolist's gate-device, in its own way. I had to use it sparingly and responsibly or we'd all pay for it. The thought came, uneasily, that we might regardless of what I did.

"Your call to make, Warlord," the orc acknowledged.

Silence lingered for a while afterwards, the two of us alone in her tent.

"Finally back at it," the Hellhound finally mused, and there was something like savage glee shining in her eyes.

"We march West, once more," I spoke in Mthethwa.

I was quoting an old verse Nauk loved. He'd spoken it years ago, before we left for the Liesse Rebellion.

"Waging the same old war," Juniper finished, and she met my gaze.

Neither of us finished the verse, though we both knew the words.

*Onwards to the fields of Callow,*

*Swift death and graves shallow.*

—

It was past midnight when I finally allowed myself a break. There was only so much time I could spend learning Reitz without wanting to jump off the balcony I was currently leaning against. It was important I learn, though. I'd have interpreters with me on the field, but going to war with the Principate without even understanding their languages was a weakness tailored to cause blunders. Still, I'd never missed my old aspect of Learn more. Hells, it wasn't like I'd been lazy when it came to learning languages. Aside from the Lower Miezian of my childhood I spoke four others well, though my Old Tongue was still admittedly sloppier than the rest. It was enough for tonight, I decided. Back to the histories after that. I'd gotten my hands on an Ashuran chronicle of the Humbling of Titans, the abortive and bloody war between Procer and the Titanomachy that had sown the seeds of hate between the nations that still held to this day. Writings from the Thalassocracy were slightly less inclined to paint Procer in a bad light than those of Praes or the Free Cities, though from what little I'd read there wasn't much defensible about why and how the Principate had waged that war. I looked up at the stars and allowed the wind to stream across my face. It was a cool breeze, not that I'd notice unless I forced myself to.

"Finally," Thief crowed from behind me.

I almost lashed out by reflex, Winter coiling in my veins, but I let out a steamy breath instead.

"That game's gotten a lot more dangerous than it used to be," I told her, voice sounding with just the hint of an echo.

Vivienne leaned against the railing next to me, blowing away an errant strand with a mischievous smile.



"Just like you to say that when I start winning," she said.

"Welcome back, Thief," I sighed, and put an arm around her shoulder in the distant cousin of a hug.

She only squirmed a little. Vivienne had never been a touchy sort but compared to, say, Masego she was neediness incarnate. I released her after a heartbeat, and pretended not to notice the slightly pleased smile on her face.

"So I hear we have a Proceran problem on the march," she said.

"They won't start moving until tomorrow, according to Masego," I replied. "But you might say that, yes. I don't suppose you have anything to tell me that'd make this loom a little shorter?"

"You want a report?" she asked, eyebrow rising.

"Nothing too detailed," I said. "We'll have a proper briefing with everyone at a sane hour. But give me the broad strokes."

She hummed.

"Well, before we touch Procer, I have something from down south," she said.

My gaze sharpened.

"The League?"

She nodded and I grimaced. I'd wanted a garrison in Dormer to keep that front under control, but Juniper had dug in her heels. The city was indefensible, she'd argued, without a fleet. And Callow had neither the gold, the sailors or the know-how to make one. She had a point about Dormer, especially after the fight with Summer had wrecked major parts of its defences that we'd only partly repaired. Coin, coin, coin. More relentless a foe than even Akua. The men had been sent to Vale instead, with only a handful of mages in Dormer to sound the alarm if it came to war. Which it was hard to say if it might. My attempt at diplomatic correspondence with the newly-elected Hierarch had yielded only a neatly-penned letter chastising me for being a foreign despot, which while very politely phrased was less than promising. On the other hand, merchant shipping up the Hwaerte had actually increased over the last few months if Ratface was to be believed. Not the sign of hostilities about to erupt.

"I have reason to believe that the League has no interest in Callow," Thief said.

"And how good is that reason?" I asked.

"The Tyrant of Helike had one of the Jacks taken off the streets and brought to him so he could swear eternal friendship with you," Vivienne bluntly said.

I closed my eyes and rubbed the bridge of my nose, warding off the headache I knew wouldn't come.

"The man," I said slowly, "is notoriously mad. And treacherous. And, not to repeat myself but it bears mentioning, *fucking insane*."

"Agreed," Thief mildly replied. "He is also, as of last month, very discretely sending people into Waning Woods."

My eyes flew open and I kept my mouth shut as I considered the implications of that. The Waning Woods could lead straight into southern Callow, true. But he didn't need to go through there to make war on us. He had the fleets to just sail up the Hwaerte uncontested without any of the risks strolling through that hellscape of a forest entailed. Which meant he was considering that route to sidestep something else, and there was only one force I knew about that qualified. The Proceran army in the southern principality of Tenerife, sent there specifically to discourage League aggression.

"You're sure?" I quietly pressed.

"There's a decent chance that he allowed my people to see him sending his own in there," Thief admitted. "It could be a plot to get us to lower our guards, but at this point does he really *need* us to lower our guard?"

No, I thought. Not with fifty thousand crusaders marching into Callow and an even larger host knocking at the front door in the Vales. There wasn't a lot I could immediately do to drive him back if he just decided to invade without all the fanfare.

"That would change things," I murmured. "If he pulls the trigger on that..."

"Looming shorter yet?" Vivienne teased.

"I'd kiss you, if you weren't so painfully indifferent to women," I replied with a smirk.

She coughed awkwardly. I had no intentions there whatsoever, but seeing her get jittery at the lightest of suggestions was always good for a laugh.

"Yes, well, Procer," she muttered. "We've already had some talks about what's waiting in Arans. As far as the Jacks can tell, there's two real ringleaders in that crowd. The Procer part, anyway."

"Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre," I said. "Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan. Milenan's supposed to be the one holding most everyone else's leash."

"Don't discount Malanza," she warned me. "Politically she'd dependent on Milenan – her younger brother's trying to sweet-talk Hasenbach into backing him – but she's the one that'll be leading the armies. Her mother fucked up so catastrophically during the civil war that she's low on allies at the moment, but she's the best commander in that army and they all know it. She'll get a lot more influential in that circle when the swords come out."

"And what do we know about her?" I frowned.

"Not much," Thief reluctantly admitted. "She's stayed off of the stage since taking her coronation. But I have somewhat reliable word that she's one of the hardline expansionists in the Highest Assembly even if she's quiet about it."

"If she's out of favour with Hasenbach, that reinforces the case the First Prince isn't actually out to annex us," I said.

"Hasenbach broke her mother's bid for the throne and made her drink poison afterwards," Thief hedged. "It might just be personal. Regardless, if the First Prince is out for land we both know she can't admit that right now. It'd eat away at the crusade from the inside. Levant's not mustering armies for the Principate to grow larger, and if they get even a hint that's the plan..."

"I think she might genuinely be after only the Empire, Vivienne," I admitted. "And if that's really the case, she has a fucking point. Malicia fanned the civil war in her country for two decades. And there's that *other thing* too."

Stating out loud that the Empress had essentially given Diabolist free reign to do whatever she wanted so long as by the time the dust settled she had a weapon to frighten off the rest of Calernia would have been... dangerous. I'd already told the rest of the Woe this much, but not anyone else. Whether Hasenbach knew this was the case or she was just using Second Llesse to justify the Tenth Crusade, I could not know for sure. It wasn't like I could ask the woman when we spoke, either, not while I was uncertain of what she knew and did not.

"I'll applaud and toast her health, if she brings down the Tower," Thief said. "But that is *not* a woman I want deciding what happens to my shit, Catherine. Even if we assume the best about her, she's still got the Highest Assembly to answer to. And we've had long talks about the kind of people that have seats on that."

"I'm not talking surrender," I told Thief. "But you know how much there's riding on Hasenbach being at least halfway reasonable."

"That begs the question of how reasonable she'll be allowed to be," Vivienne replied flatly. "And that brings us back neatly to Amadis Milenan. I've confirmed he was in the know for the Liesse Rebellion."

"We already knew Hasenbach would need a mandate to send that much silver across the border," I said. "He's the most influential man in Procer, it's not really feasible for her to have kept him out of it."

"What we *didn't* know, at least until now, is that he argued strongly for a Proceran to be in command of the rebel forces," Thief said. "The man likes his wine, and he's not as careful about who might be listening as he should be. That said, there's a two thousand denarii hole in the funds you allocated me."

I stared at her incredulously.

"Two *thousand*?"

"Yeah, well, even servants in that fucker's palace are rich," Vivienne muttered. "You wouldn't believe how hard they were to bribe."

Aside from a mournful thought about where I'd have to take that coin from to compensate, I came to grasp what she was getting at pretty quick.

"You think he wanted to be personally in command," I said.

"Look, I know the Eyes think his ambition makes him usable to shake up Procer from the inside," the dark-haired woman said. "But that's Wasteland talk, Catherine. He's a fucking snake and now we have precedent."

Precedent for Prince Amadis Milenan to consider war in Callow as way to enable his bid for the throne of the Principate. Shit. That was a problem. I'd been banking on the commanders of the crusader host in the north being rational enough that after a series of minor field defeats they'd cut their losses and retreat back into Procer, if I gave them the space. But Milenan was in command, and if he saw this as his only good chance to dislodge Hasenbach? He might decide to gamble it all anyway, and that would force me to actually break his army. Which would fuck up all my long-term plans, to say the least.

"We'll untangle that particular mess in full at the briefing," I sighed. "What've you got on the heroes? None of this matters if they just splatter us across the countryside at the first scrap."

"Wasn't able to get all the Names," Thief said. "But I do have a number for you: there's fourteen of them."

I let out a long breath. That was... a lot more than I'd hoped for. Given the reputation the Calamities still commanded, I'd thought most Named would be headed there for the offensive. *Still fewer than they sent against Triumphant*, I mused. *So there's that.* Black had always told me that too many heroes in the same place might end up turning against them. That Creation would push some stories above others, and that those who ended up behind were much easier to kill. It made villains seem a lot stronger than they were when they killed a few, and incited sloppiness and overconfidence if they survived. The thing was, though, that those villains usually still *died*. That tended to happen when someone sent a battalion of Heavens-empowered hardened killers after someone's head. I'd refined the Woe, over the last year. Turned them into a group eerily skilled at killing the heroes that came into Callow and refused my terms. But in those fights, we'd had either superior numbers or parity. On picked grounds, with enough time for me to prepare. None of that would apply up north.

"Most of them are green, and from all over Calernia," Thief spoke into the silence. "Levant, the Free Cities, Ashur. Local Named, I guess you could call them. Not the kind you see at the head of an invasion."

"Any from Procer?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Which brings me to the two I think we most need to watch out for," Vivienne said. "The first is the Proceran, an Alamans. Laurence de Montfort, the Saint of Swords."

"I think I've heard of her before," I frowned.

"She got started killing some alchemist villain in western Procer under a transitional Name," Thief said. "Nasty business. He was turning people into monsters. Then she killed the Prince of Valencis when she was in her twenties and no one's quite sure why. She disappeared into the woodworks after that. There's rumours she went up north, but mostly people say she was 'perfecting her craft' in a retreat from the earthly world."

"She hasn't done anything since?" I frowned.

"Dubious source, but I was told she stared down an army into marching around her hometown during the civil war," Vivienne said. "Whatever the truth, she's in her late sixties and she's Hells on legs. Supposedly unbeatable with a sword, and she's been known to cut through spells, wards and even once an actual miracle."

"Well, that promises to be a fun evening," I muttered.

That sounded a lot like Ranger, only with a Choir having her back, and wasn't that stuff nightmares were made of?

"The other big club is Levantine," Thief said. "The Grey Pilgrim, couldn't dig up a name. This one... Well, the more I learn the more he scares me shitless."

Thief wasn't the bravest of my companions, but she wasn't exactly faint of heart either. That she'd go this far was worth alarm.

"Priest Name?" I asked.

"Some kind of wandering monk, as far as I can tell," Vivienne said. "He's not, well, not like you. He's not the one everyone attaches to. He's the stranger in the night, and he's been around for a *while*."

"Heroes age," I reminded her.

"And I've word of him going back at least sixty years under his current Name," Thief bluntly replied. "Catherine, the man's been everywhere. Every Levantine hero in the last forty years ran into him at some point, and in the Dominion if he said he felt like being king half the country would rise to put him on the throne. As long as he backs the crusade, there's not a single hero from the Dominion that'll flinch."

"Influential and experienced, then," I said, but honestly as far as direct threats went the Saint sounded a lot worse.

It also meant he couldn't be killed if Levant was ever to be brought at the negotiating table. You couldn't kill a people's darling and then expect a nice peace treaty after, but I wasn't sure I'd be given a choice there. Thief passed a hand through her hair, frustrated.

"I'm not explaining myself right," she said. "Just – all right, think about it like this. Hero out on their first lark, meets a mysterious helpful stranger that gives advice and maybe teaches a trick. When's the next time you see them?"

My fingers clenched.

"When that hero's in over their head," I said softly. "When the stranger appears out of nowhere and wipes the floor with the villain, enough that the hero can flee and prepare for the rematch."

"Yeah," Vivienne agreed grimly. "That's the thing, Cat. He doesn't always win, but I couldn't find a single instance of when the Grey Pilgrim got into a fight and *lost*."

Well. It was a good thing I didn't need to sleep anymore, because that was the kind of thing that would keep a girl up at night.

---

*narcoduck*

"My attempt at diplomatic correspondence with the newly-elected Hierarchy had yielded only a neatly-penned letter chastising me for being a foreign despot, which while very politely phrased was less than promising."

Hierarchy is great.

*naturalnuke*

He's fantastic.

*PingleBerry*

I think it's the literal not giving of fucks he has going.

*Letouriste*

Well, he pretty much gave the finger to ALL the gods^^

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Most importantly, the Wandering Bard too. Black managed to be tricked by her, but Hierarchy?

"BEGONE, THOT." (paraphrasing)

*Cloudlight*

Pretty sure he is high on the scale of lawfulness. So my kind of guy. I really like him.

*Shent*

He's Lawful Neutral, and the pinnacle of them to boot. He's Lawful Neutrality distilled and refined into a perfectly imperfect shape. He's a riot and kinda boring, and I love him all the more for it

*Gunslinger*

Ohh joy, looks like the mooks have some pretty strong bosses. Story savvy ones too.

Numbers wise, Callow's outnumbered in both soldiers and Named (not counting the theorized but as yet unseen/unmentioned wight heroes) and given that neither side will retreat it looks to be a

long and bloody campaign. I wonder if hit and run tactics are in order.

Ohh and vote for the guide on topwebfiction if you can <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> , Cat can't cross in-story wards anymore but she can top the Wildbow one

Before we go

> She only squirmed a little. Vivienne had never been a touchy sort but compared to, say, Masego she was neediness incarnate. I released her after a heartbeat, and pretended not to notice the slightly pleased smile on her face.

There's so much shipping fuel here it's unbearable 😊

*BroadAxe*

Weight heroes is really unlikely tho, that one chapter with the dead king where he had dead heroes that only had fractions of their power left because they'd lost theyre name in death sorta says that can't be the case, doesn't it? :3

[ayon96](#)

The chapter was in the perspective of Ranger and she thought it was the hardest fight in a century at least!

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Indrani would be so jealous.

*Naeddyr*

Have we seen any actual heroic Mentors before this? The Wizard of the West etc. probably qualified, but they're all gone, and the Bard... Probably doesn't count.

Thanks for the chapter!

*Gunslinger*

Technically you'd have to count Ranger as one.

*Naeddyr*

D'oh!

*nerferf*

Oh yeah, ranger saved them from the summer queen and allowed the gang to retreat and prepare the rematch

Totally forgot that



*Letouriste*

Actually I think he meant the way she gather pupils is mentor-like but you are right her « rescue » is a little heroic-like...if she didn't had being threatening to cat too at the same time^^

*TeK*

Mother knows best.

*JackbeThimble*

De Montfort? Might be a bad idea letting that one sack one of your cities.

*JackbeThimble*

I hope one of her aspects is 'Kill them all and let God sort them out.'

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I don't get the reference?

*grzecho2222*

Arnaud Amalric during Albigensian Crusade

*TeK*

Well I don't get de Monrfort reference. Quick googling answered nothing.

*BryceWilliam*

hellsing abridged quote. maxwell says it while slaughtering thousands of civilians

*snowy*

I believe it's actually a quote from some Pope/Bishop during the Spanish Inquisitions

*nerferf*

Welp, so the deus ex machina is coming straight up instead of at least hiding? dang they really want the woe dead

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

When the GM hates your guts...

*JackbeThimble*

I feel like Cat's best option here narrative-wise is to turn this into Kingdom of Heaven with Amedis as Reynauld de Chatillon and herself as Saladin. Since she's already been seen on camera offering the heroes mercy and trying to find peace with Hasenbach it shouldn't be too hard to sell herself as the Noble Demon to contrast with Amedis as the rapacious fanatic. Allowing Amedis to take Harrow is probably a good move as well as it gives him a chance to commit some atrocities to make the audience hate him even more. That way when the Northern army and it's heroes get slaughtered it will be the consequences of their own moral failings.

*JackbeThimble*

To really sell it she needs to make a battle plan that somehow exploits the enemy commanders hubris and selfish goals to draw him into a trap or something, so the audience has no doubt whom to blame.

*Rook*

Maybe work on her public image in Callow too. Nothing like being the common man's champion to really take the wind out of the holier-than-thou sails that invasions like crusades sail in on.

*Frommerman*

Her public image is already pretty good, what with personally fighting a Demon, the entirety of Arcadia, and Diabolist one after the other and crushing them all beneath her heel. They might not love her, but they can feel secure under her.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Even better, she somehow tricks their army into a Fae Portal and they wander around, slowly dying of thirst and hunger until they're cut down by Cat.

*Letouriste*

Not happening, there is a lot of heroes present. You can be sure one of them will find an exit or create one by miracle

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

what I meant was to trick the normal soldiers to get in and leave the heroes without chaff.

*B*

Even with normal soldiers I wouldn't chance it. That's just asking for a "At dawn, look to the East." with some

hero separating for a bit and returning triumphantly at the heroes' most bleak hour, if not for Amadis's forces then another hero army like the force Black is facing.

*haihappen*

If Amadis (Cmdr.) commits some ill-advised towards the general populace, then the heroes with him might object to his continued command. That he even does such a thing, or gets found out if he does, is highly unlikely. One doesn't get to be and stay a major political player in Procer by being an idiot.

Finding a hell-egg, realizing what it is, and taking it with him because he cannot resist the temptation of a super-weapon, however, that is something an intelligent man blinded by ambition would do. Screwing everyone over in the process.

There are a lot of tropes to play down the line ones the players and the scenario unfold...

*IDKWhoitis*

The Grey Pilgrim sounds like one of Bard's chess pieces in this war.

*Big Brother*

Wasn't the Grey Pilgrim one of the names Gandalf went by in Lord of the Rings?

*Letouriste*

His first name yes:) he became the white after sarouman fall in corruption and his death/non-death in his fight with the balrog

*Rook*

So if he ever duels Cat on an underground bridge over a chasm, we can probably expect them to both fall off. Got it.

*Big Brother*

Mayhaps Cat & the Woe can help the Grey Pilgrim defeat the demon contained in the Hell Egg that keeps getting brought up, helping him ascend to a 'White' form, while becoming the first Hero to join Cat's Callow.

*Letouriste*

unlikely given the main factor in Gandalf transformation was sarouman not deserving the power of white or something. His near death experience or resurrection is only a fulcrum/pivot in his story.

Here the gray pilgrim would need a white mage falling in disgrace...and not the white one of the white knight party given she is only a newby

*Nairne .01*

Wasn't the mage from the WK party incinerated by WLock?

*Letouriste*

Oh right! I Forgot

*TeK*

YOU SHALL NOT PASS!

*naturalnuke*

Ooo, spooky mentor heroes, this will be fun.

*Naeddyr*

Silly prediction: Grey Pilgrim has such strong mentoring instincts he ends up mentoring Cat a bit.

I mean, young (idealistic? yes, i'd say) Queen of a suffering nation facing insurmountable odds and hordes of enemies, who tries to make peace but ultimately fails as the fanatics on the other side break the truce or whatever...

*nerferf*

Cat already got a mentor before, it was by ranger fending off the summer queen

*Letouriste*

Ranger doesn't count. She didn't care about cat back then. At most she didn't kill her for black sake...or she just had a better prey to kill before her

[beleester](#)

Mentors aren't always nice. They just teach you something. Somehow.

And Ranger didn't just save them, she also named them the Woe. Or well, the Summer Queen named them, but Ranger was the one who heard it and said "You see that, kids? That is your Villain Team Name."

*Letouriste*

Ranger didn't teach anything to cat though.

## *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

That actually sounds the most interesting. If Grey hears what Cat intends, he might turn cloak and join, he's no longer a young idealistic kid, he's an old dude with super hands.

Monk Man  
Super Tan

### *Morgenstern*

"Grey" also is in his very Name ^^ – and the tidbit that he's too old to be a Hero actually seems to imply he might not be a Good Hero after all...

He might be ANOTHER ONE of those mistakes Bard did by creating something between Good and Evil, ending up to be something that CAN bite Good and the Bard in the ass. At least I think something along those lines was implied in the last Hierarch chapter...

### *Morgenstern*

I'm curious about the relationship between Grey Pilgrim and the Saint of Blades, though, as we already got mention that those two seem to come up together more often than not. I hope we got some PoVs for them or rather their past.

---

He's likely a hero, what's with being a monk and all, but the heroes from Levant are on average closer to the "murderhobo" variety (see: Valiant Champion).

### *Nguyen Hong Hai*

Levant hero I think is more similar to Ranger's style, being No. 1 meanest asskicker there is.

### *Gunslinger*

It would be cool but when have last seen a hero without a stick up their arse. All of them would be gunning for blood right from the get go.

### *Letouriste*

Well his Name sound more relaxed so who know...

### *Daemion*

Heroes tend to have big personalities and are rather opinionated. I wouldn't be surprised if they were squabbling with each other constantly or even split into two sides over some trivial matter. That's something a clever villain could exploit.

## NZPIEFACE

It would be hilarious if this turned into some classroom setting with the Grey Pilgrim and the Saint of Swords being the teachers.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

That rarely works. How many stores have it start that way, but either a stinging defeat or a overarching threat makes them all work together, and then they are a beautiful clockwork of complimenting strengths? A few might need to die first so they see they need to work together, but they always get there before crunch time. The only time that exploit works is if you can get them all at once.

*Nivek*

Traitorous is always hilarious isn't he?

Of course the best part is that you don't know if he's implying this before or after he replaced the friends with shapeshifting devils. (The fact that sooner or later he would do so is not in question, naturally)

*grzecho2222*

I'm half expecting him or Irritant to rise from Hells instead of/with That One Empress

*grzecho2222*

Saying something like:  
"HA, bet you didn't expect this!"

*Snowfire1224*

If he did, he would have probably set up away to do it before he committed suicide and framed a tone of people for it .  
Sounds exactly like something Traitorous would do.

*TeK*

Funny thing would be telling this to a shapeshifting devil.

*Rook*

The grey pilgrim sounds like just about the scariest thing next to the bard so far. Fourteen total heroes and most of them green, and you've got a guy in that midst who apparently specializes in mentoring green heroes into a force of nature. Maybe even starting patterns of three to help them grow. The dude is a walking force multiplier.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

I forget \*rolls eyes\* what happens with mentors?

### NZPIEFACE

What happens to mentors who are known to be old as hell? They stick around to be even older.

#### *Gunslinger*

Generally though, mentors always die off to let the hero grow. The Grey Pilgrim has survived by skipping stage 3. He's mentored lots of them but never actually become anyone's master

#### *Insanenoodlyguy*

He already beat that by doing it with more than one. Now he's not the Obi Wan, he's the Miyagi.

#### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Or ghost people

Oo00oooo

#### *Misterspokes*

He's more "Tuxedo Mask" than an actual mentor...

#### *White*

You know, it strikes me that if Cat wanted Hierarch on her side, then all she'd need to do is hold a legitimate election. Hell, if she sends Procer packing, she might even \*win\* a legitimate election.

#### *Rook*

Hierarch would probably charge her with treason for holding an unlawful election, unsanctioned by The People of Bellerophon

Asking for a sanction would likely also get you charged with treason, for involving The People in the politics of a Foreign Nation, and simultaneously get whoever you contacted executed on several counts of affiliating with a Wretched Tyrant

Abdicating might help though, since then she'd just be a Wretch

#### *Frommerman*

All Hail Bellerophon, greatest of the Free Cities.

#### *TeK*

It is above Glorious Republic Of Bellerophon to meddle in other country's politics. Even if she condoned the elctions, it's still one person leading country -> Wretched Tyrant. And if she abdicates? She goes against The Will Of People, because, obviously, she didn't hold public referendum on whether or not she should abdicate. Same for reforming the goverment. Making Callow into democracy is just throwing it to be ripe for the taking for anothere Wretched Tyrant. Not mentioning all those pesky nobles, and landowners, and tavern owners. Truly, noone can reach the Bellerophon, Peerless Jewel Of Freedom.

### *Gunslinger*

What rook said, but also Cat's not a fan of democracy in the least.

### *Mr. Nobody*

The ship is new but it's already sailing at high speeds!!

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

We'll call it... The Titanic 2! But it's not just any regular old water boat.

It's a floating city!

### *Dainpdf*

New? This one has been around ever since their first fireside chat.

### *Metalshop*

Oh hell yes. We finally get to see what the heroic equivalent of the Calamaties is.

### *TeK*

Aparently it's twelve green heroes and two forces of nature. Who knew?

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Seems like things are looking to be fairly drab, down, spooky, and all around grey.

If only Cat had gunpowder and gelatine dynamite with a laserbeam.

### *Daemion*



That would earn her a Red Letter.

*savadrin*

the gnomes are my only beef with this entire story. it's such a cop-out deus ex machina it gives me indigestion. it would be different if the reader was given any explanation about it, but as it is the entire continent of calernia is eternally under the sword of damocles, and there's no rhyme or reason as to the rules that would trigger it's drop.

*Unorginal*

@Savadrin.

It's a copout how? the only other reasonable way would to have another deus ex-machina keep the setting from advancing because lets quickly see what was required for a European style renaissance.

Well Developed trade.

A preponderance of wealth.

(relative) stability

Mathematics

patronage of the arts and sciences fueled by the above.

First and foremost Procer is heavily implied to be the state most at war with an internal conflict every decade, and they cover most of the continent and this internal strife is rarely big according to a short history of Procer. This is frankly amazing, they don't even usually sack each other's capitals to boot! The continent may be hopelessly divided and warring by modern standards but compared to the middle ages and the feudal system it inspired/is marked by this is amazingly peaceful. They, in fact, sound like a combination of Renaissance Italy and Holy Roman Empire and the Renaissance kicked off in Italy despite all the brushfire wars during the time period. so stability check.

So do they have the wealth? taking from the fabled wonders of the wasteland and their Venice Expy on crack with added slavery as well as the amount of money and troops the first prince has been throwing around throughout the books yes there is enough freed up wealth to be used to patronize the arts and sciences. So yes checkmark here as well.

Do they have well-developed trade? Callow does healthy business and Ashur has fought multiple trade wars to maintain superiority over the sea-lanes and let's not forget mercantis the Venice expy. So yes, they have a healthy exchange of goods, expertise, and ideas.

Maths? Hells yes, Magic puts them far ahead of anything the middle-east managed while Europe was stuck in the dark ages. Forget dinky algebra and geometry they have trigonometry down and its implied to be old hat in the empire these days.

Patronage of the arts and sciences. See the Empire in regards to magic and the fact that we know there once was a power bloc of mages in Procer who only were disassembled because of politics. Guilds seem strong and healthy and while they have a chilling effect in some regards it does suggest that the conditions to kick off the Renaissance exist.

So why not technical innovations that allow them to move past the opening phases of the Renaissance?

The gnomes make a better answer than any other fantasy series I've read so far with similar conditions. and it's less Deus ex Machina that the D&D explanation which is literally the god of technology saying no.

[RANT OVER]

Welp there went 20 minutes of my life.

*TameCurtsy*

@Unoriginal Wow. I'm impressed.

@Savedrin My response is that it is hardly a deus ex machina when they haven't impacted the story yet. It's a reminder of the wider world, and the author has been so incredible in maintaining internal consistency that I'm willing to believe there's an explanation behind the gnomes that is impossible to know right now from our current perspective.

And to be clear, it is obvious that the gnomes want to keep the continent in an earlier age. The main hidden explanations are: How did the gnomes reach their current heights? How do they factor in to the good vs evil wager?

*agumentic*

Come on, it's obvious that gnomes are literal deus ex machina and GM race with a job of keeping the setting from advancing and the status quo intact. Gods want to stop their world from going full industry or magitech.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I kinda wanna know what the heroes on the main continent are like.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

There's also a nifty elven civilisation there preaching tolerance and all that good stuff, which we have been promised would never show up in story at all. I wanna know too, but it's not gonna happen.

grzecho2222

Bet they got invaded all the time

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Dude, have you seen the elves? Those Emerald Blades the Bard met? Nobody in their right mind would even consider the idea, it's the most suicidal thing I can imagine in this world. Also please keep politics out of this.

---

There was that one mention in chapter 22 of book 2 of an elven kingdom getting corrupted by a demon, so that may be the reason that they'll never show up in the story and that the elves of Golden Bloom aren't just racist, but also isolationist.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

There's a big difference between "elven kingdom" and "continent-spanning elven civilisation", I think. The Golden Bloom were kicked out of there exactly because they were a racist and isolationist splinter group.

grzecho2222

How many times Perfect Magic Kingdom get invaded in fantasy? Even in Tolkien by the time of Lord of the Rings is there any elven kingdom that is doing good?

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

And this entire story is about subverting classic fantasy tropes. Dwarves a dwindling remnant? No, they're at the height of their power and everyone fears them. Gnomes some bungling inventors? They keep every civilisation locked in medieval stasis because of their massive technological supremacy. Elves on the decline? Nope, they're extremely succesful and nearly untouchable. A classic fantasy story wouldn't be named (heh) a Practical Guide to Evil.

*Snoogle*

You are right.

Almost every fantasy story ever is about human heroes bumbling around in a mostly human world, where all of the other creatures are basically dying out to the rise of the humans. It's fun to read a story about humans bumbling around in their own little continent while the test if the world is so much bigger than them. You know, for a change.

[Antony444](#)

Well on one side we have the Woe, twenty thousand men, orcs, ogres and goblins.  
On the other side, fourteen heroes and fifty thousand men.  
A demon is somewhere around and will undoubtedly emerge at the worst possible moment.  
This is going to be good.

I love the Traitorous quote, as always, predictable and yet so fascinating...  
The first flaw in Cordelia Hasenbach's plan is about to begin with the Tyrant of Helike, attacking Tenerife and Procer by surprise.  
This continent is going to burn in the flames of war...can't wait to see it!

*grzecho2222*

He may also attack Refuge and Ranger as first part of plan to add another front

*Gunslinger*

Surely he's not that mad. She'd chop him into pieces

*Dainpdf*

He hears that and just says "hold my beer..."  
Then you die because the mug is covered in contact poison.

[Walter](#)

He is exactly that mad. Dude's whole deal is to always be in the narratively invincible first stage of his plans. He needs constant enemies.

He can't beat 'Ranger', but he has a pattern going with Black after killing Sabah. A fight between the guy who killed your subordinate and your love interest...that happens offscreen? He wins that 10/10.

*burdi*

The Tyrant of Helike is so unpredictable, no one really know  
whats his end game or maybe to mess up anyone plan is his only  
goal

*Author Unknown*

It must have been fraking terrifying to be a Trueblood during  
Traitorous' reign. Betrayal is your nature, the foundation of  
your civilization, but Traitorous is so much better at it.

*TeK*

Unless you thwart his plans, and betray yourself first. Once  
again, sweet victory is yours!

*TeK*

Just kicked in my head, we got Levant crusading. Funny. Crush  
those pesky infidels.

Gotta say, love Tyrant. I really want him to actually hold to his  
words and NOT betray Cat. I mean, it's the ultimate betrayal,  
when someone expects you to betray you, make up all those safety  
nets and contingencies, and you just don't. Who would've seen  
this coming?

*Dainpdf*

And then, after they lower their guard, double cross them and  
reveal you had actually been stabbing their back all along,  
from a completely unexpected angle.

*TeK*

And after that reveal, that you were working for their  
benefit all along. And THEN, when they're all guilty and  
confused, you slide in the knife.

*OtherPlayers*

Sooner or later, all the games turn into Calvinball.

[sengachi](#)

Then, as they die, reveal you're going to replace them with  
a shapeshifting demon that does your bidding and you're  
going to pretend that they won the backstabbing exchange,  
but really their side 'winning' will actually be you winning  
because you'll be puppetting their side.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

We march West once more  
Waging that same old war

To foreign rivers' banks  
Take heart and hold your ranks

Raise arms and lift your voice  
In glory we rejoice  
With banners bright and tall  
Could pride herald a fall?

Step to the drummer's beat  
For life is short yet sweet  
Lay down on broken shields  
Across those foreign fields

We march West once more  
Waging that same old war  
Onward to the fields of Callow  
Swift death and graves shallow.

Someone wrote an extension to the lyrics the last time they appeared and I liked it so much I wrote them down; I thought I would share. Anyway, great chapter, very ominous.

*SMHF*

There is one story Cat can use against the Grey Pilgrim though... a jealous student killing his teacher.  
Now if only Cat knew a manipulative bitch who could talk one of those noob Heroes into it...

Don't forget to vote for Guide guys!  
<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Snowfire1224*

The thing about old heroes is that they think they know the story, just like Summer Fae.

*Dainpdf*

Come on, erraticetera. You feed the shippers like this, you know they're going to follow you home. And you don't know where they've been, they're probably covered in Mary Sue from rolling around in the Pit of Voles. Plus, if they smell like author, their mothers won't take them back.

*Bonesawer*

I wonder what a fast-travel vs prophecy war would look like. Can Cat switch destinations once she's already in Arcadia? "Whoops, looks like there's a Proceran host defending this city, let's just close that gate and go a province over". Can Augur predict far enough ahead to prepare a host in case of fast-travel? Can she predict fallback destinations? It *\*feels\** like a win for fast-travel, but I don't know.

MUCH more importantly, can Arcadia travel facilitate intercontinental trade with reasonable time savings? This would be an absolute game-changer for both Cat herself and Calernia as a whole. If the gnomes didn't object, and the dwarves didn't object, and the dead king didn't object, and the elves didn't object, and the drown didn't object, etc. etc.

Also, every time Tyrant shows up I become more convinced that EE literally rolls dice to determine his actions (presumably with some set events, end goals, or general direction that ensure that Tyrant isn't a joke character or wrench in the story).

TeK

Well, I can safely assure you, that drown can't object. Unless it's the Dead King, who is behind them.

And I highly doubt that Cat's gate will bring any difference to the trade. For one, they need to be stable and multiple, safe (and they can't be, unless SHE leading them), of course, she can trade with Courts, but something tells me that trading with entities who can made up any amount of money on the whim is not a valid economical move. She could make her Wild Hunt open gates, but aside from the fact that it's, well, will require their constant attention, and even then their power is not endless, and even then they are technically not nobles, and only nobles can open up portals.

Of course, maybe, as reigning Queen of Winter she can make up nobles on the whim, and say, grant titles to any merchant, so that they can create their portals, but frankly, it's so OP, GM will probably ban this.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

I wouldn't be surprised if that's how good ol' Kairos decides on his next move in-universe.

[rygelthe16th](#)

""Heroes age," I reminded her."

Okay so Bad Guys just sorta do the 'I hover indefinitely at my peak until killed' thing, while heroes age. But what about Neutrals such as Archer and Theif where they name isn't Good-Evil aligned? Is there WOG on this?

[oldschoolvillain](#)

"Villains are given the means to evade death. Heroes to reach past it."

This or a similar quote was mentioned in one of the earlier books. Yes, Villains have Eternal Youth but not Immortality,

whereas Heroes will age and die normally, but if they're Killed, then they can be resurrected. This is why Villains can (theoretically) hold the crown for 1,000 years, but rarely manage longer than a normal lifetime, because Heroes kill them off.

*Mr. Nobody*

I think Archer and Ranger don't age because they are half-elf.

*Author Unknown*

Is Archer an half-elf? I thought from her backstory, where she was a slave, she was some form of human?

*PingleBerry*

Ranger is a half-elf

[benthelynx](#)

Ranger is technically a hero name from memory. Just neutral in action. In the same way thief is a hero name.

[Kevin Blandin](#)

One thing bothers me about this Crusade, Hasenbach really DOES have ugly, not-Good motives for this Crusade. How does it really serve the Heavens if a mass-murderer on par with a starting Stalin deceives her allies into allowing her descendants to liquefy their nation's seats of rule and absorb them all into Procer? (Which in Cordelia's PoV is pretty much her stated goal.)

A super-state like that makes the Stories really, really clunky. Whenever ANYONE tries to absorb land like that, bad things tend to happen.

Shouldn't these old-head Heroes KNOW that???

*MetruX*

I don't think they know of her motives, and even if they have a glimpse, the idea of so many troops and heroes uniting to destroy a great evil is too much for man of them to resist. I mean, they couldn't simply stop it even if they wanted, and if they don't participate the results may be even worse, no? So, what choice do they have?

[oldschoolvillain](#)

In Cordelia's PoV, she was actually trying to bind them together as a Grand Alliance, like the League of Free Cities or the United Nations. That's what she was setting the groundwork



for, not for a bloodless coup. All of the other diplomats were pretty much specifically watching for any clauses or tricks like that, since Procer has a history of expansionism and no one wanted to get colonised again.

[sengachi](#)

I mean, I'm sure plenty of old knights and templars were well aware every time the Papacy declared Crusade that there were more political motives than religious ones motivating the fight. But they went anyway.

*Voice of Reason*

I honestly don't think working with Cordelia is going to work out. She and Cat simply have too many conflicting interests.

*Shequi*

If Catherine wants educated administrators without political ties to the political factions forming in her court, why hasn't she gone to the same imperial orphanages that raised her? It was repeatedly stressed that the girls were educated well enough to be tutors to nobility; there must be some of them who would be great bureaucrats and the fact that Catherine was one of them will give weight of loyalty to them, at least to begin with.

*Author Unknown*

Because Akua burned it down...

I guess they could do some kind of ritual and make the dead bureaucrats, but that probably wouldn't go over too well with most of Callow.

*Daemion*

Akua only threatened to do that, she never actually did it.

*Author Unknown*

I think she actually did burn it down. If she hadn't followed through on her threat it would undermine all future threats. We didn't see it on screen, but I'm pretty sure it still happened. Perhaps EE can clear it up.

*narcoduck*

"Did you have time to look into what I asked you to?" I asked after a breath of hesitation.

"The orphanage is untouched," he replied. "Not a soul missing. A good thing you killed the other claimants in such spectacular manners, I doubt Heiress would have taken you seriously otherwise."

"That would have been unfortunate," I murmured. "Because I meant every word."

-Book 1: Chapter 19 Pivot

[sengachi](#)

So let me get this straight.

Callow, which stands united under the banner of orphan native who has pulled her country from the ashes to rise anew and face a new era, now faces down an enemy led by backstabbing traitors doing the political bidding of a monarch seeking empire. Callow is outnumbered, out-Named, and is beset by monsters of such power that they have never been lain low, any one of whom could expected to crush Catherine with ease.

Procer is fuuuuuuuuuuucked. Oh it's gonna be a shit show. But they are doooooooooomed.

aran

Typo or atrociously, terribly awesome pun? You decide!

[Barthumphries](#)

Speaking of typos:

he was also one of the founders of the tight-knight group  
Change knight to knit, tight-knit, as in sewn together, i.e. knitting.

So I think it's a typo. 😊

Aside from the brutal bounding our manpower would take  
Change bounding to pounding

aran

>

aran

> "I'd kiss you, if you weren't so painfully indifferent to women," I replied with a smirk.

Damn it, that ship hadn't even left drydock yet before you sank it. 😊

*Unorginal*

To the contrary, her reactions mean that it not only rose from the depths of our broken hearts but sails again resplendent in all its glory and heraldry.

grzecho2222

I wonder when others guns will fire, other then Hell Egg. There are also: missing bell from angel island, bloodline ritual and wierdly similar deaths of White's and Archer's fathers

*Unmaker*

It seems to me that you could make a person like the Gray Pilgrim. Take an organization with an intelligence network and enough money or special powers to have someone travel regularly. Take an exceptionally competent person in the organization. Then, every time you hear about a hero's creation, send your competent person to assist the hero in a tight spot. It wouldn't take long before the narrative that controls both Good and Evil would just about force the helper into a distant mentor role.

*TameCurtsy*

MINOR SPOILER-ISH Warning: I doubt anyone is going to read this, when it's so far down the comment list, but haven't seen anyone else bring up this tiny detail from a random earlier chapter about Saint of Swords.

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...

...

...

One of her aspects creates a domain. Saint of Swords is mentioned when they are discussing Catherine's Fall, as an example of Names known to create domains.

@ERRATICERRATA Can I get a brownie point? 😊

[Barthumphries](#)

Link/source? So the Saint of Swords could lure Cat into a cave, create a domain in the doorway, and then Cat couldn't get out because she'd have to go through a domain and she can't do that without an invitation? (Or matching through the fea world through the cave walls.)

*TameCurtsy*

Super impressed someone actually read my comment. Source is Chapter 37, Book 3.

As for that tactic, it's a nice idea, but I think there are too many problems with that course.

*Isa Lumitus*

You know, I think Cat's worried a bit too much about damaging her chances at diplomacy with the invaders. I mean, they already hate her so much that they are bankrolling armies to go after her.

Squashing them isn't going to make things worse. Bonfire is a plan that warrants serious consideration.

That said, I had an idea for another way she could force Procer to back off. She could go through Arcadia, and then destroy all the Lycaonese fortresses meant to defend against the Chain of Hunger. That would force Hasanbach to deploy far more forces to that front to compensate, and it wouldn't involve slaughtering as many civilians as Bonfire would.

Truth be told, Cat is reminding me of Empress Mercury from Dungeon Keeper Ami, with her reluctance to win the war. Don't get me wrong, I love DKA, but the main character is a 15 year old goody-twoshoes. Cat just feels a bit out-of-character at the moment.

Maybe she can cut a deal with Armin. Something like he doubles back to "chase the Black Queen" out of Procer, and in exchange his political alliances are left intact to attempt to topple Hasanbach.

[vuthuha912](#)

You know what. Cat can't do Bonfire because she wants to negotiate but Black and Malicia can totally do that because they aren't looking for a negotiation. Good and Evil don't negotiate. PERIOD. Cat is still holding a traditionally Good Nation so she has certain leeway with abdication and such but this is fight or dies for Malicia and Black so they will go all in. If Cordelia is not willing to commit then she is going to fail. I am going to repeat this over and over again until the Crusade is over. WAR IS NOT A GAME. Treat it with the same seriousness that you treat your love one's life.

Once you start the fighting, this is a matter of life or death. Expect your opponent to do every dirty trick because this is life or death for them. Cordelia is underprepared for the Crusade. Her carelessness is going to bite her later.

Don't worry about bloodying Procer, Cat. We killed around 100,000 soldiers from the Mongolian Army during their Conquest of us and they were quite happy in receiving our 'compensation' for their losses. Similarly, didn't the US kill more than 3 millions Vietnamese during the Vietnam War? We get over it quick, didn't we? Wait for a few decades and the sentiment will fade. Procer is the one doing the conquering after all. Should they feel justified enough to hold a grudge or will they blame Cordelia for their family dying in a foreign war? The trick is too killed enough and kissed their ass later. It always works.

Please Black, for the love of Praes. Bloody Procer enough so that Cordelia has to negotiate with Cat. Good cop, bad cop essentially. Cat might even solve your problem for you Either by opening a gate straight to Praes's heartland and finish of the

highborn, creating a situation perfect for a new system of government or by being volunteering to be a leash to stop Praes from ever threatening Procer again (and open trade with Praes).

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## Chapter 5: Interests

*“Ruling is not unlike gardening, if all the weeds were heavily armed and plotting your demise.”*

– Dread Empress Prudence the First, the ‘Frequently Vanquished’

After Thief was gone, I lingered in my solar and waited for the scrying I knew would come. Over the silent hours that followed, I found only my thoughts for company and the downwards spiral they so often took of late.

The thing with bad habits was that you rarely realized you had them until they came back to bite you in the ass. I’d had months since Second Liesse to try to map out where and why I’d failed, and as far as I could tell a lot of failures ran from the same source: I tended to react more than prevent. I could even see where that fracture line had been born, the moment I’d effectively been first among equals in Callow yet still went at everything thinking like the Squire. Looking back at that entire year, the picture wasn’t pretty. I’d recognized Diabolist as a threat, but taken only half-measures against her and *badly* underestimated the kind of damage she could cause if left alive. The moment I’d realized she was preparing a ritual, I should have taken the Fifteenth down south in full strength and crushed her without mercy. I hadn’t seen the fae coming at all, but neither had anyone else so on that particular mark I’d withhold the blame. When it had become clear I was dealing with an Arcadian invasion, though, I’d botched the affair again. I’d pulled it off, in the end, but only with Malicia’s help and after leaving the south in the hands of Summer for months.

I’d gone after armies, the visible threats, but I hadn’t aimed at the roots of the debacle tree until much too late in the campaign. There was an old saying in Callow about failure being the most apt of teachers. Considering how monumental my failures had been, I should have learned quite a bit.

Some conclusions had been evident. The coup by the Praesi elements of the Ruling Council still felt like a footnote in a much larger affair, but it’d brought one truth to the light of day: if I ruled, if I put on a crown, I gained ties I couldn’t neglect. The situation in Laure had only come to a head because I

wasn't there to scare them into line, but that was the problem wasn't it? That I had to scare them into line. The Empire worked like that, but the Empire tore itself to pieces with depressing regularity and had antagonized the rest of Calernia badly enough that they'd had four crusades sent their way. Worse, the climbing of the Tower encouraged a sort of pervasive ugly thinking that bloodletting was healthy. A way of thought that Black and Malicia were wrestling with to this day. The thing was, the whole *iron sharpens iron* philosophy did not actually deliver on what it promised: that the most competent, dangerous and ambitious person would end up claiming the Tower. Praesi history made that much blatantly clear. A lot of the Dread Emperors and Empresses who were now remembered as little more than punchlines had actually been very good at a single thing: killing their rivals frequently and brutally enough that no one overthrew them. For a while, anyway.

It was a skill set, I had to concede that much. But it wasn't one that necessarily translated to competent rule, even before you factored in the kind of infernal pacts those same Tyrants often made to come out on top and their later consequences. No, the more I read the more I was coming to the conclusion that there were two reasons Praes hadn't collapsed onto itself: the High Lords and the other villains. The same families who'd formed the Truebloods under Malicia and caused so much trouble were the same that regularly overthrew Emperors, but they were also families who poured a lot of wealth and influence into keeping Praes together. None of them wanted to rule only *part* of the Empire, the next time one of their kinsmen claimed the crown. That their way to keep it all together usually involved copious amounts of killing, an assault on Callow or general tightening of the screws on greenskins was horrid from where I stood, but in their closed little circle made perfect sense. It wasn't like anyone in Praes who wasn't highborn *mattered*, in their eyes. And then there were the villains. Chancellor, Black Knight, Warlock. Those were the most frequent, but every century seemed to bring its own batch of ancillary Named like Captain, Assassin and Scribe. None of them had been, if the histories were to be believed, particularly pleasant people. But as long as black-tempered demigods – for the old breed of villains had been that, for all their many flaws – were watching the Empire, anyone trying to splinter Praes was running the risk of taking their attention from their own petty feuds and turning it to the nail currently standing out. That tended to end poorly for the nail in question.

Callow had none of these structures. The House of Fairfax and the the aristocrats had been the backbone of the kingdom's rule before the Conquest, and they were now either thoroughly exterminated or gutted by a series of brutal wars and the purges that followed. At the moment the Kingdom of Callow had one thing keeping it together: me. And that was a *really bad idea*, as the Laure coup had made clear. Because if it was all on my shoulders,

the moment I went out on campaign or was taken out of the field by a Named scrap for a while, it all began to crumble. I'd spent long nights with Hakram putting together a way to rule this country that would weather my absence without outright turning every office over to the Regals or the Queen's Men. We'd done better than I could reasonably expect. Folding the old Praesi-built bureaucracy into the royal court had centralized power, yes, but more around Laure than myself. Most of it could function without me there to oversee it. And Ratface, Gods bless his cantankerous soul, had worked miracles where he could.

The Royal Mint in Marchford had put enough coin out there that the Tower no longer essentially decided the amount of currency we had to spare. Ratface was alarmed about the fact that the Empress still sat over massive reserves of precious metals accrued over two decades of peace and looting Callow, and that if she ever cut them loose the overflow of gold and silver would break the south and damage the rest of the kingdom. I couldn't dismiss that worry out of hand, but Malicia was at war. I knew better than most the Empress wasn't above putting an arrow in her foot if she thought it would lead to a long-term gain, but as long as she needed Callow functional enough to get in the crusade's way I couldn't see her pulling the trigger. It was still an awkward position: I could not and would not remain under the Tower's thumb, but if I ever got too out of line Malicia would have to react and coin was one of the better ways she had of hurting me. And there were risks, of course, to an unstable and war-torn country starting to mint its own coin. It'd been patriotic sentiment more than trust that saw people embracing the new currency, and sentiment was a dangerous thing to use as foundation.

I was popular enough in Callow that at the moment there was no real chance of uprising, but I would have to be very careful to keep it that way. Thief had made it clear that up north I was considered to have picked up the worst of the Fairfaxes overreaches and the most grating Praesi methods, then made both them my reign's central tenets. I had strong grip in central Callow, where a lot of people still saw me as the woman who'd given the boot to the most hated aspects of Praesi rule and taken the field repeatedly to keep the kingdom safe. In the south, though, it was a mixed bag. Hakram had overseen the feeding and settling of the refugees and that'd raised my reputation by extension, but Laure still loomed tall in everyone's memories. It didn't help that southerners tended to be more religious, as a rule, and that for all that my coronation had been at a Sister's hands I was still very much a villain. Down there, I was backed only so long as every other alternative was measurably worse. At least Procer's known involvement in the Liesse Rebellion had them almost as hated as Praes: the backlash in sentiment had only grown starker when rumours trickled in that the Tenth Crusade would be going through Callow. Conspiracies were being peddled that the First Prince had arranged it all to weaken the country

enough it wouldn't be able to fight back, and the way they were not waning but growing in popularity had the Empress' signature all over it.

Her Dread Majesty had been quiet, of late, but it would be a blunder to believe that meant she wasn't setting up the board for her later moves.

I'd begun to work on Callow too late, I knew. Less than a year of seeing to the country, when I had to both double the size of the army and rebuild a third of the realm? That Ratface had managed to find the coin for any of this was a testament to how ridiculously resourceful my former Supply Tribune was. I'd had to resign myself, in the end, to the truth that this was as much good as I could do before the swords came out. And there never really had been a doubt that the swords *would* come out, which was why I'd poured so much coin into the Jacks even when Juniper was howling in outrage. If I started to fight this war only when the armies began marching, I'd lose. It was as simple as that. Black had once told me that if I didn't start acting instead of reacting I would rack up greater and greater disasters, and I cursed myself still for not having listened to him then. I would not make that mistake again, and that meant going in with both a plan and a notion of what my opponents were up to. I had my plan. It'd taken me months and more people brought in to put it together than I was truly comfortable with, but I had the the skeleton of the Liesse Accords on parchment. Now I just had to make sure everyone else in this mess was ready to sign them, and that was a different beast.

Malicia, I knew, never would agree. That meant Malicia had to go, sooner or later, and that put a particular tone to the fact that her spymistress was contacting me on the eve of my departure for the northern campaign.

The scrying basin lit up and I leaned over, watching my interlocutor closely. Ime looked older than when I'd last seen her. The lines on her face were deeper, and though her hair remained dark I suspected there was dye behind the absence of white locks. She was warier speaking to me than she'd once been, as she should be. Aisha's kinsmen had dug up a few things about her when I asked. She'd been one of the Heir's closest supporters, when Black had still been the Squire, and the only one to survive my teacher's unsurprisingly thorough retribution as he rose to prominence. She'd been inserted at court under Dread Emperor Nefarious as a hidden ally for the then-concubine Malicia, and later served as the Empress' most precious informant in Ater during the civil war. Anyone who could deceive a Chancellor and a panoply of Praesi highborn could not be taken lightly, so I was about as wary as she herself was looking.

"Your Majesty," the spymistress greeted me.



Her face was small, on the stone basin I used for official scrying with the Tower, but remarkably detailed. Masego had done good work with the instrument.

"Lady Ime," I replied, inclining my head.

"I bear word from Her Most Dreadful Majesty," she said. "It has come to the Tower's attention that you will be leaving for campaign with dawn."

"As agreed, the defence of Callow is part of my responsibilities as tributary state of Praes," I said. "Though reinforcing Black at the Vales is no longer feasible, I will be meeting Prince Milenan's army in battle."

"The prompt discharging of your obligation does you honour," Ime said, though we both knew that to be empty words. I wasn't doing any of this for the Empress' sake. "The Tower has, however, instructions in the specifics of that discharge."

Ah, and there we went. *I know what you're after this time, you old spider.* I was about to be told, I suspected, that Amadis Milenan was to survive his little jaunt through the Whitecaps.

"It will be my pleasure, of course, to listen to such instructions," I mildly replied.

I'd learned to choose my words more carefully, and not just because I had a fancy hat. Ime understood perfectly well the backdoor I'd allowed myself in this, but I'd not given her grounds enough to harden her language. We were still at the part of the game where my deep love and loyalty for the Empress was fantasy we both pretended to be fact.

"It has been decreed in the Tower's interests that certain royals within the crusader host be spared the sword," Ime said.

"Fascinating," I smiled, wide and mirthless. "Shall I guess the names?"

"In deference to the current state of war, that will not be necessary," the spymistress blandly replied. "There are only two: Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre and Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan."

The schemer and the general. Essentially the only two people that mattered in that army, aside from the heroes. I allowed the empty smile to lapse.

"And this... decree," I said. "Does it bear the Tower's seal? Or is it simply an instruction from Her Dread Majesty?"

*How far are you willing to push this? Are you going to make it treason to disobey?* That, at the moment, was the most important

bit to find out. The line the Empress took on this would tell me quite a bit. Like, for example, if ignoring her would be followed by immediate reprisal. The last news from Aisha's relatives had the Ashuran war fleet in the Tideless Isles, an obvious prelude to attacking Praesi shores, so I doubted any of the Legions would be marching west. I had a garrison in place at Summerholm to stop them cold if they did, anyway. But the kind of pressure she was willing to bring down would give me a glimpse of her timetable: when was she going to stop thinking of me as a disposable asset and instead consider me a threat to deal with? She only had two armies in place to ward off Procer, and Black wasn't going anywhere now that Prince Papenheim was on the move. *So tell me, Malicia, when is your play inside Procer going to make me irrelevant to the defence of your borders?*

"A mere instruction," Ime smiled charmingly. "Her Dread Majesty recognizes the realities of battle may prevent you from carrying out her intent."

*At least until the passage is secure, then, I thought. Now show me the knife, Tyrant.*

"Of course, failing to achieve this may cast doubts about your ability amongst certain circles," Ime continued. "As we are currently mustering for the defence of the coast, I regret to inform you that Her Dread Majesty lacks the men to enforce the safety of trade routes with Callow."

So, the moneybag. Not unexpected. She wouldn't do anything too overt, no. Wouldn't even let her people be involved. She just needed to whisper in the ears of the right High Lords and the wolves would start going after my granaries and my traders while my army was on the wrong side of Callow to stop them. How typically Praesi that even when I was marching against an army that wanted her head on a pike she'd still threaten to shove sticks in my wheels. My fingers clenched. As always, the Empress toed the line skilfully. Escalation, but not enough it would cripple me or force heavy-handed retaliation on my part. I'd had a tutor in Praesi politics lately, though. One I despised, but Akua Sahelian knew the ways of the Wasteland the way only a monster born to its highest reaches could. Time to put what I'd learned to work. I'd spent months scrabbling for every way I knew to check Winter's influence on my thoughts, well aware of how much of a liability it made me when I swam in the deeper waters, and one of the side-effects of that had been learning exactly how that influence rose when I reached for the mantle. *Fear*, I instructed myself. *Fear but nothing else*. I smiled, and let Winter coil through my veins.

Frost tinged the sides of the stone basin as Ime's face went blank.

"Sabra Niri," I said, tone caressing the words, and she shivered. "I was surprised, to learn of your kinship to the High Lord of Okoro."

Her name had been learned, not given, and this made difference. It was still a foothold. Fear spread in her mind like a drop of ink in water. Thinned, yes, but contaminating every part of her. I could taste it, even through this thin link of sympathetic sorcery. I savoured it. I watched the curve of her neck, and considered snapping it. A little reminder to Malicia that threats were not inconsequential. Perhaps too brutal, I mused. Taking simply her sight would be sufficient. I could whisper through this working and shatter those pretty little orbs with a single word. Make bauble of them, perhaps. A bracelet for her to wear as a reminder of the costs of slighting me. *Fear. Fear but nothing else.* A weak, indecisive design. I balked at it. We would see.

"Have you ever heard the Wild Hunt ride, Sabra Niri?" I asked quietly.

It was a pretty mask of calm she wore, but it was a very thin and feeble one. It would be delightful to rip it off.

"I am not certain what you imply, Queen Catherine," Ime said.

"It comes slowly, triptych unfolding," I told her. "First you hear the horns. Distant, like—"

My voice was halfway other, the crack of glaciers and the stillness of fallen snow.

"— a promise, almost a whisper," I said. "Then you hear the hooves, and that is when you know yourself hunted."

She began to speak, but I clicked my tongue. Her lips closed and she swallowed loudly.

"The last thing you hear, Sabra Niri, is the laughter," I murmured. "It is sport to them, you see. Like a deer that can scream and oh, how they *enjoy* the screams."

"The Hunt is under your command," Ime said. "To send them after citizens of the Empire would be rebellion."

"Citizens?" I mused. "No. *Animals*. Animals are what they would pursue."

I turned my gaze on her.

"Wherever they might be," I softly spoke. "Whoever might shield them. They would... disappear. As if by the hand of a god."

I smiled and showed my teeth, knew them sharper than a human's should be. Hunger made fangs wherever it spread.

"Shall we speak of gods, Sabra Niri?" I asked.

"The Wasteland is not without learning in this matter," she replied.

"Then perhaps it should it should pay heed to these old lessons," I said. "I wish you sweet dreams, Sabra Niri. And a kindness, for the one you once offered – running never helps, but it is still better than being *caught*."

I cut the strings of the the spell, before I could talk myself into claiming her tongue for the arrogance of *having threatened me*. The sheer gall of that insect – I breathed in and out, slowly. Fear. Fear and nothing else. I'd stayed within the bounds. I spent half an hour alone and unmoving in the solar afterwards, letting the influence of Winter ebb. It was worse than the chats with Hasenbach, because this time I'd leaned in willingly. That made a difference. When I embraced it of my own free will it was always slower to recede. Gods, I wanted a drink. But the way my hand refused to move told me the oath considered me on campaign already. It'd been playing with munitions, letting Winter out, but that was the entire point. So long as Malicia believed me unstable, willing to escalate starkly at the first offence, she would be wary of starting her usual games. *Except it's not pretending if I really am that volatile, is it?* I clenched my fingers. I couldn't stay queen, not in the long term. Not when I had that lurking thing in the back of my soul and no real solution to leash it. But the only person I could feasibly abdicate to was Anne Kendall, and Thief was sure she didn't currently have the backing to stay on the throne if I put her there. Which I couldn't do, anyway, not without starting a war with the Tower and likely Black as well. For now, I had to stay. Under all the checks I could manage without crippling the kingdom's rebuilding. Fuck, I missed Hakram. It was always easier when he was around, and once more I regretted sending anyone else to Vale would have slowed necessary work by months.

Dawn found me looking through glass panels, an open manuscript on my knees. We'd be moving out soon, to fight a war against unbeatable men in a battle where I had to refrain from spilling my enemy's blood. *Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation.*

Well, the Heavens were certainly attempting to deliver.

Holy shit Cat, that was scary and awesome and fucking risky. It's a good think she didn't rip the tongue or eyes of Malicia's lover.

P.S If you can do vote for the Guide on topwebfiction <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

### *DroughtBringer*

We are again past Ward! Whoo!!  
(Not that I dislike Ward, tis a great story; this is just better :P)  
Keep voting and we'll be able to stay above Ward!

### *Mr. Nobody*

Yeah, Practical Guide to Evil deserves a lot more to be the first. Parahuman Series is not the same without Taylor Hebert.

### *Matthew*

Ward has the problem of no one wanting to kill and the story twisting itself implausibly to avoid having anyone killed.

Like the latest arc, they are saying that they can't kill all of the Fallen. Well, once you kill Mama Mathers and those under compulsion are released, why can't you kill the remainder? The Fallen as a group are way too dangerous to be left alive.

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That's the kind of decision a politician or a military commander could make, but the people whose shoulders it is now on are too well aware that they have no means to stop that conflict once they start it, that the post-Golden-Morning truce is already barely holding, and that holding back because there are bigger threats on the horizon has never been so urgent before.

### *Matthew*

1. There are no bigger threats than scion and the endbringers and both are gone/inert
- 2 . the vast majority of living parahumans hate masters... Almost as if they all have direct experience of being under their sway.
3. The fallen are militant nihilists and would, by definition, try to sabotage any coalition they were a part of.

*therealgridlock*

Hey, it me, the future, here to tell you there are much bigger problems than even scion and the endbringers are still going.

Ward is already finished though so I don't feel any problems telling you those things, completely spoiler free, because it wouldn't be a wobblebibble book without infinite escalation.

*kelioez*

Hey future, Frick u, 3 years back I used to lounge around all day long and now I have to friking study.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

"to fight a war against unbeatable men in a battle where I had to refrain from spilling my enemy's blood."

Did I miss something? Or is this just referring to the two royalty?

Also, great chapter! It has an amazing insight to the way that Winter is working withing Cat, as well as some nice foreshadowing of what's to come.

### *Byzantine*

I believe she is referring to some of the Heros, like the Grey Pilgrim.

---

She meant the Grey Pilgrim (who is undefeated so far and can't be killed if she ever wants to make a treaty with Levant) and Saint of Swords (who is more or less Ranger with a domain). She also can't kill too many soldiers, or Hasenbach wouldn't treat with her at all.

### *cozzy215*

It is probably referring to the big two Heroes that are in the Proceran camp. More specifically the Grey Pilgrim.

### *Darkening*

She's also referring tot he fact that she can't just butcher the enemy army to the last man in a single decisive victory or the Principate will react by digging in their heels and wanting to retaliate, and she won't be able to push through a treaty.

Aside from that, holy hell the bit with Winter was something. I really, really, really love this turn to things. Probably not

going to lead to good things, but I just love how alien her thought processes and behavior turned. Looking forward to seeing her go all out on some heroes.

*Jeremy*

Well, Catherine's really going down this path. When you start taking lessons from \*Diabolist\*, you know that things have to be pretty desperate...

*Rook*

Cat really is the embodiment of the Praesi ideal that way. Becoming better by learning from her enemies, pulling out the knife that you were stabbed with and making it your own. She's surrounded by treachery on every side – Cordelia in the front, Malicia in the back, Larat and Akua under her nose, the Goblin Matrons, Praesi nobles, and the other calamities in the background – and for all that they're grinding her down, she's trying to use it to sharpen herself. An almost literal case of iron sharpens iron, for all that she disparages the notion of it.

[ayon96](#)

Author

The summary says the story updates every Monday and Wednesday  
You forgot to update it

*Mr. Nobody*

I really don't know what you are talking about. He's clearly updating the story regularly.

*Darkening*

it's been updating Fridays too lately.

*The Sanity Faerie*

Yes, but the summary needs to be updated. The days have changed. (I think?)

*Mr. Nobody*

Ah, so it was the summary. Sorry, I misinterpreted the comment.

*bobthebuilder*

monday, wednesday, friday – hasn't missed an update yet.

[ayon96](#)

The author wrote in the summary that the story updates on Monday and Wednesday but now it is also updating on Friday. He forgot to change that in the summary. Sorry that my comment is misleading

*lpoolfan1*

I just started following recently, and I love this serial a lot!

If it's alright with you, erraticerrata, could I possibly incorporate some material from this in a D&D campaign I'm going to start running soon? The concept of Names would really spice up the campaign and let my players really shine. Also, the villains would be spectacular.

If you're not ok with that, that's fine! I get it if you don't want to just let other people copy you.

---

There was a supposedly author-certified RPG, you'd ahve to ask Tragedyofphilosophy on Reddit ([https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/8dbvi0/do\\_orcs\\_have\\_hair/dxm9u4e/](https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/8dbvi0/do_orcs_have_hair/dxm9u4e/)).

*Joel*

I so do love all the political parts it this (it's part of what elevates this work so), but I really am itching to get to Catherine running an arrogant Prince or two through.

*naturalnuke*

I really wonder, if she has no current Name is she more or less effected by The Narrative?

*Darkening*

Considering she replaced it with Fae magic I'd guess more.

*Nairne .01*

I'd agree. Though I think the direct influence is still limited to Oaths.

[taliesinskye](#)

Unfortunately, Fae are highly vulnerable to narratives, and she dropped her name for Fae power. Fae do have more wiggle room in Creation than in Faerie, at least.

*Rook*



Note that the knife cuts both ways though. They're not just vulnerable to narratives, but also empowered by them. They're can be on the level of lesser gods if the story supports them enough, or disposable minions if it doesn't.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

On the plus-side, she isn't restricted to as narrow a field of narrative arcs typical of Named. Sure, she'll operate best in Winter-related areas... But, that covers all kinds of stories. Even ones of cheer-within-harshness, but particularly strongly meta tales.

Winter is when you hunker down and tell or make up tales to get you through the darkest nights. 😊

---

Alright, does anyone understand why Catherine didn't just ask about the location of the demon? Mlaicia has to understand that Cat's not stupid enough to use it, and at this point not knowing about it hinders everyone for the same reasons.

### *Rook*

Malicia already knows more likely than not, and even if her spy network had not given her reason to believe it she'd be able to infer it fairly easily given the situation: Having said that, her assistance in finding it has shown to be noticeably lacking, which when dealing with a schemer of Malicia's caliber can be taken as a blatant refusal to give that card away

Asking her for it not only reveals a measure of your thoughts to her – beyond dangerous when your relationship is less allies and more using each other for the moment – but even if she were to acquiesce, it puts Cat in a weaker bargaining position for the future and is a potential weapon in the field of shifting public opinion considering how prevalent Demons were in Marchford and second Liesse.

So essentially it's a terrible move because you're asking for something that isn't critical, in a way that bares your neck to a potential enemy, while knowing that it's for the moment a wholly futile endeavour

### *d\_o\_l*

I wonder if Malicia is planning on releasing the demon herself? She's definitely been sliding more towards old school Evil tactics. She might see an opportunity to hurt two of her enemies at once.

### *Jonnnney*

A demon of absence might be exactly the tool Cat needs to slaughter the army without consequences. The Procter can't be too angry about the death of 50,000 soldiers if no one remembers that they ever existed.

She can't ask for the location because she is trying to portray herself as violent, unpredictable, and controlled by her winter urges. Asking for the location is reasonable and suggests that she is acting predictably which allows the Empress many more actions and manipulations.

*agumentic*

She did, though. Inquiries were politely rebuffed, I think it was mentioned in the Chapter 2.

*nipi*

Didnt Cat complain a few chapters back that Malicia has been uncooperative on thet front?

### [MurkyTruths](#)

The rabbit hole stretches deeper..

*Jane*

You know, it occurs to me that, as harshly as she judges herself, the fact that Thief is willing to work for her is a pretty clear sign that she's actually doing reasonably well; for all that the rest of the world calls Thief a fallen heroine, she's signaled plenty of times that she's only in this so long as Callow is better off with Cat as Queen.

Though, I suppose her judgment DOES have much to do with the fact that she's comparing herself to Black and Malicia, two of the greatest planners and schemers of the age – that would undermine anyone's confidence in their competence. Still, just compare her to pretty much any of the other characters we've heard about, with the exception of Cordelia – even as half-hearted as her efforts at planning have been, pretty much nobody else seems to have even seriously considered the long-term. Given how she's been rushing from one disaster to the next, that she was able to accomplish ANYTHING is still remarkable, even if much of it has more to do with recognizing and employing talented individuals than it does setting in motion decade-spanning projects.

Not that her self-reflection is off – she's been content to react despite being in a position where she's been expected to plan, and the costs for that have been dire. But it's also important to recognize that most others in her position would have lost everything, and that she's come out of this with a country still able to pose a threat to the Crusade is a remarkable

accomplishment. Well, more important for the rest of the world to recognize, I suppose – if SHE were to think that, it would risk leading to dangerous complacency.

*Slider*

Cat should just marry Thief and make her queen of Callow. That would solve all her problems with being forced to abdicate for the greater 'good' due to being compromised by winter.

*DD*

It seems like there were 3 chapters last week. Has the update schedule changed?

*Jonnnnz*

It's been three a week for a few now

*Matthew*

Am I the only one upset by Cat breaking from the Tower?

Malicia and Black are the best.

Black especially as his weaponized genre savvy and use of institutions makes him genuinely new and a threat to the existing order. I imagine Black and the Heirarch actually agree about the supremacy of humanity over stupid meddling gods.

I was always hoping that Black and Malicia could "Ship of Theseus" Praes into a reformed empire which is 'good,' because taxes aren't onerous, everyone is fed, people are treated equally before the law... etc,

Watching Cat plot to destroy Praes and, by Extension, Black's goals of using institutions and organization to defy the very gods is sad and anticlimactic.

Now she's just another anti hero fighting within a groove that creation wants her to fight in.

Creation wants this Crusade to go 3 ways.

1. Best Case: Procer knocks out Cat and Praes
2. Second Best Case: Procer fails to knock out Cat or Praes, but Cat then knocks out Praes.
3. Worst case for creation: Cat and Praes cooperate closely and figure out a way to force Procer into a sustainable treaty.

The story is on #2. I'd much rather read #3.

*Voice of Reason*

Cat only said she was going to get rid of Malicia, who said anything about Black? She may be planning to help him depose Malicia and take her place.

*Matthew*

This is a possibility, but unlikely.

Black broke Malicia's trust by destroying the array. I don't think he'd dignify her resulting distrust by actively plotting against her. He'd want a way to remove the dread empress through... "constitutional" means.

*Decius*

Isn't Usurpation considered a valid means of succession?

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

Yup. I remember because one of the chapter quotes mentions that, while usurpation is a valid means of succession, a group of animals which ate a Dread Empress weren't smart enough to be considered as successors (but were smart enough to be charged with treason in light of the desertion of the tiger army, if you remember that; the quote was from the animals' trial (not the tigers)).

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I think that is what Malicia and Black wanted to do originally, but that ship has sailed.

Malicia de facto embraced Stupid Evil by sacrificing a city worth of people of one her allies to get a super weapon and Black no longer believes in half-measures and wants to exterminate the Praesi nobility like the cancer they are.

So... yeah. Cat's idea to jump ship makes sense because the Empire is no longer a reliable ally.

*wagnerap*

And in this chapter Cat realized the nobility is an important stabilizing and unifying force despite being maggots in the flesh of Praes . . .

*Rook*

They're a necessary evil contingent on Praesi culture continuing to be self harming to the point of tearing itself apart, is what Cat realized.

Which is the exact same thing Black wanted to change in his argument with Empess, to break that culture and stop being

(paraphrased) 'a snake choking on its own tail'. Cat essentially came to the same conclusion he did, which still eventually ends with the high nobles ripped out root and stem.

*Ed*

Cat has to break from the Tower, the Tower itself is the ultimate symbol of idiotic evil she said it herself in this chapter. The highborn fight to preserve Praes even when they give no shits because \*their\* family might be next in the Tower.

*grzecho2222*

There is also:

- Cat taking over Praes
- Black taking over Praes
- Everyone fighting bigger theat

*grzecho2222*

Also Miss "One day, we will have foreign allies who are not complete imbeciles. By sheer dint of odds, it has to happen eventually." jumped the maneating tapir with Hellgate plan and decided to antagonize said allies because Cat stabbed Black.

*d\_o\_l*

Malicia is pretty clearly going off the deep end. Seems like maybe spending so long at the top of the Tower has started to warp her perceptions a bit. Black was 100% right about the flying fortress gambit being a stupid idea, and now she's bringing the Dead King into the mix. What's happening right now is not Cat's fault.

*Albatross*

I've been thinking with all the 'Winter affects my mind' stuff recently, if the name 'Dread Emperor/Empress' doesn't do the same to the people who hold it. Still I don't think Malicia's gonna hang onto that name once Triumphant comes back

*Albatross*

Also I reckon the most likely endgame is more: Callow & Praes become one country, Cat abdicates, Malicia is deposed. Heck maybe if the League can pick up enough power their Exarch can impose hideously ineffective democracy on everyone

*Albatross*

**\*\*Hierarch**

*DD*

I love the fact that the utterly democratic nation is aligned with evil. I know that anyone who studied the Ancient Greek city-states knows how terrible and bloody democracy can be, but in modern times it is always depicted as some great good. This is good stuff.

*RanVor*

For me, they seem more like Bolsheviks than democrats.

*grzecho2222*

For me they seem more like French revolutionists, Bolsheviks had very organized military (with chariots with machine guns and other stuff), also they fought Mensheviks (who dethroned Tsar and who generally made much more sense) and spent most of their time fighting democratic countries. Also most people among them didn't believe in system and spent a LOT of time fighting for power among themselves

[sengachi](#)

Yeah they're not democratic. They're ... something else. Some form of lunacy which is only stable and doesn't immediately get co-opted by some power-hungry (or well-meaning) official on the inside because of mind-reading shenanigans.

Honestly I don't feel like they have a good analogue to any real-world political system, other than being what Pure Marxist Communism *would* be if Pure Marxist Communism had actually had some mechanism for enforcing distributed rule rather than just hoping that everybody would pick the cooperate button in their political prisoner's dilemma (and if someone then dumped a bucket of pure chaos on the whole thing). Which, of course, means it's nothing like Marx-descended Communism at all because every awful thing that ever happened in the USSR basically begins and ends with: "Marx didn't actually bother figuring out how to incentivize distributed political unity and just believed really hard that the people would make it would happen".

*Fern*

God, and I forgot about the fuckin Dead King.

Wait, is Malicia gonna go for Bonfire?

I mean, obviously Praes can't directly go for it, not without the portals. But it's the same principle, really: keep the bulk of the crusade hemmed in at the Red Flower Vales then let the Dead King completely ruin the country. It's what I would do, in that situation, especially if Malicia thinks she can get rid of the Dead King afterwards (I mean, that seems pretty unlikely though, what with the whole secret hell wars that everyone forgot about. If it didn't work then I doubt it could work now, unless they bring Ranger into the fold).

*mavant*

What secret hell wars that everyone forgot about?

*Fern*

IIRC it got mentioned a while back, in "The Secret Histories of Praes." There were a few wars fought for control over the hell that the Dead King occupied that ended with a horrible loss for Praes. I don't remember if they had to use an absence demon or not but i'm 90% sure they did.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Winter is coming.

As is \*with my various phalanges crossed\* suicide goats.

baahk to the classics.

*Jordan*

Oh boy, crossed phalanges.

*SMHF*

Wow I really love to see The Hunt in action in a Heroic Interlude!

Idk watching them through Cat's eyes, while still awesome, seeing as she's the Queen of The Hunt, would take some of their mystic away...

*grzecho2222*

I wonder if one of Heroes is Kid Hero/Sidekick, because they are one thing that Creation didn't throw at Cat

[shieldredblog](#)

Page

*Shoddi*

Already done once with Page. See Book 2, Chapter 18: Tinder.  
Not to say it can't happen again, though.

*grzecho2222*

Hmm, how old was Page? I always she was Cat's age. Also, I meant 12 -15 years old, like Artemis Fowl, Will Treaty, Percy Jackson, Robin etc..  
Kid – Hero

*grzecho2222*

\*always assumed

[Antony444](#)

Seen like this, the demand of Malicia to keep the two Princes alive can only be seen in a very dark light. After all if the Prince of Iserre and the Princess of Aequitan are captured alive, we must assume their army will be beaten by that point (because they didn't strike me as front-line commanders) and the heroes will be in disarray or dead.

With this kind of situation, their influence will be spent and the majority of their elite forces destroyed. The only reason Malicia wants them alive is because the Dead King is going to unleash his armies once the two 50 000+ armies are no longer able to disengage and march north.

Malicia is certainly going to let Keter invade Procer, kills most of the Princes and Princess. Cordelia Hasenback, unable to repulse the greatest Evil invasion of this era, will be the scapegoat. At the last moment, Praes armies will of course gallantly come to the rescue and put Prince Amadis on the throne, with the Princess of Aequitan as his wife.

The Tenth Crusade will be dead without the Principate, most heroes will be dead too, and Callow will have been bled in the process. The Dread Empress will have killed most of her opponents, internal and external.

At least, I consider it a possible scenario. This story has the potential to surprise me at every chapter...though it's definitely a bad sign when the main character considers she can trust herself anymore with a crown.

*Ashen Shugar*

I don't think Malicia expected Cat to capture the Princes, but rather didn't want them taken out in a decapitation strike to weaken the army as she still wants them around to scheme against Cordelia.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Does anybody remember why Ime being related to the High Lord of Okoro is significant to Cat and worthy of the Wild Hunt?



## *Byzantine*

It's Cat saying "I know who you are, and the Hunt are at my beck and call."

## *RanVor*

It's important because Cat knows who she is. She can't hide behind the mask of relative anonymity anymore.

## *DD*

It also Cat saying "I am a fae-like power who knows your full name, and names have power..."

## *Fern*

so, four people she cannot kill: two by decree of the empress, and two by rationality. Clearly, Cat is going to have to decide what wheelhouse she's in on the eve of this campaign; is she going to destabilize Procer for long enough that they're no longer a threat? Or work to ensure that the two Proceran Demigods live to ensure peace. Although – at least to me – it looks like she's trying to go for both. This would be the best scenario, of course. Save the revered Heroes and let the blame for a failed operation fall on the two snakes, keeping Hasenbach and Malicia content enough to beat each other senseless.

Obviously, we've passed the gold end way forever ago, when Black let his failure in the Free Cities influence his actions. Now, we're just desperately scrabbling for the best possible outcome for Callow, and perhaps seeing our darling Catherine come out as a major player in Calernian politics.

## [Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Me personally,  
I'd take my army ALL THE WAY to the north end of Procer if I were Cat, much like Move 1 in Bonfire. Then instead of massacring the population, I'd sweep the defenders against the Chain of Hunger off their walls from behind. With Procer completely undefended in the north for the first time in millennia, the Chain would likely rise as it hasn't in ages.

Faced with the utter annihilation of her nation, Cordelia could either turn her forces for home, or be crucified by her own troops before they hurried home.

Simple. Easy peasy. You can't stab your way to Paradise, but you can always stab your way to better. This diplomatic solution....I don't have a ton of faith in. Kinda feels like Cat is goin a bit soft due to her (justified) fear of her mantle.

## *Nairne .01*

Except the Chain of Hunger is not anyone's ally and where will they turn after they eat through Procer?

*Engineer*

Either Callow or the Dominion. Maybe both.

That said if they employ that version of bonfire and word ever got out that Catherine was the one indirectly responsible for such a large amount of death, then the reasons she did not want to employ the vanilla bonfire plan will still come to pass.

That's not even touching the fact that all the old monster heroes that would undoubtedly survive such an onslaught on their home country would be turning their eyes to Catherine in particular.

They'd even have the narrative weight to kick her ass.

So no, if you want a long term, peaceful solution you can't go for the kill them all (whether directly or indirectly) approach. Because Reality in the guideverse is far from impartial.

[skyguy998](#)

The way I see it, Cat wasn't ordered not to kill the Princes. She was ordered that they "be spared the sword", intentionally or unintentionally giving Cat the same out she gave herself in her "listen to instructions"

On the rest fabulous as always, can't wait to see what happens next, though I can't wait to see what type of name she gets, something like "Queen of Woe" would be awesome. Also would love to see the hunt in action

*grzecho2222*

Iron Queen:

- iron sharpens iron
- wears iron crown
- rules with iron fist
- Fae hate iron and if something has selfcontradicting n(N)ame its usually Very Bad Sign

[sengachi](#)

"The thing was, the whole iron sharpens iron philosophy did not actually deliver on what it promised: that the most competent, dangerous and ambitious person would end up claiming the Tower. Praesi history made that much blatantly clear. A lot of the Dread Emperors and Empresses who were now remembered as little more than punchlines had actually been very good at a single thing:

killing their rivals frequently and brutally enough that no one overthrew them. For a while, anyway."

I feel like this is true for a \*lot\* of socially Darwinist / competition oriented philosophies.

*TeK*

Not really, it's just that the set of skills they compete in and the one needed to rule do not coincide.

*Jago*

But that is a very common occurrence. The skills to run an insurrection, usurpation of power or getting a ruling position through adventuring doesn't coincide and only partially overlap with those needed to make a competent and stable government. Rarely a person has both sets of skills.

*ritvik jha*

Mr.David Verburg aka erraticerrata I would like to garner your attention through this comment cause I was not able to find any other means of communication to contact you .

I am a law student pursuing a BA LLB and have written some articles in local news papers and magazines as a freelancer.

I have been reading your web fiction a practical guide to evil from quiet some time I just wanted to inform you that i am quiet interested in adding more detail to the lore of your web fictions like i.e the average life of a citizen in pares,life of a noble in callow or details about the administration of Procer.

This would need your approval as you are the owner of the original work as I might be adding details to the original material or creating some new details in the existing.

If approved I would like to guarantee you that the details and additional lore would never move away or obstruct the cannon that you produce this might even lead a few short stories i.e like the accounts of a paresi soldier during the doom of lessie and spin offs.

I am ready to do this free of cost or at a token fee (if u like to give it to me totally upon you) everything I write will be first sent to you for approval first so I will in no way obstruct your work.

please contact me through the email [ritvikjha1@gmail.com](mailto:ritvikjha1@gmail.com).

*dude*

Are you... seriously asking the author to canonize or pay you for fanfiction of his own work?

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Eh,  
I think this Universe has established it doesn't really punish  
"Evil at a remove" with bunches of Heroes descending. Malicia  
spawned mass civil war in Procer with indirect action and fifty  
Heroes didn't descend on Praes.

The "Story" isn't too smart. It's highly reactive, certainly. I  
will allow that without more details as to what the Ratlings are,  
it's difficult to say whether unleashing them would screw  
anything but Procer. It's possible they might simply infest  
Procer, requiring everyone adjacent country to wall up and  
defend. Alternatively, they might go all locust as assumed.

Still, Cordelia is hunting an Evil knockout for Empire-building  
purposes. She's crazier and more power-hungry than Malicia.  
Therefore even more untrustworthy.

*Jago*

I don't see where you guys see that Empire-building purposes in  
Cordelia. Her aim, as far as we know, is to build something  
like the NATO/Western Alliance after WWII. Sure Procer will be  
"primus inter pares" in that alliance, exactly like the USA was  
in the NATO/Western Alliance against the URSS. Why it is a way  
to aggrandize Procer it is not empire building.

[Hakurei06](#)

Laure, not Liesse?

[vuthuha912](#)

I am going to say this again and again. WAR IS NOT A GAME. Stop  
ordering your generals around Malicia and commit to the fight.  
Your country is going to get invaded and all you think about is  
your little game of politics. Gosh, these people are a bunch of  
cunts.

Cat makes mistakes but she is not even 20 years old yet. Black  
has 40 years of experience dealing with Trueblood. He should have  
known better by now. Yet, he still believes in the excuse Malicia  
gave him, isn't he? Sure, letting the Trueblood lives, giving  
them a chance to change their alliances and start working for  
more than their own ambition, and showing them the method for a  
way out is great and all. But after 20 years, if they still  
aren't switching sides then you are better off just killing them.  
What is the point of magic power or secret contract or money if  
they are just using it to shoot yourself and all of your allies  
in the foot?

I will forever be bitter with those two c\*nts on the Ruling  
Council. They butchered the chance to build unity and cooperation  
with Callow, bidding them closer to the Tower. They betrayed  
Callow for personal greed. What they are trying to accomplish, I  
have no idea. There is no way a coup like that will bring any

long-term benefit. They just gutted a goose unnecessary for some eggs. And they are completely Malicia's fault. You have the time to build the bureaucracy up to take over Trueblood. If this is your result then no wonder you get fucked. Praes might as well go with a military dictatorship at this point. At least, the training in the army will make them understand the importance of having a stable rear in a fight. It works quite well for nearly every Chinese dynasty ever. They are all military dictatorships at the beginning of their reign. We can settle the governing body later. A government is formed at gunpoint after all.

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## Chapter 6: Hedges

*"Irritant's Law: inevitable doom is a finite resource, and becomes mere doom when split between multiple heroic bands. Nemeses should never simultaneously engage a single villain."*  
– Extract from 'The Axiom Appendix', multiple contributors

I sat at a table across from Baron Henry Darlington of Hedges and Baroness Ainsley Morley of Harrow, shared a smile with them and wondered which one of them would be the first to try to sell me out to the crusaders.

I knew for a fact that Procer had approached the both of them long before a hole was punched through the Whitecaps. Hasenbach's people were good, but the Observatory was better and no one had any real idea yet of exactly what it could do. You couldn't counter something you didn't know about, as I had learned the hard way. I'd been keeping a close eye on these two, through both the Jacks and sorcerous means, and even though Morley was the one who'd just had to flee her own city my bet was on Darlington being the one to try for a deal. He was the older of the two, in his late forties, and though he'd had a reputation as a knight of some skill in his youth his belly made it clear he'd traded swords for mutton chops a long time ago. Morley, the Jacks had informed me, was in her thirties but had inherited the barony from her father only a year before the Liesse Rebellion. Her lands were larger than Darlington's but her personal holdings smaller and the rest split among vassals who'd been rather unruly after her ascension. If the betrayal came from the Harrow contingent, I'd wager that it would be from one of her sworn lords and not Morley herself. Both of them were being very cordial as we shared a drink – water for me, that tricky little oath – but they were also quite bad at hiding how surprised they were I'd reached Hedges so quickly.

Seven days through Arcadia, and my twenty thousand strong Army of Callow began marching out into the pastures to the south of the city. The Observatory had confirmed that the crusaders were only starting to come out on the Callowan side of the passage through the Whitecaps. Slower than expected, but then our estimates had been based on Legion marching speeds. Revised downwards, of course, but apparently not quite enough. There'd been some alarm when we popped out of the woodworks, but I'd been one of the first out the fairy gate and to be blunt if we'd meant to take Hedges there wasn't shit either of them could have done about it. The city was more of a glorified town, and its defences were laughable. The curtain wall was a short and worn-down compared to almost every other city in Callow, since the north had never really faced the threat of Praesi invasions. Their enemies had been each other, which involved more cattle-theft than sieges even in the old days before unification, and on rare occasion Daoine. The Deoraithe were not prone to expansion, but before they were brought into the fold by Eleanor Fairfax they'd not been above the occasional raid or punitive expedition to express displeasure at the royal family in Laure.

"I'm impressed by how quickly you got your people out, Baroness," I told Morley. "And how thoroughly."

There was a slight tinge of discomfort in their eyes at the reminder that I knew exactly what was going on in their lands and they had no real idea how. Darlington cleared his throat.

"Perhaps prematurely, Your Majesty, if you'll forgive my saying so. It seems to me it might have been possible to contest Harrow."

I took that more as an indication that he'd rather pitched battles not take place at even the outskirts of his lands than sympathy for Morley, but then he'd gotten on my nerves often enough I wasn't inclined to think well of him. I sipped at my cup.

"They've moved slower than anticipated," I conceded. "There are, however, concerns you might not be considering. Do you both know what a Hell Egg is?"

Morley paled but Darlington was unmoved.

"Some Praesi devilry, no doubt," he said.

"It's true then," Baroness Ainsley said quietly. "The Lost Standard, it actually exists?"

"I have it on good authority it's in the lands around Harrow," I told her. "But my attempts to locate it have been fruitless for now."

Darlington was lost, and by the look on his face that was not a state of affairs he was willing to tolerate for long.

"And what Wasteland tale is this?" he said. "I did not take you for a superstitious sort, Your Majesty."

"Considering the Diabolist used one of those very standards against me at Marchford, superstition is perhaps the wrong term," I very mildly said.

It was rather delightful to watch it sink in. It was a well-told tale what I'd faced in the defence of what was now my personal holding.

"There's a *demon* in the north?" he hissed.

"My father told me that Triumphant left old madness behind her, when I was a child," Morley said. "I thought it a legend, but are these not times where old stories breathe again?"

"I won't fight heroes on grounds where releasing a demon is a risk," I told them frankly. "The moment the crusaders forged a beachhead near Harrow, it became indefensible. I'm sorry for what that puts your people through, Baroness, but--"

The woman shook her head.

"No, Your Majesty," she said. "Nothing was lost but pride and coin. If anything, I must thank you sincerely for your prudence. I would rather see my coffers emptied than my people..."

She trailed off, and I didn't finish that sentence for her. Where demons were concerned, the least said was always the better.

"They're my people too," I said quietly. "I would rather not fight this war at all, but diplomatic resolution has been refused."

"*Procer*," Morley said feelingly.

And though I suspected Darlington wished me dead at least once a day, even his lip curled in distaste at the mention of the Principate. We did like our grudges, us Callowans, and Procer had earned more than a few. That passing moment of common feeling did nothing to blind me to the very real possibility that one or both of these two would try to sell me down the river before the month was out.

"I would offer my men for the battle, Your Majesty," Morley finally said.

"It'd be a pleasure to fold your horse under the Broken Bells," I told her. "I'll send Grandmaster Talbot your way. But if you mean

to send foot as well, I'll need Legion officers overseeing. Marshal Juniper will not agree otherwise."

The latter was a little sketchy, under current Callowan law, but Juniper was the highest officer in the Army of Callow and theoretically had the same broad authority that the Shining Princes and ruling Fairfaxes had once held in war time. This particular request, though, had consistently seen me stonewalled by the same two nobles in front of me. Even after amending the request to having *observing* Legion officers it had remained a sticking point. Baroness Kendall had argued the matter wasn't worth forcing, given the limited amount of men these two could bring, and she'd had a point. Better not to have them at all than have them only as unreliable addition.

"That will not be an issue," Baroness Ainsley grimly said.

Some of my surprise must have shown on my face, because she offered a rueful smile.

"Morleys have held Harrow for three hundred years, Your Majesty," she said. "I will not surrender my lands to some prancing Proceran shit without a fight."

"We'll be glad to have you," I said.

That'd been... unexpected. And, though I'd like to think better of her, was enough of a change it raised my suspicions. Still, it wouldn't do to look a gift horse in the mouth too openly.

"They sent an envoy," Morley suddenly said.

My eyes sharpened as I studied her. She looked embarrassed but determined.

"The Procerans, they sent an envoy," she said. "To offer terms."

Baron Darlington had gone very, very still. I drank a mouthful of water then calmly set down the cup.

"Good ones, I hope?"

She snorted.

"I would be allowed to keep my lands," she said. "A marriage to one of our *bettors* would be arranged for one of my children as well. They wanted Henrietta, which was rather telling. They're more interested in us taking their names than the other way around."

"Let me guess," I drawled. "You were to join with the army and pass information. Maybe change sides halfway through a battle?"



"They were slightly more circumspect," the baroness said. "But the implications ran along those lines. They... it was a way to weather the storm, Your Majesty."

I watched her closely. She'd not agreed, no. She wouldn't have spoken up otherwise. But she'd not chased them out either. I'd already known that, but I was surprised she was willing to share. *You dislike me, I thought. We both know that. But in the end for all that you see me an evil I am Callowan evil and that still matters, doesn't it?*

"Treason," Darlington said thickly. "How horrid. It is mother's milk to the men of Procer, we have always known this."

"I do not hang women for entertaining envoys," I softly said. "And would rather have honest, open opposition than a snake in the grass. Hasenbach will make offers again. She needs to, because she knows it is madness to try to hold Callow by force while warring with the Wasteland. But make no mistake, she *needs* to hold Callow. And we all know Procer does not easily relinquish lands it takes."

Morley nodded slowly. She was not a handsome woman, and the stark relief on her face did her no favours.

"My duties prevent me from lingering," I told them, and slowly rose to my feet. "Baron Darlington, an officer from the general staff will seek audience to discuss our supply lines."

"They will find me a welcoming host, Your Majesty," the man said, rising to his feet as well.

I nodded at Morley, then paused. I looked into Darlington's eyes.

"A redheaded man," I stated, "with a Liessen accent. He stayed two days."

The man's face went bloodless.

"Always assume I know," I gently said.

I left only utter silence in my wake.

—

I'd decided, when first stumbling upon this particular wall, that it was too low to be meant as a defence. And too far from the city besides, though the low hill overlooking the outskirts of Hedges would have been good grounds to raise a guard tower. Most likely it'd been used to keep cattle penned in, though by the looks of it years had passed since it'd last fulfilled that purpose. With the cool evening breeze and the view, it made a pleasant enough place to sit as I awaited the people I'd sent for. This was my first visit this far up north, and to be honest

the entire region seemed rather bare to me. Green and brown fields made muddy by the melting snows spread as far as the eye could see, touched by only sparse thickets of trees and the occasional low slope. Hedges itself was a far cry from the large cities of the south. Larger than Dormer in overall size, perhaps, but most that space was empty and the city itself was visibly poorer. No paved streets, here, only mud tracks. And fewer stone houses than any other Callowan city I'd seen, most of them wooden structures with straw rooftops. Aside from the run-down curtain wall that sloppily circled outer Hedges, there were no real fortifications to speak of. Even the baron's keep was only a glorified hill with towers and a hall.

I puffed at my pipe and blew the smoke into the wind, watching twilight catch up to the Army of Callow encamped behind me. Cooking fires were already lit and the tents raised, a series of palisades preparing the soldiers for an attack unlikely to come this early. Juniper had insisted on full fortifications, though privately she'd told me it was more to drill the men in the raising of them than out of true worry got an enemy strike. A plume of wakeleaf streamed further and further away until it thinned out of existence, and I felt a smile quirk my lips. I'd have to give him this, even if my senses had only grown sharper he was still giving it a worthy effort.

"The mud gives you away," I said. "Should have tried it without boots."

"I have very delicate feet, Your Majestic Queenship," Special Tribune Robber cheerfully lied, rising from his crouched position beneath the hill's angled slope.

I hid the spasm of grief that passed through me when I looked at him. Robber was fifteen, now. Most goblins didn't make it past thirty-five, and past thirty they began to swiftly go decrepit. I'd always known at as a villain, if I didn't get killed, I'd likely outlive most my closest friends in the Fifteenth. Looking at the thickening eyebrow ridges and the fresh wrinkles around his mouth, I was imposed a fresh reminder that the goblins among my companions would be the first to go. Pickler wasn't showing either of those marks, but then she was from a matron line. Those were supposed to be almost a breed apart. I waited until he was plopped at my side, swinging his legs like a greenish murderous child, to reply.

"You know, lying to your monarch is technically treason," I informed him.

"I heard if you commit it enough time it cancels out," Robber mused. "I should probably keep doing it, just to be on the safe side."

"That's the kind of talk that'll get busted back to Lesser Lesser Footrest," I said, eyebrow quirking.

"Oh come on," he whined. "Where am I going to find another sworn enemy's father to murder?"

"Well, if anyone can it's going to be you," I snorted.

I inhaled the smoke as he remained silent, though never still. It was something I'd learned to notice about goblins: they always seemed to be moving, even if only slightly. Like they were afraid they'd drop dead if they stopped.

"We're about to start having informational issues," I finally told him. "Too many priests and heroes with the Procerans, and that'll screw with scrying. Even the Observatory's."

He grinned, wide and vicious.

"Are we still pretending that thing's just a pretty bunch of scrying pools?" he asked. "'cause the Catherine Foundling I know doesn't shell out that much gold for anything she can't swing at an enemy."

I smiled thinly but did not reply. The little discovery Masego had made that he called *absolute positioning* was potentially one of the nastiest tricks up my sleeve, but it was one I intended to sit on as long as possible. The moment I used it I would grow sharply as a threat in everyone's eyes. I couldn't afford that, not until I had all my pieces in place.

"We can narrow down their positions with the negatives," I said. "But we can't go in with sparse eyes against an army that large. How are the mages we assigned you?"

"They're coming along nicely," Robber said. "They don't even scream anymore when they wake up with a knife to the throat in the middle of the night."

"Don't break my mages, Robber," I sighed. "You know we don't have any to spare."

"You do me grave injustice," he mourned. "I'm teaching them important life lessons, like 'crying never helps' and 'sleeping deep is sleeping dead'."

"You're not getting new ones if you screw these ones up," I warned him. "There's nothing left from the Hedge Guild to draft."

"It's my Gods-given duty to educate tender-hearted Callowans like them," he righteously told me. "Speaking of, I heard this thing about northerners. Is it true they-"

"Every single joke about northerners and sheep has also been made about goblins and goats," I warned him.

"Calumny," he protested. "That hardly ever happens unless the goat is shaved and painted green."

I rolled my eyes.

"All right, if you're comfortable enough fucking around then they won't be an issue," I said. "Juniper will put scouts on the field, but I want a set of eyes deep behind enemy lines. You've just volunteered for that duty."

"I am the most dutiful goblin ever born," Robber agreed, clearly pleased. "Tell me we're not just skulking, though. It's been a while since my people stabbed anything, they're getting restless."

"I'm keeping you as a dagger," I said. "That means low profile until I use you."

He blew his tongue at me, which was mildly unsettling considering it was pitch black.

"Boo," he said. "Boo Catherine boo."

"Have Captain Borer write you up for insolence," I ordered. "The exceedingly well-documented fact that you are a filthy wretch aside, we both know sending you to roam when there's a crew of heroes on the loose is like feeding a wolf meat scraps."

"They can't kill us if they don't fight us," he shrugged.

"I thought you'd say that," I grunted. "But I have worries, and Juniper shares them. So we're assigning you a partner."

"Tell me it's Larat," he begged. "The man is like a goblin that was fed particularly violent rocks."

Wait, could goblins actually eat – no, Catherine, never go down the Robber rabbit hole. There are no answers at the bottom, only headaches and befuddlement.

"No," I replied. "She's actually coming up right now."

Yellow eyes flicked downhill and then I was given the opportunity to delight in the vicious little bastard actually looking uneasy.

"Gods no," he said. "That's sadistic even for you, Queenie."

"Evening Cat," Archer grinned. "And you too, Robert."

"You know that's not my name," the goblin hissed.

"I'm very sorry, Bobber," Indrani said. "I swear."

"You can't send her with us," Robber said. "She bit off Akua's head!"

I blinked.

"She did what now?" I warily asked.

Robber looked shifty, which considering he could skulk in broad daylight without trying was an almost miraculous achievement.

"I'm not saying it happened, but it's possible a betting ring technically illegal under Legions regs just spontaneously emerged," he said.

"Akua was a scorpion," Archer cheerfully informed me.

"Not just a scorpion, you brute, she was a purebred Wasteland Rattler," the goblin insisted. "And her full name was Akua Sahedon't."

"You bit off a scorpion's head," I enunciated slowly, looking at Indrani.

She shrugged.

"The Lady always said it's important to establish the pecking order early in a relationship," she replied. "Wouldn't you agree, Borer?"

"That's someone else," Robber muttered peevishly. "And I had a month's pay riding on Akua killing Willie Angels."

So my sappers were importing no doubt massively oversized Wasteland scorpions, naming them after old opponents of mine and pitting them in death fights. I truly wished I could say that was the worst thing I'd ever caught them doing, but this was a bad time to start lying to myself.

"I'm going to pretend I never heard this," I decided out loud. "Mostly because, well, Hakram's not around and I'm sure as Hells not filing a report about giant scorpions if I can avoid it. As your beloved queen, I order you to pretend to get along when I'm within hearing range. There, I fixed it."

"I love it when she gets all authoritative," Archer told the goblin.

"I hope you also enjoy scorpions in your bedding," he whispered back at her. "Akua had babies, before you callously murdered her."

"See, he's already offering me snacks," Indrani smiled. "Herbert and I are great friends, Catherine. Just the best."

I closed my eyes and wished very hard they would disappear, but when I opened them they were obstinately still there. One of these days, that was going to work and they were all going to be sorry.

"Robber, get your people ready," I ordered. "You're leaving in half a bell. Archer..."

"No need, I've already prepared supplies," Indrani replied, hoisting up what was quite clearly a wineskin full of – by the smell of it – hard liquor.

"Just don't forget your bow," I sighed.

Gods go with them, though hopefully not the ones Above. The kind of work I had in mind for these two would be frowned upon, upstairs.

---

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Just how big are these giant scorpions? Are we talking cat sized, dog or small horses here?

*Rook*

I read cat sized as Catherine sized and I'm now having trouble getting the image of a caped scorpion out of my head

*sheer\_falacy*

Archer was able to bite one's head off, which places an upper limit on the size – probably smaller than cat sized unless her Name comes with the ability to unhinge her jaw. Which seems unlikely but not impossible.

*TeK*

Your estimation hinges on expected size of object Archer can put in her throat, and I think you are doing her a disservice, even if she was out of commition for a year.

*Fern*

well then, thanks for that image

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Yeah but scorpions don't have the largest heads relative to their body size. Did she just bite off the front of the head, did it take more than one bite, was named bullshit involved? Given that goblins were able to handle them I suppose they're probably not much bigger than dogs, but they're described as "massively oversized" not just as big arachnids.

### [Mental Mouse](#)

> probably not much bigger than dogs,

I always wince when someone uses dogs for a size comparison: Dogs range from teacup breeds that can sit on your hand, up to Russian wolfhounds and bear-dogs that are bigger than most humans. (And Guideverse offers wolves big enough to carry *orcs* on their back.)

Anyway, from a quick glance at WP, the largest scorpion species of our world(\*) runs about 9 inches/23 cm long, but only weighs at most 2 ounces (56 grams). But given we're talking about the Wasteland of Praes, the better question might be what size scorpions the goblins can hide from nosy officers. 😊 Also, the goblins themselves stand under four feet, so small enough for them to handle easily.

Something about twice the length of the real-world max, perhaps a foot and a half overall, might be about the bulk of a one-pound lobster with extra tail (but half that weight). That could be kept in a big basket, but maybe a bit too big for discretion. A foot-long would be more easily concealed, and plenty big enough for goblin games.

The "more serious" (not very) issue is that scorpions don't have a separate head, but I'm sure Archer could bite off the front of the cephalothorax, while ignoring the claws pinching her ears. 😊

(\*) That's *Heterometrus swammerdami*, a "giant forest scorpion" from India and thereabouts. It's noted as having relatively weak venom, probably because they're big enough to actually hurt things with their claws.

Joel

On occasion, this is one of the funniest things I read. And this chapter was just glorious.

### [boballab](#)

When you have Robber, you have a funny chapter.

*Theoretically\_human*

but when you have fan favorite Robber in a snark-off with Archer is extra funny

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter, as always!

Thought: it seems like the cities of Callow are more healthy, and rich the more they've been invaded, almost. Up here in the North, there has been little cause for Named to show up, and, thusly, little cause for civilization to spring up around it. The more trials and pains that someone goes through, in this world, end up making you stronger and richer... which is interesting the way it plays out.

Also, go vote everyone! Ward got a chapter released and we stayed on top! Let's keep it that way! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

### *ALKATYN*

I think the causation is the other way round, the north is barren and isolated so no-one invades it

### *Dainpdf*

If you're not deeply involved in the Narrative, the world just forgets you and leaves you behind.

### *kelioez*

That's an interesting take on the issue, that fate even abandons cities and countries, y'know, this might even be y the gnomes do that red letter, so that they remain \*relevant\* to the gods

### *Cap'n Smurfy*

I think the best thing about this chapter was learning Dread Emperor Irritant's plan of having eight different heroic bands after his head was successful.

### *narcoduck*

It explains First Liesse quite well. Instead of Akua or William having a 100% chance of beating her in the end, they both got 50%. And they both rolled bad lol.

### *Letouriste*

I would not compare akua to a full band of heroes^^

### *TeK*



Why not? Same principle works: the band of heroes always win, which means every hero has about 20% chance of winning. Five hero bands, and now it's only 4%. Then you engage them one by one, always careful not to kill almost everyone, maintaining your opposition plentiful, so to make the story not about whether heroes will win (which they will), but rather about who will do it. Can be turned into perpetual cycle, where you kill a half, they turn mentors, teach new generation, and you got something like horse races, with teams Heart and team Lancer. You can even have a betting pool.

*Taichi22*

I find this remarkably relevant to the current situation, actually.

Cat's got a lot of people after her head, maybe this is why she's gonna beat them all...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Heck, get to know the long-termers well enough, and you can sell action figures. xD

*Cap'n Smurfy*

That was a rule of three event not two hero bands though. Both William and Akua had a third battle with Catherine and there was three of them involved.

*Forrest*

I'm pretty sure at that point William's rule of three had already been completed, and Akua's rule of three got diminished due to his and also that other goblin's rules of three coming in just before hers at basically the same time. Since Creation cared little for the repeat.

---

Given the "multiple contributors" mentioned, I'd guess he escaped rather than straight up won.

*Shequi*

TV Tropes calls it the law of conservation of ninjutsu.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ConservationOfNinjutsu>

*danh3107*

That was some very deserved levity.

*Stormblessed*

Robber remains the best side supporting character (I meant supporting in a way that the Woe wouldn't be considered here)

More interesting though is Morley. I like her. A lot actually. The fact she understands the importance of 'don't fuck with Demons' raises my estimation of her immediately. Of course, also using a reasoning of her people doesn't hurt either. And she told Catherine the truth about the emissary which is cool.

This just means she's going to stab my heart later either by betraying Catherine or dying.

*Taichi22*

Literally.

A reasonable lord? No, no way. There's a small chance of her becoming one of Cat's aides, or perhaps stepping up to Anne Kendall's post, but more likely she's a red herring.

*ritvik jha*

Mr.David Verburg aka erraticerrata I would like to garner your attention through this comment cause I was not able to find any other means of communication to contact you .

I am a law student pursuing a BA LLB and have written some articles in local news papers and magazines as a freelancer.

I have been reading your web fiction a practical guide to evil from quiet some time I just wanted to inform you that i am quiet interested in adding more detail to the lore of your web fictions like i.e the average life of a citizen in pares,life of a noble in callow or details about the administration of Procer.

This would need your approval as you are the owner of the original work as I might be adding details to the original material or creating some new details in the existing.

If approved I would like to guarantee you that the details and additional lore would never move away or obstruct the cannon that you produce this might even lead a few short stories i.e like the accounts of a paresi soldier during the doom of lessie and spin offs.

I am ready to do this free of cost or at a token fee (if u like to give it to me totally upon you) everything I write will be first sent to you for approval first so I will in no way obstruct your work.

please contact me through the email [ritvikjha1@gmail.com](mailto:ritvikjha1@gmail.com).

this is for a second time a ues or no will do sir

*Bookworm*

I hope you take this as constructive criticism instead of an attack. If you were serious in your desire to receive the author's permission to add content under your own pen, one of the things which you should have considered was following the grammatical rules in your request. There are many errors in your writing, and in this context, is the equivalent to going to an interview in sweatpants and an unwashed T-shirt. It is actually worse because your presentation ties directly into the skill set you are trying to highlight for this "job", i.e. you have shown that you cannot write to the proper standard required by your request (which is not a reflection of your ideas which may very well be excellent).

I will not reply to any comments you make to this comment because I was just saying this as constructive criticism, not a way to actually engage. Please take it as such, and I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.

*Halinn*

Given this example of your language skills, I personally would rather you didn't.

*Sable*

Dude. David verburg is a sprinter, are you stupid? That's obviously not the author. Furthermore if it was why would you address an author gonna by by a moniker with his real name? Are you so daft?

[Barthumphries](#)

Not the person you're responding to, just wanted to point out that there's nothing inherently wrong with a sprinter also being an author. 😊

*Antoninjohn*

Cat can take life energy from victims, could she give it to Robber to grant him some more years

*Snowfire1224*

So are the gaint scorpions relatives of the gains sewer spiders?

Also I've been thinking about Black and stories. Mentor and student come at odds with each other. Usually student kills mentor or mentor kills student. Because this is Cat lost trust in black, and not the other way around, it would normally be student kills mentor. Except she didn't. Now the story goes in a different direction— either the student kills the mentor later on, or Mentor redeems themselves and dies saving the student and tells them they were right in their final breath. Sounds like a

hero thing to do, but I could see it being possible. At this point this is all just speculation.

*Seabornia*

Herbert! Long live the Queen of Escalation, for she has returned in the deadliest of forms!

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

No "R" in the middle you filthy heathen!

*Seabornia*

I thought it was a hidden reference( never knew there was such a name as Herbert

*Flameburst*

It's originally a german name, but can of course be found with descendants of immigrants or among the populace of typical immigrant nations like the US

*John Galt*

Last name of main character in Worm, I believe. Also name of pet rock from Heretical Edge.

*maresther23*

And it was mentioned after a discussion about giant scorpions

*Notimpressed*

That sounds like a terrible erotic 40k fanfic

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Herbert Hoover, George Herbert Walker Bush, Herbie the Love Bug, ...

*Jonnnney*

Seabornia?

[Barthumphries](#)

That's also an old LOTRO reference, when the Warden class first came out, one of the first and greatest players wrote up a forum post heralding "Wadens" and it became a meme there that a person would lose their "R" when they became truly great.

*Morgenstern*

"Herbert" is a perfectly fine German first name 🤔

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

I guess Indrani's bite is worse than her bark.

*Drd*

Gotta love our favourite lil psychopath... and then there's robber.  
:]

*Flameburst*

Man i wish Herbert knew the Ubua story

[Antony444](#)

Robber, Archer, giant scorpions, illegal bets...the poor heroes don't stand a chance, Catherine.

*TeK*

This is why I'm reading this web novel. While plot and characters are engaging as well, the petty banter between the likes of Parcher and Berber is where practical guide shines most.

*nipi*

Typo:

"The kind if work"

*stevenneiman*

"The curtain wall was [a] short and worn-down compared to almost every other city in Callow"

"I heard if you commit it enough {time->times} it cancels out"

*Big Brother*

Steve, that first sentence was grammatically correct, since it's a comparison of that specific wall compared to others around Callow. No [a] is needed for it.

[Barthumphries](#)

Yes, delete the "a" there.

[Barthumphries](#)

And to add to this typo chain:

The exceedingly well-documented fact that you are a filthy wretch aside,  
Change document to documented

## [shieldredblog](#)

Anyone got any guesses what Absolute Positioning is?  
Just being a way to open Fae Doors anywhere seems under powered.

---

The last time positioning was mentioned in regards to magic was Masego telling in chapter 48 of book three that imprecision would make a ritual backfire, I'd go out on a limb and say that he's now got his own Greenwich meridian and can now cast long-distance rituals in an area he has mapped out. Maybe even use it in conjunction with the distance-diminishing effect of his eyes.

*stevenneiman*

I'm pretty sure it's either that or the ability to precisely target some other kind of magic that's very hard to target at range otherwise. I would guess that it allows her to punch through scrying guards, but we've already seen that she can't.

## [BarthHumphries](#)

Well, if you put a big enough magical punch under something, you can launch it into the air. And then once it's falling, it's simply falling. True, a magical shield could block/move/whatever this falling object, but if the falling thing were able to eat magic...

I'm betting they'll have set up a magical "goblin fire launching" system. Precisely deliver burning goblin fire munitions to anywhere they want...

## [Mental Mouse](#)

Using magic to throw around goblinfire might be a bad idea.  
We already know those munitions react to power...

*Fang*

Gods i hope Robin gets Named and lives forever as Lesser Lesser Lesser Footrest to the Black Queen, it will be a sad day when hes no longer there to laugh maniacally at Cat's mad plans

*grzecho2222*

But what Name? I'm torn between next Black Knight (if Amadeus will no longer be Black Knight) or Evil bardic Name (he seems to author of XV's songs)

*Notimpressed*

Lesser Lesser Footrest of course! That Name was bestowed upon him by the Black Queen herself!

*RanVor*

Irritant having a law of narrative physics named after him was the funniest thing I've recently read.

Or so I thought until I read the scene with Indrani and Herbert. That's his official name from now on, by the way.

[Warriormonk](#)

Didn't... what's her name, one of the old goblin matron generals, live to an old old age because Black found a way to keep her alive? Through sorcery/black magic shenanigans or what not.

Perhaps Cat will find a way to keep Robber in her services forever, unfortunately for her.

*Adurna*

Was that not also in combination with a matron line keeping her vital?

*Jordan*

Good chapter for my bday. Probably one of the best yet.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Hilarious chapter! "Have Captain Borer write you up for insolence." That's just good management right there: always delegate tasks to subordinates whenever possible.

[Russel Pratt](#)

Cat, your friends will never die if you turn them into Fae.

*grzecho2222*

Or undead monsters, or eldritch horrors, or leaders of global goblin revolution...

*Engineer*

Well Robert just planted his own death flag. Kudos. Ye will be sorely missed, you skulking little homicidal bastard you 😊

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nope... He's comedic relief.

*lehteyatamug*

The part where Robber and his cohorts started a scorpion illegal betting ring, is that a homage to Hedge (malazan book of the fallen)and his squad and their scorpions? (I forgot their names xD)??? OwO Sappers are all crazy!! But FUN!!!

*cheerlessmirth*

I feel like Cat letting him (and, in all honesty, them) know that she knows about the envoy is a bad idea. You can scare some people into never stepping out of line, but there will be those that keep trying to find ways around it until someone eventually succeeds.

If they didn't know they're spied on, they wouldn't think of extra countermeasures, but now they have the incentive.

[vuthuha912](#)

If a Praesi were offered this, they would have agreed already or pretend to agree but trying to play both sides then ultimately sealing their demise with it or getting it to work. Whatever the outcome, everyone is fucked.

It is a miracle Malicia and Black was able to reign these people in for as long as they did.

Cat is treating the situation with the gravity that it deserves, unlike every other person in this conflict aside from maybe ... Black and everyone else who is not directly benefiting from this ordeal.

Whatever the reason, the civil wars were as much Procer fault as Praes's fault. They are not holding your family hostage and forcing you to commit treason. You are doing it on your own. This is Procer's problem right there. Committing treason can be forgiven as long as you are a Prince while doing your patriotic duties gets you killed for being a peasant.

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## Chapter 7: Snares

*"Petty thieves hang, the great wear crowns."*  
– Proceran saying

"We're being baited," Juniper announced.

We'd cut loose the general staff for this particular meeting, at my insistence. The Arcadian Campaign had taught me that while the broader officer councils had their uses they also devoured time



and focus that would be better spent on other matters. The Hellhound was my Marshal of Callow now, she had the clout to run those however she liked without my being at the table to back her up. There were advantages to formal rank and not leading an awkward coalition I had only nominal authority over. Only the bare bones of a council were in attendance, the people that would have direct relevance, and that meant three aside from me: Juniper herself, Thief and Grandmaster Talbot. I preferred to cut that latter out of these little evenings when it came to politics, but on campaign was a different beast. I could not have the head of my horse ignorant of the larger realities at work.

"That's the theory, anyway," Thief hedged. "There's a few unprovable assumptions at work."

"May I assume we are speaking of the Proceran vanguard?" Brandon Talbot asked.

"We are," I confirmed. "The report you haven't gotten to read yet states that, as of midmorning, five thousand Proceran horse has invested Harrow."

The Grandmaster's eyes narrowed. We'd given ground to the crusaders knowing they would take or pass through the city on their way south, but Talbot was a clever sort. He'd noticed, as the rest of us had, what the reports *didn't* mention. Which was anything but a detachment of horse sent far ahead of the still-lumbering Proceran army.

"The Jacks could not get into the city itself, mind you," Vivienne said. "But I had knots of people out in the country and they say the riders came alone. The crusader army is at least two days behind."

Talbot smiled ruefully.

"Five thousand light horse," he said. "We have number parity with the Order, and the strength of the Woe and the Hunt besides. Should we play it carefully, we could wipe out a significant part of their cavalry before it comes to a pitched battle."

"We're being baited," Juniper repeated.

"Too good to be true, isn't?" I agreed darkly. "I think we need to reassess how much of a threat Princess Malanza actually is. I didn't expect that kind of sophistication from a Proceran commander, given the nature of the trap."

The Principate was famous for rarely fielding Named, unlike Praes and Callow who usually had at least a handful on each side when the blades came out. And while it was an assumption, like Thief had reminded us, I was willing to put hand to flame that if we

gated into Harrow we'd be walking straight into a carefully arranged heroic kill zone.

"Assuming this is her notion," Talbot frowned.

"It's not Milenan," I said. "We know exactly what *he's* up to, as it happens."

The Grandmaster raised an inquisitive eyebrow, though he knew better than to request information he might not be cleared to know. I cast a look at Vivienne and nodded.

"Prince Amadis Milenan had a previously unknown agent within Hedges," she said. "We know that now, because this morning the woman attempted to discretely get in touch with Baron Darlington."

Talbot grit his teeth.

"He always did fancy himself ruler of the north," the aristocrat unkindly said.

"We allowed it to happen," Thief said. "While watching, of course, but we wanted to know exactly what he was after."

"Land," I bluntly said. "Land is what he's after, as it turns out. Prince Milenan is already gathering support for the divvying up of Callow, and he seems to believe Darlington is the key to the north."

"The man's making a lot of promises, for someone without a field victory to his name," Juniper growled.

Brandon Talbot, for all that his meddling got on my nerves, was not slow-witted. He understood what we were driving at without need for an explicit statement.

"Darlington's been promised the north as his own principality under the First Prince," he deduced, visibly appalled.

"Mostly right," Vivienne said. "There's a prior change of throne involved in that promise coming true. Amadis is a little more openly ambitious than we'd previously assumed."

And he was gathering allies for his bid. I'd let Talbot into the loop for the Darlington play, but for now there was no need to tell him that Prince Milenan was also sending men towards the Silver Lake as quickly as they could ride. The Observatory had picked them out two days ago, and I agreed with Thief's assessment of their ultimate destination: Daoine. The crusaders were trying to get Duchess Kegan on their side before moving south. I could see why he'd assume there was room to negotiate there: the last time Callow had come under Proceran occupation, the Duchy of Daoine had remained out of the fray in exchange for

concessions and effective independence. They'd even fielded armies alongside Procer's, when the Empire began the Sixty Years War by trying to invade occupied Callow. Both Praes and the Old Kingdom had come out of that ruinous war on the brink of collapse, but Daoine had gotten off light. It always did. House Ismail had a well-earned reputation for knowing when to strike its banners and cut its losses. Unfortunately for Milenan, I'd cut a deal there long before he'd thought of opening negotiations.

"Regardless of all that, I think we can safely discard the possibility that the crusaders don't know about the fairy gates and the Hunt," I said. "The trap doesn't work otherwise."

Without cutting through Arcadia, it would take my men weeks to get close enough to Harrow for a battle. Long after the rest of the crusader army caught up to the vanguard.

"And that puts a lot of their behaviour up until now in question," Juniper grunted. "I'm having a hard time reconciling a general clever enough for this kind of snare and one who'd willingly take her army through a bottleneck – especially one she knows we might have been able to seize the end of."

To be frank, trying to hold a narrow pass against a company of heroes would have been godsdamned ugly work. But I had the Named and the trump cards to be able to make a solid try at it, and if we did manage to hold then the entire invasion plan collapsed. Which meant, most likely, that we'd missed something.

"If this trap is not Malanza's own notion," Talbot tried. "Then your estimation of her competence might be..."

"Believe me," I interrupted quietly. "I'd love to have an idiot in charge on the other side. But that's genuinely not feasible, not with Hasenbach running the show in Procer. She doesn't want this army to do *too* well, but she's still banking on a victory. That means whoever holds the reins of the soldiers knows what they're doing."

"Without alleging incompetence, the information they're using might be imperfect," Thief said. "There's not a lot of reliable witnesses outside our most loyal for how quickly we can move through gates. She might have been under the impression that even by Arcadia you wouldn't be able to arrive in time to hold the pass."

"If we're lucky, that's the case," Juniper said.

"If we're not – and let's be honest, when have we been that lucky? – I think we have to proceed under the assumption that they're sitting on something that would have blown us away at the pass," I said.

"Proceran sorcery is nothing like the Wasteland's," Talbot said.

"Sorcery is the least of our troubles," I said. "This is a *crusade*. The Choirs aren't shy about stacking the deck even when it's just skirmishes between Named. For something of this magnitude they'll have taken out the good silver."

That saw grim looks bloom across the table, with good reason. No one had forgotten the kind of threat the Lone Swordsman had been able to cause in Liesse with just a few days and a single angelic feather. *And Masego tells me Contrition isn't exactly head of the pack when it comes to the Choirs*, I thought. *If Judgement or Mercy gets involved, this will be a whole lot nastier.*

"It goes without saying we have to reassess a lot of our engagement doctrine," Juniper announced bluntly. "Which is why I think we need to dust off Headsman."

"It's not going to look good abroad if we pull the trigger on that," I grimaced.

"I made it clear when we killed the plan that I considered it a measured and reasonable response," Talbot noted. "The Dread Empire has signed no treaties barring the targeting of officers, and while the Principate *has* they've never enforced the terms unless it suited them."

"If we want a seat at the table by the end of this, people, we can't act like Praes," I reminded them. "There's a reason we didn't spend the last year scrabbling for every destructive artefact and ritual we could get our hands on. We start using shit like the Dark Days protocols and the only peace we're getting is after one side has been pounded into dust."

"No one's dumping alchemy into rivers," the Hellhound said. "We're talking two hundred dead at most, including projected collaterals."

"We made those projections before we knew how many heroes there'd be on the other side," I pointed out. "I'm not refusing out of hand, Juniper, but if we start using assassination campaigns then we get a reputation that might cost us more in the long term than we gain in the short term."

"If you have another way to shake them before battle, I'm listening," she said. "Look, I don't give a damn about the politics of this. I'll own that. But I think the hole we fall in if we lose is a lot deeper than the one we dig with Headsman."

She wasn't wrong about that, even if I didn't like it. Hasenbach would have absolutely no interest in negotiating the kind of peace I was after if she had me on the ropes.

"Talk with Kegan," I finally said. "She was never eager, and it's not a given she'll still be willing. There's risks involved for her people. If she agrees, though, start laying the groundwork. But we're not going through with it until I give the word."

"Chances of success improve significantly if we don't wait," Thief said, tone mild. "Especially given the amount of heroes they've got floating around."

"It also kills every other option than pitched battle to get the crusaders out of Callow," I flatly replied. "I'm not committing to that unless I have no other choice."

"As you say," Vivienne shrugged. "That still leaves our little problem in Harrow."

"I realize we're dealing with a trap," Talbot said. "That said, Your Majesty, if we don't thin their horse soon we're going to have trouble."

I raised an eyebrow at Juniper in silent invitation.

"He's right," she admitted. "If Malanza moves against us with the meat of her host and peels off a few thousand horsemen just before, the only assets we have to check them are assets we're going to need in that battle."

"What kind of damage are we looking at?" I grimaced.

"If Darlington flips, or even just stays out of the way, they've got free rein until Southpool," the Hellhound said. "If they move quick enough, they could possibly hit central Callow before Adjutant manages to force a battle. Our forces just aren't deployed to block raiding parties coming from up north. Even if I pull the garrison from Vale tonight, there's no guarantee it'll get there in time."

"We have watchers on Darlington," I told her. "He's not changing sides anytime soon."

"I understand we are worrying about the devastation the riders could cause in the countryside," Talbot said slowly. "Yet it occurs to me there is another possible target for a detachment. The Red Flower Vales."

I almost dismissed him out of hand. A few thousand horse wasn't going to worry Black in the slightest, considering the kind of forces he had at hand. On the other hand, what if they *didn't* fight Black?

"The supply lines," I said.

"It would be risky," the Grandmaster said. "Hostile territory, and they'll be within our scrying net – though they might not

know about that yet, at least not for certain. But the Carrion Lord is already heavily outnumbered, Your Majesty. Can he afford to detach the men to keep his supply lines clear?"

"He's been stacking food, munitions and steel for almost a year now," I said, but it was half-hearted.

"We lose the Vales, our entire defence collapses," Juniper said. "We have contingencies in case they lose, Catherine, but none of them involved fighting up here at the same time. None of us saw the passage coming."

Shit. I hadn't thought of that. Which was exactly the point of these councils, I supposed.

"Juniper, I know this is a lot to ask but I need..."

"You need me to get close enough that if this is Malanza's intent she will send off the horse, then avoid battle until you've dealt with the threat," the orc said.

"Is it possible?" I asked.

"You did not appoint me Marshal of Callow because I look good in furs," the Hellhound grinned, slow and savage. "You will have the margin you need."

I'd made a few good decisions, over the years, but none that'd paid off quite as much as offering her that draw back at the War College. I smiled gratefully at her, not that she seemed particularly moved by that gratitude.

"There is one last matter to address," Vivienne said.

I nodded.

"Prince Milenan attempted to arrange a meeting with Baron Darlington through his envoy," I said. "That means I'll be away from the army for a while."

"I don't follow," Talbot frowned.

"He wants to talk to a Callowan?" I smiled thinly. "Well, he's going to get his wish. It's about time we had a closer look at the opposition."

—

It took three weeks for the meeting to become feasible. Three weeks where we watched the crusader host slowly move south, camp at Harrow for a few days and then resuming the march when it became clear my own army wouldn't march to meet it. They were still at least a month of march away from Hedges, at their current pace, but we wouldn't be letting them get that deep into

Callow unchallenged. The border between the baronies was the battlefield Juniper had picked, and I'd seen no reason to gainsay her on that. We had scouts out on the green to find us the kind of field that would best play up our advantages, but for now the location was still in the air. It'd been tempting to grab and interrogate Prince Milenan's envoy, for a plethora of reasons. The strongest among them that if Milenan hadn't known about the pass – and we were reasonably sure he hadn't – then he'd sent that envoy months ago and trusted her judgement enough she would have been able to negotiate in his name without being in contact afterwards. Plenipotentiary authority was not something Procerans gave lightly, and she would have been a treasure trove of information. But that would have been giving the game too early, so instead Baron Henry Darlington was given strict instructions and arranged the meeting where and when I wanted it.

He wasn't going himself, of course. The envoy had not requested as much, understanding that with my army camped outside his city his absence would not go unnoticed. Instead he'd sent his nephew, an anointed knight who stood fourth in the line of succession for Hedges and was young enough to be unmarried. The other diplomats were people Thief had gauged we had enough leverage over they wouldn't speak up, including a small escort. Of which I was part, riding a still-living horse for the first time in quite a while. The possibility of heroic presence had meant it was necessary for me to take some additional precautions, but those wouldn't come out of the woodworks unless blades left the scabbard. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. We were fewer than twenty all in all, and dawn found us out in the wet plains waiting for the other side to arrive. The nephew – Julian Darlington – had insisted we get a fire started for cooking before the Procerans came and I'd declined to speak against it.

I sat on a hollow log I'd dragged by the fire, surrounded by men too visibly scared of me to attempt conversation. I didn't particularly mind, since I was in not in a talkative mood myself. Milenan's envoys arrived half a bell later, riding in on tall steeds. I raised an eyebrow at the Darlington nephew and he hurried to raise the truce banner as we all got to our feet. The anointed knight stood behind a pair of guards but positioned himself clearly as the leader for our side while the Procerans approached. I watched them as discretely as I could. The one in the gilded armour seemed in charge, and from the looks of his nose I could guess why. The Jacks had gotten their hands on a few sketches of Amadis Milenan's likeness, and the resemblance was noticeable. A kinsman, then. The Prince of Iserre was taking this seriously. Most the others were soldiers, with only one woman bearing a scrivener's kit over her back. Only one man wore entirely unadorned clothes, a loose grey robe that seemed almost a priest's garment. I kept my face schooled into mild boredom.

If that wasn't the Grey Pilgrim, I'd eat my hand.

Julian Darlington greeted them warily, and was answered by the man who confirmed himself to be highborn – and a Milenan, too. Likely a cousin or a close branch family. Elaborate courtesies were offered by the Proceran side while the Callowans offered stilted greetings in return. It wasn't long before they got to the meat of the meeting, as I suspected neither of them were comfortable speaking in the open like this. The Proceran envoy and Darlington strode off away from the rest, standing side by side and speaking in low voices. No matter. I could hear them well enough from where I was, back sitting on the log as the soldiers all stood down.

"-the duty of all children of the Heavens to deliver their fellows from the tyranny of the Tower's get, of course. Still, there are practical necessities to be addressed."

"May I?"

The Grey Pilgrim stood before me, hand gesturing at the log.

"By all means," I replied.

Did he know? It shouldn't be the case. I was wearing leathers and mail with a Callowan-forged longsword, nothing out of the ordinary for a retainer. And without drawing on Winter or him actively looking for it, he shouldn't be able to tell I bore a mantle. Assuming he didn't have some sort of trick that allowed him to see through those things, anyway. Something I was less certain of by the moment. The old man gingerly sat at my side, warming his hands by the fire. It was my first time seeing a Levantine, and I had to admit they really did look like the cousins of Taghreb. This one was darker in skin, though, his face tanned and leathery. But the limpid blue eyes were sharp, and for someone as old as he allegedly was he displayed surprising vitality. The few tufts of white hair on his head made a makeshift crown, but his face was either hairless or very closely shaved.

"Nothing quite like a fire on a cool morning, is there?" he sighed.

"One of the little pleasures in life," I agreed.

Or it had been, before Second Liesse. Nowadays neither heat nor cold made much of a difference.

"The truce banner," the Grey Pilgrim said mildly. "Is it genuine?"

My fingers clenched. So much for being unnoticed. *And he's distracting me from overhearing what his people are saying to mine.* I'd have to let that go, irritating as it was. This was the more important conversion of the two.



"It holds," I said.

"There have been rumours you care little for such arrangements," he noted.

I grimaced. Three Hills, when I'd had the Exiled Prince shot.

"I was younger, then," I said. "And no banner was raised."

He hummed, and did not disagree.

"Then your friends in Arcadia will not be joining us?" he politely asked.

Well, shit. So much for that remaining quiet.

"No unless that is made necessary," I replied.

"It won't," the Grey Pilgrim said, with bedrock certainty. "Shall we have a talk then, Catherine Foundling?"

My eyes narrowed.

"We're about due," I agreed.

---

*PingleBerry*

And here we go.

*NerfContessa*

Oh and how we are.

Seeing the future....shall we say "trouble" between these 2 this is extra fun.

*Onos*

Oh joy, I'd forgotten about you.

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT FOR NEW READERS: Try to avoid the comments section going forward, this asshat becomes increasingly fond of dropping spoilers from multiple books ahead and is usually amongst the top comments.

*Kai Wingless*

Thank you! ♥

*Anon*

thank you for being an asshat detector

JC

B R U H

*Renasma*

Holy fuck, shit just hit the fan, looking forward to their talk, so much possibility.

*Antoninjohn*

It's not evil to burn cities to the ground and kill all the people in the country if it is self defense, after all your action to protect against those who would not accept peace

[oldschoolvillain](#)

. . . nope. That's textbook evil in the form of Disproportionate Retribution. The nonevil act would be to defend your borders and hit them hard with truce terms that will keep them pretty economically crippled for a few decades when you've driven them back into their own lands.

*Decius*

It's not evil to starve the residents of the cities through economic damage while leaving the people who made the decisions in power. As a bonus, the cities are intact when your merchants buy them in a generation.

*Rook*

I feel the line of capital E – Evil for that type of situation is drawn where you punish a populace for the crimes of their leaders. Practicality aside, there is a vast world of difference between acting directly against your opponents – violently or otherwise – versus harming third parties as a tool to indirectly affect your opponents.

Not to mention, there's way way too much parallel with the kind of methodology Heir and Heiress were using previously to be of any comfort. Genocide by zombification or starvation is still genocide, and it's more than a small line to cross to start appropriating tactics that you previously abhorred so much that the last person to do so had their soul sown into your cloak as punishment.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

The point of said economically crippling truce terms would be to make sure that they can't shell out the funds to raise another army before you've had a chance to recover

and repair your own country. It's NOT to starve the populace, just make money tight enough that it goes towards things like food instead of soldiers. Even the biggest army can't do anything if it can't eat.

*Dainpdf*

Just like the Treaty of Versailles. That was the one that worked really well, right?

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

The thing about economies is that they're kind of important to surviving—let alone living well— in a society. Cripple an economy and you have just personally directly wronged every member of the relevant society. The balance you describe striking is a delicate, tenuous one, and I've very little confidence that anyone could do it reliably.

*Decius*

You have to make there not be enough food to go around before the army can't afford food.  
You have to make there not be enough metal or smiths to go around before the army can't afford swords.  
Those things cause poor civilians to starve or be unable to afford plows BEFORE they cause the army to be unable to eat or get swords.

The fact that it's a means and not an end matters to those who need justifications.

*Abrakadabra*

Bullshit.

*Decius*

When the fight is between nobles over who will claim the crown, it doesn't make sense for the victor to massacre the serfs of the loser.

When the fight is social and not personal, like "Will the wasteland have a secure food supply or will Callow be independent?", the political goal might involve reducing the civilian population.

*Vortex*

Where do you think the leaders get their army, food, and weapons? Does it magically fit rain down from the sky? Of course not, it comes from their populace. If you want to punish a leader yet you do not control their populace,

another threat will pop out in a few years and come at you again.

*nipi*

Good and Evil are points of view. The gods points of view. Wonder if the gods in this story have disagreements over what is or isn't good/evil?

*Fern*

From what I can tell about PGE's morality so far:

Stupid Good is all about being right because you're right. See: Shining Prince, (implied) Good King Edward, William, etc. The /morality/ of your choices doesn't matter so much because you're fighting for the Gods Above, and as long as your fighting Evil it doesn't really matter what ethical lines you cross. Naturally, this also means Stupid Good stands for the status quo. After all, if the only people who try to make changes are Evil, why bother rocking the boat? Unless that change is putting a Good polity back into power, of course.

Practical Good is all about actual morality, and using smart methods to make life better for everyone, see my good bitch First Prince Cordelia. She seems to be much more interested in peace than her own nation having power over others (I'm guessing that if Prince going-to-die-in-five-chapters took the throne, he'd be more interested in amassing power to strike down Evil, i.e. getting those pesky rebellious colonies back under the righteous banner of the Principiate.) Practical Good sees looming threats and hordes it's grain, sharpens it's swords, and uses every asset available to them to achieve lasting peace (in a show of Grand Strategy that must be rather uncommon, at least in the late-mideival Calernia.)

Stupid Evil, as has been explained to us in-story, stands for change (you might put this under chaotic evil, but i don't like D&D morality) and complete freedom for the great to do what they want. The logical end point of that great man theory of historiography that was popular for forever. We have a super small sample size for this – just the Dead Kingdom and Praes – but that seems to be the aim overall. Great Men/Women are Great, and therefore everything and everyone besides themselves is an asset to be used. The most successful Stupid Evil villains – Trimegistros, Triumphant, and of course Akua – are a good proof of this. Each of them had a design, and used everything around them as ruthlessly as possible to achieve their aim; whether that was dominion over death, the hells, or all of creation.

Practical Evil is similiar to Practical Good, but they use intelligent methods to achieve their goals, instead of making life better. Of course, Practical Evil is going to make life better (when people like this take the reins of 80% of the continent, the standard of living is going to go up for everyone), but this is mainly a byproduct of them putting their plans into action in the smartest way possible. Black and Malicia, as always, represent this perfectly; Black wants stability in the realm and Mailica wants a legacy, and they both use the most ruthless cunning possible to achieve this.

When you view PGE's morality like this, it's easier to see how Cat might have /started/ as Practical Good, but is now much further down the chart. Her aim at first was simply to put Callowans in control of their own lives, but has now evolved to achieving control over the whole of Callow. She stopped being Practical Good the second she stopped justifying her actions, once she decided that the only way to keep her people safe was to assume complete control.

Of course, this isn't even taking into consideration the Gods Above & Below, and how their machinations change the nature of the game. The Gods make Heroes that much more righteous, and Villians that much more cunning. I imagine it must be infuriating, to be forced into these roles by a literal cosmic force. Pity the characters dancing for our amusement, I guess.

MAN I really like how complicated this shit gets when you think about it, can you tell?

*Abtrakadabra*

Non evil? Are you out of your mind? Crippling economy means making people poor, possibly starving. Non evil my ass.

*nimelennar*

... I'm seriously hoping that's satire.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Those last lines sent a chill down my spine. Well, well done. Cannot wait for the next chapter. Also feeling a bit cockblocked, because that was a particularly volatile cliffhanger to end on. As long as Catherine isn't the one to break the truce, though, she should be fine.

Also, Milenan is tipping his hand too soon. You don't send your nuclear deterrent alone with the first wave of talkers. This delegation should have had at least one or two junior heroes with it, not a monster like Guideverse Gandalf.

---

He implied he knew about the forces that followed through Arcadia, so he may have some kind of backup. Besides, if Catherine decides to attack, the Pilgrim will have a leg up, narratively speaking, and his presence was already known to her

[Trikki](#)

"You don't send your nuclear deterrent alone with the first wave of talkers. "

Why? Cat went with "the first wave of talkers" too, and if they knew that beforehand (I don't know... maybe through that clairvoyant hero? I forgot her name, sorry) then it's reasonable to "send a deterrent".

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Catherine went specifically to talk/get a measure of them, and specifically went incognito. I somehow doubt that Amadis sent the Grey Pilgrim for the same reason. I might be wrong, but he hasn't seemed to be the savviest guy on the field so far.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Also, while the Augur *\*could\** have foreseen Catherine being there, I rather doubt that Amadis was in the know on that. If Cordelia were aware of him arranging this little meeting, I don't think that she would be supporting his attempt at a coup.

[Trikki](#)

Yeah, that's true, the Augur (or Cordelia) probably wouldn't have informed him. Well, I still have a feeling that they knew Cat would be there... but maybe it's just some Grey Pilgrim trick that he always knows where he is needed.

*Dainpdf*

Sounds a lot like him, to be honest. He did spot her immediately.

*maresther23*

The golden luck of heroes

*Decius*

A significant portion of the reason for the delegation is to have the Named talk.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

From Catherine's perspective, yes. From Amadis' perspective, though? All he cares about is becoming First Prince and usurping Cordelia's position. He didn't send The Grey Pilgrim so he could talk to incognito Queen Catherine.

*Rook*

Amadis doesn't really matter though. Fairly shrewd noble with more ambition than sense, but that's about all he is. No particular weight in the big scheme of things or wider vision that makes him worth noting.

The Grey Pilgrim isn't a servant or tool of Amadis. The Grey Pilgrim was a legitimate monster while Amadis was still soiling his bedsheets. I'd bet gold to horse dung the Pilgrim has his own agenda and an entirely different set of objectives than Amadis' petty attempt at a power grab.

What makes him dangerous is exactly that. He's an almost completely unknown element, who isn't nearly as predictable as a relatively minor side character following the role of a stereotypical politically-minded antagonist.

*d\_o\_l*

Amadis absolutely does matter. He has more potential than anyone else to fuck up the entire crusade. He has the power to turn it from a story about a war against evil to a story about invading Callow as part of a cynical power play. If he does, the heroes are going to get absolutely demolished no matter how powerful they are.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

The Grey Pilgrim is a member of the Tenth Crusade in the army led by Prince Amadis. Yes, Amadis is predictable, and yes, his plan at a coup is petty, but he's still absolutely a narratively important character. If he weren't, Catherine would be able to have Archer headshot him from a mile or two away instead of being commanded by Malicia to leave him alive.

While the Grey Pilgrim is absolutely a Hero who can probably be referred to as a force of nature, he's still a Hero. Amadis is a slimy politician, but he's still Good. True, the Heroes may begin ignoring Amadis later, but this early in the book, they'll still be playing nicely and doing what the commander of the army they're a part of says.

*Metrux*

I completel disagree that they will be hearing him. Heroes, and villains aswell, in this world, are a force

upon itself. Unless the Hero actively seeks to follow someone unnamed, only kings and alike can truly order them, and only inside their countries. If the Grey Pilgrim said "I'll be going with your delegation" there is nothing Amadis could do to stop it, unless he stops the delegation itself, and even then the Grey Pilgrim could go by himself. Yes, the heroes won't control the army or go directly against Amadis, but Amadis doesn't have an control over them either, they are WITH the army, not IN the army, and that is a pretty big difference when it comes to Named.

*Dainpdf*

Have you met Juniper? She can and will order Named around during battle, if they for some reason are her subordinates.

Also, I don't think First Prince is a Name.

The thing is, these Heroes are part of the Crusade, and as such are likely to at least nominally respect the chain of command.

*Decius*

The goals of the characters are made by fit the Narrative, which acts directly on the Named.

The Narrative has in-universe powers that are acknowledged by the characters.

*Trupo*

More like Guideverse Obi-Wan...

I suspect it had less to do with Milean sending his best asset and more with Pilgrim co-opting the envoys the same way Catherine did, so two of them can meet her under radar and have a talk. He's a force of his own, and as much talking partner for Cat as First Prince.

Whether he did so because he \*knew\* that Cat is coming or just made a good guess is interesting. But, being in right place at right time seems like part of his Role.

*RoflCat*

I'm going with him knowing.

At this point I'm really hoping the Grey (a color mixed of white and black i.e. Good and Evil) part of his name will make him become a mentor to Catherine, the latter being rather 'grey' herself with the makeups of the Woe and other things.



*Dainpdf*

I think we're past Cat getting more mentors. She just shed two.

*ParadoxicalThought*

Damn, about time we met The Grey Pilgrim

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

The Practical Guide to Blueballing

A web series.

*Bluballed*

Watch the next chapter skip past it and only reference the meeting vaguely for a few dozen chapters.

*Darkening*

Don't even joke about that 😞

*Allafterme*

Well, it is more or less like that since we got 3 chapters per week. I sometimes wonder if we get 2 chapters worth of story spread among 3 chapters

*naturalnuke*

Oof, spooky mentors reveal themselves.

*darkening*

I admit, I look forward to seeing the perspective of a long term, professional hero. With black killing off all the ones around we've only seen amateurs aside from the bard.

*Rook*

Pretty exciting since this is around the caliber of 'old monster crawling out of the woodworks to end us' that Black was trying to avoid in his argument with Malicia about the hell gate

When the gods damned Black Knight of all people wants to avoid fighting someone, you know they're serious business.

[sengachi](#)

If this is the caliber of hero which crawls out for a politically motivated crusade, I don't even want to fucking imagine who would have come out to take out the Hell Gate.

*Decius*

Expect to see this one killed off shortly, then come back as The White Pilgrim.

*Gunslinger*

I love the grey Pilgrim already. Great ending that.

*d\_o\_l*

Interesting. Next chapter should reveal a lot about how the rest of this book will go. I find it worth noting that the Grey Pilgrim came, and not the Saint of Swords. I think it's very possible that with that many Named in the army, there are a few minor differences of opinion on the correct course of action.

*OmniscientQ*

No, the next chapter will be an interlude, just to screw with us.

The part about the heroes not being entirely in sync with each other, though? Of course not. There's no way you can get 12 Named to agree on pizza toppings, much less the proper way to execute a crusade. Just think of the three- and four-Named heroic groups we've seen. White Knight, Ash Princess, Champion, and Hedge Wizard would all have given different answers, and they were perhaps the most cohesive group of all. Lone Swordsman's short-lived group was worse. The group from the prologue of this book who didn't even exist long enough for me to remember their Names... Evil is not as monolithic as it appears to outsiders, and neither is Good. So far, these groups only function as groups because the clashing personalities defer to a leader figure.

Huh. Look who Catherine's talking to.

*Dainpdf*

Makes sense for it to be the pilgrim. As someone else said above, being in the right place at the right time seems to be a part of his Role. Not to the same degree as the Bard, of course, but still.

*Byzantine*

You know, this is the first time we've seen a Hero actually willing to just... talk.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Yup. Hopefully this means he'll be willing to at least consider Cat's deal. Even if he doesn't accept it himself, he might pass it on to the junior heroes in the army and get them to leave.

*Metrux*

Well, I'm honestly not surprised. This is the first Hero that we get to see that isn't an amateur or the allucinogenic Bard. He is experienced enough to know that talking is good, even if peace can't be reached.

*Jonnnney*

Wandering Bard talks plenty and Thief talked to robber in Liesse.

To your point it is the first time that a physical/magically Powerful Hero seemed willing to start with a conversation.

*Nairne .01*

Will he put a wedge in Cat's resolve? Will he become the teacher of a painful lesson? Or will Cat be able to persuade him to at least step aside? Or will he turn into a disappointment like the other "heroes" i.e. a glorified butcher?

*Letouriste*

That's the question isn't it?:)  
He give a total different feeling from Gandalf so I guess EE made a monster from scratch. That could go plenty of different ways

*Jonnnney*

I wonder how many of the 14 heroes he has under his wing. I could also see him either sensing the demon or, considering he's been doing this for 60 years, he might rather have a free Callow vs a Strong Procter.

[ftaku](#)

Really hoping that he is more of a reasonable experienced hero. I doubt he will agree with Cat but I hope he at least listens and doesn't reject her with bullshit hero logic but just another standpoint instead

*IDKWhoitis*

I have a feeling we aren't going to see the other half of this conversation, since it might have serious implications for later on. (Think Cat's negotiations with Malica and Winter) I have a feeling that the old mentor is too old to be tricked, but this also means he does know when he's being bullshitted. Therefore,

Cat's deal may actually work on him or at least persuade him that she isn't capital E evil.

Also, I wonder if Grey was befuddled when he saw Cat pretending to be a mere soldier. Like can he detect named using the bullshit Masego pulled? Did he think it was cute like a child wearing a sheep costume (she is naive to think it would work) or was he confused like seeing a grown man wearing one out of nowhere (She is too powerful to pull this bullshit anymore)?

*Letouriste*

The Wandering Bard was doing that too the first time we met her. And now we know she is one of the strongest around (story-wise). That doesn't matter much, just a exposed part of the Named personality

*Drd*

It did say that all in Cat's group were to scared to talk around her, group dynamics being what they are, I'll bet an old hat like him would have noticed. Plus she is the last of winter, akin to fae, and her looks or manner probably hint at that, even if unconsciously.

*MetruX*

Also to note the Wandering Bard is a role that is better kept hidden or away from combat, while also being a Hero, meaning she has heavens help. On the other hand, Cat is a battle Named, even if her new Name hasn't been shown yet, from Evil, trying to hide against one of the most experienced MENTOR Heroes around. There is a clear diference in the narrative, if nothing else.

[Barthumphries](#)

Cat is in a state of transition. As we understand it, she doesn't truly have a Name at this particular moment.

And this right here is what the Grey Pilgrim is all about. He meets young Heroes, people who don't really have a good idea of what they want to do, where they want to go, how they plan on doing anything, and gives them some helpful advice, susses out what their future plans are. And Cat could be a Hero. From the moment we heard about what the Grey Pilgrim does, this moment was narratively unavoidable.

She'll either gain an ally, an enemy, or maybe both.

*Naeddyr*

an ENEMENTOR

no wait that sounds really really

*Fern*

Enementor

...  
shit, I really like how that rolls off the tongue

*RoflCat*

My vote is on a mentor and an observer.

He'll be intrigued at her actual goal being neither for Good nor Evil, but for the people.  
He'll choose to help her out, but at the same time also keeping an eye on her very carefully.  
If she ever become the thing she's against for real and not just as a means to the goal, he will be back, and this time there won't be a truce banner.

Basically the actually threatening version of Thief's words when she accepted the deal.

*Erfling*

Thief stole the sun.

None of the Woe do nonthreatening very well

*Morgan*

That's a good point, and since Grey Pilgrim has approached Catherine I look forward to seeing what kind of influence he has. So far all the foreshadowing pretty obviously indicated that Catherine would become the Dread Empress (capitalized for being an actual Name instead of a title) but there are a lot of new options in the mix if the Pilgrim winds up being a mentor. Cat has been a leader of both the living and the undead, a queen of mortals and fae, and has a track record of beating down anybody who harms her subjects. If this background is then adds a heroic mentor in addition to her villainous one, Cat may become a truly neutral Name that reflects her grey morality.

As for how Pilgrim knew she was who she was? Not that hard to figure out. Between the group dynamic here and the fact that Cat has a long history of going undercover to achieve her goals (going back to the first book even!), It's reasonable to believe he could infer that the woman sitting by the fire who everyone's avoiding is our favorite queen come to interfere in this meeting.

I'm still kind of hoping that, knowing what we do about a nation's role in the patterns, Cat will take over the Dread Empire and remold it so that it exists as a true empire

composed of multiple cultures working toward a common welfare. Instead of being the Dread Empire of Praes, it would be the Dread Empire and escape Praes' pattern of aggressive and untenable expansion as well as Callow's pattern of being passively fighting off invaders. Black tried to break this pattern and had mixed results, but if the Dread Empire's pattern is made separate from Praes' I think there's a real possibility for success.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Cat's not the master of disguise she thinks she is. I bet Gray would tell her how he knew if she asks

*beleester*

There are a lot of ways. Masego had a spell that detects Names. There's probably a Name trick that does the same. It could have been one of Grey's aspects, some sort of mentor-ish "I can tell your personality from your stance" power. It could have been how Cat reacted (or failed to react) when he showed up. Heck, he might have just recognized Cat's face.

I do like the idea that Catherine should just ask him, though. I get the feeling he'd answer.

*Author Unknown*

I don't know about everyone else, but the fact that he is called the "Grey Pilgrim" and not the "White Pilgrim" gives me a lot of hope for how this all plays out.

In fact, I think his reason for being there is, in part, to test Cat. Find out which stories are true and which are exaggerated.

*MetruX*

Since he was mentioned I got this same hope, and things seem to have started on a good foot, even if they end up disagreeing and staying enemies, I doubt they will simply fight each other then and there.

### [oldschoolvillain](#)

Good point – he did open up with a reference to The Exiled Prince, which is one of Catherine's more infamous moments.

*Drd*

Dunno about infamous, more like her most opportunistic moment!

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

I don't know about "Grey vs. White" being a sign that he's more tolerant of "evil". Its easy to imagine he's "gray" because he'll go after the villain instead of putting out the fire the villain just set in the orphanage.

[frolamiz](#)

I just noticed, but the Grey Pilgrim has been a mentor figure for a very long time. This mean he has survived the mentor occupational hazard for that long. If we needed proof of how much of a monster he is, I think this is a good one, because even Black barely escaped it with only one disciple, even though he was very wary of it.

*Highwayman*

Then again Black did make decisions that essentially "betrayed" Cat's trust.

I know its not exactly betrayal but for the love of God I can't think of a better way to describe it right now.

[vuthuha912](#)

He ... um ... hard parenting her ? He did make her do something without her opinion and basically force her to do what he want. Exactly like an Asian parent, he is a tiger dad – maybe. It feels like it.

Granted the situation was to her benefit and he did has good reasons – trying to save both her and Malicia and all. That is no reason not to give her a warning about his plan, yet, he did not warn her, probably because to him, it is unnecessary but it means alot to her. And let's not ignore the time he try to goad her into kill him so she can get her inheritance early. She loves him and it might pain her to think that he thinks that she would kill him for something so trivial.

So dysfunctional family dynamic – the one where both loves each other but has problems showing it or communicating properly

*aran*

Let's hear it, Gandalf.

*Naeddyr*

Quick random prediction:

A politician in Procer will turn into a Villain in this book. The Schemer? Something like that. Possibly one of our two beloved adversary generals.

## *Drakshaa*

Finally caught up! What a wild ride this has been. Absolutely amazing, blows worm out of the park.

But, what am I to do now. The journey is paused. Is there anything else close to this quality on the internet to read?

*lennymaster*

First, thank god I am not the only one that considers Worm decent, but not even remotely on the same level as Guide.

On the matter of advise, I am happy to give you some. I rate books by several different aspects: Character development; Worldbuilding and depth; Plot complexity and logic; Tactical and strategic competence; and finally magic and or tech development logic/coherence; if I have nothing to say to any of these points consider them at the very least sufficient, at most satisfactory but not outstanding. If I do mention one of these aspects it is at least better than average. (One glc stands for Guide length chapter.)

Webserials:

The Gods are Bastards author is a reader of both Worm and Guide if I remember correctly and does some very good work on character development as well as worldbuilding. Updates at least one chapter (roughly one glc) a week. Ongoing since 2014.

The Zombie Knight Saga has some amazing fights, magic system inherently sensible and logical. One to three PAGES a day (a fifth glc) occasional holiday extras. Ongoing since 2013.

Mother of Learning has a good concept amazingly well done and excellently founded in the worlds logic. Also decent fights and a solid plot. One Chapter (ca two Guidlengthchapters) every three to four weeks. Ongoing since 2011.

The Legion of Nothing is an exception as it cannot truly boast excellence in any one of these aspects but is better than average in all of them. One chapter (ca a third glc) a week. Ongoing since 2007.

Super Powered finished this year with four books (the last the longest with roughly two thousand pages if I remember correctly). Decent world, good character development, solid plot.

At the moment not free to read on the internet as the author wants to promote them on amazon, they should however be back



for free, properly this year. Some of his other work is pretty good, but not as webserial available.

That was it for webserials. oh, there are some other decent ones that I did not mention thanks to various faults (at least to my opinion) that tarnish my otherwise good opinion. Heretical Edge, ENDLESS enemies, none of the big ones get ever killed, villians ALWAYS see through the protags plans / have endless luck / loose but always turn any victory on the good guys side to ash. Main character the total opposite of Cat.

Good nonwebserial books;

Chaos Seeds, Awaken Online and Ascend Online are examples for how good LitRPG can be.

David Webers Honor Harrington is a prime example for fantastic world building, inherently logical cultural and scify tech development as well as outstanding tactical and strategic understanding of modern warfare. Overall the best scify I have ever read.

John Conroe's Demon Accords is always at least decent.

Andrew Seiple is a very decent writer, aside from one botched tech mishap in the first Dire book.

Niall Teasdale works alway satisfy, but rarely amaze.

Demons of Astlan is after Guide one of my absolute favourites.

I could continue eternally as I have collected over a thousand books in my Kindle Library over the last ten years, but I will stop here and now.

In the end I must however say that very, very few of them can measure up to Guide.

### [benthelynx](#)

Sometimes the serial format plays hell on narrative flow – I imagine reading straight through to the next chapter would be far smoother than the cut off here. But that's not necessarily avoidable.

### *Fern*

Yeah, the cliffhangers between chapters for books like these are always a bitch. It's why i'm glad I read Worm in one go after it was finished, and why I hated when that one story (The Undead Knight? Zombie Knight?) stopped updating like 1700 pages in.

As a rule, though, I really really prefer having three updates a week with short chapters to having one a week (or a month, here's looking at you Origin of Species and Mother of Learning :/) and getting blueballed even harder.

### *Darkening*

I saw a big update to zombie knight pretty recently, Haven't read the new stuff, but I saw it was around again. I do agree that it can be rough reading stories as they update instead of all at once, I know I've stopped reading several in the past just because I couldn't maintain interest in anything going on with the gaps between reading it.

*nipi*

"Petty thieves hang, the great wear crowns."  
– Proceran saying

My people have a similar saying:  
"Suured sulid tõllas, väiksed sulid võllas"  
meaning:  
"Big crooks in carriages, small crooks in gallows."

*Barrendur*

Estonian?

*Josh*

This quote leads me to believe Thief is being groomed for Queenship of Callow. She is noble after all, and Cat knows she can't stay queen forever.

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## Chapter 8: Dialogue

*"That is the secret to a peaceful court, Chancellor. Regularly having the High Lords for dinner."*  
– Dread Empress Sanguinia I, the Gourmet

"This is quite refreshing," I admitted. "My experience with your side doesn't involve a lot of talking. Or at least none that didn't end with blades drawn."

The Grey Pilgrim didn't seem particularly offended, but then he'd never lost that vaguely serene look since I'd first had glimpse of him. Might be part of his Name. *Or just the result of having seen shit that would turn my hair white.* No one made profession of kickin villains in the teeth for over six decades without having stumbled over some old horrors.

"There are few interlocutors worth speaking to, on... 'your side', as you so delicately put it," the old man replied. "One cannot bargain with madmen and minions."

"Yet here we are, talking," I said. "Should I take that as a compliment?"

He laughed quietly.

"If you wish," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Though I will not deny that Winter's shadow looming in your soul is cause for worry, you have displayed noticeable restraint. I am not in the habit of seeking conflict when other roads are open."

Couldn't say the same, so I wouldn't. Just because I'd learned that killing often caused as many problems as it solved didn't mean I no longer recognized that there were fights worth picking. I should know, I'd yet to manage a godsdamned year as a Named where I wasn't up to my neck in enemies.

"Funny thing to say, for a man marching with an invading army," I noted. "If envoys were sent to achieve diplomatic resolution, they never made it to Laure."

"And this surprises you?" he asked, seeming genuinely curious. "You have hacked your way through every opposition set before you, and twice now slighted the Heavens through their ordained servants. There are few, mundane or Bestowed, who believe you can be reasoned with."

Bestowed. I raised an eyebrow. Another word for Named, I'd assume, but from the almost reverent way he'd spoken it there might be religious implications. More worrying was the fact that he knew how my little tiff with the Stalwart Paladin had ended. There shouldn't have been any remaining witnesses to that aside those who wore gaudy wings.

"Look at the graves I've left behind," I said. "What do they all have in common?"

The Exiled Prince, Page, the Lone Swordsman and his band, Diabolist. The pattern there was far from a puzzle.

"They were threats to the Kingdom of Callow," the old man said. "Or at least what you perceive that should be."

That last qualifier didn't escape my notice, but I reluctantly let it go. Heroes would be heroes.

"And so that's the question," I said. "What *is* your merry band of comrades after? Somehow I'm guessing Proceran interests aren't why you signed on with this crusade."

"The Empire crafted a doomsday weapon that would have held all of Calernia hostage to the Tower's whims," he mildly said.

"Weapon's broken," I said calmly. "So's the one who made it. You're still invading."

"The capacity to create another remains," he pointed out.

I hummed.

"All right," I said. "Fine. If that's all then let's get this done. Bring your army south, I'll take the lot of you through Arcadia and bring you out on the outskirts of Ater. You can level the Tower and put to the sword every mage in Praes who has the know-how and inclination to make another Liesse. Hells, ask nicely and I'll lend a hand."

He blinked, and the serenity fractured.

"You are not lying," he said, sounding baffled.

"Pilgrim, you think I *approve* of any of this shit?" I flatly said. "It's my people who got bled for that weapon. I signed on with Evil to personally put a knife through the eye of anyone intending to pull this kind of play on Callow, among other things. You want to bring down the Tower on Malicia's head? After last year, you can be my guest."

"And your mentor in the Vales?" he pressed.

"Was the one who broke the weapon in the first place," I said. "Someone's going to need to settle Praes after the bloodletting, and if you have a better candidate I'm all ears."

He opened his mouth and I raised my hand to signal he should let me finish.

"I don't mean forever," I said. "But if you approach Black with an offer that gives him say... ten years? A solid decade to make Praes into the kind of nation that'll no longer piss in the continental porridge every generation, before he abdicates, I think you'll be surprised by the answer you'll get. Even if heroic supervision is part of the terms."

His eyes narrowed.

"You genuinely believe this of the Carrion Lord," he said.

It wasn't a question. *Chalk one up to the man having a truth-telling ability*, I thought.

"With all due respect," I said, "I know him a lot better than you do. If he wanted a crown, he'd be wearing one right now. That's

not what he's after. And as long as he gets what he wants, everything else is expendable – including personal power.”

“This is... an unexpected offer,” the Pilgrim admitted.

“It's one I'm willing to swear binding oath over,” I bluntly told him. “The only real question is whether or not you can get Procer to turn around if I do.”

“There are other considerations,” the old man said.

I smiled thinly.

“Like a gaggle of princes wanting to carve Callow into their own little fiefdoms?” I said. “I'm honestly disappointed, Pilgrim. You're willing to kill your way through Callow so that likes of Amadis fucking Milenan gets his way?”

“I have been courteous to you, child,” the Pilgrim spoke curtly. “A grace that should be returned equally. Has it truly escaped your notice how much of a threat you are?”

“Which of us is invading the other's country again?” I asked, then bit my tongue.

Losing my temper here would bring no gain.

“I... apologize,” I said through gritted teeth. “Much of this tries my patience.”

He nodded silently, the serenity back on his face.

“You are Queen of Callow,” he said. “You are also a villain.”

“Fucking Hells, am I tired of hearing that,” I replied, anger immediately flaring again. So much for restraint. “I didn't sign on with the side that tosses around demons out of great sympathy for their philosophy, Pilgrim. I did it because I could not find a single other working alternative. Where was this coalition of yours, twenty years ago? Where were all these upstanding heroes during the Conquest? You don't get to throw it in my face that I'm an evil when Evil was the only game in town. I may have failed spectacularly, but the other choices were either a doomed rebellion or just lying down and taking it. Callow crowned me because it's desperate, and it got this desperate because *help never came*.”

“Simply by being who you are, you darken Creation,” the Grey Pilgrim replied calmly.

My fingers clenched, but he raised his hand to prevent the harsh reply on the tip of my tongue. Courtesy for courtesy, huh. I didn't like it, but I was willing to bend my neck that far.

"This is not a condemnation, it is a fact," the old man said. "You rule in Callow. Your story is its story. Already, I suspect, you will have seen the effects of this. Your people becoming warped by your presence, old traits grown more vicious or acute. Whether you realize it or not, you are slowly turning your home towards the Gods Below. If you rule long enough, the Kingdom of Callow will sever its allegiance to Above."

*But if losses must be had, better Proceran than Callowan,* Brandon Talbot had said. Giving his approval to the slaughter of thousands. The chance the hero might have a point cooled my temper, but only so much.

"And that justifies killing people who still pray at the House of Light right now?" I replied. "Even assuming you're right – and I'm taking this with a grain of salt – if all the Heavens have to offer is a slaughter then, honestly, fuck the Heavens."

"Think, Black Queen," the Pilgrim grimly said "Beyond your anger and grudges, *think*. Of what it really means for all of Calernia if a nation as pivotal as Callow turns to Evil. Already, to be a hero is to be the corpse that will hold the dam in the face of the flood. If the Kingdom turns, the fragile balance of this continent breaks. Procer weakens. The Chain of Hunger and the Dead King will tear into its flesh, and when it dies darkness will spread across the land."

"What I'm getting from this," I coldly replied, "is that that keeping the Principate propped up – no matter what it does – matters more than the lives of innocents. If that's the argument your side is making, then you might just be praying in the wrong direction."

"All of this rests on the fact that it is you who rules," the old man said.

"And if I abdicate, can you guarantee that Callow will be left untouched?" I asked. "Will you swear on your Gods that if Procer tries to annex it, you will turn your sword on whoever is trying? Or even that you'll stay out of my way and let *me* take care of them?"

"I do not rule Procer," the Grey Pilgrim softly said. "And if I take the field against them, too many would follow. It would birth a war as dangerous as this one, in many ways."

I smiled bitterly.

"The terms I offered you have so many concessions in them I'd probably have to fight a civil war to enforce them," I frankly told him. "If even that isn't enough, then I think we can dispense with the pretence that there was ever anything but conflict on the table."

"And so now we are enemies, confirmed," the Grey Pilgrim said.  
"And you may unleash your arsenal of horrors with peace of mind."

I shook my head.

"That isn't the kind of war I'm going to be fighting," I said.  
"I've been down that road before. If I escalate, so do you. The thing is, you and I, we get to crawl out of those ruins. 'cause someone Above or Below decided we mattered enough. That courtesy isn't extended to nearly everyone on Calernia though, is it?"

I scoffed.

"Oh, I won't pretend I'm not sitting on some nasty stuff. So are you. But even if I used it, even if I won, what would that accomplish? I bleed Procer into a truce, but that truce doesn't survive me. All that does is kick the next war thirty years down the line. Nothing is *solved*. I'm tired of seeing Callow turned into the battlefield of Calernia, Pilgrim. So are Callowans."

"Heed an old man's advice, Catherine Foundling," the Pilgrim said tiredly. "The world can only be healed so much."

"I don't believe that," I said. "My teacher dedicated his entire life to breaking this game, but that's a reflection of his flaw – he can't conceive a world where he doesn't win. I'm willing to settle for the lesser prize. What I can't break, I would *regulate*."

"Some might construe such a boast as blasphemy," the old man said.

"Aren't you tired of killing kids because they're sworn to the wrong side?" I asked quietly. "I know I am, and you've been at this for a lot longer."

"There is not a single life I've taken I have not regretted," the Grey Pilgrim sighed. "No matter the deeds to their name. To inflict death is to end the possibility of redemption, and that is the greatest gift the Gods have granted us."

"It doesn't *need* to be like this," I said. "We're the dogs in the pit, but what does that ever really accomplish? One bleeds, another dies, and then they release another hound. The pit's still there even if one side gets a winning streak."

"Some of those hounds have gone rabid," the Pilgrim said. "I grieve their deaths, but I will not allow them to bite children."

"And those should be put down," I agreed flatly. "But we don't need wars for that. We just need rules that both sides are willing to enforce."

"An agreement," he slowly said. "Such a thing would be without precedent. And there are many who would balk."

"Every single Named is a highly dangerous weapon, in their own way," I said. "Any unwilling to accept constraints placed on their actions have no business wielding that kind of power in the first place. And before you ask, I do not exclude myself or any ally of mine from that statement."

He studied me silently.

"For such a thing to hold, there would be need for trust where none exists," he said.

"Then we begin with something smaller," I said. "Rules of engagement, for your host and mine. Would you be able to enforce these?"

"Within limits," he said. "I am not without influence and the Saint's reputation has its uses."

"If you don't sack cities, neither will I," I offered.

He nodded.

"Agreed," he said. "Innocents should not be made to suffer. You must refrain from using demons."

"I'll swear to that, if you refrain from calling on angels," I said.

He frowned.

"The nature of those interventions is different," he said. "The Choirs are not a blight, their purpose is to aid in the rectification of wrongs."

"There kind of *rectification* they would have offered at Liesse when the Lone Swordsman reached for Contrition was a wrong itself," I flatly told him. "It was ugly as the things the Empire pulls. And that's besides the point, anyway: if you use something of that scale, then I have to deploy an equivalent or you're just going to walk right through us."

"The Choirs have been known to extend hand when defeat looms," the Pilgrim told me. "There is difference between call and offer."

"You think your side's the only one afraid of dying?" I said. "Calling demons is probably the single worst thing a person can do, objectively speaking, but it feels a lot more acceptable when the alternative is getting stabbed in the throat. We can't prevent escalation if your bargaining position is that we fold but you don't."



The old man stayed silent for a long while.

"I will concede," he finally said, "if you swear away devils as well."

No great loss for me there. I'd never approved of using those either.

"Done," I grunted. "As a gesture of goodwill, I'll add a warning. There's a demon from Dread Empress Triumphant's day bound somewhere in the vicinity of Harrow. My people believe it might be one of Absence."

"A Hell Egg, after all these years?" he said, brow rising. "I thought none remained within Callow."

"Would that this were true," I ruefully said. "I don't know exactly where it is, or what keeps it bound. Odds are it's an old Legion standard but I can't guarantee it."

He inclined his head in thanks.

"I will discuss this with the others," the Pilgrim said. "If we can slay it, we will."

"So long as you keep the fight *contained*," I sharply said. "If a chunk of the north suddenly no longer exists, I'll consider that a breach of terms."

"If have fought their like before," the old man said. "It is ugly strife, but there are ways about it."

I didn't like the risks involved in this, but then I wasn't all that happy about that unlit sharper staying buried near Harrow either. If they could kill it without making a mess I wasn't going to complain. If.

"I want prisoners well treated, even Praesi and greenskins," I said. "Neither beaten, tortured nor otherwise harmed. I'll extend the same treatment to anyone I capture. I'm also willing to arrange regular prisoner exchanges when the campaign allows."

"There are evils I have been forced to make peace with," the Pilgrim said with iron in his voice. "Torture is not one of them. You may be certain I will allow no such thing so long as I draw breath. The matter of exchanges, however, will have to be discussed with the Princess of Aequitan. Answer will be given before battle."

I nodded. I wasn't sure Malanza would bite but it was worth a try. Morality aside, I needed my officers much more badly than she did hers. If she cottoned on to that she might just decide to sit on them. On the other hand, the Procerans tended to make

officers of their relatives. They might want the assurance of being traded back if they got captured. We'd see.

"No killing of anyone offering surrender," I proposed.

"So long as that surrender is genuine, and no attempt at treachery is made," he countered.

I grimaced but nodded. Fair enough. I'd need to ride my sappers hard about the treachery clause in case they ever got captured. They did like to offer 'surrender' in time for the enemy to walk into a field of buried munitions.

"Those are the terms I have to offer, at the moment," I said. "Unless you have anything to add?"

"No," he said, after a moment. "This will serve."

He sighed.

"You are right, you know," he said quietly.

I had a few pithy responses to offer, but I kept my mouth shut. And to think they said I couldn't do diplomacy.

"It is shameful, that Callow was left under occupation for so long," the Grey Pilgrim said. "That we only ride to relieve in in fear of what your coronation represents."

Limpid blue eyes looked up at the morning sky.

"This does not absolve you," he said. "But there is truth in what you say. We stand burdened with the guilt of inaction. For that alone, I grieve that it must come to blood. You are the sin of our indolence returned to haunt us."

"I don't want to fight you at all," I said. "But I will not bend my neck to the kind of ending you peddle."

He sighed.

"We will try to slay you, on the field," he said. "Even I. Much suffering can be avoided by your death, however tragic that ending."

"Suffering is the nature of human condition," I said. "We are what we do with that. I choose to give it a purpose."

"It does not sound," he gently said, "like I am the one you are trying to convince."

"None of that, now," I said, wagging my finger. "You want to fight for a side that's not exactly driven snow? Fine."

Disappointing, but that's the world we live in. But you don't get to pull the grandfatherly act afterwards."

He smiled sadly.

"Am I not allowed to grieve the sight of a child who mutilated her own soul trying to make a better world?" he asked.

I flinched. That struck closer to home than I would have liked.

"I am my mistakes too," I said. "Not just my victories. And I knew going in that power comes at a cost. No one gets to eat the first course then balk at the bill. Grieve all you want, but someone recently told me that grief without corresponding action is meaningless. That applies to both sides of the fence, I'd think."

"All your plans," he said. "They are dust, if you do not survive to attempt them. All that would be left is the costs."

"Isn't that always how it is?" I tiredly replied. "There's a reason it goes 'change the world or *die trying*'."

And on that cheerful note my first talk with the opposition concluded.

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### [\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

Great chapter, I'm really looking forward to what this Entails. Also, I think Grey Pilgrim is my favorite Hero so far.

#### *Flameburst*

Probably because he and hanno are the only heroes we've met so far that don't have their heads so far up their asses they get stuck in their esophagus

### [\*NZPIEFACE\*](#)

Hell, if the Angels let Cat live, then Hanno would happily comply.

#### *Ezreon*

Not that it would ever happen.

### [\*greatwyrmgold\*](#)

I don't think that's fair. They're just the first like that who we've had the chance to understand. Bumbling Conjurer and Dashing Bandit seemed nice enough.

*stevenneiman*

I think it's because he does the whole "shame of necessity" thing but manages not to seem clueless or full of shit when he does. Most of the other antagonists so far have either been driven mad by their own guilt or else became convinced that their higher purpose meant that they could do whatever they wanted free of moral or practical repercussions. People like Hanno who decided that he should offload all responsibility for his actions to a group of eldritch horrors, and William who never really had a better reason for wanton destruction, murder and attempted mass mind rape than because he felt bad about taking reasonable action to protect himself.

Plus, there's the fact that for all that he thinks that Catherine's death is necessary, he's the only one so far who's been willing to meet Cat halfway on a matter that seems so basic as preventing warcrimes. The only antagonists who've even been in the same room with Cat without trying to kill her directly were just trying to manipulate her into ruining herself regardless of the consequences, but the Pilgrim actually met in good faith, tried to dissuade Cat from a course of action that he felt would cause unnecessary suffering, and then when he realized he had nothing tactical to gain he still worked with her to help with the reasonable parts of her own vision. That's better than we've seen from anybody else, including Black and Malicia.

*Yotz*

Reasonable action to protect himself? I guess – from your point of view – William ought to chop his sister to pieces, bake them into pies, and sell said pies to his and his future fiancée's relatives to collect enough money for the wedding for his actions to become unreasonable? Or it would be reasonable still?

There's nothing reasonable about William, that's why Contrition was able to hook him up so easily.

*Zachary*

The tragedy of William is that he was actually experiencing positive character growth, but was manipulated by the Bard into going all-in and summoning the angel. There was one interlude chapter where he's basically commenting on the fact that maybe Catherine is right and it doesn't matter who's in charge as long as things are better for regular people, but then Bard persuades him otherwise.

*Mani*

Reading through your comment, I believe I figured out why the Grey Pilgrim survived this long.

It can't be because he takes the role of a "mentor". Mentor more often than not die right before a pivotal change in their apprentice. No, the Grey Pilgrim survives because he is loved. It's even stated a few times that people really like him, and we've just seen why that is. He is so god damn reasonable, almost like the Hero equivalent of Black, which I'm sure is no coincidence. And he is not just loved by the people, he is, more importantly, also loved by the readers, which gives him a similar kind of "meta-game" advantage Black has as the protagonists mentor.

I'm really interested how his story will turn out.

*Drd*

Interesting comment comparing Pilgrim to Black. They've both been at it for 60yrs, are both highly influential – even loved (Black is loved by the armies he has rebuilt, and by the other Calamities), both reasonable, intelligent, sharp and insightful, and both dislike the senselessness of unnecessary conflict (Black hates the trueblood's precisely because of this).

We already suspect that the Bard is the heaven's counterpart to the Dead King, does that hint to other hero/villain links?

*MetruX*

If so, this might be more a game board than we thought, when you deploy a important piece you give the other side a piece of equivalent power, that he may deploy to intercept yours, or somewhere else to tilt the balance. If so, each place that is Evil or Good might as well have been chosen by the Gobs, Above or Below.

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Why do you think this has been compared to a shatranj board the whole time.

*stevenneiman*

If it's a game, I feel like it's less like chess (or shatranj, which sounds like it's basically chess but possibly with less strategic depth) and more like poker. Each side largely knows what its own advantages are and the game is mostly about deciding how much Above and Below are willing to wager on any given hand.

*kelioez*

Poker is great example tbh, it encapsulates the entire scene perfectly

*Lark*

Phenomenal as always. Thank you for this delightful story.

*Matthew*

I like that she still has Black's back on the important issue of breaking the game.

Can we have a Heirarch, Grey Pilgrim, and Black teamup?

*Dany*

Black doesn't want to "break" the game. He wants to WIN the game.

Cat seems to sometimes understand that, but not in this chapter.

*Rook*

Black wants to win, Cat wants to flip the board, and Hierarch has decided they're already playing a different game, thus everyone else is breaking the rules

[Walter](#)

The games of Foreign Tyrants are of no interest to The People, Long May They Reign.

*Cloudlight*

Hear, hear.

*Jeremy*

Damn, it got dark and philosophical up in here!

*SilentLurker*

I can genuinely say I've found a Hero I like now. The Grey Pilgrim, for all he has an annoying idea that his side is incapable of moral offences, is both interesting and also seemingly willing to try to make change, even where it means compromise. For that alone he's easily the best hero we've seen so far.

*Rook*

I don't think he's saying Good is incapable of stumbling, it seems to me it's the opposite. He agrees that Procer isn't perfect, he admitted it was their failure to only march on Callow out of fear when it was too late, and he doesn't seem to be any particular fan of the suffering that innocents and civilians go through as a side effect of Good vs Evil.

It's just compromise. Cat has no perfect solution so she settles for what she sees as the Lesser Evils, and the Pilgrim also doesn't have any perfect solution, settling on what he thinks is the Greater Good. I mean he's stands on the other side of the fence but you can't begrudge a man for not abandoning an entire lifetime's worth of belief and experience over a single campfire talk.

### *Stormblessed*

Gods, Cat keeps offering so much as terms to avoid conflict but nothing is ever good enough for pissy little Good, who has to have everything. At all. They offer no reconciliation, no compromise.

### *Sean*

In an interesting way, I think Good can be seen in a broader way as an unwavering loyalty to one's ideals. Evil, broadly speaking, has no ideal but the acquisition of power (and to a lesser extent, what could be called hubris). On the otherhand, Good gains its power by an unwavering dedication to ideals, regardless of whether or not those ideals are actually worth anything.

In the real world, both of these have wrought tremendous damage. Ideological conflict being as responsible for as much misery as selfish ambition.

### *Walter*

Cat is super lucky this dude has a truth sensing power, or she wouldn't have even managed this much. I mean, put yourself in dude's shoes.

You are preparing to liberate a land which was conquered by the Empire of Evil. The slave in charge of it is noted badass Black Queen, famous for her motto 'justifications only matter to the just'. So you can't ask her to justify anything, because she not only thinks having reasons for stuff is for chumps, she thinks it so strongly she PUTS IT ON HER BANNER.

You know a few things about her. She recently had a pissing match with another monster, and wiped out the population of a large city in an attempt at building a demon summoning superweapon, which then got broken in more internal squabbling.

She crucifies prisoners. She is resettling the ares she has ethnically cleansed with goblins, a race of war criminals known primarily for sexism and arson.

The various slaves under her are kept in line through fear of her omniscient surveillance systems and her mighty army, which she used recently to settle yet another squabble with her own underlings by, surprise surprise, hanging her enemies.

Looking at her, you can see that her soul is shrouded in Winter, the branch of Fae characterized by skullduggery and treacherous conduct. She attends the meeting not openly, to treat with the dignitary, but in disguise, with monsters waiting in Arcadia.

Now you start talking, and she has a proposal. She gives you her word that she'll help you take down her master (this is the same word she gave that master of her fealty, for those keeping score), and in exchange you leave her to continue to oppress her people and turn them to devil worship.

Sound fair?

*werafdsaew*

Catherine didn't wipe out the population of a large city; that was Diabolist. And when did she ethnically cleans anyone?

[Walter](#)

Nobody else knows that. Cat attacked one of her own cities. All of the civilians ended up dead, and everyone who surrendered she crucified. The official story is that some of the victims were responsible for killing the others or something, but the obvious explanation is that the winners did the killing.

*werafdsaew*

You're not reading the same story I'm reading.

*Silynt*

That's the whole point of this person's comment – the Pilgrim isn't reading this story and so can't possibly know the whole truth. Walter listed out a bunch of things that the Pilgrim could reasonably know about Cat's recent activities, and his point is that without being able to KNOW that Cat is being honest, he has absolutely no reason to take her word on anything.

*Agent J*



The Angels said it best. "We take everything and give nothing." Are we really surprised that their tools have taken up the same motto?

*Joel*

Both sides scored some points here, but I think that Grey Pilgrim was positively shocked at how reasonable she was. If that "code" of warfare holds, it could have interesting effects on the "story" of this war. If neither side is committing atrocities, and Catherine doesn't do anything too Evil, then it becomes less of "Good vs. Evil" and more "unlawful invasion."

*Byzantine*

We already know it is possible for a country to be ruled by Good and Evil working together. Unlike Black she isn't going to try breaking the game, she's going to see how far she can push the rules.

[vuthuha912](#)

I swear if the entire game of Good and Evil has gone way too far. Many of the problems that plague Praes can be traced to desperation. The Good side instead of sympathizing and trying to alleviate the situation only double down on stomping Evil while Evil without a way out, continues to escalate their effort. Like, if they gave Praes the grain it needed in exchange for technology or precious metal then both sides might have staked in keeping the trade going and limiting the scale of warfare accordingly. Yet, somehow, the reasonable person who can make the decision all died due to a bunch of reasons and we end up with a mess of the current situation. Both sides hate the other so much that they have no sympathy for the situation the others were in. Only when a girl from a Good country is willing to look at the other side and sympathized with them can changes be made. And even with a girl like Cat in the middle, things are still a mess. The Big Good – Cordelia is still too high up to actually consider meeting the offer. The Big Bad – Malicia just escalates due to crazy dread empress syndrome or desperation. The other Big Bad – Black got stabbed by Malicia and Cat for ... saving their life against their consent (in his opinion), and has been preparing to strike at Good to protect his country. Still, both sides don't think that negotiation is on the table, both don't think that the other will stop seeking their destruction and both are willing to see the war till the end.

I can not say that both sides don't have their reason and that they aren't right about their opinion but someone gonna be the better person if negotiation were to happen.

[boballab](#)

It won't hold, this whole chapter is setup and foreshadowing of that and it won't be "evil" that breaks it either. The Princes will do something that breaks the terms such as killing the Orc's out of hand when they surrender or doing something with the Demon and that act is what will break the hero contingent of the Crusade.

*Amoonymous*

I like this thought (and would like your comment as well if I had a WordPress account).

Good being the first to break the terms would also tilt the story (more) towards Evil being the relatively innocent victim (and thus make Evil more likely to win).

*Nairne .01*

It would certainly be interesting if that prince took the demon after gaining enough support to shake things back home so he could be seen as representing the Principate and that given the tools they too would unleash demons on the world.

[DroughtBringer](#)

If the Prince did use the Demon, though, would would Grey Pilgrim react? I could see that either forcing or letting Cat and him work together.

Something I've been waiting for something to happen that brings Good and Evil together; if Winter is Evil and Summer is Good, we have still yet to see the joining of the courts as we saw from Arcadia.

*Darkening*

Hahahahahahahahaha Summer as good, that's funny. They're blue and orange mentality at best.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Killing their heroes isn't what the Grey Pilgrim was talking about. After all she's killed a lot more than two just this past year, so that's not it.

The first insult was when she forced the choir of... Well the ones backing William. She effectively spit on everything that they stand for as she forced them to raise her from the dead.

She even said something along the lines of "Come on you fuckers. I won the game playing by your rules and now you have to pay up and raise me from the death your pawn caused me. That's right you will use your heavenly powers to grant life to a evil undead undead

abomination to all that is creation, and you have no choice about it. ”  
And then she curbstomped William which probably did little to smooth their feathers.

I’m not sure what the second one is though. It’s not that Cat hasn’t done some outrageous things, but I can’t remember anything that explicitly involves the heavens.

*Cpt. Obvious*

And that comment didn’t end up where I thought it would...

[frolamiz](#)

Yeah, we where already making parallels between Praes’s high lords and Procer’s princes earlier and how the current Procer is acting more like Prae than Prae with the backstabbing, invasion of callow and use of great rituals.  
The greedy prince leading one of the armies of the crusade choosing to keep the demon for its power make a great story for his coming into a villainous Name.

*Rook*

The Pilgrim actually worded an extremely dangerous pledge there about torture.

“You may be certain I will allow no such thing so long as I draw breath”

Extremely double edged sword there, pretty surprised. It could be used offensively – interpreted as a pledge to not let the culprit off so long as he draws breath; and it could be turned against him just as easily – interpreted as allowing such a thing to be forfeiture of his right to draw another breath.

Especially when this comes in the context of a formal verbal agreement between the two. I’m not sure if he’s banking on his experience to play a very dangerous game, or intentionally making a show of goodwill.

*Busser*

I mean the key word is allow. I think like most good he is uncompromising in whatever ideals he does hold.

As long as he has verbally forbidden it, I would think that’s enough.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Remember, Cat made a big deal about whether or not the Pilgrim can enforce the agreement to his side. If he dies, obviously all bets are off. Just like killing Catherine means demons are on the table again—a fact Mr. Gray doesn't seem to realize—because what good is a rule nobody can enforce?

Honestly I think Cat got the better end of the deal by far. Did she give up any advantages she actually wanted to use? And she got the Pilgrim to agree to keep the Choirs out of it, as much as that's going to be possible. And Cat has so many other weapons, like the Fae, the Observatory, etc. That, or the Pilgrim has some hidden aces she's unaware of.

[sengachi](#)

Ohhhh, there's a thought.

By offering these terms she's fundamentally altered the nature of the Crusade. If they're accepted the very narrative may see her side as less "Evil with a capital E" and more "homeland defenders". And if they're refuted, then the Crusaders definitely give up their "Good with a capital G" advantage.

*Raved Thrad*

Is it just me, or does the Grey Pilgrim ultimately have his head up his ass? When he says "You have hacked your way through every opposition set before you, and twice now slighted the Heavens through their ordained servants" I parsed that as "How dare you kill the heroes heaven sent to kill you." It takes a certain kind of zealotry – one which I equate to evil – to berate someone for killing the assassins you (or your side) sent after them, no matter how holy or righteous you think your side is.

*naturalnuke*

The thought of infallibility is a big one among those that see themselves on the side of the 'greater good'.

*Rook*

The same can be said of the mentality of the Lesser Evil though. Both of them have their own blinders and neither are perfect; the latter tunneling on the fewest flaws and the former tunneling on the greatest virtues. It's a mistake to consider a difference in point of view as arrogance simply because they disagree.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Huh? How is this anything other than whataboutism? Of fucking course neither side is perfect, so fucking what? And

what is this "Lesser Evil" you speak of, and what parallel thing did it do?

*Lucas*

She did insulted the choir tho right? But yeah, they did try to kill her first.

*Rook*

It's not so much being in opposition so much as looking at the end results. The characters in the story don't get an omniscient birds-eye view of her methods the same way readers do. All that they know of is that everyone she's gone up against so far had ended up a corpse, if you can still call what was left over a corpse.

I mean as a reader we know it's not true but she's the type of character where her namesake 'foundling gambit' is literally burning everything down with goblinfire

*Yeah Nah Yeah*

I think he was referencing the two separate times she told angels to go fuck themselves. Once with the Lone Swordsman, and once with old mate from the start of this book.

[poignardazur](#)

Yeah, he was being pretty arrogant.

"How dare you have killed all these people we sent to assassinate you and invade your country? Aren't you ashamed of all that blood on your hands?"

It's the same kind of thinking that lead to the Treaty of Versailles.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Heh, I had to look up which one the Treaty of Versailles was, but the very first sentence in the wiki article was enough reminder to see your point

*Nafram*

I believe he was referring to the fact that she personally rebuked and insulted the Choirs when she met them face to face through Willie's sword and the Stalwart Paladin's connection (how that works I have no idea). Then she proceeded to rub salt in the wound by immediately killing their ordained servants in a brutal fashion right in front of them. And while she may be well justified in both of those things, a Hero, even one as

reasonable as the Grey Pilgrim, would balk at those, especially what happened with Contrition.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Killing their heroes isn't what the Grey Pilgrim was talking about. After all she's killed a lot more than two just this past year, so that's not it.

The first insult was when she forced the choir of contrition to raise her from the dead. She effectively spit on everything that they stand for and even said something along the lines of:

"Come on you fuckers. I won the game, even playing by your rules. So now, again by your rules, you have to pay up and raise me from the death your pawn caused me. That's right you will use your heavenly powers to grant life to a evil undead abomination to all that is creation, and you have no choice about it. "

That she then curbstomped William probably did little to smooth their feathers.

I'm not sure what the second one is though. It's not that Cat hasn't done some outrageous things, but I can't remember anything that explicitly involves the heavens.

For some reason I can't recall anything special about the Stalwart Paladin that would make his demise more noteworthy than any other of the heroes she's killed.

*Doruma*

"What I can't break, I would regulate."

I think we just found her first aspect of her new Name, Regulate.

[sengachi](#)

Ohohoho. That would be a \*fascinating\* Aspect.

*Rook*

Thematically fits too, what with Black having Break and all.

Although it brings up a pretty comical image of a madman trying to fill out all the paperwork required to commit his permitted atrocity for the month

*Antipath*

Black has Lead, Conquer and Destroy. You're thinking of Cat's second run aus the Squire.

*Nairne .01*

Is it me, or was someone already using this aspect? (I know more than one person could possibly have it, and it would probably work quite differently too).

*Alivaril*

I am absurdly happy this conversation wasn't skipped. It's also one of the rare times I haven't been annoyed by an impending conflict between two likable people with legitimate points. On that note, good job with Grey; he's a really nice change from certain Stupid Good individuals.

*nipi*

That may be because he is The GREY Pilgrim.

*Joel*

Whenever Cat refers to him as "Pilgrim" I'm imagining her as John Wayne.

*danh3107*

Now that was worth being blue balled for a whole weekend for, awesome.

*Fern*

Looks like we're going to settle on enementor then; i can safely say i'm pretty happy with that. It's interesting to see a Hero actually willing to debate philosophy without sounding like a tool.

*Big Brother*

The Grey Pilgrim is now my new favorite. Sorry, Masego. Any Hero willing to sit and talk terms with a Villain to establish restrictions in warfare before combat ever begins is one worth listening to.

*Antoninjohn*

And then Procer raised the city, the Angels were sore losers and lent a hand and on a field of cold and darkness did Cat strike down the armies, the heroes and the Angels backed by the power of their broken Oath

[sengachi](#)

Ohhhhhh shit, any oath she'd give would cut both ways wouldn't it? Breaking an oath with a fae lord/god is up there when it comes to Bad Ideas, and narratively speaking, breaking faith

with the beleaguered queen of the country you're invading automatically forfeits your divinely protected Good status.

Cat probably could turn them breaking their oath into a hell of consequence.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

\*RAZED, not raised. This misspelling completely and overwhelmingly razed your point: what you said is not what you meant.

SPELLING MATTERS, not that you would know it from EE's writing (ugh)

*Rook*

The Pilgrim has a point.

Cat or even Black are the exception, not the rule, the same way the Pilgrim is an exception for team Good.

I think it's important to realize this is a guy who's spent most of his life fighting the Heirs and Diabolists of the world. Fought villain after villain and failed trying to talk sense into the Evil equivalent of the Lone Swordsman more times than Cat has yet to even try.

I don't think he's looking at Cat when he decides to keep on his path. He's most likely afraid of what happens when she's gone and Callow flips, all the Akuas of the world that might spring forth from it. At the end of the day his main issue is that he doesn't have enough grounds to trust Cat can break that kind of cycle he's probably seen a hundred times. It's not an unreasonable position.

*nick012000*

If Callow flips to Evil, I don't think they'd produce very many Akuas, if any. They'd just be magnifying Callow's negative traits, like their tendency to hold grudges. You'd start seeing things like the Tolltaker, Callowan Squires and Black Knights, villainous Queens and Kings, etc. Maybe you'd get Named members of the various Dark Guilds, like Thief running the Thieves' Guild.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

oh fuck, cat's already started creating names for callow.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Remember the aspect **Learn**, and how it's compounding over time? Evil, at least as Pilgrim describes it, is a corrupting



force, building on itself, and in a few years (5? 10? 50? Does it matter?) the Callow you know will be unrecognizable.

Fuck, in fact, over a few decades even without Evil influence, it will change to the point of unrecognizability. Your assumptions about Callows enduring nature are off base. And even if they aren't, we don't know the nature of the Heros Callow has produced. There may well have been budding Akuas in that bunch, we don't know.

### *Nightlurker8*

"We are the Others, We serve different forces,  
But in the twilight there is no difference between the absence of darkness and the absence of light.  
Our struggle is capable of destroying the world. We have concluded a Great Treaty, a truce.  
Each side shall live according to its own laws,  
Each side shall have its own rights. We delimit our own rights and our own laws. We are the Others. We establish the Night Watch,  
So that the forces of Light may monitor the forces of Darkness. We are the Others. We establish the Day Watch,  
So that the forces of Darkness may monitor the forces of Light. Time will decide for us."  
The Great Treaty between Darkness and Light. ©Night watch.

### [John Smith](#)

Wait, I don't remember a Stalwart Paladin. When did that happen? Or am I being brainless?

### *Byzantine*

Prologue to this chapter.

### *White*

The prologue of the book. He was one of the three heroes trying to kill Car.

### *Author Unknown*

This was everything I hoped it would be and more.

### *Jordan*

Damn

### *Rainbow Trenchcoat*

I think this is probably the single most important moment that's happened in the story so far, because the Grey Pilgrim conceded that the Angels were in any way equivalent to demons, and was

willing to forswear their use. From the Prologue on, the most important point about the Angels was how the Choirs showed themselves to people at their worst moments, and then fundamentally broke them in some way to fit into their greater plan. Good's whole point is that people can't be trusted to do the right thing, and so there's interventions from the Angels at the most direct to the Bard at the more subtle. Agreeing to block that intervention is a huge change for the Good side.

*nipi*

He didnt concede that they are equivalent.

"The nature of those interventions is different," he said. "The Choirs are not a blight, their purpose is to aid in the rectification of wrongs."

This is what he conceded to:

"We can't prevent escalation if your bargaining position is that we fold but you don't."

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Wait, is Bard an angel?

*daniel young*

No bard is just an immortal, shapechanging, teleporting meddler.

*DD*

Lots of Pilgrim love here, for good reason. But I still kinda, you know...want to Cat to kill em all. And then turn on Praes and crucify the High Lords. And then spank Malicia for acting like a mentally ill moron this past little while. I know it won't go that way, but still.

*Vortex*

I mean Malicia's actions make perfect sense to me. Just as Cat prioritized the interests of Callow and Black prioritized his personal agenda of breaking the game, Malicia prioritized the interests of her Empire, as any good Empress should. Now, she did it in an evil and backstabby fashion, but that is Praes in a nutshell and she has a reputation for being the most backstabby and evil of all of them.

*Engineer*

I am really looking forward to this talk being repeated with Amadeus, Alaya and Cordelia also in attendance.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

As much as I love the talk they just had, I can't see Prince Amadis bending to the will of an "ancient kook", as I'm sure he'll view the Pilgrim after this, when slaughtering prisoners and looting cities for supplies makes things so much simpler on him.

*Rook*

Realistically I can see him conceding in this to be honest. It's really just a numbers game, is it worth losing the cooperation of two of your biggest powerhouses (likely more, given that the veteran heroes will probably draw more than a few of the younger ones into their orbit) to sack some cities right now, considering you plan to own by the end of it all anyway? Probably not.

Not to mention it's limiting on both sides, and limiting the foul play is on paper a good strategic move when you have such a major advantage in numbers in the first place.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

That, though, requires a view of the bigger picture than we've seen Amadis display so far. Remember that this is the guy who was pushing for a Proceran Prince to go down and take command of the Liesse Rebellion, which would have turned it from a civil war/rebellion to a blatant expansion attempt. He doesn't seem to see past his goal of becoming First Prince, and damn the consequence, hang everyone who would stand in his way of that.

The Princess in command – Malenza, I think her name was? She might see the strategic benefits of agreeing, but she's been shown to be the competent commander to balance out Amadis being the bumbling slimy politician trying to turn the crusade into a political coup. How much influence she has is yet to be seen, especially since I think it was implied that he had leverage over her.

*Rook*

I think it's pretty straightforward really. Slimy as he may be, he's still on the side of Stupid Good, with all the prejudices that apply. He has a lot of reason to fear that the Black Knight's protege has a lot of nasty tricks up her sleeve. Limiting those is a pretty straightforward victory, especially if you're also being pressured by the two biggest powerhouses you have available.

On top of that he's shown to have quite a lot of fixation on divvying up Callow after the conquest, it makes perfect sense to not burn down the prize you're aiming for to ashes. If for no other reason than selfishness, he already has

plenty of motive to ensure he doesn't 'liberate' callow into a barren wasteland.

*SMHF*

You know when the Grey Pilgrim said coming to an understanding between Heroes and Villains is "unprecedented", I get the feeling it has less to do with no one ever trying it and more with Name shenanigans!

I mean stopping Heroes and Villains from making peace with each other, is probably the one thing both above and below Gods agree on!

btw dont forget to vote for the Guide! lets keep it on number one spot as long as we can! 😊

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*nipi*

Is it "unprecedented"? What about the kingdom ruled by both a Hero and a Villain?

*letouriste*

unprecedented on calernia at least. that kingdom is on another continent

*Zach*

There's always been this weird mismatch between the gravity attached to happenings on Calernia (like the Gods apparently being super-invested in there being a balance there) and the scattered mentions of Calernia only being a small part of the world and there being an all-powerful race of sci-fi gnomes (who are apparently strong enough to render the powers of Calernian nations – which include demons and shit – meaningless).

[vuthuha912](#)

If you think about fictional China then you know that real-life China is the absolute master of East Asia, just like the Roman Empire but their hegemony lasts even longer than the Roman. They tried to conquer every place they can possibly conquer and successfully keep it long enough that it sets precedence: the biggest achievement for an individual whether they are good or evil is to unite their entire world. The biggest common between good and evil in every Chinese story I have read is their desire to put everyone under their rules and go down in history as benevolent kings or virtuous men (honestly, you can count on one hand the number of Chinese Emperor who ACTUALLY live up to their ideals). When you have

protagonists like Cao Cao and Liu Bei then no wonder they can work with each other. I assume not! China in this setting has the same kind of mentality as the main characters from Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

To replicate a similar result in Calernia is not possible, unless Triumphant had Black sensibility and everyone started playing country building instead of war game then yes, they might.

*nipi*

Is that a typo?

"But even if I used tit"

Cat, you naughty girl. Tame your tongue. You're in the presence of a holy man. 🙄

So is one of cat's new aspects going to be Regulate? (And there were a few other words thrown around in that conversation.)

*nipi*

I wonder when Cat is going to sit down and start making oaths to restrict what she knows Winters' mantle is changing her into.

*Allafterme*

I half-expected a hero with an angelic staff up his a\*s so far up that you can see the holy shine when he speaks. Excellent chapter.

*letouriste*

just wait, there is definitively one in the attacking force

*mavant*

How on earth are you planning to enforce rules on the Ranger, Cat?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Oaths and authority of her name.

It's always been a Name's way to force Creation to their will.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Ranger, and by extension, Refuge, are independent polities of the Kingdom of Callow. Catherine doesn't have any power over Refuge, but the Crusade won't be bound by their bargain with Cat if they go that far south.

*SilentLurker*

Refuge is actually an entirely separate nation that is a technical protectorate of the Kingdom Under. You know, that one nation on Calernia that might qualify as a world power comparable to things like the Miezens, the Yan-Tei Empire, and the Gnomes? Refuge is not in any way loyal to Callow, and it is mostly off limits because Ranger, acknowledged as the strongest Named on Calernia by basically everyone, says so.

*nick012000*

By force, because that's the only type of authority that the Ranger is willing to accept. She did say that Named on either side that weren't willing to agree to limit their use of power would be killed.

*LM*

This reminds me of Vietnam. Or perhaps Vichy France? A very good chapter, either way.

*letouriste*

the regime de Vichy is more akin to Callow at the start of book 1.

*beleester*

"Pilgrim, you think I approve of any of this shit?" I flatly said. "It's my people who got bled for that weapon. I signed on with Evil to personally put a knife through the eye of anyone intending to pull this kind of play on Callow, among other things. You want to bring down the Tower on Malicia's head? After last year, you can be my guest."

Be honest, Cat. You were perfectly willing to take that weapon for yourself before Black blew it up.

I mean, I'm glad she's changed her mind since then, but she's definitely willing to go full supervillain if she thinks it might prevent further invasions.

---

She had heard Malicia's argument after her talk with Akua on the roof, but she also hid the bargaining cheap that was Akua's horcrux. While she mentioned that the transition into Black Queen would allow her to take the control of the weapon, this Name would be influenced by Winter enough that telling which urge was her (exaggerated) wish to protect Callow and which was the Role settling into the grooves of a villain with a superweapon is harder than usual.

*werafdsaew*

I think she's simply aware of the sunken cost fallacy. She would not trade lives for the weapon, but once the weapon has been created, would keep it to avoid further war.

### NZPIEFACE

You know, I think we've been missing something really important so far.

So many times this book, only 8 chapters in, have we seen countless references to Cat holding back her Name, Mantle, and idiosyncrasies.

Is that not the biggest Checkov's Gun so far? How long will we get to see the gun be loaded before it fires off a nuke?

Also, I just want to see her decimate shit with her name and raise the dead into an undead army.

### DroughtBringer

Huh. Spent some time thinking about Grey Pilgrim and stumbled upon this:

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grey\\_Pilgrim](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grey_Pilgrim)

And I'm now significantly more concerned about him, and how powerful he is.

### *Forrest*

To be fair, I don't think Cat would be a problematic ruler in Tolkien verse, since Creation itself would not see to altering an entire country just because the ruler was a bit morally ambiguous when deciding to protect her home and people. So there probably would not have been a conflict in that case. But alas, Creation in this case is geared to try and force a people down one of two roads.

### *Antoninjohn*

The rule of three for the story, 1. No raising cities 2. No Angels 3. No killing prisoners and accept surrender  
Break these rules and Callow has the story

### *Forrest*

Side note: They just made a Story altering deal, that only one of them is in any real position to enforce.

### oldschoolvillain

While it's true that Catherine isn't in a position to really enforce the terms of the deal on the Crusade, consider this – when has breaking a deal with a Queen or High Lord of the Fey courts EVER gone well for someone? Also, if the Crusade breaks

the rules, they'll lose a lot of their Heroic support, and Catherine will be fully justified in emptying every hell that Masego can get his hands on to drive them out of Callow.

*Forrest*

I actually meant the other way around. Catherine can enforce her side to obey the agreement, as the queen. Meanwhile, the Grey Pilgrim may be a popular cultural hero, but he practically even said himself he can't make the nobles behave in response to Cat's abdication offer.

*Jabbertalky*

Erraticerrata:. 'tit' when you wanted to write 'it'

*Anon*

I'm perhaps a little confused at the recurring Name usage (capital-tense) going on by the opposition for Cat as the Black Queen. Does no one save Black and maybe Malicia not realize that said Name didn't come to her?

(Sidenote: Hopefully Malicia can't hear this conversation, or Cat's a goner)

Aside from that...it's sad to see that even the most reasonable 'Good' element in the pilgrim refuses to see any large-scale compromise with leaving Callow and preventing Procer from divvying up the spoils. Procer getting a pass for being 'good' leaves a bitter taste on the tongue.

But on some level, the refusal makes sense due to the Named still being a thing (which influences more than any normal man or woman could), but at the same time, if you think a thing is destined to fail, you'll usually end up self-fulfilling that prophecy.

I'm a little uncertain on Cat's plan of 'regulation' – does she mean something akin to 'self-policing', in that all sides police each other to avoid excessive GOOD or EVIL actions? That seems like a terrible idea, from an outside point of view, and one that GOOD would have a huge difficulty in agreeing to.

*Unmaker*

Having rebellious underlings is normal for rulers of Praes. Admittedly, not many of them want to overthrow Praes itself, as opposed to rule it, but Malicia has probably already predicted Cat's attitude anyway.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

It hit me that Arcadia opting out of Summer/Winter is a prologue of creation opting out of good/evil.



*Darkening*

Hm. I suppose it did get mentioned that arcadia and creation were created as mirrors to each other, and masego speculated that they still might. Should be interesting to see if that actually pays off somehow.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Yes. I was just realizing what that could mean. I should have caught it earlier.

*Zach*

Yeah, including the fact that the one to jump the gap was from the Evil-equivalent side and did so through morally questionable means, which is a decent parallel to Catherine's efforts.

*WuseMajor*

If that's an example of the kind of person sworn to Compassion, I think I can see why they're supposed to be the most dangerous.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Where did it mention that he was sworn to Compassion? Also, when did it say that the Heroes of Compassion were the most dangerous? Not saying you're wrong, I just can't remember these events.

*Decius*

Crusade finds the demon, Cat fights the demon with them because the demon is worse than the Crusade, Crusade goes home because the Grey Pilgrim refuses to gain an advantage from the Callowan hosts fighting a demon.

*lennymaster*

You forget he survived 60 years fighting the Diabolists of Calernia. I think he is just a mite too practical for that.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I dunno,  
I might try for a nice win...but force my back to the wall, and I'd Bonfire it up and worry about a unified Calernia hating me later. Still don't get why critically weakening Procer's defenses versus the Ratlings would be bad. Procer will hate the one responsible for it? How's this a negative when they're at the head of an invading Crusade already?

Cat's playing this like Procer/The Crusade are unbeatable heavies...but only if you play by Good's rules. Armies are made of soldiers. Soldiers are people. Convince those soldiers they are allowing their families and loved ones to be slaughtered whilst they're serving in a foreign war, and find out what the term desertion means.

Just getting a little tired of the new soft Cat. Escalation and double-down on some more escalation got her this far. She doesn't have the mindset, the skillset, or the disposition for clever statesmanship. She's a warlord. What she wants to be is immaterial. Killing her enemies until there's no one left to disagree with her philosophical position is her strength.

### *RandomFan*

That's evil's trap. You escalate, and good escalates back- and the thing is, good's closer to united. The heroes might be no saints, but the Good nations seem inclined to cooperate if things go sideways bad enough- even when not, the heroes don't engage in petty backstabbing, it seems, with the exception of bard. Good isn't united, but they can put away the swords when push becomes shove, it seems.

Because of this, and because your Evil associates are as likely to see you as a threat as an asset, Good can escalate farther, even without the inconvenience your Evil peers can cause.

The more harm you cause, the more likely your story ends in an unmarked grave. The heroes won't back down for mere threats, unless you bunker down or are an endless horde, it seems. And note that even the dead king doesn't seem to have been doing much on the offensive- he's just holed up and takes down whatever heroes come for him, most days.

The Tower's tried escalation for generations, Triumphant herself was a master of it- but it ends the same way. Everyone bleeds, and you haven't built anything of value for it. You don't bleed less for it, either- no, you bleed the most. Even her own kingdom says "May she never return"- for all she was a champion, they don't want her back.

That says something. I don't know what, but I don't think being the queen of escalation lets you win, not alone.

Besides, she hasn't locked off a lot of routes to escalation. Fae are still fair game for both sides. Her resurrection trick, if she pulls it again, is probably more dangerous than wielding an angel-feather sword but also fair play. She never agreed not to use goblinfire. All said, she agreed to not do stuff she wouldn't do anyways save from utter desperation in exchange for never having to deal with angels. Angels would have been an

inevitability, otherwise- good sees no issue with using them, and of course they could.

In short, she won the negotiation. Sure, the Grey Pilgrim probably got as much as he could of what he wanted out of it too, but that's not losing.

You can't beat good down. That's just not possible- Black pointedly avoids that kind of escalation for a reason. If Cat hadn't grown up and tried to focus on something other than "win", she'd just be the next Triumphant- may she never return.

*Dwwolf*

Double post ?

*Mr. Nobody*

Found it: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/05/02/interlude-crusaders/>

I think he just put the wrong link on the table of contents.

*Hardric62*

Late to the answer, but... I can bet this measures won't take for long... Posterity is talking about Uncivil Wars, after all...

[shieldredblog](#)

It occurs to me that as a Hero of Mercy, Absence may be the Grey Pilgrims weakness.

Nothing alleviates suffering like having never existed at all.

*Onyavar*

"Am I not allowed to grieve the sight of a child who mutilated her own soul trying to make a better world?" he asked.

That brought up the tears.

Especially when I think that Cat will have mutilated her soul further when she is done with his army.

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## Interlude: Crusaders

*"There is no absolute virtue to peace. To avoid war out of petty fear is the exact same moral failure as waging war in name of it."*

– Clément Merovins, fourth First Prince of Procer

"They're up to something," Princess Rozala of Aequitan said.

She had, that very morning, received a second report on enemy movements that baffled her. Unlike Amadis, who already saw their victory as writ in the sky and was positioning to benefit from the aftermath, the only daughter of Aenor of Aequitan had made deep study of their enemy. Oh, the Prince of Iserre was not a fool. Ambitious beyond reason, perhaps, but no imbecile. He'd be much easier to deal with if he were. Yet he only ever saw war as the pursuit of political advantage through steel, and that blinded him to the nature of the foe before them. Rozala was an Arlesite of ancient line, and her kind were as distinguished with the sword as they were with verse. Her people had fought and fought well in almost every major war since the founding of the Principate, and the Malanzas had been famed as generals long before they rose to royalty. Which was why this 'Army of Callow' worried her. The Legions of Terror, in their current incarnation, were admittedly one of the finest military machines on Calernia – second in lethality perhaps only to the army of Helike, though much more numerous. Yet that was not what she was facing: more than half the Army of Callow was foot from that same kingdom, and more worryingly under the Black Queen's banner rode *knights*.

Prince Papenheim had taught her mother a bloody lesson in the dangers of engaging heavy cavalry with light, at the Battle of Aisne. Rozala had no intention of repeating the mistakes that forced Aenor of Aequitan to drink mandrake extract. She had seen the aftermath of the Regal Kindness, and it was neither of those things.

"Praesi are known to have a certain low cunning," Prince Arnaud of Cantal mused. "No doubt they've some sort of parlour trick in the works."

Rozala eyed the middle-aged man with open distaste. The man was the living justification of every prejudice about Alamans arrogance, and she would have disliked him for that even if her agents had not learned about his... proclivities. She was no Lycaonese prude, but someone taking a knife to that man's cock would have been a boon to Creation.

"We underestimate the Empire at our own risk," Princess Adeline of Orne sharply replied.

Rozala inclined her head in thanks and the other young woman offered the ghost of a smile in return. Adeline had already hinted that she was not so securely under Amadis' thumb as the prince seemed to believe, through subtle intermediaries. Of all the royals to have crossed the Stairway, the Princess of Aquitan was fondest of this one. Adeline had ruled Orne for less than a year now, ascending to the throne after the assassination of her brother at the hands of what was speculated to be the Assassin himself. The princess understood the dangers of tangling with the Tower better than most. She also despised the First Prince to the bone. The Augur had, after all, not seen fit to give warning about her beloved brother's coming death. Cordelia Hasenbach, they were learning, could kill simply by staying silent.

"It is unseemly for women of your standing to quake at the coming of the Carrion Lord's bastard," Prince Arnaud sneered.

Rozala's lips thinned. There were persistent rumours that the Black Queen was the villain's illegitimate daughter, though she put no more stock in those than the speculation she was some distant Fairfax spared after the Conquest and reared in secret over the decades that followed.

"It is unseemly for a 'man' of your standing to be such a relentless jackass, Arnaud," Princess Adeline replied with a lightness that belied the anger beneath it. "But you don't hear us snipe about it, do you?"

Rozala sighed almost inaudibly. The Princess of Orne needed to learn to leash her temper, else they would eat her alive in the Highest Assembly. An ally this easy to bait was more liability than grace. She would have intervened to soothe the tempers, but Amadis finally decided to grace them with his presence. He was not, she saw, alone. The kindly wizened face of the Grey Pilgrim was a welcome addition to this council, but the other silhouette flanking the Prince of Iserre was not. Laurence de Montfort was short and skinny, for so infamous a woman, and her creased cheeks were showing the mottled spots of creeping age. They did nothing to detract from the austere presence of the Saint of Swords. The Princess of Aquitan stiffened, though she forced her shoulders to loosen before anyone could notice. Not royalty could ever be comfortable in the presence of the Regicide.

"I do hope my lateness caused no offence," Amadis Milenan affably smiled. "It occurred to me that an infusion of wisdom to this council would benefit us all, hence my company."

The smile was a little too broad, Rozala decided, to be entirely truthful. Had the heroes strong-armed him into inviting them along? They had certainly begun wielding their influence more strongly since the crossing. For all that the Saint was the one who brought sharp discomfort, it had been the Grey Pilgrim that brought terms back from the failed attempt at diplomacy in the

south. The man was much more influential than his easy manners suggested.

"We are honoured to be offered seat at his table," the Pilgrim smiled, inclining his head.

"Honoured, yes," the Saint drawled, a hard smile splitting her face.

The Regicide had been exceedingly clear about her low esteem for royalty as a whole, which cast interesting light to the rumours she'd once been the lover of Klaus Papenheim. It would take someone with stomach as steady as the Iron Prince's to bed that one, Rozala silently conceded. For all they knew all there was down there was more swords, though for a Lycaonese that might just be spice in the wine.

"No offence at all," Prince Arnaud smiled brightly. "We always welcome the advice of those Chosen by the Heavens."

Rozala hid her derisive snort behind a sip of wine as the heroes and their glorious leader took their seats.

"Princess Rozala was expressing worries about Praesi scheming," Princess Adeline spoke up.

More to break the heavy silence than anything else, the ruler of Aquitan suspected. She did not grudge her the distraction.

"Ah," the Grey Pilgrim smiled gently. "Always a subject worthy of interest, yet I would caution you that it is not Praesi we face. It would be a mistake, Your Graces, to believe the army to the south anything but Callowan."

Rozala disliked the notion of taking military advice from priestly vagrant, however high his repute, but the circumstances warranted prudence. It was a villain that led the Army of Callow, and she knew little of their breed compared to the old man.

"Callowan she may be, but her throne was built on sand," Amadis languidly added. "Her grasp on the kingdom remains shallow. Duchess Kegan Iarsmai has already replied to my envoys."

Rozala hid her surprise. For all of Amadis' swagger, she'd fully expected the House of Iarsmai to remain aloof from the crusade until a clear winner could be discerned. The Prince of Iserre's smile broadened as he looked at her, the unspoken gloating ringing loud.

"Though she will not declare for us openly at the moment, she was willing to send a detachment of the Watch to join our forces," Amadis revealed. "They've already begun to sail across the Silver Lake, and I expect they will swell our ranks in time for battle."

The Arlesite princess frowned, displeased she'd been cut out of negotiations involving military matters.

"And how many of the Watch did she pledge?" she asked.

"A full thousand," Amadis said. "Easily worth thrice that number, if the old histories are to be believed."

*And what did you have to promise that Deoraithe fox to get them, I wonder?* Rozala thought. Amadis Milenan had been rather generous of late in partitioning the kingdom he expected her to conquer for him.

"You really should have been smacked more often as a child, Amadis," the Saint of Swords idly said. "Gods know a few bruises would have done wonders for your character."

The silence in the tent was so absolute it was nearly palpable. Rozala smothered a very unseemly grin.

"Pardon?" the Prince of Iserre coldly said.

"You heard me just fine, you repulsive little wart," Laurence de Montfort said. "Kegan Iarsmai fought a campaign with the Black Queen less than a year ago and you think that, what? Your viper tongue befuddled a *Duchess of Daoine*? That house was putting Praesi heads on pikes back when your ancestors were shitting in their own huts. She's playing you like a spectacularly dim fiddle."

Amadis Milenan's face purpled with fury. It was unlikely, Rozala mused with dark delight, that anyone had insulted him this bluntly even once in his life. The Grey Pilgrim cleared his throat.

"Laurence," he reproached.

The Saint of Swords sighed.

"Fine," she said. "The honourable Prince of Iserre is displaying the intellectual faculties of an *averagely* dim fiddle."

The Grey Pilgrim looked pained.

"What my blunt-spoken friend means, Your Grace," he intervened, "is that Catherine Foundling belongs to a very specific breed of villainy. The nature of her Bestowal is what my people call a *thresher*. One who separates the wheat from the chaff. She will earn great enmity, but also great loyalty. And she has fought by the side of Duchess Kegan before, against common foe."

Rozala was honest enough to admit that watching the Prince of Iserre having to swallow his cold fury to avoid beginning a feud with heroes was making her evening. Perhaps even her month.

"The Duchess bargained well," the prince stiffly said. "And extracted great concessions in rights and territory. The Queen of Callow has naught to offer of equivalent value."

So, land had been sold. Rozala wondered how far he'd gone. Had Laure been offered up? Denial almost certainly, it was the old dagger the Fairfaxes had kept pointed at Daoine's belly in case the Deoraithe began talking of independence again. The Princess of Aquitan quietly cleared her throat, gaining everyone's attention.

"I'll be blunt," she said. "The Black Queen should scare everyone in this tent. She has displayed surprising restraint so far, but this is the same woman who crucified a few hundred mages after the Doom to make a point. We are cornering her, and she has a reputation for baring her fangs when cornered."

Rozala sipped at her wine, drawing out her point in a reminder that in matters military it was her word that counted most.

"We marched out believing she'd come after the first bait we set out," she continued. "The failure of the trap at Harrow makes it very clear we were wrong in our assessment. And that is without considering she not only knew about the overtures to Baron Darlington, but turned that debacle into an offer of her own. I expected she scares the Duchess a lot more than we do, at the moment. Any contribution from her is suspect."

*I'm not going to let you forget the Darlington failure any time soon, Amadis,* she thought, smiling at the Prince of Iserre. *So much for the north rising up behind the Black Queen.*

"Making terms with the Enemy is always a fucking blunder," the Saint of Swords said. "Mark my words, the moment she feels the noose tightening the usual horrors are coming out. You should have smoked her then and there."

"She spoke truth, Laurence," the Grey Pilgrim stated, and there was iron beneath the mildness. "Do not gainsay me on this. I find it deeply shameful that any of us would hesitate at an opportunity to lessen the bloodbath, no matter the provenance."

"You've always been soft, Tariq," the Saint said. "The only thing I agree on with this band of clucking hens is that the east is in need of a good cleansing. The rot will only spread if we spare the flame. We go in half-hearted, and you know we'll have to come back in twenty years. Assuming we're still around."

Something pale and cold roiled in the Grey Pilgrim's eyes. Rozala felt the taste of a storm against the roof of her mouth. It unsettled her enough she spared no irritation for having been called a hen.



"You should know better," the hero quietly said, "than to question how far I will go to spare this world pain. You, of all people."

The old woman looked uncomfortable, then chastised. Rozala's eyes sharpened with interest. Of all the Named gathered under the banner of her army, these two were known to be first among equals. That they would quarrel at all had interesting implications. Until now, the politics of the heroes had been utterly opaque to her save for the fact that the other Levantines took the Pilgrim's words as sacred writ. All of the Named had resisted attempts to induce them into a deeper relationship so far, but if this rift before her was exploitable there were... possibilities to keep in mind. Known ties to a Chosen would silence her brother's ambitions for good, no matter his schemes.

"Apologies," the Saint finally said. "You know my temper."

"Like a bear with a bad tooth," the Pilgrim fondly said, patting her hand. "Already forgotten. We are all worried about the young ones in the south."

Princess Adeline cleared her throat daintily.

"Apologies, Chosen," she said. "But if I may ask, are you speaking of the heroes marching for the Vales?"

"I was under the impression the remaining Calamities were expected to fold," Rozala added warily.

If the Red Flower Vales held, their position up north became exceedingly precarious. Their supply lines would be effectively impossible to maintain as soon as they passed Hedges, and the First Prince had indicated she would be *displeased* if the crusaders turned to foraging in Callow. The Arlesite princess wasn't going to starve her army out of fear of offending Hasenbach, but she'd also rather avoid kicking that nest of wasps for a while still.

"In matters of might, the Carrion Lord is outmatched," the Pilgrim agreed. "So, we suspect, is the Warlock."

The Saint snorted inelegantly.

"The Witch is from Brocelian Forest," she said. "What she learned, she learned from the Gigantes. And that lot ruled the roost while the Praesi were still busy figuring what cocks are for. She'll pulp his ass across the valley floor, if they go spell for spell."

"Young Hanno has already fought the Black Knight once," the Pilgrim smiled. "He will not repeat previous mistakes. Yet the

opponents are villains grown old, and this is a rare thing for a reason. It will not be an easy victory."

"The man is one of Ranger's toys," the Saint conceded. "And that ornery old bitch plays rough. He won't go down without making a mess."

The Levantine flicked an amused glance at his companion, but did not comment.

"We thank you for your guidance," Prince Amadis said calmly. "Yet I fear we have strayed from the purpose of this council. Princess Malanza was expressing worries, I believe?"

Rozala nodded.

"It's clear that the Black Queen is expecting to give battle on the outskirts of the Barony of Hedges," she said. "But I've been getting reports of her splitting up her host, and that honestly baffles me. We outnumber her by more than two to one. She should be the one attempting defeat in detail, not the one offering me that opportunity on a silver platter."

"She is barely more than a child," Prince Arnaud shrugged. "Blunders are to be expected."

And there went the only Alamans royalty in the tent, breaking his silence to offer idiocy.

"She's a girl that never lost a battle," Prince Amadis warned. "In matters of statecraft poor judgement is to be expected, but she is not unskilled at war."

"She could have gotten arrogant," Rozala admitted. "It's not uncommon in undefeated commanders, and that she was confident enough to offer limiting rules of engagement when so heavily outnumbered is telling. But I imagine the Exiled Prince and the Summer Court told themselves much the same right before she ripped out their guts."

"Though her nature is undeniably warped," the Grey Pilgrim said, "she struck me as remarkably clear-sighted in some regards. Not a woman prone to blind mistakes."

"There's a whole city of dead Callowans that begs to disagree," the Saint drawled.

"It is not only the children of the Heavens that can learn from their mistakes," the Pilgrim chided her. "She will be wary of being burned in that manner again."

"Perhaps she intends to gather her forces through the fairy gates," Princess Adeline suggested.

"We know there's a delay for journeying through Arcadia," Rozala replied, shaking her head. "And she can only take one host at a time. There are three columns marching towards us. Even if she timed it perfectly, she'd still have a third of her army in the wrong place when the battle begins. Which, to put it bluntly, she cannot afford if she wants even a shadow of a chance of winning."

"We know the Wild Hunt is sworn to her," Prince Arnaud said. "Perhaps she *can* make multiple gates."

"I can't dismiss that possibility out of hand," the Princess of Aquitan agreed. "But that still begs the question of *why* she'd split her forces in the first place. She has to know we'll be expecting gates to appear at our flanks and back when we engage. There would be no element of surprise, and that is half the advantage to be had with them. And if our foot moves quickly enough towards the gates, we could even keep her penned inside Arcadia. It is risking disaster for no gain I can discern."

"That is worrying," the Grey Pilgrim admitted. "I must see to the children, Your Graces, but I will seek guidance from Above on the matter. Perhaps a meaning to this can be divined."

Rozala hid her surprise. She'd been under the impression that future-telling was rare even among heroes, and often too vague to be of any practical use. The Augur was rumoured to be speaking in tongues half the time, and that Hasenbach was constantly struggling to turn her attention to threats instead of weather patterns. If the Grey Pilgrim could truly discern the workings of Fate, however, this was major advantage. It was irritating that such a thing would only now be revealed, but then Rozala was hardly in a position to chide the man for it.

"We will look forward to hearing your wisdom, Chosen," the Princess of Aquitan said.

The man rose, and bowed deep. He cast a look at the Saint, who smiled but shook her head. Rozala schooled her face into calm. She had an inkling that what would follow would not be pleasant. Silence followed in the wake of the departing Pilgrim, until the Saint of Swords sighed.

"He's a good man, you know," Laurence de Montfort said. "Likes to see the best in people."

"A-" Prince Arnaud began, but he was interrupted.

The Saint raked her fingers across the table, leaving deep gouges in the wood that no mortal fingers could have made. The sound was deafening, an ugly grind of steel.

"Shut the fuck up, you insignificant toady," the Saint said. "Now, Tariq chooses to believe in your moral fibre but I *know*

better. I know the wickedness that you crave, that sweet whisper of earthly power. There are some among you, even now, that believe holy war can be made tool of ambition."

The old woman smiled at them, cold and terrible and utterly indifferent to their survival.

"You will not disappoint this nice old man," she said. "You will keep to the terms, and not seek to work around them. And if you seek otherwise?"

The Saint barked out a harsh laugh.

"You might be under the delusion that the consequences of ripping you animals to pieces would give me pause," she mused. "Discard that notion, princelings. The only people I answer to are up Above, and they exactly what you are made of."

Laurence de Montfort rose to her feet, shrugging.

"Think of me as the angel on your shoulders," she suggested. "You know, the one that says 'be Good, my children, or I will *fucking dine on your entrails like an orc*.'"

The Saint of Swords smiled at them, wagging a finger.

"I think we have an understanding, don't we?"

No one nodded.

No one needed to.

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### [erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, so extra chapter in the usual tab! This one is titled "Court I", the first of a multiple POV arc set in the interim between Book III and IV.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What do you mean by "tab?" In the menu there's "Home", "Art, Maps, and Other", and "Table of contents." That's all. I don't see anything else this could refer to

### *Stormblessed*

Basically I expected nothing less from an interlude of our oncoming Heroes. Or "heroes". Brandishing threats and brutal murder is only heroic because they got Angels and Good and I can

really see Black's point about the unfairness of their reality during chapters like these.

### *Byzantine*

I have said it before and will say it again: Good is order and Evil is chaos.

They are just using the labels "Good" and "Evil" because the Heavens had a better PR guy.

### *sengachi*

I don't think that's quite accurate. Malicia has proven quite well that Evil can be order. And William proved quite well that Good can be chaos. (Also one of the main heroes literally flips a fucking Heaven-backed coin to decide his opponent's fate. Good is absolutely *\*not\** order).

I think what we see in this world is an absence of an actual force promoting good. At least, good as I'd see it defined. To me good is something which seeks to construct a world in which everyone is valued and cared for.

Evil in this world definitely can't be good because Evil in this world is all about personal accumulation of power. Black's ideals and goal might break the dichotomy of Good and Evil, but it won't actually make the world a better place in any meaningful sense. All he'll have succeeded in doing will have been concentrating power behind a new status quo, which will be no more beholden to people's good than what came before. Praes may no longer have to go to war on the regular if he has his way, but the world he seeks to create isn't one in which those in power have any material incentive to actually improve their citizens' lives.

(Framed this way I think we can make a pretty decent argument that Cat isn't actually a villain. She's actively decentralizing her power, doing the opposite of what Evil typically does. She's not Good ... but she's not Evil either).

And that brings us to Good. Good, I think, is retribution. And it is explicitly *\*not\** redress. It is payment and consequence for sins with no remedy or solution to improve for the future. There's no moderation to it, and no positive purpose. Unlike Evil it does recognize cruelty and injustice as, y'know, bad things. But it doesn't *\*do\** anything about that. It kills the people who perpetrate it, but that's barely even handling symptoms. There's certainly no attempt to address causes. It's an action movie's caricature of justice, in which the world is fixed by Bad People being Punished and Good People Triumphant, without any actual social change or serious contemplation of systemic problems.

The end result of which is a world in which the powerful spend their citizen's lives as currency, and one side revels in it while the other side chides them for reveling in it. And villains concentrate power and heroes kill villains and absolutely no one tries to make the world a better place. (Except Cat and maybe kind of Black). And everyone with power, hero and villain alike, gets to throw that power around as they see fit.

*Graeme Sutton*

Good in this world seems to be based purely on a Natural Law ethical framework. Nothing that we would recognize as utilitarianism or humanism seems to enter into it.

*TeK*

I personally would like to see Good that is redemption. To quote the line that sang true to me:

"There is not a single life I've taken I have not regretted," the Grey Pilgrim sighed. "No matter the deeds to their name. To inflict death is to end the possibility of redemption, and that is the greatest gift the Gods have granted us."

And people are so often disappointed with it, because most Heroes think that Good is about retribution. Half the problem you got with Villains doubling down, opening grimuars and summoning demons is because they KNOW, that they will get no second chance, only gallows. Not a shred of Compassion and Mercy, just Justice and Contrition. That is why so many Villains rage against Heavens. The sheer fucking arrogance of many Heroes, to think that because someone is not on the same side as you, they can't even be considered humans, but should be put down like rabid dogs. I would balk at that too.

*Charlie Hegarty*

I think firstly that Good in this story does to an extent fit your definition of good but also that the you are putting somewhat of an unfair burden on the forces of Good, this is medieval setting and as such isn't going to reflect modern opinion because that has evolved over time.

I would say that there is a positive moral value to the prevention of evil acts, in this chapter the 'brandishing of threats and murder' is not heroic only because they have Angels on their side but because it is done to prevent what we would consider war crimes. The positive purpose of Good is the creation of a world where less atrocities happen. I would agree that heroes should do more, but that stopping Evil acts from happening is still good; it is hard after all to have that better future where everyone is valued and

cared for when there is a Tyrant in charge who will enable the destruction of their own city. The world might not be fixed by 'Bad People being Punished' but it is made better.

Also we have only seen martial heroes who are fighting villains as this story is about a villain and consequently those fighting her. Heroes chosen by the choir of mercy who never take a life probably do acts that aren't focussed on mitigating the damage done by villains but on making the world a better place. Cordelia for example, has for a long time been working on accords with the hope of unifying Procer more, so that there would be less civil wars, which certainly sounds to me like trying to address systematic issues within her country, but this is not her story this is the story of a villain.

*TeK*

Did I hurt poor Heroes itty-bitty feelings? Maybe I am unfair to Good and putting too much on it. The thing is, what's the difference between Good and Evil then? Both Cat and Black "Punished Bad People". Black also invaded country to break them from perpetual circle of countless wars, saving many, many lives. Oh muh God, he's a Hero))) That's the point of Good, that it strives to be better. The moment they slackened at this quality, they are nothing more than glorified butchers. I know there are good heroes out there. As of yet, Gandalf is my favorite Hero, hands down. Really excited to see someone sworn to Mercy or Compassion. But do you know, what I would've expected someone sworn to Mercy do? Go into the thick of fighting on the continent (Callow), and help everyone, like a red Cross or Doctors without Borders. Where are all of them? None even came with a Crusade. Also, you do not Prevent anything, if you only React.

Yeah, there are ONLY martial heroes. Even technically non-martial Heroes do only fighting. I've been whining earlier that there are little to none Non-Combat Names, like say, Inventor, Architector, Plower, Chef, at best we got vague governmental Names, say Good King, Hierarch, they still fight, just in non-direct way, like Jupiter is still a bloodthirsty ork, even if she found a unique way to indulge her passion.

Lastly, Cordelia is NOT Named. Me thinks it's why she's so much more far-sighted.

*Jago*

War crimes ....

Exactly how mind reaping a whole city and making an army of all its inhabitants isn't a war crime?

You have realized that that means making child soldiers of all the underage people of that city?

I am not speaking only of the Lone Swordsman attempt, but of what has already been done in the past.

Or almost anything the Wandering Bard do? Pushing for the realization of Akua weapons, manipulating the Free Cities war to slay a single Calamity and sacrificing people left and right to get that result?

Good (not capitalized) isn't the absence of Evil (capitalized), especially when Good use evil means to get that.

The definition of Good in this story is "our side".

Nothing more. All is allowed, no moral restraints, no doubts, anyone that isn't on that side is automatically an enemy and Evil.

Some individuals and some heroes are good and not only Good, but they seem to be exceptions, not the norm.

### *Byzantine*

I'm talking Order as in obeys the Laws set down by the Heavens vs Chaos where they obey no laws except their own – and even those only when they want to. It isn't quite the same as D&D chaos and order, but it makes a usable comparison.

The entire concept of "Good" and "Evil" are really "The gods should dictate our lives" versus "We should be able to do whatever we want." With an amendment that in the second case the gods won't be helping, either.

This makes Evil turn to using human means to do the impossible, which generally involves a horrific price. On the other hand Good gets to turn to the divine and get their aid to accomplish the impossible, letting them evade the human price. Instead they pay it by being obliged to follow the rules the gods above set down.

### *His Royal Madness*

I know this is really late but Catherine's phrase "Justifications only matter to the Just" is very accurate to the Heavens and Good. All the forms of Good are those who's forms of Justification and Justice align with an alien sense of right. The Angels are an alien form of Good that is distilled through Heroes they deem as aligned with their views on a human level. Even their actions and thoughts are on the extreme level of human acceptance.

### *Abrakadabra*



You Just dont get it. Good IS order. Divine order, which means divine hierarchy. Which means kneeling before the gods above and observing their rules and judgment. And Evil is chaos, because there is no divine order, no rules, no judgment.

AS an aside ever wondered why Bellerophon sides with the below? Because they refuse the divine hierarchy thats why.

*stevenneiman*

@Sengachi Hanno is actually one of the stronger arguments for Good being defined by order. He's not like two-face, flipping a coin because he craves the randomness of its results. He flips a coin because he knows the results of that flip to be decided by a higher power and genuinely believes that power capable of making better decisions than he could himself. Of course, from an outside perspective his attempt to escape responsibility by following orders doesn't work any better than it did at the Nuremburg trials.

What I would say is that Good is about community and social contract and Evil is about personal ambition, though both also have a lens of classic hero and villain roles in stories. These two forces have roughly the same conflict and roughly the same balance of pros and cons as in the real world, amplified, formalized, and distorted where stories clash with those broad ideals. Good has a regulating effect which can often prevent the most disastrous of individual behavior, but which can also prevent dissent against harmful social policies and convinces people that what they do is for a higher purpose even if it isn't actually helpful. Evil encourages people to do whatever they feel is appropriate, which leads to more of the worst kinds of people like Akua or Triumphant (may she never return) rising to power and not being checked because the system encourages their behavior, but at the same time no divine support to control others beyond what you can accomplish by your own means, which means greater personal freedom in most cases.

Where things get really nasty is in the recurring patterns. Almost every real conflict is driven by people who believe that they are in the right and that they could make the world better if they could just get the other side to get out of their way. Not necessarily healthy, but it's at least a paradigm which is focused on progress. In Calernia, conflicts are driven by the forces of narrative, which set up both sides for the spectacle of making them fight, and those forces are given reasons to fight almost as an afterthought. This not only robs conflict of any kind of purpose, but also precludes any kind of meaningful victory. Good triumphs over Evil because that's what the stories are about, but Good can

never win in such a way that there won't be a sequel. The horror isn't so much that Good and Evil have flawed ideologies (the real world has plenty of flawed ideologies but it isn't nearly as much of a mess as Calernia), it's that those ideologies can never be the real focus of conflict so much as the conflict itself.

The real world does occasionally see things like this, but they're fairly isolated cases compared to Calernia, because they need to be set up by malicious people rather than being the default state. Things like wars started because someone wants to profit from them or use them as a distraction from their own action, or artificial controversies created to hide the truth that everyone in the know recognizes. Despite their rarity these kinds of conflicts are often the most harmful and the most long-fought, and in Calernia they are happening constantly by divine mandate. The Gnomes might have escaped this by focusing their narrative on progress and on effectively managing threats, but there's not enough data on them to do more than speculate.

### *Metrux*

I myself think that Good is about control, because anyone who is truly Good follows the Heavens, no exception, since the ones who could be Hero or Villain are more grey than Good. While Evil is about freedom, but not free will, such as you can control someone else as long as you're capable of. You can see that both in the first prologue, in inverted roles, as in every heroic chapter.

The problem with Calernia, in the end, is not the beliefs, but I don't think it is the focus of the conflicts neither, it is the Gods Above. The Gods Below are horrible for what we've seen, but they never make you do anything, while the Gods Above are the ones making the conflict. Every Villain becomes a Villain because he wanted something, most of the time, something that Heavens took from them or wouldn't allow. Sure, most of those are selfish and even idiotic, but then we get people like Cat, Hakram and Hierophant: She wants to help her people, he wants to make his warlord's dream true, the last wants to learn all there is to learn. They basically don't want any confrontation, and doesn't this seem good, although it sits on the Evil side? The Heroes, on the other hand, are ALWAYS under Heavens mandate to vanquish Evil, their mission is always something antagonistic, while Villains want to achieve something, Heroes want to oppose something, most of the time something bad, but even then they are against, not in favour.

In the end Good is absolutely not good, and Evil isn't necessarily evil, but Good is what drives the necessary

conflict for ever single person, so as long as there is Heavens mandate there will be fights and deaths in this ridiculous scale, with only some pockets that have too much power to be draged into it, like hte Gnomes or Archer's place. Thus, my belief that it isn't the beliefs or the focus, but the Heavens that drive things to this state in the story. To be made clear, in the story only, not a religious discussion here.

*iwishiwasinger*

I agree with everything else but I think the most important thing in this story is the Gods. The gods in this story are claimed as black and white, but I have one question. Are there actually two factions of Gods or just one?

As you mentioned things are started usually out of greed and one of the best examples is that of war profiteers rather than politicians. I can't help but wonder if all the villains and heroes are being nothing more than faith generators and wondering if the Gods above and bellow aren't in the same office.

A seemingly off hand thought by Cat when she was sitting in the temple was that the congress never changes in size in the church. It never gets too much nor to little. Reasonably that means divine intervention. It makes very little sense though, because that would imply that the gods above were stronger and we know that villains are tired of losing because of black, but why haven't villains disappeared entirely? The villains can't be losing that bad because then why would there be any left after thousands of years of war. The Gods above are obviously cheating, because they keep helping out whenever they are close to losing, and while the same is similar to demons being summoned, they don't seem to ever help the villains in the long run unlike the angels.

The other thing that would suggest they are cheating is how many heroes pop up naturally the second there is one evil person nearby but as far as we know the villains only pop up near other villains and only to replace the last villains. There should be no reason that villains have survived this long, which can only mean that there is a reason that the angels will suddenly pull their punches when they are about to win and will stop the gods bellow from winning. It could also be that the angels have won long ago and that evil is only kept to fear monger. I could definitely imagine the temples saying things along the line of "your sister was killed by a demon because someone became a villain if you don't go to church and donate sizeable gold to the temple you are basically letting the demons win and killing her again."

I would love to see this as how the story goes. They could end up fighting the angels and just when they think they are going to lose the gods bellow are suddenly killed off and there with the biggest grimace is Lady Triumphant having returned after taking over hell and the last campaign being into heaven with Lady Triumphant, heroes, villains, Orcs, Ranger, and Catherine fighting the Gods themselves

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

I disagree!

More seriously we DO see examples of Good "winning" and Evil "winning" on more local scales. Keter, the Dead King and his Hell are an example of "Evil wins" in that area.

For Good we have the far off Elf country that spans a whole continent. And as we know, that type of elf is "Good", even if they commit a little light ethnic cleanse.

There does not seem to be any strong rubber band that keeps on resetting things to neutral. There are probably other forces, just like in our world, that prevent one nation or faction from overrunning everything. But it absolutely can happen!

*iwishiwasinger*

But they haven't seriously won, and if no one ever won on a local sense then there wouldn't be as much fear. If no one good people died in movies you wouldn't have to be afraid for you character's lives and the same could be said with countries. Yes there are the occasional victories but why hasn't one side completely won. You say that there does not seem to be any strong rubber band but there does with the angels that are extremely powerful and that aren't afraid of interfering heavily, but that just haven't finished off evil. The villains also seem to only be created in an enviromeant where there are other villains which also puts them at disadvantage too. So the question is why hasn't good won for good?

There is just enough victory that either side thinks they could win or at least benifit and make a difference.

Again Cat mentions that the church never gets too big or too small, which in this case seems to be a chekov's gun. It is weird for her too mention that. I also can't help but wonder who the bard is. The bard doesn't seem to be liked by good or bad, but is also seemingly

unstoppable. She might be someone else working against the system of continual war.

The small wins seem to encourage prayer on both sides. Maybe if it is not outright collusion, they might both understand the consequences of their side winning. Prayer would be trivialized as it is today. If you never have good you can't be truly evil and if you don't have true good you don't have evil.

It is also possible that we use the comparison of light and dark to show power. The greater the light the more noticeable the dark. The darker the night, the more bright the light shines. Maybe if good is about to win the angels can't interfere and must rely on heroes and maybe if evil is about to win the greater the cost the devil's charge. It would explain Triumphant's loss if the angels got a power boost because they were about to lose.

*stevenneiman*

I'm not really sure about the exact specifics, but what's important is that the driving force is the spectacle of conflict with the reasons for there to be conflict arising as a result. This is the opposite of the real world, where reasons for a conflict to exist generally spawn conflicts. For example, the leaders of Praes got stupid and greedy and attempts to check population growth always failed because Praes was an Evil nation meant to invade the Good nation of Callow, rather than Praes invading Callow because their rampant population growth created a need for more food. It's like that with every conflict in Creation. Whether its the work of Fate, one or both of the Gods Above or Below, or if there's no difference between the three, all that matters is a setup that by design and almost by definition has problems that will be addressed by war but never solved.

It's just like Cat's vision of the cycle of Summer and Winter victories. One side might win or lose, but the board always gets reset close enough to the same way, and the trivial coup-counting victories are meaningless compared to the fact that nobody can leave.

*RanVor*

I'd rather say Evil is change and Good is stagnation. Every Hero we've seen so far is all about upholding the status quo by any means necessary. The entire point of this crusade is bringing the situation back to square one.

*danh3107*

The Saint is a prickly, ornery old bitch. I like her

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Really wish we could see how the old lady tussle with Ranger, that is the stuffs of legends there.

*Antoninjohn*

The official reason for the Crusade is the greater breach, but who funded and ordered the greater breach, the First Prince for more territory, and Cat knows this through her murder coat and can tell everyone about it on a sworn Oath of truthfulness, along with Callow officially annexed by the Princes suddenly there "allies" won't be very happy and they loose high moral ground

*naturalnuke*

The money was from Malacia not The First Prince.

*SilentLurker*

Actually the money was from neither, and came from Akua's only family funds. Malicia's contribution was disguising exactly what was happening and allowing specific materials that only had a few purposes to reach Akua in secret, instead of being discovered and done away with. As for the First Prince? She probably had Augur tell her something was going to go down, and started setting up for the repercussions instead of stopping it. At the heart, all the really high rulers appear to be schemers of the worst sort, and equally capable of terrible deeds, just executing those deeds in slightly different ways due to differing resources.

*SilentLurker*

meant to say \*Akua's own, not \*only

*JackbeThimble*

Akua's family funds came from the First Prince.

*SilentLurker*

I don't remember this. Can you point me to the place in the books where this is? The only big thing I remember the First Prince funding in Callow was that first Rebellion.

*White*

It was in one of Malicia's conversations with either Black or Cat. Probs black. They were talking about how Cordilia was propping up Talia as revenge for Malicia using the Pravos bank to extend the Proceran civil war.

Malicia let it happen so that she could cut the money off in a coup de grace, but presumably no small amount of it was used to fund Akau's little plan.

[\*frolamiz\*](#)

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/closure/>

"It was the irony of it I could not resist," Tasia said. "All that gold you poured into Procer, turned to silver and sent to my coffers. You might as well have been funding me yourself."

*JackbeThimble*

The Saint of Swords appears to be living up to her illustrious surname.

So is this basically confirmation that Catherine's Name is now "The Black Queen".

[\*oldschoolvillain\*](#)

Not really. People have been calling her that for ages now, the Heroes might just be making that assumption, along with the rest of Calernia.

*JackbeThimble*

Yeah but WOG is that there are no 'Stealth' Names. What makes it a Name is the fact that it's what people call you. If she has a new Name then people should know what it is by now.

*Rook*

We did, however, have some foreshadowing through the augur that Cat is ill suited for a throne though, and on top of that she still has no aspects that would confirm a Name being set in stone.

A major war against literal legends crawling out from under rocks older than half the players is exactly the kind of thing that could engrave a different Name for her.

*SilentLurker*

Except this excludes Book One where Black and Cat talk about Goblin Names, and how if your culture, what a Name springs from, revolves around working in the shadows and being secretive, the Name could be hidden. It isn't a guarantee, but I'd be willing bet there are some Named out there that are completely unknown to be Named.

*naturalnuke*

"Jokes I'm the White Knight now!"

– Catherine faking another prophecy

*bobthebuilder*

specifically said the transition was interrupted when Black destroyed the deal between Cat and the Empress

*stevenneiman*

"Black Queen" is a common nickname which neither side has any reason not to use. Personally, I suspect that her technical Name is either Queen of Callow or she doesn't exactly have one. It already talked about Fall having a cancerous effect on her old Name of Squire, gradually eclipsing her other Aspects, so I wouldn't be surprised if the current state is that she doesn't exactly have a Name or Aspects at all at the moment, just a the power of Winter wrapped around the remains of her old Name.

Not that I can ever be 100% certain of anything with this story. I definitely think that there's a low but nonzero chance that her Name is Black Queen now.

*haihappen*

My suspicion is that she currently has \_NO\_ name attached to her, because Winter ATE the last one. Winter only ever takes, and gives nothing back. Didn't Cat say something like "there is not enough of the name left to qualify", which could have meant "left inside her" or "left at all". The Name Squire may be gone for good, at least until it is restored some way.

And the Name Black Queen was forming in Liesse, but that forming was interrupted by the Black Knight, when he destroyed the Folly. Maybe that forming was completed when she was crowned, but maybe not, and Queen is traditionally a "Good" Name, so it is unlikely that she ended up with that one.

My second-best personal theory is that she is currently on her path to "Queen of Winter" as her Name, but is consciously or subconsciously fighting it, because that would make all her domain into an icy wasteland.

First one, as stated above, is that as long as Winter has its claws so deep in her soul, she cannot get a Name.

Or, because of narrative imperative, some shit will go down and the truth will be revealed in a dramatic fashion.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Queen of Winter would just make her a god though.

[DroughtBringer](#)



Huh. Saint is... interesting.

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Erraticerrata, is it House of Ismail or house of Iarsmai? It was Iarsmai thorought the entirety of the last book, so I thought I'd ask.

*Rook*

The Saint has so little subtlety it makes Cat almost seem refined. If there isn't enough vitriol in their first conversation to create a second wasteland, I would be very surprised.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

It'll be great.

[Walter](#)

Saint seems like the other side of the Black coin. Like, Black is enraged that the world never lets the villains win. Saint is enraged that the heroes victories never 'stick'. Every time they put the east to the sword they have to come back and do it again a generation later.

It feels like this is the hero, above all others, who Cat must strike down. I have a presentiment that if she wins she'll try to burn her victory into the world in horrific fashion. Kill all Orcs and Gobilns or something similarly hideous.

*Graeme Sutton*

Something like... 'kill them all and let god sort them out.'?

[vuthuha912](#)

I find that Black and Saint are the same in their opinion of Evil. Black hates Evil, everything about it, the backstabbing, the devil summoning, the if-I-am-on-fire-then-so-is-everybody-else attitude, he wants to kill them off the stop it. Maybe Saint can do it for him when he is busy at Vale. Black might even help Saint deal with the Stupid Evil. He might die for it but honestly, he does not seem to care. The exact reason that the entire Akua mess happen is that Black wasn't forceful enough. He is too lenient and too willing to compromise for his friend. I swear if you had given somebody 20 years to change their minds, show them a way out, give them as many chances as possible and they still didn't change their side then we have to accept the fact that they will never change and deal with it accordingly. Sure, they will fight back and it will be bloody but it is better

to do it when we can still recover than right before the fight for survival.

My gosh, 40 f\*cking years, and the result is the 2 c\*nt on the Ruling Council and Akua. How many 40 years do you have in a lifetime? How much longer do we need to wait for these people to have a change of heart? Never, I will tell you.

### oldschoolvillain

"She'll pulp his ass across the valley floor, if they go spell for spell."

Ha. Ha ha. Aha.

Funny thing about Warlock – he didn't get his sobriquet by going "spell for spell" with his old mentor. He got it by being clever, and arranging his enemy's destruction without the application of such brute force. True, The Witch might be a vastly superior spellcaster than Warlock (I doubt it, Word of God had Warlock as the greatest living sorcerer in Calernia in Liesse III or IV), but if she whips him in their first encounter, he'll open up their second encounter with a chunk of hell big enough that even he can't destroy it. In the case of his defeat, it was outright stated that he knows more of the hells than pretty much anyone in Calernia – dropping her into one or ripping open a Lesser Breach to introduce a few demons to the Crusade would be right up the Praesi alley.

That said, these guys seem competent. But making a very big mistake when they say that Black is doomed because Hanno is stronger than him. Black has never found victory through raw strength. He's done it by being careful and by not playing fair. And when he's got an army in front and behind him, with a general greater than Juniper and a pair of old bats like Ranker and Sacker behind him . . . this'll be one to remember.

### DroughtBringer

Greater than Juniper? I'd disagree, I'd say that The Woes (and company) replace The Calamities (and company) by building off of what came before and becoming something more. Juniper wins. That's what she does, and the more tactics she sees the more wells of knowledge she has to draw from.

Although others may have more of a legend to them, I think that The Woes are set up to surpass the Calamities in every way.

### *SilentLurker*

Grem One Eye is largely acknowledged as the single most competent tactician on Calernia, with even Black, who can apparently plan for twenty years ahead with little difficulty, and it took a memory carrying Hero as old as the Dead King and a prophet to throw a wrench in the works, saying he can't match Grem. Juniper is excellent, but tacticians, unlike regular soldiers who start to get weaker

as time goes on past a certain point, only get better with experience until they either start losing their minds or retire. Juniper might match Black if she has a good day, but she's still a few years from being able to really stand equal to Grem. Juniper also isn't a Woe, and neither is Grem. Both are mortal, and it's also worth noting the last orc before Hakram to come close to a name was Grem, and with his skill set, there's only really one type of name he could have gotten.

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Warlock is probably far more talented as a spellcaster alright. I get the impression the Witch has more raw power though and probably a solid background in enchanting from the Gigantes. The idea of the two going directly head to head seems off to me though. Warlock isn't one for direct spellcasting and witches in folklore tend to be more about curses, rituals, summoning and potions, not fireballs and lightning bolts to the face. It would be hilarious to see the two try and constantly one up the other with clever spellcasting tricks though. "Fool, you are now under my control!"

"That was just an illusion with a rebound spell. It is in fact you who is under my control!"

"I knew you'd do that which is why I'm wearing this amulet of rebound spell rebounding!"

"I knew you'd know I'd do that so I actually cast an illusion on the... ect"

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

So basically your average DnD munchkin sessions?

*Engineer*

Oh that would be a treat! However EE said Warlock would go all out before the end of the series and this strikes me as the perfect time for that to happen.

[sengachi](#)

Nah. It's totally gonna be saved for Triumphant returning.

*SilentLurker*

WOG that I remember is that Warlock is actually just in the Top 5 on Calernia, though this might be because those five have never gone head to head instead of being a statement that he isn't the best.

*criptus*

iirc, WOG is that Warlock is in the top 5 in Calneria, not number one.

*criptus*

Yeah, Warlock is number 3: "Warlock is the third mage in that top five, and your two guesses are on the list."

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Well the top one has to be the Dead King, but then whose the second? One of the Gigantes?

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

Assuming Team Good knows their stuff the Witch is presumably the 2nd best.

- 1) Dead King
- 2) Witch
- 3) Warlock
- 4) ???
- 5) ???

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Looking at the oppossiton, all I can think is "Oh dear, Cat's going to eat them alive.". Heroes aside, I can see why an upcoming battle is named The Prince's Graveyard with this pack of morons in charge.

*Darkening*

Yeah, the one princess seems relatively competent, but running a war by committee seems like it's going to end horribly. Especially if the watch is coming and ready to backstab them.

*Rook*

From the Heroes attitude toward the nobles, I almost wonder if the Prince's Graveyard will be all Cats doing.

The Saint is about as softhearted as forged steel with all the subtlety of Ranger, and she almost mirrors the Choirs in how severe her judgement is in anything she doesn't see as strictly Good. I can see her fighting a battle against every side at the first hint of her lines being crossed, since she's made it abundantly clear that she's not on Procer's side. She's on the side of the Gods Above and just about nothing else.

I don't see the pilgrim being any less severe when push comes to shove either. You don't command respect – not request, but \*command\* respect while her temper is flared up – from someone like the Saint by collecting bottle caps. Something tells me

that the iron in kindly old grandpa's eyes is as sharp as any razor when he bares it.

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

Yeah, just because its the Prince's Graveyard doesn't mean that Cat's gonna come out ahead. It might mean bad things for the Princes, but it sounds like Saint wants to kill them all as it is. Her nickname is Regicide! Look their chances of survival probably go up the more complete and total their defeat. If they win there is about a 100% chance they manage to piss off Saint.

*Rook*

Pretty long shot, but if the Pilgrim/Saint were so inclined it would be one of the only ways to actually flip Cat over to Good. Win against her first, and offer terms to forcibly keep Procer out of Callow in exchange for switching sides. Presented with an option to keep Callow safe when the alternative is likely death, there's actually very little holding her back from taking the offer (albeit mostly in Name, since she's all about Callow in the first place).

Her Name is up in the air, she only gives a shit about Callow, Adjutant only gives a shit about her, Masego only gives a shit about research, Archer gives no shits about anything, and Thief leans toward Heroics in the first place. She's estranged from the Tower and Black at the same time, and Callow in general has no inherent Evil inclinations. Kegan is probably more comfortable on the side that puts Praesi heads on pikes, and appeasing the Hunt has never been the issue so much as keeping power over them. Even the fifteenth is more bound to her than Praes at this point.

It suits the type of outcome the Pilgrim is looking for as well, since it's essentially a chance for Redemption of not just one Villain but most of her massive retinue and the entirety of the nation at the same time. A far less bloody way of putting a Heroic ruler on the throne – without murdering the current one or destabilizing the country.

*Unmaker*

@Rook (just in case this doesn't indent)  
Your reasoning looks sound... but I'm not seeing that actually happen. This is, after all, Practical Guide to Evil. Redemption just doesn't seem like it would fit in there.

*Rook*

Yeah it's a real long shot. Title of the serial kind of kills it though lol you're right

*TeK*

Who knows? Maybe the first rule of Practical Evil is: don't be Evil? Given a world where Good is ordained to win, seems like a working strategy.

*Ashen Shugar*

Practical Evil is to run a protection racket until you've managed to buy up a bunch of legit, profitable businesses, then go squeaky clean. I don't think it's completely out of the picture for Cat to stay in a winter frozen transient name state until everything is almost settled, then jumps into a "Good" name for the final climb up the tower.

Or maybe, she climbs the tower, settles everything, then finally transitions in "Dread Empress the Kindly". Then everyone in Praes goes "Huh?" as their jaw drops. ; )

*Atypical Gult*

Actually, that would make things easier for Cat, for if the Saint kills the Princes, Cat can truthfully tell Malicia that she did not have any hand in the death of the two Princes who she was supposed to keep her alive. It's not like Malicia asked her to save them, just merely not kill.

Considering how Cat's luck though, I expect that this would not happen precisely for that reason.

*Theoretically\_human*

"and they exactly \_\_\_\_ what you are made of."

I Think you \_\_\_\_\_ a word there.

great chapter EE

[oldschoolvillain](#)

"And they [know] exactly what you are made of" I think, was supposed to be the sentence.

*Darkening*

Y'know, for a moment I felt that last bit would be out of character for an angel to say, and then I remembered what angels are like in this setting. I could totally see one gutting someone for misbehaving.

*nipi*

Yeah. What happened when you summoned an angel of Judgement? Oh right everyone deemed to have sinned dies or something like that

*DD*

I am Team Evil all the way. Not a Stupid Evil fan, but I came weary of fantasy's constant forcing of "good" victories, even when an idiot can pick out the plot holes and pick out the obvious reasons the heroes should have lost. This serial let's me dance upon their graves.

That said, I am quite liking this Saint of Swords, though not enough to want her to survive the Calamities or Woe.

[\*ahd\*](#)

The Saint of Swords may possibly be able to see peoples' actual intentions and desires.

(Which, yeah, explains the general crankiness. I would be crankier than that.)

Outside chance she'll take one look at the Foundling and defect to join the Woe.

*Rook*

There's no way the relationship between Cat and the Saint ends in anything but someone getting steel shoved through their throat (figuratively speaking, considering at least one has already survived a beheading)

The Saint seems to be wholly on the side of Good, which means she's likely not one to tolerate the petty bullshit Procer will try to pull using the name of Good. Unfortunately, it also makes her nearly irreconcilable with anyone even superficially related to the Gods Below.

I don't see her as a sympathethetic/finding common grounds type of character so much as, 'well, at least the psychopath is consistently brutal to everyone'

[\*ahd\*](#)

Never seen a pair more suited to playing Good Hero, Bad Hero.

Now if only I could be certain which of them was which. (:

*Fern*

All other things equal (and they are, i believe; Cat's going to have superior leadership and unit cohesion, the Princes multiple

have superior numbers) this battle's going to come down to ability to react to fulcrums and manipulation of story. Cat has the obvious advantage there, of course, but she's going up against the Grey Pilgrim, but he's hamstrung by the Princely committee, but he's got enough influence to change their minds, but will it be enough to change Princess General's mind, etc. etc. etc.

This is going to be VERY interesting

*Dany*

Will it, though? Procer isn't led by Names. That strikes me as a major strategic advantage going against someone like Black or Cat, who seek to manipulate the story. The un-Named aren't really part of the story the same way a Named is.

It could be that Cat defeats the Names but doesn't defeat Cordelia.

*DD*

Cat, for all the "unit cohesiveness" you cite, is ready to stab her nominal allies in the back for the greater good of Callow. I have too much respect for the Calamities and Malicia to believe they aren't at least somewhat aware of that. Cue Xanatos Gambit Roulette. This could easily turn into a huge mess for Team Evil, and maybe Team Good as well.

*Fern*

Unit Cohesiveness i.e. well drilled troops with excellent leadership, which Cat has left mostly up to Juniper.

As far as the Gambit Pileup is concerned, I think Cat was only really willing to betray her allies if it meant Callow was completely spared this and any other proceran invasion for the foreseeable future. Aside from that, she's tried pretty closely to everyone in command; I imagine Juniper trusts her enough to know that she won't raise banner against the tower w/o good reason, the Woe all believe in her in their own way (I won't say for certain until we get a Thief POV, ofc), Talbot isn't going to betray the only Callowan power in the middle of a war, and the Daoine are a bit too smart/aware of their own limitations to turn on Cat at this point. If there's any betrayal, it's going to come from the East, and we've seen the one obvious point of failure there (Praesi gold in Callowan coffers).

Malicia's the one to watch in these next few chapters; how she decides to handle Procer is going to play a large part in where Cat ends up at the end of the story.



*goliath1303*

That was a LOT of "buts" in one sentence.

*SilentLurker*

"The man is one of Ranger's toys," the Saint conceded. "And that ornery old bitch plays rough. He won't go down without making a mess."

So, am I the only one who wonders if Ranger might make an appearance? As far as we know, the big reason she left the Calamities was a disagreement between her and Black about Malicia keeping the throne. Now that they've fallen out though, is it possible she could show up?

I can see that throwing a GIANT wrench in the Crusade's plans. And given her nature as a non Hero/Villain name, at least explicitly, she might even be hard to predict for Augur. She might only be one person, but she also the only person on the surface Calernia who in the modern day went, "I like this place, it's mine", and everyone just went, "OK, it's yours. Please don't hurt us." It is a Crusade too, with a ton of Heroes to fight. I'm sure there's one or two she might deem worth hunting. All around I just think throwing in Ranger could screw with the plans a ton, and provide moments where we see what the Calamities are like, now that their time is mostly ending.

On another note, the Saint of Blades and grey Pilgrim relationship feels familiar. She might not always agree with Grey Pilgrim, but she is apparently fairly close to him, and reminds me of Scribe in how she promises retribution if they betray his trust.

*werafdsaew*

If Ranger shows up, it's definitely to hunt the older Heroes, since she's running out of things to fight.

[\*frolamiz\*](#)

If I remember correctly, Refuge is considered a protectorate by the Kingdom Below, which Black admitted is the only power on Calernia that can be considered more than local. It always made me wonder what happened between her and the Dwarves. It also help that the place she claimed is in an inhabited forest where The Hunt activities are known to be centered around.

[\*benthelynx\*](#)

Aren't the gnomes separated from the dwarves? (Both being non local powers)

*Fern*

Didn't we get a hint that the Kingdom Below was planning something in the last epilogue? This should be interesting...

[benthelynx](#)

Isn't ranger technically a hero name? (In the same way thief is)

*Rook*

Ranger as a Name is pretty neutral. Some of them are obviously Villainous or Heroic (not a lot of paladins or gallant anything will be Evil for example), but things like archer, ranger, thief, or squire are ambiguous enough to be either.

The Named as individuals all seem to be on one side of the other (other than the Hierarch, but he's a bit of a special case), but the names themselves aren't always innately heroic or villainous. For example the Black Knight and White Knight apparently both transition out of Squire, not the Black Squire or the White Squire.

[sengachi](#)

Ranger seems like a mostly blank slate upper-tier name which could be transitional, final, Good, Evil, Neutral, martial, magical, intellectual, basically anything. The only truly concrete component of it is that Ranger seems like a more loner name (so you're not going to get Lead as an aspect or anything), but even then it doesn't run counter to teamups like the Lone Swordsman did.

And it looks like the current Ranger basically grabbed the ambiguous nature of the Name and used that to twist it until it was nothing but her own personal powerup, rather than something with narrative properties.

*TheTime*

So Pilgrim and Saint have a Good Cop-Regicidal Maniac Cop dynamic. I like that~

*White*

"the speculation she was some distant Fairfax"

You know, I was with Princess Rozala on this one, but... the narrative is really powerful. What was it Cat said in first Liesse? "I have Three things. A kingdom, and enemy, and a claim." Well, guess what's also true right now.

I'm not saying that Cat is a Fairfax byblow, but dear god would it utterly destroy the crusade's narrative if she was. On the other hand, given how the last time she spoke those words she did in fact become queen... Well, it's pretty clear to see where she's going to get her transition.

Several other readers have remarked on the similarities between Cat and the Queen of Blades. Now, the Saint of Swords (who seems very much like an old chaotic good version of Cat) is set up against Foundling. Who better to defeat the saint of Swords than the Queen of Blades, especially because of the formers expressed hatred for nobility. There are so many story threads here. To top it off, Cat becoming the Queen of Blades also utterly destroys the Proceran narrative. That's a Callowan name without question (even if the first wasn't a name. That's been vague, I think?). She takes on a old callowan name, and suddenly the reasoning behind the invasion—to unseat the villain of Callow—goes up in smoke.

So many threads. So many, many threads.

[frolamiz](#)

Yeah, narratively, an orphan is a goldmine. It's no wonder this trope is so overused. She *\*could\** be Prince Amadis bastard child foretold to be his doom at birth that a servant has hidden in Callow instead of killing.

Or anything else. A wildcard for the author to play however he want.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Cat: You are my father

Amadis: Wha-

*\*Amadis gets killed by Cat\**

*esryok*

She already used the "Luke, you are my father" card when she became Duchess of Moonless Nights. In her shoes I'd be nervous about trying to double dip, at least now that she's a construct and shucking her mantle might be fatal.

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

Or she could be the bastard daughter of the fifth son, of the seventh daughter to the bastard daughter of the ninth boy to the niece of the third [seventeen+ more generations] of the first Queen of Callow! The best part is she probably is something like that!

*DD*

I would absolutely hate that, in spite of the narrative power.

Why can't we have an orphan hero or villain just be Nameless, son of Nobody Important and No One Special?

*Micke*

'I snorted at that. Booker's skin and hair were as dark as mine: we both had Deoraithe blood running through our veins. Still, I was an orphan and she was Laure born and raised – neither of us had ever set foot in the northern duchy or spoke even a word of the old tongue.'

Maybe she's Kegan's cousin, twelve times removed (or long-lost niece)?

*Letouriste*

I doubt a revelation would matter at all to her. And I expect all the fairfax, even the ones far in the succession line have been killed by black.

Would make More sense narratively for her to start a new sort of dynasty too

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

Because if you go back far enough in generations you're related to everyone! Also inserting "niece" allows for even more trickery I think.

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

I can see the Winter side if Cat not wrecking "Queen of Blades". Foes will Fall as blades of iron and ice slice in a deadly dance as terrible and cold as a midwinter night.

Nothing offensively fluffy to gobble up, there.

*nipi*

Typos here:

"exact same moral failure as a waging war in name of it."

and they exactly what you are made of."

[\*wyaldriddler\*](#)

Woah.

This chapter was enlightening. To be perfectly honest the situation on the Proceran side seems so bad that I expect it to flip around and actually eek out a win. I'll just, enumerate the issues here:

First the way the opening paragraph is laid out it makes it decently clear Rozala sees Amadis as an enemy.

Second is the immediate problem of Arnaud. That is a pile of heaping hot shit ready to blow up in someone's face. He's got acceptable target written all over him.

Third is the Princess of Orne, who seems like a excellent Malicia plant, and part of the hidden blade Malicia is aiming to make Procer irrelevant. Additionally the way Rozala wavers on Orne so quickly is not a good sign.

Fourth, Amadis has aimed a knife at his heart by "hiring" the Watch because we already KNOW that Cat has made a deal with Kegan and Kegan holds to her deals.

Fifth, Darlington is Fucked. If Procer knows that it failed, then he likely reported back, so Cat knows and he is Deeeeeaaaaaad meat now.

Sixth, the conflict between Laurence and Pilgrim is... mostly standard for this sort of tale, but it's severity is of some note.

Eighth Cordelia mandating no foraging is... cute considering some implications that we have seen for her actions so far. Be interesting to see how that works.

Ninth the Procerans have no idea of Cat's gambit. They've actually suffered a MASSIVE intel failure because they have no idea how far and fast Cat's boot is going to be traveling up the ass of their supply lines. Completely clueless as to the point of her splitting her forces.

I was worried there for a bit that the Saint wouldn't care about the terms, but that she wants to enforce them so hard is a good sign. But yeah, something is fuuuuuuuuucked in the state of Callow.

### [oldschoolvillain](#)

I have to disagree on the fifth point – Cat already knew that Darlington was entertaining envoys from Procer, and turned it to her advantage. She distrusts him, but I don't think that she'll kill him unless he either continues juggling the thought of treachery or proves to be a liability in a warzone.

Also, I think you skipped point #7?

#### *Rook*

Agreed. No way she kills him while she's reasonably sure she's got him under her thumb out of fear. He's a known controllable element, treacherous nature aside. Displacing him might bring in someone more trustworthy but it could just as easily go the other way.

Much better the enemy you know (especially one who fears you and can be bent to your will if needed) than the one you don't

[wyaldriddler](#)

Certainly a possibility. My thinking on the matter was that Cat caught him out and then essentially implied that if the relationship continued he was just dead. If she's using him as a catspaw though, that's yet another area where Procer seems to be routinely screwing themselves in the ass.

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

I think someone might have forgotten to keep up the wards around the Absence Demon.

*Redlaw*

It seem that the older they are the least they are influenced by their name. Of course it could also be because they have more experience of the world. The saint of the sword is a good example. If black is a practical villain then she is a practical hero

*Yotz*

On that I'll disagree with you. If any on the Heroic side can be called "practical" that would be Grey Pilgrim. From his words he is ready to tolerate some evils in the world if it leads to lessening of world's suffering. With Saint of Swords it is markedly not so – she will burn everything and to Heavens with consequences: "kill them all, hashmallim will know their own"(C), and all that jazz.

*nick012000*

So, add "led by Named that keep the rebellious nobles in check by fear alone" to the list of reasons that Procer's acting more like Praes than Praes is.

*Letouriste*

So....they judge the calamities by sheer power? Lol:P if there is something defining them, this is the way they gave up power for a purer source of strength. I think the heroes at the Vales will be totally wrecked if they really think they are stronger

*MetruX*

I disagree a little. They will be screwed if they believe they'll WIN for being stronger, not if they believe they are stronger, since they truly are. The Calamities work without pure power, but it is always good to know things realistically, and being more powerful IS an advantage of the Heroes, just not one that should give them the win.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah, didn't Black just have a whole series of Interludes showing that he and his don't rely on raw power at all when fighting heroes?

*Rook*

Black is a thin needle slid into your throat, not a hammer. Not the strongest, but no less dangerous for it.

The Heroes that face him all learn this eventually, the question is whether or not they survive the lesson.

*Author Unknown*

Interesting that the Grey Pilgrim reveals some ability of foresight; it lends weight to argument that his accompanying the envoy was specifically to meet Cat.

Is anyone else imagining Duchess Kegan sitting on her throne snickering while saying, "I can't believe he fell for that."

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

I'm glad to hear she got the watch back in working order. I was worried the ghosts would combine into some sort of angry Omnicidal Oversoul or something terrible.

*TeK*

We do not snicker.

Official motto of House Iarsmai

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

(Slasher Smiles Permitted Upon Occasion)

*Letouriste*

i wonder how nauk is doing...maybe he has permanent flame going out of his eyes?

The guy got burned (pun intended) and lost all his followers he trained. Right now, he is not needed in the frontline so maybe he train new recruits?

*Antoninjohn*

For a treaty to be made there needs to be trust and by the Humbling of Giants and the fact the Callow has had their land stolen by "heavens sent trusted allies" shows that it's not Cat that can't be trusted but Procer and the first Prince

*Letouriste*

Probably half the reason cat proposed this is she expect them to fail their part and lower their cause.  
Would make the heroes easier to kill and get her a superior position in the post war peace talks.  
The other half is about her not really wanting to kill the enemy leaders (malicia order, her own Accord thing etc...) and to see her officers dying

[don](#)

Is anyone else noticing that Pilgrim agrees not to use angels, then almost immediately turns around and uses an angel for an auger? Even though it could be argued what the definition of 'use' entails, that still seems a bit mealymouthed.

[sengachi](#)

Eh. I see that as the difference between using a scrying spell that routes through a Hell to get around wards and summoning a demon to kill folk. It's pretty clear what the agreement was meant to prevent, and it's the latter not the former.

*Engineer*

EE, if I may make a suggestion; could you please write Names when they are introduced in italics or something similar? It's quite difficult to discern what is a Name and what is a mantle/title.

*TeK*

That is half the point, no? Keeping the audience at the edge of the seat, suspense and intrigue racking up emotions.

*Engineer*

... Damn, you're right.

[sengachi](#)

I just remembered. Adjunct is somewhere else right now. Doing something with military forces. I'm betting that Cat's apparent troop splitting is going to suddenly turn into an encirclement when Adjunct gates in with the other half of her army.

*DD*

Who is Adjunct? Am I missing something?  
You've got me thinking about the Malazan Books of the Fallen.

*Letouriste*

He mean Adjudant, hakram^^

[sengachi](#)



Woops. Damn autocorrect.

*Leonard Inkret*

I'm getting confused when you refer to the same person by their first name, second name, or their title. It makes it hard to keep track, and gets especially difficult when basically all of these new noble characters are pretty new, and there's a lot of them in the same place. xd

But thanks for the chapter, love your work

*Draconius Sinister*

Hate to be negative, but the Saint Of Swords grinds my gears. It feels like her whole job is to be edgy, and all her cursing makes me think of her as nothing but a child that never grew up. I'm seeing edgy teen rather than sixty-plus years old woman who has battled horrors and evils the entire time. All of what she is doing feels like posturing, either to make her seem like a badass or the Pilgrim to look more like the mildmannered grandfather that can tear you apart. I think she'd be a much better character without the cursing.

Of course, she is new, and I am not the writer. Could be I'm missing something huge. This doesn't mean I'm going to stop reading or anything, aside from my issues with her the chapter was very good, and I can't wait for more!

*aran*

Oh look, it seems that the other side has a Catherine as well in the form of Laurence.

I'm sure they'd get along like a city on green fire.

*editor*

Mistake on "The only people I answer to are up Above, and they exactly what you are made of." Should be "know exactly what you are made of."

*Exec*

God damn. Pilgrim and Saint are so fucking great!

They are everything I hoped for from the veteran heroes' side – A genuinely wise and merciful hero, and a fuckshitupper that would've probably been Cat's best friend in another life.

*His Royal Madness*

I know this is really late but Catherine's phrase "Justifications only matter to the Just" is very accurate to the Heavens and Good. All the forms of Good are those who's forms of

Justification and Justice align with an alien sense of right. The Angels are an alien form of Good that is distilled through Heroes they deem as aligned with their views on a human level. Even their actions and thoughts are on the extreme level of human acceptance.

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## Chapter 9: Grand Pas

*"Casualties are a consequence of properly employed tactics, not the intent. To merely bludgeon away is to reduce the conduct of war to arithmetic."*

– Theodosius the Unconquered, Tyrant of Helike

Hakram had once told me about an old orc proverb: *even a child can devour a bear, one mouthful at a time*. Apart from reminding me that most orc sayings tended to involved blood or death in some way – and that orcs apparently weren't afraid to eat things with even larger teeth than they, to absolutely no one's surprise – it'd struck something of a chord at the time. As a rule, I'd tended to be the underdog in fights since becoming the Squire and never had that been truer than when my waltz with the Tenth Crusade began. Fifty thousand Proceran soldiers had come through the pass, and though Juniper had been dismissive about the quality of most that host she'd cautioned that numbers had a weight of their own. Even if we traded soldiers at a rate of one to three, halfway through that battle my army would collapse as an effective fighting force while the Procerans just got started with deploying their reserves. From a strict military perspective, we couldn't afford the casualties that thoroughly shattering the crusader army would cost us. From a political perspective, if took the gloves off I'd effectively kill any chance of Callow retaining its independence in the long term.

We had to beat Princess Malanza without beating her too badly, without losing too many men or resorting to any of our uglier tricks.

The Hellhound had complained of having her hands tied often and loudly, if in private, but under all that barking there'd been a visible thread of pleasure. She might have hated that politics played any part in this campaign, but I suspected she enjoyed the challenge of having restricted tools. It was forcing her to think beyond her traditional methods, to put the steel trap of a mind under all the glaring at work. We'd begun planning our battle before we ever entered Arcadia, refining it with every fresh report from the Jacks and the Observatory. The Unconquered had

famously said that grand designs in war were a thing of vanity, but to us they were even more than that: with the number of heroes the other side was fielding, any plan too complicated was essentially guaranteed to fail. As long as there was even one critical component that *had* to succeed, that specific time and place would be crawling with angry, literally Heavens-sent foreigners out to fuck up our day. We couldn't reiterate the old traps we'd used in Three Hills and Marchford: no matter how clever the bait, if we closed the teeth we'd find that steel gauntlet beat fangs.

So we hadn't made a plan, not exactly.

It could be argued to be a dozen of them, instead, or even just a general operational doctrine. If having a pivot meant we lost, then we had to either avoid pivots entirely or make them impossible to reach. And we had the means for that, for all our other flaws. That was our real trump card, when it came down to it: the fairy gates. Or more specifically, the mobility they lent my troops. I doubted they understood everything I could do with those, or even that I wasn't the only one who could make them: the Wild Hunt could open its own, if it was led by Larat. So far I'd used Arcadia to cut down time on long journeys, but that was only the surface use. Closer to the enemy I could still use them to disappear an army into thin air and reappear close by quicker than was physically possible. Just because I'd not used the gates for short journeys didn't mean I *couldn't*. The first step had been splitting the Army of Callow into three columns. Two of six thousand, and one of nine and chance – the largest one was the central one as well, and fielded all of Baroness Ainsley's reinforcements. The two armies on the wings had split from the central host, moving east and west.

We'd set out the silver, now we were going to eat the bear one bite at a time.

The crusading army was large. It had nearly twelve thousand horse to my own mere five thousand. It had priests and wizards and heroes. It was also *slow*. We'd only realized how slow it really was when it crossed the northern passage, and carefully confirmed it over the weeks since. Of that fifty thousand men, more than a third was levies. Men and women in the prime of their life, certainly, and in good shape. But farming and marching were different kinds of labour, especially when weighed down by arms and armour. The Hellhound had described our conflict as two hounds with a chain around their neck, sallying out to fight in the place where both our chains allowed us to reach. The anchor on our side was Hedges. We couldn't allow them to take the city, since it opened them a direct path into the heartlands of Callow. The anchor on theirs was their supply line. Snaking across the Whitecaps, the wagon caravans moved day and night to bring enough food across that the crusaders wouldn't run out of foodstuffs

before they reached a place where they could take local supplies – either by sacking granaries or foraging the countryside. But the passage was narrow, and they had fifty thousand bellies to feed. The foodstuffs from Procer were slowing the rate they were burning through their reserves at, but it wasn't stopping it.

If our strengths were insufficient to carry the day, Juniper had said, then we had to play to the enemy's weaknesses. And the two that were exploitable were the sluggish pace and sprawling supply lines. Now, Malanza had already proved she was no fool. She had to know it would be child's play for me to take the Order of Broken Bells out and hit the pass up north while she was still too far to prevent me from putting everything to the torch and leave a small garrison behind to make sure the river stayed dammed. We believed she'd gambled on her having enough supplies to reach Hedges even if we did, which meant she'd be picking up the pace soon to force a battle there. Taking a swing at our anchor to force us to be where she needed us to be, essentially. Except instead of facing the single host manning walls she must have expected to see arrayed before her, she now had three field armies to contend with. And those armies were moving closer to hers, making a loose half-circle so she'd be blundering into encirclement if she didn't break us apart.

"And now we find out what kind of a commander Malanza is," Juniper said.

The two of us had remained with the central army, the beating heart of the net we'd cast over the region. The crusader army was too far in the distance for us to see even the fire smoke. Seven days away, by our estimate. We'd been prudent in case she had the means to make them pick up the pace. Scrying had allowed the western and eastern army to keep the same distance on the sides.

"The Jacks finally confirmed the Watch linked up with them two days ago," I said. "Kegan is keeping her part of the bargain."

"They won't be trusted," the orc grunted. "Not if what you told me about the Grey Pilgrim is true."

"They don't need to be trusted," I reminded her. "They just need to be there."

I'd sent instruction down to Hakram to kick up a fuss at the border with Daoine to add some weight to the gambit, but my hopes were not high. Procer, unlike the Empire and I, did not have the benefit of having mages capable of scrying within Callow. Which meant information travelled back to Malanza and to the First Prince with a considerable delay compared to us. They might not even learn about Adjutant's agitation in time for it to matter, but the possibility still existed and that was enough to warrant the attempt at disinformation.

"So, what's your guess?" I asked after a moment of silence.

"She either splits her forces to engage us separately or she goes straight for the head of the snake," Juniper said. "There's risks to splitting. She's not sure how quick we can redeploy and our foot's usually better than hers. Smaller armies make that count more."

"So you think she's headed for us," I said.

"It's what I'd do, if I were her," the Hellhound said. "Otherwise she's engaging on terms we dictated. She swings at us, though, and she can assume we'll pull down our other two armies to reinforce us. She still gets the battle she needs."

"We can't give her open field all the way down to Harrow," I conceded.

"The woman has been having too leisurely a march so far, Foundling," Juniper sharply grinned. "Time to kick the hive. First blow tonight."

I nodded slowly.

"East or west?" I asked.

"Sending your vicious little minion to the east first loses us at least four days," she grunted. "West, has to be. I don't want to give her a breather or too much time to think."

"I'll talk to Larat," I said. "The Hunt's been raring to get off the leash."

"Lots of that going around," Juniper said, a tad drily.

I frowned at her.

"You're going somewhere with this, I take it?" I said.

Juniper spat to the side.

"Don't take this wrong, Catherine, but you've lost the taste for it," she said. "Any fool can see that."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," I admitted. "That I'm trying to stab people less? Juniper, saying *fuck it* and chewing through the opposition no matter the consequences is what got us in this mess in the first place. We're not playing with the kind of stakes where mistakes can be afforded anymore. One slip is all it takes to tumble down on our heads."

"You put on a crown so you have to play Wasteland games," the Hellhound grunted. "I don't like it, but I get it. But a year ago, Foundling, you would have been licking your chops at the

thought of a battle like we're planning. You were *hungry* for it. Now you're just..."

"Tired," I finished quietly. "Tired and afraid."

"It's not pretty to look at, Catherine," my Marshal said. "Now's not the time for the fire to go out. The enemy's at the gate and going at them half-hearted is going to get a lot of people killed."

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched. If Juniper was willing to say this much, she'd been sitting on it for some time. And she wouldn't be the only one of my officers thinking it.

"When I was nine, I think, I was sent to the market by the orphanage matron to pick up our meat for the month," I told her. "When I got there, I saw the butcher getting roughed up by city guard. They wanted him to join one of the guilds, so Mazus would get his cut."

"So Imperial Governors were shit to your people," the orc shrugged. "Not exactly a revelation, Foundling."

Compassion had never been one of Juniper's strengths.

"I stood there," I told her. "I knew, bone-deep, that there wasn't a fucking thing I could do about it. So I just watched."

Juniper bared her teeth.

"You have the fangs now, Catherine," she said. "Keeping them pearly white means nothing's changed."

"I used to believe that," I admitted. "You know who broke that fight up? Legionaries. A pair of orcs. They beat the guards badly enough one had to be carried away. I think that's when I decided, before I really knew it, that I was going to join the Legions. So one day I'd be the one handing the beatings instead of just *standing there*."

"So why the fuck are we giving Procer a pass for invading, then?" Juniper growled. "Those princes, those heroes. It's like we're worrying more about keeping them alive than our own soldiers. No one put a knife to their throat to make them cross that pass, Catherine. Banner went up in Salia and they signed on. I'm not preaching devilry at you – that sort of blow always comes back around. But we have all these nasty tricks we're just sitting on, and I can't think of a good reason why. So Procer gets pissy if we kill their boys? They're already riding on a godsdamned crusade. Burn them all, and the First Prince too. I'll say this for the Empress, at least when she screws us she doesn't expect us to *apologize* for it."

"You're still angry I shut down Bonfire," I said, and it was not a guess.

"I love it, you know," Juniper grinned unpleasantly, all teeth and malice. "Having this unholy mess up north and still having to beat the opposition with my hands tied. Ain't no one ever fought a war like that before. We will be *remembered*. But you know how we got all these fancy titles? 'cause we were willing to go as far as we needed to. We brawled in the mud to get up here, Catherine, and suddenly we're too good for it? We're going soft. And soft ends up in the cooking pot, sooner or later."

"That's the thing, Juniper," I said quietly. "This is the strongest I've ever been. I have armies, wealth, a kingdom. I have the Woe, sharpened fighting heroes. I have the Wild Hunt and the last good claim on Winter. Even in wildest dreams as a kid I never thought I'd get this much power."

I bit my lip.

"I thought that was *enough*," I told the orc. "Having the biggest stick. That once you had that, everything else fell into place. But while I was using that stick to whack the opposition, running all around Callow, an entire city went dark."

Juniper opened her mouth, but I gestured for her to let me keep speaking.

"No," I said. "Really think about it. *An entire city*. More than a hundred thousand people, Hellhound. Because we were good and we were strong and we got cocky. There is an entire part of a kingdom gone forever because I thought being feared and powerful would see us through. It didn't. It won't now, either."

"You can't let Liesse fill your shadow, Catherine," Juniper said, almost kindly. "Wasteland get always fucks the world. It's the only trick they have."

"I have to, Juniper," I said. "I've walked out ruins still breathing again and again, so I stopped thinking we could lose. But we did lose, last year. We killed and got killed, and all we had to show for it at the end was a mass grave."

"We killed Diabolist," the orc said. "We shut the door on the Fae."

"We beat them," I said. "That's not a victory. We just stopped them from making the larger mess they had it in them to make."

"Then you learned the wrong lesson," Juniper said. "And we should have pulled the trigger on Bonfire the moment the army was halfway ready. We're still fighting their kind of war, Catherine."

"No," I said, and ice crept into the tone. "They think that, no doubt. Some of your officers might think that too. But make no mistake, this is *my* play from opening to curtains. I'll negotiate with the other side, because it gets me better results than crushing them outright. Because peace is a better path to what I want than setting cities aflame. But I still have it, Hellhound. The urge to just *step on them*. The victory I'm after simply happens to require more than corpses."

The Marshal of Callow studied me for a long time, before giving a sharp nod.

"So long as it's not squeamishness," she finally said.

I looked up at the afternoon sky, the spring sun that failed to warm me.

"You're right, about the fear," I said. "I am afraid. That was the hardest learning, that power doesn't solve anything, it just... broadens the scope. Raises the stakes. I got on top of the pedestal, and now that I've had a good look around what I'm seeing is making me want to flinch."

I was not blind to the gathering storm. The Empress was feeling cornered, and she'd already proven the kind of measures she was willing to take if she thought survival was at stake. Black had holed up in the Vales for winter, cut from his old anchors, and in a way that made him more dangerous than he'd used to be. When he came out swinging, and he would, there was no telling who he'd be swinging at. The Free Cities were a pot about to boil over, led by two madmen whose intent was anyone's guess. And the whole muster of the West was gathering, preparing to hit Callow in waves. And in the middle of it all, I had to break the ugly story that had ground both Callow and Praes under the wheel for millennia.

"Fear's good," Juniper said. "Fear is blood and life. But it's too late to flinch, Warlord."

"I know," I murmured. "And so we got to war again."

We parted ways after that, and began our work. The thing was, what we were doing wasn't rewriting the book. The tactics at work were old ones, used by armies for centuries. On the other hand, none of those armies had had fairy gates to work with. All it took was asking Hierophant to scry our western commander – the freshly-promoted General Nauk, as it happened. And so after nightfall, the six thousand men of the western army disappeared from the field. They reappeared three days of march behind the crusading host, and the wolf riders that had once been General Istrid's began to raid their way up the Proceran supply line. They took cattle and grain, poultry and bread, but left the men who surrendered untouched. Didn't even take them prisoner.



Juniper's notion, that, not sentimentality. Leaving them behind mean more mouths for Malanza to feed. The Princess of Aequitan sent twelve thousand men north to bring Nauk to battle, mostly horse and fantassins, but by the time they arrived the army was long gone. It reappeared to the west a few days later. *That's right, Malanza. Now you know for sure I have two gate-makers. So let's find out if your heroes can discern where they are, shall we?* The hive had been duly kicked.

Now we got to see what came screaming out.

---

*Burnsy*

So far I'd used Arcadia to cut down time on long journeys, but that was only the surface use. Closer to the enemy I could still use them to disappear an army into thin air and reappear close by quicker than was physically possible. Just because I'd not used the gates for short journeys didn't mean I couldn't.

This is a random comment but this is the exact tactic I used against my latest opponent using psi jump drives in stellaris. It's INCREDIBLY EFFECTIVE if you use it right, and I'm proud of both myself and Cat for seeing it through.

[onedollargum](#)

Everyone loves a good Piccard Maneuver. =D

*nimelennar*

But what if your uniform tunic doesn't ride up on you?

*RanVor*

Army-scaled Teleport Spam. Brilliant.

*Antoninjohn*

I think it's going to become violent anyway the heavens want escalation and they can pull a lot of strings and burn a few Callow cities single handedly and when that happens Cats going to get mad and Callow will go Blood for the Blood Queen, Skulls for the Skull Throne, Souls for the Soul Eater

*Yotz*

MILK FOR THE CORN FLAKES! WHIPPED CREAM FOR THE ICE QUEEN!!

...and for her treacherous lieutenant, I suppose – nothing pacifies the Wild Hunt better than unbridled bloodshed and whipped cream, after all.

The trick is to balance those two, for even illusory bridles on one's ability to let blood or insufficient amount of whipping applied to the cream can promptly drive one crazy in a very bad way.

Trust me on that.

In all seriousness though, that would be too predictable of an outcome, therefore – boring. It would serve as a nice moral to a Tolkienesque story, of course – Queen of Ashes, sitting on her Throne of Skulls in the middle of Queendom of Waste, drinking a wine of sorrow from an empty chalice that is a skull of her closest friend...

But from what we've seen so far, I dare to hope, this story is far from Tolkienesque – and amen to that! After all, that also means no more dumb questions about the Eagles from the people who with stupendous spectacularity failed to understand basic premise behind the Parable of Frodo.

### *HandyCapped*

Could you elaborate on that spectacular misunderstanding about the eagles and the basic premise behind the parable of Frodo? So far, there have been quite a few fans claiming that, but all of them have been reduced to muttering and half answers, when asked further about it. This is particularly vexing, as I'm not even in it for the smugness or anything, but I'd just really want to see the point of it.

### *EagleFacts*

Many people think they should have just taken the Eagles to Mordor. This has quite a few problems.

1. They would refuse. Eagles aren't pack animals. They are emissaries from the Valar (angels), on par with Gandalf.
2. They would die before even getting close. Humans and Orcs alike shoot at them and they can't fly high enough to be out of range. Getting near Mordor only to be shot down by Gondor archers would be ironic, but not the best decision.
3. They would be seen. The Eagles are quite conspicuous and Sauron would see them, then send the Nazgul after them. It'd be practically handing the Ring to him.

### *Tarial*

Alternatively, when Gandalf tell them to "fly, you fools", he means to tell them to get the giant birdies but they don't understand, so they walk.

[Walter](#)

I didn't realize Cat could open gates without being physically present. If she can open a gate for Nauk's army while they are camped just by scrying him...can she do the same for the Proceran crusade? Leaving them wandering in Arcadia seems like a good tactic.

*sheer\_falacy*

Pretty sure it's Larat opening the gate there – she mentioned he could do it this chapter.

And the gates seem like static things that you have to go through, so she can't use them on the crusade. Plus trapping a bunch of heroes in Arcadia is a great way to get them coming out (somehow) at the least opportune time.

*soonnandnaanssoon*

Also, time passes by differently in Arcadia. Trapping the heroes in a realm of horrors where they might uncover a new skill/trick or transcend themselves to return to their comrades, just in time to stop the villain from the striking the final blow is a Narrative setup that might actually work.

*SilentLurker*

And we saw the Lone Swordsman exploit this after Cat let him go. Got a year of training done in the course of a month outside of Arcadia. This is definitely one of those Bad Idea scenarios.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Yeah, supplying a free levelling-up side quest with a bonus grudge multiplier isn't exactly a clever move...

*werafdsaew*

I think Larat was with Nauk.

*Soronel Haetir*

In addition to it being Larat that opened that gate even if she could move the Proceran into Arcadia I don't think she would. She came right out and said a pile of corpses isn't her goal here.

*Morgenstern*

It's in her last thought comment: >> That's right, Malanza. Now you know for sure I have TWO gate-makers. So let's find out if your heroes can discern where they are, shall we? <<

*sheer\_falacy*

"You can't let Liesse fill your shadow, Catherine,"

Should be "fill", though I still don't quite understand it.

*Unorginal*

Its flowery language for you shouldn't let the shadow of Liesse hang over every action you take. I quite like the non-standard turn of phrase.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Hive metaphors, huh.

Well I'll be damned.

*RanVor*

Cat would execute you right now.

*naturalnuke*

Nah, sappers get a free pass 😊

*ALKATYN*

One subtle way they are inverting the normal Good and Evil dynamic I just noticed is that normally it would be the heroes using the small army and clever tactics vs. a numerically superior enemy force. The rules of the Narrative seem to work more at the level of individual named then at the scale of armies, but if I was on Procer's side I'd be rather worried that we were letting the other side be the plucky underdogs in this.

*SilentLurker*

Not only that but the Proceran's are the invading force. The title of Crusade and the Heroes are honestly the only thing I see keeping that force somehow on the side of the Heavens. Invaders, check. Planning to permanently take the country, check. larger army, check. Basically all I see is an incursion into a semi-sovereign nation, and that is not really on the side of Good without the heroes to make it so.

*Taichi22*

It might just be that the gods tend to prefer supporting those kinds of stories, good or evil be damned, and the roles have now switched up.

*Hammerman*

I think that is the narrative that our Dark Queen is spinning, tied in with promises from the Grey Nomad they are

practically inviting the Wild hunt to prey on them one stormy night as oathbreakers.

*Rook*

The mobility from the fairy gates isn't the key here. It's a good tactic don't get me wrong, but it isn't even close to the enough with this caliber of opposition.

On top of that, if this was the key, she just tipped her hand immediately. The Catherine Foundling that's leading this host isn't the same Catherine Foundling that simply Struggled through the mess by the skin of her teeth with no plan in place. This isn't it.

The key is misdirection, making them play the wrong game from the start. Just like Black tricking Akua into playing the wrong game with his body double, and just like the Bard tricking Black into signing Captains death warrant using a series of utter short term defeats.

Tipping her hand this way has to be intentional. The Faerie gates were the focus of attention in the first place, a known dangerous card. With this she just shifted even more attention to them; and more importantly she indirectly shifted attention away from other possibilities. Reaffirming assumptions that might not be true.

I'd guess at two things so far. The lesser game is pulling focus away from Glamour. It's something all Fae can do to a varying extent, is completely overshadowed by the gates at the moment, and wasn't used in Liesse or the Arcadian war. So what if the first bad assumption she's pulling them into is that they actually know which force is where. That the gates they scout actually exist, and that they can scout the gates at all.

What if you could, say, hide a gate with a waiting army in plain sight? Use the visible forces to draw the opposing army into showing their backs to the gate, and bring a hammer of cavalry down on the anvil once the battle is underway.

The bigger, potentially much scarier game though, is the assumption that gets reinforced with all this focus on mobility. Putting so much effort into moving pieces around more quickly, that implies that the pieces actually need to be in position to strike. But if this assumption doesn't apply to a certain piece, you could checkmate them from out of the blue.

That scary weapon she had in her pocket – what was it, absolute positioning? What if that was something that let Masego cast from the observatory at a position on the battlefield, without actually having to be at the battlefield. What if the key was being able to know what was happening from inside his fortress with the Scrying amplification, and being able to change the game

at a pivotal moment when no one took him into account because he isn't physically there.

It would be the exact kind of trump card that would make you a hellgate level threat once the implications are realized. The entire war – the guerilla tactics, the illusions, the faerie gates – they could serve as a distraction so that it wouldn't be on anyone's mind when it needs to be used.

The best part is, it would be a plan with almost no chance to fail, because it isn't really a plan. She can literally just fight as she normally does, and it's a card which isn't even in her own pocket. It would technically be in the Hierophant's.

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Absolute positioning presumably would require the Observatory to be directed by Hierophant, who was told in chapter two to have departed with Catherine's host. More importantly, it's exactly the kind of a trick that Cat and Juniper talk about in this chapter – brutally efficient, but severely complicating the later negotiations, which they'll need more than a magical superweapon at the moment. It's been foreshadowed, so they'll probably have to use it in this book, but so far that doesn't seem to be the plan.

*Yotz*

Going to spout some more tangentially related dubious truisms, so bear with me:

\* The goal of your actions during the game is not to make steps that will lead you to victory. What you ought to do, is to take actions that will lead to creation of environment where every step your opponent takes leads him to profound defeat regardless of his intentions. This way all players will be striving to reach the same outcome. \*

Take scrying, for example. It is far too useful, far too great of an advantage to discard once you've managed to acquire it. And of course – big army with no reliable communications can be likened to Polyphemus during his unfortunate confrontation with certain Nobody, especially in the middle of war against someone who can utilize scrying to the greatest extent.

Now, imagine there is a way to gain at least partial control of your opponent's scrying wetware. Not simply to deny one's ability to communicate, but – in essentiality – to tie puppet strings to your enemy's nervous system.

It is a very dangerous thing to do, yes – but not on the level of Mass Application of Demons of the stable Greater Breach, surely.

All one need to do to counteract that threat, is to stop using scrying!

...Oh, wait...

[Not a robot](#)

– Juniper, IIRC

*MetruX*

I agree on the first part, but disagree on what the true plan is. You see, she said already that she needs to give battle before they reach Harrow, but she also mentioned she can bring the army out in a moment, thus my take on the plan is this: She will keep harassing the supply lines, forcing the enemy to march faster and give battle. After stopping their advance, she retreats through the gate to a nearby position, but one that would need more marching and tiring out just after a battle. When she pursues, because even if she decides to rest first she will pursue, Cat can do the same again. And again. And let the food end this war, without much death, but in an utterly dominant way. If the enemy decides to rush to the city instead of fighting them, there is still the problem that the First Prince said to not take form the people of Callow, thus Cat will try to stop her, but one way or another this is create a schism that won't let this army run freely anymore. Win/win.

*Highwayman*

Juniper isn't wrong, but she has too much of a militaristic view on things in my opinion. Its a pleasure to see Cat maturing.

And Nauk! I missed Nauk. There hasn't been much mention of him in ages!

[NZPIEFACE](#)

He's been half dead for ages.

*HiThere*

Indeed, I thought the last time Nauk was mentioned he was still in a coma. Did something happen, maybe in an upcoming "Court" interlude perhaps?

*Morgenstern*

If I remember correntyl, he got healed by.. Warlock, was it? Because Masego wanted him to, even though Wekesa himself disliked it as hell because he dislikes Cat that much?

*Morgenstern*

correntyl.. what? o0 "correctly"...

[Antony444](#)

Brilliant manoeuvre on Catheriine's part here. The Proceran army is going to get even slower, and their supply situation more complicated. Plus they have been denied a battle and a massacre to show their cause is heavenly.

One thing which is for the moment really bad for the Tenth Crusade and the heroes is that for the moment, only the Saint of Swords and the Grey Pilgrim have been described in this army. The other twelve heroes are completely unknown and the Callowan Army is always describing as 'heroes' on plural...the next battle for many of them is going to be their last, I think. Is it going to be a graveyard of Princes or Heroes first? What an interesting dilemma...

*Antoninjohn*

For Cats deal with the watch do you think she's going to make a fairy gate to Arcadia and invade or just have Mango stick that demon of corruption on them

---

She says that Watch "don't need to be trusted, just need to be there." The only Idea I have that wouldn't include giving them orders to do anything is for Malanza to leave a detachment of three thousand to keep an eye on them, so I must be missing something. Also, Cat just banned any use of diabolism for this campaign, so no deploying the demon.

*Redlaw*

When many heroes from different band gather together the story is directed by the one with the heaviest. If their story isn't strong enough they will be crushed.

In this case we have two super old heroes who can determine the course of the battlefield. I dare to say that at the end of this war apart from them the number of surviving heroes will not exceed two or three

*taovkool*

From wiki:

In ballet, a grand pas (French: [gʁɑ̃ pa]; literally, big or large step) is a suite of dances that serves as a showpiece for lead dancers, demi-soloists, and in some cases the corps de ballet. It usually consists of an entrée (introduction), a grand adage, sometimes a dance for the corps de ballet (often referred to as the ballabile), optional variations (solo dances) for the demi-



soloists, variations for the lead ballerina or danseur or both, and a coda (sometimes referred to as a coda générale or grand coda), which concludes the suite.

Oh, I'm just loving the implications thrown here and there. Not really sure what Kat's planning, but I know i'm going to like it.

*qfeys*

When did Nauk come back to life?

*Darkening*

I don't remember myself, had the same thought. I mean, it was mentioned that faerie magic could fix him and Cat has that in spades these days, so maybe she fixed him? Dunno.

*oldschoolvillain*

When Cat and Warlock came close to throwing down in Book 3 – Masego asked Warlock to heal him.

[sengachi](#)

Sometimes, most times, characters stating aloud how they feel and why they're doing what they're doing is bad writing.

But when you have a really complicated issue, and really nuanced stakes and meaning, just being able to state something can be impressive in its own right, and engrossing to read. This is that.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Part of me is all like, "Congratulations, Princess Malanza! Your glorious prize is: a Vietnam War situation! Except, the climate is more temperate, you are dealing with Gates over tunnels and your version of 'the Press' back home who will kick up a fuss about body bags is actually your Boss Lady of Exceedingly Pointy Words. Enjoy!"

*Theoretically\_human*

if cat gets angry enough she could freeze the area around the army and then the eather stops being temperate

*grzecho2222*

Courvedmouth tactics are always fun to watch

[Euodiachloris](#)

Such lovely transport you had...

## [DroughtBringer](#)

Beautiful chapter! Seeing Cat grow had been fun, and it's nice to see her move away from just using power.

*letouriste*

"General Nauk" !!!!! glad to see he is well and kicking:) given he lead a separate army we will maybe see his pov soon and learn what happened to him after waking up.

the grand pas title can have so much meaning:o

*Atypical Gult*

When you think about it, Cat going for a diplomatic style victory over crushing the opposition into a mountain of corpses is probably going to surprise and throw off everyone else. She has a reputation for being ruthless and solving problems by smashing her opposition with her sword/fist/boot. So if she suddenly starts cutting deals and avoiding force of arms to achieve victory, its going to seriously mess with people's perception of her.

I'm very interested to know more about her Liesse Accords and plans to end the war/keep Callow out of the war. As stated in one of the earlier chapters, she's playing an entirely different game than all the other commanders on field. There are hints of that in this chapter too. Here's hoping she totally crushes the Princes. Can't wait for the next few chapters.

Urgh. I hate it when I catch up with the author and the latest installments. It means I can no longer binge read and devour entire novels at once.

*ICSM*

I'm fully waiting for conservation of ninjutsu to kick in and dispatch most of the heroes. Right now, aside from Hanno, the Pilgrim and the Saint, they all amount to glorified monks destined to job at the best possible moment.

Hitting supply lines is a fine opening move, but nothing more than that. As Cat has stated, the Crusade probably has enough rations to last until Harrow. I can't see it being crippling to them, but it is a fine way to kick procerans into action. Taking no prisoners is a fine touch. Annoying, and costs literally nothing.

I would love for this to be resolved in a battle of cannae style battle.

[wyaldriidler](#)

As Cat obliquely mentioned in this chapter it was a form of probing attack which achieved multiple things:  
Probing the enemy, obviously, to see their response to a threat they can't ignore.  
Deception of the enemy as to what she actually wants to do.  
Causing annoyance and complication to the enemy, forcing them to move up their time table.

Off the top of my head, I'm pretty sure Cat is using some principles from that Proceran hero who defeated Theodosius of Helike by having a bunch of plans at "the first step" since the first step in a villains plan's always succeeds. At least I think that's where the principle came from.

TeK

Nah, you missing things. First step is mentioned with Irritant and Tyrant, the general you are talking about is Isabella the Mad, most commonly known for making such an insane fight, Theodosius just got annoyed and quit.

dandon223

Ok , so I have just read all chapters in like a week. Maybe it is too late for that , but I just wante to say that I had really hoped for some more "Heroes" to go to Cat camp , but I guess my dreams got shattered in prologue, or maybe not? What do you think ?

[wyaldriidler](#)

We'll see. The "Heroes" if their cause is shown to not be righteous may defect to her side, and while the Pilgrim for example is very very unlikely to defect, he did agree with her on some things and she agreed with some things he said. Actual functional communication is a pretty huge step up from where it was before Cat.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

A series of wasp stings to enrage your enemy and make him move where you want. First, an attack on the rear to suprise them and destroy supplies. Doesn't do a lot of damage, but now the Procerans need to devote troops to protect the supply lines that they had planned to use in the attack.

I suspect next will be raids on the Proceran foraging parties, they may have food but probably not enough wood for fires. This will further annoy and anger the troops. Meanwhile, the younger heros are anxious to fight evil and will be pushing to attack. Some of the Princes will push to attack as well, these Callowan attacks make them look bad.

grzecho2222

She can go full Courvedmouth on them and destroy their supply of horse food. Mayor problem for proffesional cavalry was always food, since horses breed for combat are quite picky about what they can eat and won't survive very long on grass alone. If Masego can summon rain that also would be great since armies absolutly crawl through mud especially ones with horses.

grzecho2222

\*horse breeds

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

The thing that bothers me about all this love for the Grey Pilgrim is this:  
For all that his demeanor is a bit more reasonable, the GP suffers from the same blinders as every other Hero. Kill Catherine and then what? If Procer divvies up Callow, all you've created is a multi-generational story of an occupied land seething with hatred for their foreign overlords. Truthfully, that's far, FAR more likely to drive the Callowans as a people into the arms of Below than having a Villain whose a stabilizing force on the throne for awhile.

End of the day, Heroes in the Guide are incapable of being Good. Above isn't interested in Good. The Heavens simply want to beat Evil. Mass mind-rape, (which was actually done on a scale far beyond what William attempted, to throw a failed Crusade at the Dead King) and the extinction of countless innocents doesn't make the Heavens blink in the slightest.

Before it's over, I'm sure we'll have seen definitive evidence the GP is just as much a minion of the homicidal/genocidal angels as all the other Heroes.

plantsbeans

I finally caught up this chapter, aka this story has been ruining my life for a few weeks now. I have a few questions now that I'm here.

Didn't Catherine make a promise to Larat to give him the heads of seven mortal princes and one, in exchange for him taking the field against summer on their third trip through Arcadia? The imprisoned princess of summer thought that was a very bad idea. What happened to that debt? I'm guessing I missed the resolution since he mostly seems subordinate to her now.

My other question is regarding Nauk – did Hierophant just heal him? I don't remember a big fuss about it.

*oldschoolvillain*

Technically she swore to take the crown's of seven mortal princes and one, and to lay them at the feet of the Prince of Nightfall. That prince no longer exists, as Larat abdicated his title, fundamentally changing his nature. Especially with the shift in Arcadia away from the Courts. It's a technicality, but those are important when dealing with Fey.

*Antoninjohn*

You have to remember that Procer's view of the common folk by the Princes is that their lives don't matter, shown by how they regularly kill them off in political wars which happen about once a year, given that I can't see them hesitating to just start killing off Callow and trying to dump the fantassins as colonists

*grzecho2222*

Bears are completely normal food source. Bigos is traditionally made from them.

*TeK*

Didn't notice anyone mentioning it, so just putting it there, hoping someone will notice.

EE, do you know that your page name for Chapter 9 is actually [practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/05/04/chapter-10-grand-pas/](http://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/05/04/chapter-10-grand-pas/)? Tad misleading.

*Digitize27*

You're right. It's almost like chapter 9 is... absent.

*editor*

Mistake on "You can't let Liesse fill your shadow, Catherine," missing an L in fill

*editor*

"I know," I murmured. "And so we got to war again."  
Should be " go to war again"

*Gobbler*

"It's like we're worrying more about keeping them alive than our own soldiers. No one put a knife to their throat to make them cross that pass, Catherine."

THANK YOU! Juniper. The amount of effort and trouble she seems to have gone through to avoid harming the other side is ridiculous.

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## Chapter 10: Allegro

*"There are no reserves, you fool, only second waves!"*

– Isabella the Mad, only general to have ever defeated Theodosius the Unconquered on the field

"They're about to split, Boss," Robber said.

He was standing too close to the scrying bowl, which made his face look a lot larger than it should be and was just kind of distressing to see in general. Thief cleared her throat.

"We need numbers and direction," she said.

There was the sound of struggle, a yelp and then Robber was pushed aside. Indrani grinned at us through the bowl and I sighed before she even began speaking.

"This camp is just crawling with heroes, Cat," Archer said.

"Dunno if you were aware, but they've got at least one mageling. Zeze's going to have competition."

"And how would you know that," I slowly said. "You were under orders to stay out of sight."

"I got eagle eyes," she proudly said.

From behind her I heard Robber snort.

"It's true, Boss," he said. "I saw the eagle she took them from. Wasn't pretty."

Indrani pouted.

"You ruined it, Blaster," she complained. "I was going to work up to the reveal after she got snippy."

I was too wary to be amused by the thought of Archer attacking the local wildlife, sadly.

"Tell me you stayed out of sight," I said.

The other Named rolled her eyes.

"I was good," she said. "Used an aspect at a distance, they never saw me."

"We don't know if they have anyone able to detect that," I told her harshly. "Now there's a chance they know you're out there."

"They're not Praesi," Vivienne said mildly. "I won't call this anything but reckless, but unless they were on the lookout for her already the chances she triggered a ward are negligible."

I ignored her.

"Quiet, Archer," I said. "*Quiet* is what I asked you for."

"It's what you got," she dismissed. "That was over a day ago, if they thought someone was out there they would have sent heroes after us by now."

"Let's hope for that," I grunted. "But we're now assuming you, at least, were made."

"It's just twelve heroes," Archer shrugged. "Nothing to worry about. Worse comes to worse, I shoot a few in the eye and run away."

Strange, it hadn't occurred to me before now that the muster of heroes on the other side was essentially a tenth and two officers. I *had* been tired, and there'd been a few days a while back where I'd had vicious headaches. Must have been the lack of sleep having unforeseen consequences. We were all feeling the pressure: even Vivienne and Masego had been out of sorts.

"Don't engage, just run," I told her. "And get Robber back in here, unless you can tell me about their troop movements."

"She can't," the goblin piped up from a distance. "She was roaring drunk at the time."

"Barely tipsy," Archer blatantly lied. "But this is beneath me, so Jasper can handle it."

She moved aside, and an irritated-looking Robber filled the bowl again.

"Best we can tell, Malanza's splitting her army half and half," he told us. "Same for the heroes, though that's harder to be sure. They've got their own little camp aside from the army."

I grimaced. Juniper had told me that if the crusaders separated their army they were unlikely to send a host after each of my own. It'd whittle down their numbers by too much, enough that if we went to reinforce a single army we'd have them outnumbered at that particular battle. Evidently Princess Malanza intended to have numerical superiority wherever she engaged regardless of reinforcements.

"And where are they headed?" Thief asked.

"This is guesswork," Robber warned. "But by the way they're shifting their supplies, I'd say centre and west. There's a few days left before they'll be ready to move."

Vivienne let out a breath and my face darkened. So they *could* tell where our gate-makers were. I'd sent Larat and the Hunt to General Hune in the east, after Nauk had struck the supply lines from the west, in an attempt to keep the shell game going. It was possible the Proceran princess had gotten lucky with a guess – her odds weren't bad, half and half since it was a given the centre had to stay mobile – but she did not strike me as the type leaving things to luck. Which meant there was a hero who could sniff out our gates, or at least the assets who made them.

"All right, good work," I said. "Anything else to report?"

"They're keeping a close eye on the Watch," the Special Tribune said. "There's a hero on them at all times, and the two old timers visited a while back. Not sure what happened, but no fighting afterwards. They didn't relax the surveillance either, though."

My lips quirked. We'd known going in that the odds of a truth-teller being along with the crusade were high, and we'd planned accordingly. None of the Watch were aware of what side they were actually on, and I'd made sure Kegan planted false rumours in her commanders that the heroes could chew over. The secret order was known only to one of her mages, and even the specifics of it were nothing too suspicious on the surface: all the mage had to do was check for a signal in the sky at a specific hour, and scry after seeing it. That, and note the position of officer tents. It would be quite enough.

"No need to worry about that," I told Robber. "Keep your people ready, Special Tribune. We'll have work for you soon enough."

"Looking forward to it," the goblin said, baring needle-like teeth.

The spell died, and after a last glimmer of sorcery the scrying bowl was filled with mere water again. Vivienne drummed the table lightly, though given the sensitivity of my hearing she might as well have been pounding away.

"I know," I said. "We need to make a decision about Headsman."

Thief smiled mirthlessly.

"I know you worry about the fallout, and not just because enemy officers will be put to the sword," she noted. "We'd be revealing another trick the crusaders don't know about."

"But," I said.



"The means it would be carried out might be different, but Procer is not unfamiliar with the use of assassination to influence warfare," Vivienne said. "Catherine, they murder each other over grazing rights disputes – and I'm not exaggerating there, the sister of the Prince of Orne was poisoned over that not even eight years ago. We are fighting off an invasion."

"You know what we need to achieve," I reminded her.

"Hasenbach at the table, without blots on our war record that would make her people unseat her if she negotiated with us," she agreed. "But considering the woman sent all her opposition into the mind grinder that is you, I doubt she'll balk at treating with us after 'mere' peasant officers are killed."

The last part she spoke with distaste, as much for the phrasing as the people it applied to – not the officers, no, but the handful of nobles who considered them so very expendable. Not that I could talk, I'd admit. Headsman had been designed as an operation that would shake the crusader army without getting half the High Assembly howling for our blood. I was, in my own way, considering them just as expendable. The thought tasted bitter, but I did not deny it. Lying to myself had become a lot more dangerous since I'd let Winter in.

"If we pull the trigger on it, we have to act now," I admitted.

"There is a chance their host will later reunite," Thief said.

"If we fuck up," I bluntly replied. "We want them split, it makes them manageable. The only way we have all their major officers together again is if we blunder. Besides you've already told me the longer we wait the higher the chances this fails."

"It's a judgement call," Vivienne said. "I don't envy you the decision, but it is yours to make."

I watched her as she brushed back her hair. It'd gotten longer, though still quite a ways were left to go until it reached the length of mine. Her blue-grey eyes were untroubled, which I envied more than a little. Every day seemed to add another few pounds to what was already balancing on my shoulders. I chewed over what she'd said, but not the decision she'd brought to the fore. More the fact that she'd laid it at my feet, instead. When we'd begun, Vivienne had made it clear she was only sticking around so long as she thought I was the best game in town for Callow. And now here we were, planning how to turn back an invasion together.

"You seem amused," she said.

"Just thinking about how far we've come," I honestly said. "Can you imagine us having this conversation two years ago?"

She laughed, a little bitterly.

"It was a simpler world I lived in, two years ago," Vivienne Dartwick admitted. "The lines in the sand were visible."

"And now?" I asked quietly.

"Now I wonder," Thief said, and her lips set in a hard line. "In your service, I have been part of ugly things. No two ways about that. But nowadays I look at the rest of Calernia, and all I see is vultures. You are flawed, I know that even if you've grown on me. But you're also the only one who seems to care about any of this. There are twelve heroes on Calernian soil, Catherine, and every single one of them is a pawn to Proceran ambition. It is the reason they came in the first place. I thought... I thought *better*. Of all of us."

"They're not responsible for the Conquest," I murmured. "For Malicia's cold-blooded ruthlessness, or what came of Black playing his game with the Heavens. They get no pass from me for their own actions, but I will not blame them for that."

"I've studied them, Catherine," Thief said. "And the histories as well. When Callow as being invaded, Ashur was fighting for supremacy of the Samite Gulf. The princes of Procer were so far gone they preferred fighting civil war to taking up arms against Praes ascendant. Half the Dominion was fighting border skirmishes over trade rights, without a care of what happened beyond their borders. And the heroes... well, they had their own struggles, the ones that were already born. Yet none so great they should not have been set aside to fight against the fucking theft of an entire kingdom. It is infuriating, that it took them twenty years to suddenly find their *principles*. Can they really be called that, if they only surface when convenient? It reeks of pretext instead, and my tolerance for those has grown thin."

*Your people grown warped by your presence, the Grey Pilgrim had said. Old traits grown more vicious and acute.* I could not tell if Vivienne had come to speak those words because she had seen the face of the enemy and felt only disgust, or because of something more insidious. A spreading influence I was unaware of. I had asked nothing of the Gods Below, since taking my Name, but I would have been a fool to believe they gained nothing from empowering me. *Does it not matter in the slightest what I do?* I wondered. I'd always dismissed the talk of heroes as mere religious prattle, the kind of empty sermons the House of Light garnished its true power with. But if there was truth to it, if I was a blight on Creation just by standing on the side of Below however loosely... That was the thing, wasn't it? I was expected to take on faith the words of people trying to kill me. Or to follow the sayings of sacred texts that had been used as tools of ambition as often as not. There were no easy truths to find. All I had was what I knew, and it was always too little.

"I do not mean this as excuse of the Empire," Vivienne softly said. "I have learned of the people within it, that they are not as wretched as I once believed. But the High Lords and the Tower, that entire edifice of bloody misery? It must be brought down. There is not other choice, because we cannot tame a dog gone rabid. But I will not mistake the horrors of one side for the virtues of the other."

"It was easier, wasn't it?" I said whimsically. "When we thought right and wrong had a colour code?"

Thief put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed, a rare gesture of affection.

"I will not thank you, for opening my eyes to that," she said, withdrawing her hand. "But I understand now, why you are who you are. Why anyone would look at the sky and curse. There is a point where it is no longer about right and wrong, isn't there? Where it's about doing something, *anything*, to avoid falling in that same old pit."

Her fingers clenched, her eyes hardened.

"They don't get to walk over us, to kill us, just because some fucking angel handed down a mandate," she hissed. "They don't get to avoid the responsibility of that choice. Or the consequences."

*Villain*, I thought. There was only one side that spoke this way, and didn't pray to Above.

"Black told me, once, that Fate it the coward's way out," I murmured. "The abdication of personal responsibility. I hate him a little bit, for still being right after all these years."

She snorted.

"We might still lose, you know," Thief said. "That's the part that gets me. No matter how prepared we are, it might not be enough."

"Could be," I agreed. "But then we do the same thing villains have always done, when their plans fall apart."

"And what's that?"

"You get up," I said. "You spit out the blood in your mouth, and you try again."

We stayed sitting there for a long time, the two of us in front of a bowl gone fallow.

"We proceed with Headsman," I finally said, breaking the silence. "Tell Masego to prepare. And send word to Kegan. The Deoraithe are to cross the river."

"I will," Thief replied. "And me?"

"I'll open the gate as soon as Hierophant does the numbers," I said. "This is going to be... delicate."

"Isn't it always?" Vivienne smiled.

—

It'd been some time since I had worn my full regalia – if it could be called that.

Full plate from head to toe, with chain shirt and aketon beneath. I'd considered this heavy, once, enough that it restricted my mobility. Nowadays I barely noticed it. I wore the helmet Hakram had gifted me, the hinged thing of steel with the black iron crown set atop it. My shield lay hanging on Zombie the Third's flank as it idly picked at grass it could not actually digest, but my longsword was clasped tight to my flank on the sword-belt. The satchel at my side held munitions, though not standard issue. Robber had tinkered away before his departure. The Mantle of Woe streamed down my back, its bright colours muted in the shade of a moonless night. There was a weight to wearing all of this, and not only a physical one. Black Queen, they called me, but it was not a Name. It might have been, before my teacher broke Liesse and himself with it, but the story had died and the path with it. It would have been a lie, though, to still call myself the Squire. No one did anymore. I could still feel the bare bones of that Name, some days, but the flesh and muscle over them was Winter's. Whatever I'd done in Liesse, when I had broken Masego's scaffolding, it had ended my tenure. I had no aspects anymore, only the power that my mantle lent me. Even what I'd ripped from Akua, what had once been Call, it was... different now. By taking it I had come to own it, and that opened doors I'd never even dreamed of.

I rolled a dark wooden whistle between my steel-clad fingers, feeling it pulse with had once been the Diabolist's power. To be fae, and I had touched the face of that, was to cease seeing the difference between principle and object as more than thin boundary. I'd experimented with that power, under Hierophant's supervision, and the whistle had been one of the greater successes. It was an aspect made matter. Certain limitations had not been escaped, and some had even increased – anyone could use the whistle, yes, but Take had been theft of a finite bundle of power. The whistle could only be used once, since I'd yet to figure out how to partition uses. It would, however, work with the full strength of that aspect.

"A worthy trinket, for the Queen of the Hunt," Larat said.

I glanced at him. Of all the fae sworn to me, he was the only one willing to bring his mount close to mine. In the early days after

receiving their oaths, I'd had to... establish a pecking order. Some of them had been under the impression that entering my service was only a means to enter Creation unrestricted, and that now they'd entered they could play as they wished. My eyes turned to the dark-haired woman at the back of the pack, who shivered when she noticed me watching her. She'd been of Summer, before. It had not stopped her from trying to make sport of a full tavern of people in Laure, weaving glamour into their minds so they could play out a tragedy for her where real blood was spilled. Thief had been tracking all of them, so I'd intervened before any damage was done. I'd taken power to call her to heel, though, and drawing that deep had coloured my reaction. There were only two fingers to her left hand, now. I'd made her *eat* the rest.

No one had tested me since, at least.

"Won't see use tonight," I said, and flicked my wrist.

The whistle disappeared into nothingness, returning to Winter.

"Such leashes you inflict upon your might," the former Prince of Nightfall sighed. "You could take so much more. And you have yet to bestow."

I grimaced.

"I'm not going to hand out mantles to anyone, Larat," I said. "Much less you."

He laughed, cold and crisp.

"I have no more need of titles, save that which is owed," he said. "But you are Queen of Winter, Catherine Foundling. No queen can be forever without a court."

"You must take me for a complete idiot," I mused. "Bad enough I have it whispering in the back of my mind, I'm not going to *spread* that influence."

"Ah, but there are such benefits to bestowal," Larat smiled. "Freedom from the chains of entropy among them. How many of those you love are you willing to lose to age, before bending your neck?"

My fingers clenched. Was he implying that if I titled Robber or any other of the goblins... No, I could not begin down that road. Bad enough I'd had speculations about what the Council of Matrons might be considering back in the Wasteland, if I ended up granting a sliver of Winter to Robber there would be *blood*.

"I am no stranger to sacrifice," I replied shortly.

"So you say," the Huntsman languidly shrugged. "We have all the time in the world to find out, don't we?"

I eyed him darkly.

"Even for a treacherous lieutenant, you're a little much," I told him.

He scoffed.

"Am I a mortal, to deny my own nature?" he replied. "I am Fae, my queen: be it fair or foul, I will never be less than I am. I will be monster and schemer, hound and prince, but not once *untrue* through any of it. Deception lies in the eye of the other, not in one's own blood."

"That was very inspiring," I drawled. "Doesn't make me want to stab you just to be on the safe side any less, but lovely little speech. Really. If I still had functioning tear ducts I might shed a tear."

"Tears will be shed when you feel them," Larat told me. "Your mistake is in trying to quantify, to place rules where there is only will."

That, more than his tirade, had me shivering. Because it rang true. *Place rules where there is only will*. I looked away. Masego had continued to study my body, and the more I learned the more unsettled I became. He'd told me since the beginning that my flesh and blood was a construct, now, that there was nothing natural about it. To learn that I no longer sweated had been no horrifying revelation, but that while I might breathe out of habit I no longer *needed* to? There was a reason my liquor cabinet was well-stocked.

"You're sure we're close enough?" I asked.

Larat sighed.

"Your meddling practitioner tries to regulate that which is beyond regulation," he said. "My queen, there is only the story. All else is beneath your notice."

Yeah, that was less than reassuring. I felt the power bloom in the distance, and turned Zombie around so I could have a better look. Red lights in the night sky, so tall and bright they must have been visible even down in Laure.

"Ready yourselves," I called out the Hunt. "You know the rules."

There was sparse laughter, but many eager grins. I did not have to wait long before it came. I'd expected it to be different, even though I'd not really known what to expect. Like a gate, maybe, or a spell. All I felt was a window, just at the corner of my vision.

"The Wild Hunt rides tonight," the fae who'd once been the Prince of Nightfall laughed. "Raise your banners, damned souls. Sound the horns and loose the hounds. *Let us make sport under moonless night.*"

I stepped through, bridging thought and act without embracing either. The water-filled bowl shattered as we crossed through it, a reflection made truth. Wind whipped at the inside of the tent as Zombie neighed, the terrified Deoraithe mage at my feet turning white. Every Callowan knew that scrying near the Waning Woods was like sending an invitation to the Wild Hunt.

We had accepted it.

---

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Ooohh the chills down my spine when Larat said those words. Winter has come.

*Aeon*

Very interesting. Confirmation that she hasn't gotten her new name yet. I honestly can't wait for her to come into a new one, because I think it'll be coming sooner or later. Awesome chapter.

*Rook*

That brings up a question, are we sure whether she's going to get a Name at all? I mean it's been assumed as the rule so far, but the thing is that she's pretty much Fae now, she already seems to play by a completely different set of rules.

Larat mentions that she inflicts 'leashes upon her own might', and that she could 'take so much more'. This could be interpreted as holding herself back out of morals or caution; but it's very ambiguously stated, and it would be an extremely Fae thing to do to tell the truth in a way that's prone to misinterpretation.

His actual point might be that she's already at the height of her power, and that she's just limited by what she thinks the rules are – the old rules. What if a new Name hasn't come and never will come because that unshaped mass of power was eaten by Winter when the Black Queen broke? It would be an explanation for why she has a Squire-level strength with no proper Name at all. It's her self-imposed binding, that's what she thinks she should have until a proper Name is granted.

It opens up some interesting implications, if Winter could eat bestowed Name power and make it solely her own, instead of borrowed from the Gods Above or Below. If she could extend her capacity by Bestowing the Taken power and using it to bind individuals to her court? Her court, and her by extension, would essentially be the Fae equivalent of an infinitely-growing slime.

*Decius*

She's not going to get a Name like Black Knight.

She's going to get a name like Dead King.

*naturalnuke*

I'd like to mention that the Crusade is set to take place in the metaphorical 'dead of Winter'.

This can't end well for them.

*Shoddi*

Hmm... "The Dead of Winter".

That's could be a good name for the winter-fueled zombies she creates.

*Figerally*

She has leaned so far into necromancy that I wonder if Death Knight is a Name, but that might just be wishful thinking influenced by Warcraft.

*BryceWilliam*

this story is all about \*stories\* about narrative weight, Cat becoming this strong was part of the climax last book yes, but it wasn't its own.. \*event\*. When cat took the name squire we got a whole chapter about it. the whole story so far has been slowly building up to a name transition, it can't not happen and it also can't have already happened because when it does its going to be the main focus of that chapter and maybe even several chapters. Its going to be a huge deal and have major impacts on something insanely important happening in that moment.

hell id guess that Cats gonna get her new name and pass out in the middle of a battle and we'll get some interludes of the Woe defending her but then when their about to lose Cat comes back from dream quest 3.0 and rains down hellfire

*Drd*

New aspect – Goblin Fire. :]



*stevenneiman*

I think that what she might end up with is a chance to be free of Fate entirely. She's a Fae, but she isn't bound to the old ideals of Winter because there is no Winter but her, while at the same time not being mortal anymore. As a fae (or at least pseudo-fae), she would be bound more tightly to the applicable stories, but the only applicable stories are her own stories of forging her own path

*burdi*

I think she can't come to her name, because she is the Winter Queen, yet she have not a court, "No queen can be forever without a court", when she start to bestow title, her court will start..and when it has, she will come to her Name, something that cannot be changed anymore that her Name is The Winter Queen

*Big Brother*

There's a reason Cat gets even more terrifying the longer she lives. Her Story is not one of a Marble on a track, forever following the same path, but of a wrecking ball falling on that track and giving true freedom for all that were stuck in that rut.

*Rook*

That, and the whole murder-knight thing she has going, where she rides around on a rotting horse corpse while covered in a metric ton of steel and war trophies. That's pretty scary too.

*Unorginal*

Ahhh but while she may ride on a necromantic horse it's not a bones and gory bits style one. Rather it had refinement, class, can fly, probably doesn't even have any noticeable holes in its pelt yet. Also has its own personality and it is not dependant on Cat unless she wants it to be.

Or so I have interpreted the text, honestly, I could be really wrong when I say that.

*danh3107*

The Wild Hunt rides once more, when the horn sounds there are only two choices: Ride or be Ridden down.

*Naeddyr*

Thanks for the chapter. So seems like Cat doesn't have a Name anymore, it's just Winter and some trinkets.

Does she count as a Villain then, anymore? I think we could try to fudge with a technicality here.

### [oldschoolvillain](#)

I don't know, honestly. As much as she still claims she's on a "side", with Hierarch's action in the Epilogue of book 3, Archer/Squire/Apprentice all being Names capable of Good or Evil, and Adjutant/Hierophant being previously unknown Names, and now Thief spitting in Heaven's eye but maybe not being quite a Villain . . . she could honestly just be building a Neutral Kingdom and sending a missive to all the other countries saying "Bugger off, Callow is not yours to burn."

### *Sanityfaerie*

Pretty sure Hierophant isn't new. Apparently, being blinded and having to find an eye replacement was a known feature of the type – or at least certain comments (by Warlock?) shortly after he made the transition would suggest so.

### *goliath1303*

Does anyone happen to know if this is true? If so, can you point me to where that was started in the story? I vaguely remember a WoG or something saying that it wasn't a new name, just that it was either one that hadn't been around for a while or it's not a very common one. I definitely don't remember the bit about being blinded and finding a replacement though. I know this is an old comment and I'm not really expecting a reply from Sanityfaerie, but maybe someone else who comes along can answer this question.

### *burdi*

i think winter is represent of villain in the arcadia, that make catherine a double villain...maybe

### *Panic!*

Summer and Winter does not equal Good and Evil. Like said Before it's more of a situation of Red vs Blue.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

It is interpreted as such, yes. But, just as with Good, Summer was no joke, either. And in Arcadia, neither Winter or Summer remain.

It might not remain in Creation, either. The Wild Hunt is technically a Winter thing, but the Summer Court has revels and hunts of its own, too, in myths and legends. In short, Summer could also call the Hunt, although its nature was a

bit different. Think the difference between fox hunting with dogs and hawking. Things still die.

*Yeah Nah Yeah*

>The Wild Hunt is technically a Winter thing  
I thought the Wild Hunt was a Spring/Autumn Court thing?  
Don't think the Wild Hunt was ever tied to Winter/Summer  
until Larat and co. joined up with Cat.

### *Euodiachloris*

In some traditions, it's mid-winter. And, it all ways hangs around the chilly rather than the toasty. The dances, revels and marches that have laughter, bells and a side order of entrapment and slaughter? Summer.

*oldschoolvillain*

Practical Guide specifically stated that the Wild Hunt comes into being in Spring and Autumn.

*JackbeThimble*

I get the impression she's more in the Monster category now. Like a Dragon or that Orc Demigod that Captain fought.

### *oldschoolvillain*

Whoo, Robber was good, Archer was, honestly, irritating for not taking this seriously and assuming she could take a full dozen heroes solo – you never get away after you shoot more than one, a student of the Ranger and a “Fey Expert” should know that. Vivienne's bit was wonderful, honestly. Seeing her Fall in truth, here, was great. A woman who once thought being Righteous was enough now spitting in the eyes of Heaven. Oh she and Cat would actually make such a fantastic couple. Then . . . the Hunt. Ooh that sent chills down my spine, because that was truly glorious. And it gives Cat's lesson to Ime on what it's like to be Hunted a whole new perspective on how badly the night will go for those officers.

*Yotz*

Ah, The Legend of Woe:

The Hierophant, a cold madman whose strange sorceries tamed demons and stilled miracles.

The Thief, a fallen heroine said to have once stolen an entire fleet and even snatched the sun out of the sky.

Hakram Deadhand. The Adjutant. They said he was unkillable, that he was large as an ogre and his hand of bones could wrest out your soul.

And, last but not least – the Archer, who managed to shot herself in the butt with yumi, twice. Somehow.

### James, Mostly Harmless

Leading them, the Queen of Air and Darkness with the Wild Hunt at her heels, crowned in black iron and cloaked in Woe. She will be another about whom they say “may she never return” whe she is gone!

*grzecho2222*

Queen of Air and Darkness whose first enemy was knight in sour armour type of hero who wears longcoat, was supposed to be her red right hand, planned his own death and is totally dead with no chance of return what so ever.

*NerfContessa*

I.  
Didn't see the similarities.

Haha, oh man, William, you could have been a Dresden expy if you had been less contrite...

*Blue*

Oh yeah still shipping Catherine and Vivienne. They're good together and looks like they can push and pull each other in the directions they need to go. Cat has become suprisingly hamstrung by a mindset to appease Cordelia and I don't see that working in the long term. It's holding her back from taking the action she needs to on an almost dangerous level. Glad Thief talked her around.

*Joel*

Now that is a brilliant play. Have the Watch (who have no secret commands otherwise) scry, which opens a gateway to the Wild Hunt (which you command). The enemy is so busy looking for the types of gates you usually make that they won't see it coming. Perfect.

*Decius*

Brilliant on many levels;  
Assume that the heroes will be able to determine the actual orders given to The Watch  
Give the watch the order to scry when a condition is met.  
The enemy expects that the scrying is to get additional orders, to evade their truth-detection.  
The enemy closely monitors the scrying, to figure out what the secret orders are and if the Watch is betraying them.  
Wild hunt appears.  
Enemy is suddenly being attacked, right when the Watch is

scrying for secret orders that might be betrayal.  
Enemy concludes that the Watch is betraying them.  
Enemy implements their contingency plan to attack Watch.  
Narrative is now that the Enemy attacked their ally without provocation.

*daniel young*

Very clever foxes

*Andrei*

Considering all the spotlight the whole “being a villain will make people under you darker” thing is getting if the Watch doesn’t get clarification that they were used I can see this becoming one of those long grudges Callowans are so famous for (and the Watch especially)

*Antoninjohn*

The God’s fear her for she is the Anathema, also known as the God Empress of Mankind

“The Empress Protects”  
-The Lectitio Divinitatus

*Yotz*

While we on the “random crossovers” timelike curve...

...

Brace yourselves.

The Winter is coming.

*grzecho2222*

Talbot: But Your Highness, now that they know of our plans—

Cat: Ahh, Grandmaster, but that is the plan. Now that they know our plan, they will plan around our plan, and so we shall in turn plan around the plan that they are planning around our plan!

Talbot: Your brilliance knows no bounds!

Cat: And regardless... we have one advantage that they sorely lack~... GATES!

*Yotz*

Talbot: My Queen, what do you plan to do tonight?

Cat: The same thing we do every night, Grandmaster – try to defend Callow!

*grzecho2222*

Dread Empress Triumphant: Ahh, after many years I'm free. Time to conquer Creation.

Bard: She escaped. Recruit Band of Heroes with attitude.

*Bookworm*

I wonder if Catherine should even have a new Name at this point in the story. She is growing in such a way that she sounds like our own myths. Merlin, Hercules, Beowulf. Those figures formed the archetypes in our reality, rather than the archetype forming the figure as happens in this story. All of the excerpts at the start of the chapters refer to her as Foundling (as I recall), which just reinforces that she will not get another Name. She does not need one, and frankly, being forced into an archetype may inhibit her from doing what has to be done, as demanded by her character and story.

*Anon*

I don't necessarily disagree, but as has been pointed out both in this chapter and previous, the more she takes from the fae, the more bound she is to the rules of Arcadia, which can be used to entrap her.

*Bookworm*

I understand this, but it is an obvious trap laid out by the author. Because of the foreshadowing and the fatigue seen in Cat, it becomes more enticing for us the readers to believe in this danger, which is necessary for good writing. And good writing would seek to elicit our relief and excitement when she avoids such a trap in an exceptional way. It is guessing on a meta-level, but I don't think she will ultimately fall under the binding of the Fae name (though there may be some temporary flirtations with Winter). No, I think the Fae mantle is just an escalation of the Named ploy. Both force the wearer of the mantle or bestowal into the archetype, the Fae more so than a Named. But Foundling's character and story demands that she breaks free of archetypes in order to pursue her own path (which is an archetype of its own in our world). She is the ultimate driving force.

*Andrei*

The thing is we're seeing new names pop up around her and these don't really have an archetype (think Hierophant) so if she ends up getting a new name she wouldn't be bound by any story

other than the really big Good vs Evil one since there is no historical context for what she will do as "Insert name here"

*amc*

her new Name is 'Triumphant'

*Allafterme*

Thats heresy, but I'll take it 😊

[blitzxs](#)

"The secret order was known only to one of her mages, and even the specifics of it were nothing too suspicious on the surface: all the mage had to do was check for a signal in the sky at a specific hour, and scry after seeing it. That, and note the position of officer tents. It would be quite enough."

Heh. So we finally get to see the Battle of the Camps. This'll be interesting.

*Anon*

Hmm....Cat's certainly giving the 'evil begets evil' aspect some solemn/serious thought – I would have thought that if this were true, it would have been evident (or at least visible) before now – considering Cat's the 'least' evil she's ever been, compared to when she was willing to accept the weapon with Malicia to act as a deterrent.

It almost feels....perhaps a little too blunt, now that she's seeing it everywhere? I get that it's going to likely end up a driving force for her to abdicate (along with the rest of her plans), but if doing that much is enough for Thief to become 'evil', (of which, incidentally, she's really not, if she's trying to fight against zealots who won't back down to reason), this would be a much more common tactic among villains....Unless the 'thresher' type of villain mentioned by the gray pilgrim is relatively rare?

Especially when Cat's now technically only 'named' in the vaguest sense – unless the Squire's skeleton is enough to leave that association, and/or Winter itself is enough to make the people evil (which could be closer to the truth, given how the fae interact with Creation), it seems like reaching.

But at least Cat's moving ahead with her plans, and the story, right now, does have some credence against fighting back the Crusaders, even if the latter are on the side of 'Good' – which I'm guessing will end up being a part of the Prince's Graveyard battle.

However, I'm guessing the name battles are going to start taking their toll, even for someone of Cat's power. And on that note, I'm perhaps most worried about Cat's body at this point – between the headaches, the mental contamination, and the other worries her Winter body has brought her, I'm expecting it to end up a focal point sometime during this battle.

At any rate, I'm curious to see how the named battles start stacking up – with the grey pilgrim teaching the younger heroes, and the sword saint running interference, Cat's gonna be pressed for success.

Also, sidenote: has the story ever made mention of any good/evil names 'hopping' to the other side like Thief is maybe doing here, and the potential consequences therein? Unless Cat's 'allowed' to do that because of the 'thresher' nature she has, I would think the heavens would start to try and trip up Thief.

PS: the Vivienne/Cat ship also takes a few steps forward, though not in healthy ways....

### *Darkening*

There was a big deal made out of Cat's rule of three with William being a possible redemption story, which seems to indicate it's certainly possible for people to go from villain to hero and back again.

### *Mr. Nobody*

I think Vivienne had a kind of Neutral Name since the beginning seeing how Assassin didn't kill her, going as far as trying to recruit her back then.

### *Jonnnnz*

Evil begets evil, but good sometimes also begets evil. Take the Champion, a hero that only cares about killing, as an example. Or take Black and his plan, where people don't need heroes, as an example of evil begetting good. The dichotomy of good and evil is at best forced from human standards. It only really exists for the gods

### *MetruX*

Like mentioned in the comments in so many chapters, do not confuse Good with good and Evil with evil, what we see as good and evil don't define those forces, since they are directly derived from the Gods, both Above and Bellow.

[\*ahd\*](#)

"Twelve heroes on Callowan soil", surely.



*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

don't call me Surely.

Yotz

You mean this very night, before the rooster crows, one of them will disown their side three times?

[frolamiz](#)

Yeah, the story will love that. Under the moonless night, the Queen of The Hunt, Sovereign of Moonless Night, lead The Hunt to pursue mortals who dare to trespass in her domain.

This one is going to give birth to so many rumours, myths and folklore...

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

I hope that summer fae was able to season her fingers before eating them.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Regret is over accommodating sauce. Comes in ready instant, prepared from fresh the long way, or a little corner-cutting cheating, too.

Shoddi

They were lightly salted with tears of regret.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

It seems that Cat might've stolen Vivienne's heart.

White

Poor Killian. We barely knew thee.

Yotz

Don't discard her just yet – she is a half-Faerie, after all. One potential avenue would be stabilizing her blood-related problems by Bestowal of, say, Viscountess of Whatever-is-the-antonym-to-Indian-Summer upon her...

And in the face of Eternity silly little things like polyamory are not only normalized and accepted, but rather expected from one.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

That just cries out to happen. 😊

*nick012000*

Thought: Names are bestowed by the gods of this setting, right?  
And the Kings and Queens of the Fae are said to be (lesser?)  
gods.

Does that mean that Cat can make Named?

*Yotz*

More like orthogonal gods – but yes to the first, at least as I see it.

To the second – depends: are Fair titles can be considered names? For they sure as sugar are something more than just “Baron of the Rotten Bog” or “Marquise de Sty”...

*MetruX*

You should remember she fought a Fae who was Named in the “common” way, the Rider. Thus titles have power besides Names, and you can have both, not only in Cat’s way.

*Yotz*

Remind me, please, was the Rider Entitled in addition to be Named?

What I lead to – there can be several explanations to this:  
\* firstly, the Rider was Named by the will of the Gods of Creation, for only they can bestow a Name, while only Lords of Arcadia can grant a Fair/Foul Title, thus the “orthogonal” part;

\* secondly, “The Rider” can be a lesser Arcadia Title like, say, the Constable, the Küchenmeister, or the Seneschal.

Regardless of that, the question was about Cat’s capacity to create a Name for someone. The way I see it – she can only facilitate Naming (like it was with Hakram), but not simply nickname one and expect it to become one’s Name just because of her own Title. She, however, can grant a lesser Title to anyone – or almost anyone – without any fuss, and it will stick.

*TeK*

He was a Rider of the Host. He didn’t have a name, only profession.

*Yotz*

Which can be a Title. Count and Baron are professions too, after all.

*agumentic*

"Wasn't able to get all the Names," Thief said. "But I do have a number for you: there's fourteen of them." – Chapter 5.

Ouch, so the fight with Absence did not happen without casualties.

*Morgenstern*

Or two of them are on a trip somewhere else for yet unknown purposes...

*SMHF*

Cat knew there's gonna be fourteen Heroes in the enemy camps from Vivian's report... the fact that no one bothers to point out why two of them are Absent now should tell us something!

*d\_o\_l*

Holy shit, I totally missed that. And next to the remark about having a vicious headache for no reason in particular, too.

[shieldredblog](#)

It may be the Grey Pilgrim got absenced then. As hes the only Hero she even talked too and Absence seems like it would be a weakness for the Choir of Mercy that's all about alleviating suffering. What does that do for the terms set?

*agumentic*

No, Cat still mentions that there are 2 experienced heroes leading ten novices, so both the Pilgrim and the Saint are alive.

*Yotz*

Which brings to a question: how exactly do the Absence works? Are the Absenced simply cease to exist, blinking through time and space a-la certain Bard until the effect wears off; or they continue to exist within Creation but get ignored by everyone and everything akin to certain Joe Schmo, who is compleatly normal, non-anomalous person, and in no way, shape, or form is a Keter-class permanent containment failure in progress? For if the second is true, that opens some terrifying options for the side of The Greater Good...

*agumentic*

Probably just cease to ever existing forever and retroactively. It's hard to say what would that mean for all their achievements and consequences of all their actions, but

they may also retroactively vanish. Which turns everything into a huge mess, actually, but that's demons for you.

### [oldschoolvillain](#)

mm, not necessarily – the example of a Demon of Absence's power was some city vanishing from everyone's memory for a specific period of time, though I can't remember how long that was. It's possible that the Heroes will make a triumphant comeback just in time to save the group from utter defeat.

### *Quie Possibly A Cat*

So potentially the two vanished heroes can kick their way out of non-existence, pop back into creation at the worst possible time and probably come out with a gaggle of power ups? Wonderful.

### *d\_o\_l*

Not necessarily. That's how things would normally work, but it's stated that demons actually destroy the narrative itself. The usual rules don't apply when demons are involved.

### *Yotz*

More likely not "kick their way out", but simply appear suddenly and without their volition or intent in second worst possible moment as if they always were here. If continent wide empire can appear as of nowhere, why not two Heroes?

Demons do damage the Narrative, though, so possible heroic reappearance can't be predicted with narrative tools – ultimately, one must be/have knowledge from beyond the weave of the Story to be able to see/remember damaged parts of it. So – possibly, Hierophant. Probably, Larat.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

And, sort of Cat. She's hungover after Creation got kicked, possibly. But, it's her first time, so she thinks it's just being knackered. 😊

### *grzecho2222*

Or it works same way as Licho (demon of random disappearing) and it just moves random people/objects/places/concepts to heck knows where

### [Antony444](#)

Well, we can safely say the Procerans and the Heroes didn't see that one coming...or they would never have authorised a single scrying, or refused the Watch inside their camp. The enemy is already inside their defences. The heroes are numerous, but there is one charged to mount guard near the Deaoraites who is going to find himself against Catherine and the entire Wild Hunt. I would not like to be in his place. Add to this that Masego is planning something impressive magically.

Yeah, this battle has already begun badly for the Crusaders and the intended target is not people the Princes are going to protect at all costs. After all the lives of high-ranked nobles are far more important than up-jumped commoners, right?

The effect is going to be terrifying, seriously. If it works, any mage on the surface of Calernia scrying at night is potentially a target. That isn't exactly going to provide a boost of confidence.

I suppose this is the Battle of the Camps...and unless the authorities are misleading us, the Light has already lost two heroes to a demon of Absence.

Can't wait for the next chapter...

[taliesinskye](#)

Personally I suspect that the two missing heroes are the Grey Pilgrim and the Saint of Swords off on an errand somewhere, not heroes lost off-screen to Absence.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

Doubt it. Cat noted on how it was strange she hadn't noticed there was a Tenth of Heroes+two officers. Two heroes got fed to Ur, Demon of the Firsts Choir. I mean, Abstemious Demon, Archer's Greatest Weakness. I mean the Demon who Smells of Sunflowers. Okay, this is just going downhill.

I guess we know why no one was able to locate any records of it.

Yotz

Surely you meant the Demon of Absinthe, Archer's Bestest Friend! Its appearances have been thoroughly recorded. And... let's call it "studied".

[Euodiachloris](#)

I thought her greatest weakness was a stunning pair of buttocks... xD

*Miles*

I think she would have been questioning where the other heroes went if there had been 14 and now there were only 12, but there wasn't a single line about it.

*oldschoolvillain*

It also mentioned she had a splitting headache, and that even Vivienne and Masego had been "out of sorts." As close to confirmation that the Heroes engaged Absence and lost two that we're likely to get for now.

[taliesinskye](#)

OK, that's a pretty strong argument. You've changed my mind.

*Thea*

It's funny, really. Cat fought the fae in Book 3 because she wanted all fae influence out of creation. Except she turned herself in the quasi-Winter Queen, making all people of Callow quasi-Winter Peasants, until she elevates them. But this might be the actual reason Callow's people turn harsher. "Better them than us" is a winter-theme as well. Because as a villain, the Squire, she shouldn't have enough power to subtly influence a whole nation, and she hasn't received Name-power since.

This would mean... as long as Cat rules, Callow will grow harsher. She might escape by eventually abdicating and focusing on being the Queen of the Hunt. It would allow her to travel, for example with Archer or people she might eventually bestow titles on, after all. Relying on your close and loved ones and keeping close is another winter-theme, after all. And as the Queen in Exile, she always has a story thread to come back and pull Callow out of trouble. Like one vicious Guardian... maybe not Angel, but you get my drift. Would that qualify as a happy ending?

*grzecho2222*

She seems to be going way of:

- Future Callow is invaded (again)
- King/Queen is failing
- King/Queen goes into the darkest, the coldest place in Callow during moonless night
- King/Queen offers his/hers crown of gold and mantle of ermine and asks for help the darkest ruler of Callow
- Black Queen (or under other Name) appears crown in iron and cloaked in fallen
- Black Queen raises armies of Callow from death and calls for her court of horrors
- Black Queen crushes invaders

-King/Queen realizes that they have no idea how to make her go away now  
-Ow snap we count as Evil nation again

*Yotz*

For souls long lost and full of fright,  
For those alone in Moonless Night,  
To set right what has been made wrong,  
I call you, Black Queen – make us strong!

*Miles*

I'm kind of hoping she casts off that mantle at some point and becomes not-fae again. Right now her greatest weakness is the fact that the Queen of Summer/King of Winter union is the court that would oppose her metaphorical one, and if they were to die somehow she'll go dormant until the fall/spring cycle completes, along with all the other summer/winter fae.

And it's only a matter of time before the King/Queen of Winter/Summer have a little spat and who knows how that'll turn out.

*MetruX*

They kind of don't exist anymore? I mean, the whole reason for the wedding was to end the cycle, there is no more Winter and Summer, the only thing from ANY of them that exists is Cat. Larat is only there because he abdicated his Winter mantle to become part of the Wild Hunt, which is something any Fae can do, but the Wild Hunt is strictly from Spring/Fall, thus if they are here, there is no Summer/Winter, or simply it all got broken, like the king wanted.

All in all there is simply no problem or reason to worry about them dying, they are not her antithesis, and she isn't even a true Fae, so she won't go dormant, just like half-fae doesn't, neither does Fae on reality soil.

*TeK*

Grandmaster Brandon Talbot: They'll hunt you.

Catherine : You'll hunt me. You'll condemn me, set the dogs on me. Because that's what needs to happen. Because sometimes...the truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more.

Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded.

Brandon's Son: Catherine? Catherine! Why is she running, Dad?

Grandmaster Brandon Talbot: Because we have to chase her.

Brandon's Son: She didn't do anything wrong.

Grandmaster Brandon Talbot: Because she's the Named Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now. So, we'll hunt her, because she can take it. Because she's not a Hero. She's a silent guardian. A watchful protector. A Dark Knight.

Damn it's sad she's not a Squire.

*RanVor*

I didn't expect to see Herbert again so soon... not that I'm complaining.

Overall, yet another brilliant chapter.

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

Whelp, it looks like the demon is out and about.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Weeeeelllll then.

So, for our first point of the day, it looks like the Pilgrim's requests for Heavenly aid gave him a way to track the gate makers. Reasonable and a good choice, if that was anywhere close to the game Cat was playing. But sadly, as has been demonstrated, she isn't playing that game.

It's almost like she doesn't even know what game she is playing anymore! It's great! Embrace the madness of Isabella!

Second thing, Absence is up and about and seems to have eaten two heroes. It's interesting that even when she is so charged with Fae power that Cat is still affected. However, the very fact that people in universe can remember the name and existence of Absence indicates their power has flaws which can be used to undo it.

The two old timers are definitely still here though and it was two rando's who got ate, so it's possible that Absence has activated on it's own some how and is slowly working it's way through the Procerans. I... would not be surprised to find out that chunks of the armies are starting to slowly go missing.

Third up is that what the Pilgrim said disturbed Cat and set her up on a path which is currently ill defined. The bluntness of her awareness of this seems like a growth from her initial thoughtfulness before the Pilgrim, but I am concerned its some kind of mind shenanigans like the redemption story attempt. The Pilgrim seems a bit too honest, and affected in turn by what she said to do that kind of thing intentionally. Could be the Heavens being cheating meddlers.

Fourth Cat looks like a badass and is really getting into enchanting of magic items. The fact that it can be used by anyone is rather concerning. Though I wonder if it can be used to call Cat by one of her allies. It's a good thing she isn't relying on it though as Black taught her.

Fifth, it must suck like flaming ass to be a grunt in Malanza's army right now. First there was a great long hike through a



mountain pass over a giant stair case made through spooky magic. Then they got into Callow and have faced minimal resistance juxtaposed with pants shittingly terrifying moments of abrupt lethal battle by armies which can't be pursued. The supplies are gone and you might not make it to Harrow. The Great Hasenbach is forbidding the soldiers from feeding themselves through intense foraging. Annnnnd now you learn that your enemy can somehow pop right in the middle of camp while you're taking a piss in the latrine.

Life sucks being a Crusader.

*Author Unknown*

Two questions spring to mind. One, how good is the Grey Pilgrims foresight. Cat seems to be doing something very reckless, that she specifically said she wasn't going to do: making plans which hinge on things going right. Jumping into the middle of the enemy camp with only one way out makes it seem like she has forgotten the kind of bullshit heroes can pull out of there ass. 'Specially given that she is gambling on them not reacting fast enough to counter her before she can retreat. For all she knows, the rest of the merry band has chosen this moment to have a few drinks with the commander.

Two: Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Which hero is keeping an eye on the Watch? Cat is guaranteed a Hero battle against an unknown opponent and she still waltzes right in, even though she will be needed to flee. Yeah, she has had a good run against newbie heroes, but this seems rather arrogant. All that talk about Squire being nothing more than a skeleton brings up one potential weakness. For all her current strength, her foundation is still that of an introductory Name.

All in all this strike me as a remarkably reckless move. One of questionable merit. Even if she accomplishes her objective, I don't think it will have the effect she wants. Some of the princes seem to think that the real war is fought with hushed voices in smokey backrooms, and all the marching and everything is just the fiddle bits in between.

I expect some of their reactions to loosing their commanders to be something along the line of: So we lost a few jumped up peasants? Plenty more commoners where they came from. Promote a few and get on with it. After all, their only job is to do what their betters tell them. How hard can that be?

I'm concerned about how this all going to play out. I would feel a lot better if Deadhand was there to pull her frigid ass out of the fire, again.

*MetruX*

1. You are simply assuming there is only one way out, which is a pretty bad thing to do when you confront Fae. To start with the way in has already been destroyed, the scrying bowl broken, but they could accept the invitation on any other scrying bowl anywhere (we don't know the limitations, if there are any). Then we come to have two fae gate makers just on this group, which strikes me as making retreat a very easier thing, especially since anyone under her command is free to pass through Arcadia, but her enemies are not, so shenanigans should stop them from going after the Wild Hunt. Also, we don't know what Masego is doing, but it should be nice aswell.

2. Why would that ever be a problem? This is not HER battle, but a Wild Hunt with her in it, it's been noted before that few Named have ever seen the Wild Hunt and left alive, that is one of Ranger's list of achievements, so a single Hero in the way, trying to fight or contain the Watch just before the freaking Wild Hunt comes for him? Yeah, I don't see any way he is going to cause Cat any problems, even the Pilgrim or the Saint would have trouble staying alive in this situation, and I'm pretty sure it won't be one of them guarding the Watch.

All in all, Adjutant being there would make things harder, since he can't mount and he isn't part of the hunt, which would make him a fourth party (if you count the Watch as a third one). He would need to have his ass saved, not the other way around.

*TeK*

You misunderstand something, I think. The fact that Catherine is, for all relevant intents and purposes, nameless is a huge advantage. For one, most of players seem to think, that she is a Villain. She is not. Villains are Named, so if she has no Name, she is not a Villain, she is a monster. Or a force of nature, given that she is of Winter. It's another breed entirely and requires different tactics and different attitudes. For example, Villains always lose at the end of the story. Monster?

*grzecho2222*

They come back in sequels?

*warriormonk19*

What does Cat owe Larat? Did she promise him something when he brought the Winter Army to ride against the Summer's in Book 3?

[oldschoolvillain](#)

"The Crowns of Seven Mortal Princes and One, lain at the feet of the Prince of Nightfall"

That is, at least, what she told Princess Sulia. She was warned, however, that it must not come to pass, so whether she finagles out of it or not is in the air. It was given a callback in the prologue though, so chances are not high.

[taliesinskye](#)

The funniest way of getting out of it would be to buy eight princes brand new, very fancy crowns in exchange for borrowing the old ones to get the sizing right.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Not sure that'd work. As long as it is a crown of a mortal prince, it counts to be given, but that means it likely counts to be gotten. Pretty sure this is some story bullshit that lets Larat ascend into something, or gives him a destiny/prophecy fulfillment that makes him neigh-unstoppable as he gets whatever it is he wants.

*TeK*

Say, crazy thought, but what if he wants to be a King of Winter? While he did said, that he does not want any titles, he mentioned "beyond already owned". What if this crown bullshit is some kind of wedding gift? He mentioned that his realm is very close to Cat's. If the Winter court will be firmly established in the Creation, since it sees everything in monochrome, the Summer court will need to appear. And since we already got one court in Arcadia, it can potentially mean war between Arcadia and Creation.

I think my headcanon needs a bit more polishing.

*grzecho2222*

Good guys: Oh Gods.

Evil guys: Oh Hells.

Dead King: "Training flower catching"

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Isabella is fucking great. I can see how she bet Theodosius now.

*grzecho2222*

"Agreed," he said. "Innocents should not be made to suffer. You must refrain from using demons."

"I'll swear to that, if you refrain from calling on angels," I said."

Grey Pilgrim never said that Heroes won't use Demons. Is there a possibility that some Antihero is using Demon as invisibility cloak?

grzecho2222

Or a prince?

JJR

Probably not Demons, they are too far over the line to even keep anti-heroing afterwards I think. Given how the damage creation itself and rather permanently. Devils though, there's a maybe. They are far more controllable and arguments about "The Great Good" might abound.

Either way, this would open the narrative door to Cat using Angels on the crusaders. Most of the choirs would only strengthen the crusade of course. But what happens if the entire army is made Merciful? It's a bit hard to win a crusade if you will never again take a life.

[sengachi](#)

"Strange, it hadn't occurred to me before now that the muster of heroes on the other side was essentially a tenth and two officers. I had been tired, and there'd been a few days a while back where I'd had vicious headaches. Must have been the lack of sleep having unforeseen consequences. We were all feeling the pressure: even Vivienne and Masego had been out of sorts."

Oh, so that's when the absence demon ate those two heroes.

Blue1ao

1st comment I've made since binging this I realize it's already written but I hop robber joins her court

[vuthuha912](#)

Cat. Procer does not follow the Below, they had food, and every resource they need, yet, they still act like Praesi without the magic part. At least, we know that part of Praes's problem is the lack of food and divine interventions pushing them further and further down a pit and they lashed out. Procer has nothing to blame but itself for its inadequacy. Humans aren't nice, they can be vicious to everybody else, and most of the time, they do. None of your advisers is wrong in their opinion of Procer. Your people can be influenced by the Below but even when influenced they are still head and shoulder better than most Procer Princes who go to the House of Light daily. Hell, Black and you are both fighting for your country when they all sit around waiting for it to fall so they can take a share. Black does this whole thing for the

benefit of Praes – who people get fuck over by Gods so hard, self-destructing is their only option. He is playing the Game to drag his country out, not for some personal ambitions. Vivienne is doing the same, she sided with you because you are objectively better for Callow than any of the Heroes she is with. Every officer that you have is fighting for their country, they are more heroic than any people on the opposite side.

I am telling you justification matters because idea matters and thoughts matter. Sure Black conquered your country and that is inexcusable but when you know why he did what he did, you can actually tackle the root and help each other. How about William? He has justification and you know why he did what he did. Yet, it does not matter because the reasoning is not good enough for what he was doing. Racism is no excuse for trying to brainwash an entire city into a suicidal Crusade. Religions are not a worthy cause. Buddhism nearly wrecked my country's economy so we changes how we follow it. Religion is good for nurturing order and virtue among the people so everyone can live better lives but if it betrays its main purpose then it needs to be challenged and changed.

Who the fuck cares about Heaven's opinion? Black doesn't, Cordelia doesn't. They both said fuck you to Heaven and go on to manage their country. When there is no food on the table or death is at the door, honor, dignity, and morals all run off. Good teaching is not good enough. It lets too many people suffer to be considered adequate. It needs to change. Evil was never okay to begin with that is why Black is trying to change it or wreck it when you look at his attitude toward Tyrant, Heir, and Malicia.

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## Chapter 11: Ballon

*"You might say that they'll never see me coming."*

-Dread Empress Malevolent II, announcing the raising of her invisible army

*"Your Majesty?"* the Deoraithe mage stuttered out.

I leaned down and gently touched his forehead with an armoured finger.

*"Don't resist,"* I said. *"It'll be uncomfortable, but not painful."*

Unless he tried to fight me, but in this case the fear that trailed me as much as my cape saw to the matter. The man went rigid as a board. I breathed out mist and Winter crept through my veins. His soul wriggled under the tight grip of my will, as I rifled through vague memories. He had, I thought, a well-organized mind. Shame about the panic tinging it. I found what I needed anyway, the locations of the officer tent's he'd found as he'd been told.

"You were thorough," I said, withdrawing my finger. "Well done."

The fifty riders of the Hunt were too many for so small a tent, and one of the fae casually blew it away with a flick of the wrist before it could tangle the banners. Midnight was no bar to my sight, and what I saw around us was the Watch responding to our sudden arrival with flawless professionalism. Ah, the things I could do with an army's worth of these. It was almost tempting to hollow out Kegan's soul, tie puppet strings to the remnants and take them all for my own. I bit my lip until it bled, the flare of pain helping me focus. I reached for my saddlebag, taking out the seal of House Iarsmai I'd asked Kegan to send me months ago. I tossed it into the mage's hands.

"Validate this," I ordered.

The man shivered, though I was unsure why. I'd been very polite so far. Murmuring in the mage tongue he traced the tall dead oak on the seal with his fingers, gasping when it glimmered green.

"It's real," he said.

Unsheathing my sword, I flicked the blade behind me after gauging the surroundings. Creation folded unto itself, the fairy gate opening thirty feet wide and just as tall. I tied off the threads, giving it a finite lifespan. One of the newer Winter tricks in my arsenal.

"By the authority granted to me by Duchess Kegan Iarsmai, I order the Watch to immediately withdraw," I called out. "And quick about it, I don't have the time to hold your hand. You have half an hour before the gate closes."

Zombie was chomping at the bit, which admittedly was better than chomping at grass I'd probably need to have a goblin dig out of her later. I took a moment to calm myself, then dug into the memories I'd glimpsed. Reorienting myself was the hardest part of figuring it all out, since none of the unconscious markers the mage had used were markers I was familiar with. Masego and I had figured out a way around that through the Observatory with the card I'd been keeping up my – heavily armoured – sleeve, but I was without the benefit of Hierophant tonight. My mind struggled with the discrepancies, until I let through another sliver of

Winter and there was a sensation like a spike through my forehead. No pain, though, only terrifyingly clear understanding.

"Riders of the Hunt," I called out.

All fifty of them turned to me as one with unnatural smoothness.

"Follow," I laughed. "Tonight we ride."

"*Finally*," Larat hissed, blade in hand. "Sound the horns. Let them hear us coming."

Banners were raised, not of silk or cloth but crow's feathers and shadow. Shining coldly like a raven's eye. A fae with hair like spun gold touched the horn to her lips, and doom screamed across the night. I spurred on Zombie, and felt her devour the distance easily as I guided us by memories not my own. The Watch parted for us, already preparing to retreat, and we fell unto the unprepared camp of the crusaders like hungry wolves. Men shouted out in Chantant, known to me regardless of sight. The heat of them could be felt on the tip of my tongue, the fear that set their hearts aflutter thundering in my ears. It pleased me. It was slaughter, wherever we rode. Men half-dressed and half-awake were torn apart by sword and spear and darker things: hounds of air and darkness, called forth by the horns. I wielded the monster like a knife as my thoughts cooled. The Alamans army closest to us had kept the tents of their officers together and I made them pay for that mistake. Before the hounds even reached them the soldiers I raised my hand and choked them with rings of ice and shade, a dozen dead in a heartbeat. Smiling, I leaned forward.

"Up," I ordered. "*Kill*."

Corpses with broken necks and ugly marks around their throats rose up as the Hunt passed through. Screams followed in our wake. We would begin, I decided, with the outer ring. Princess Malanza's own host was closer to the centre, but I would let her people feel it coming. Know what was prowling the night for them. We carved our way out of the Alamans army camp, scything through the company of fantassins that tried to form up in our way. Men and women were trampled by horses, terror blooming again in the wake of death as the corpses rose and chaos spread.

"You will go no further," a man's voice announced calmly.

I cocked my head to the side. No fear in this one. And such power. Young but scarred, his voice had echoed of faraway Levant. A large man with a war hammer hoisted over his shoulder, burdened with heavy plate. I neither slowed nor ceased, Zombie galloping straight at him. The hero hefted his war hammer and struck with impossible swiftness, aiming to shatter the legs of my mount. With a cold laugh I guided my horse and her wings unfolded,

leaping tall above the man as the Hunt streamed around him seamlessly. We rode even as the man screamed of our cowardice, ever onwards. I had not come here to be waylaid by petty sidekicks. The camps had come alive and our prey was moving. It became slower work, picking off officers who'd joined their companies. Frustratingly slow. The riders slaked their blood on those that could be found instead. No surrender was offered and no mercy granted.

Then the sky came down on our heads.

Instinct allowed me to guide Zombie away from the worst of it, but wet earth sprayed over us as a massive gouge split the ground open. Even as it began to rain mud, a woman walked out of the mess. Old, I thought. Neither tall nor short, and she wore no armour aside from a cuirass over long cloth robes. In her hand was a simple sword of oiled steel, and she was rolling her wrists to limber them.

"Saint of Swords," I said, voice echoing with the howl of blizzards.

"Black Queen," the old woman said, light tapping the flat of the blade against her shoulder. "Nice of you to visit."

My will spread, weaving glamour across the sky according to borrowed memories.

"Go," I told the Hunt. "Fulfil my purpose."

"Stay," the Saint grinned. "Die screaming."

She swung again, and this time I grasped what was being wielded. Not an aspect or a spell. Nothing like the Lone Swordsman's power or the Gallant Brigand's. No, I'd only seen this once before: when Ranger had considered killing me seriously enough I'd felt myself die. When the Saint of Swords attacked, she did so with the sharpened intent to kill us. She had hardened her willpower so much that Creation counted no difference between her will and truth, the air howling as it cut itself apart. I drew deep and laughed, ice crashing against the blow with a gargantuan cracking sound. Shards sprayed everywhere as the Hunt obeyed, hounds and riders streaming out in every direction but that of the coming fight. I leapt off Zombie and set her aflight. Her wings made her too valuable to risk here.

"Winter, is it?" the Saint of Swords mused, strolling forward. "Never had that before. Try to make it entertaining."

"You will make," I said, "very useful artefacts."

A quiet voice in the back of my mind howled, screaming that revealing any unknown capacity to the enemy was sheer stupidity.



I could not seem to care. It had felt... right to chastise her that way. We closed the distance as one, swords bared. I feinted to the side but she slapped it away contemptuously, a half-step bringing her into my guard and without missing a beat she cut my throat. Red gushed out, but it was more Winter than blood – an exertion of will was all it took to heal the wound. I spat out the blood in my mouth, making distance between us.

“Regenerators,” the Saint sighed. “You never bother to learn how to fight properly, with a crutch like that. Sloppy.”

The nonchalance tasted fouler in my mouth than the blood, called for *utter destruction* in answer, but I breathed out and smoothed the edges growing ragged. I attacked again, low and quick. Parry, but when she closed in again I was ready: a spear of shadow formed out of my free hand and tore towards her. Snorting, the heroine raked her bare fingers down and tore through the darkness like wet parchment. In the heartbeat where I hesitated, she struck quick as a viper – aiming to cut off my head in full, this time. I ducked under by the barest of margins but she kicked me in the face, and as I rocked back she struck again. My parry was effortlessly turned, blade twisting around to carve through my wrist like it was butter. I pivoted, caught the hand still holding the blade with my other one and forced it back on even as I avoided a thrust that would have gone through my eye if I’d been a moment slower. Winter flared and the pieces reattached, my fingers twitching as the power skittered through them.

“I can see it,” the Saint mused. “Take the crippling to avoid the killing. There’s a hint of Ranger in there, however diluted. A bastard’s bastard.”

I rolled my shoulders as she watched me indifferently.

“Again,” I said.

“Change of plans,” the old woman smiled.

The spell struck me from the side like the fist of an angry god. I felt my flesh melt off, my blood boil – until I opened the floodgates, and shot out of the fire storm as my face peeled off flake by flake. That had *stung*.

“Reinforcements, my dear lady,” a man’s voice drawled. “Though you seem to need them not.”

My eyes flicked to the side. Three of them. Short man with a leather coat and a casting rod must have been responsible for the flame. An olive-skinned woman with two knives and a red-painted face started walking towards me, while the last was unarmed. Priest, I decided, looking at his ornate robes. Attrition was no longer feasible if they had a healer. On the other hand, now it was four on one. My odds had just gotten a lot better.

"Well," I grinned, my teeth grown sharp. "Now it's a party. Have at it, heroes."

"How uncouth," the man in leather said, wrinkling his nose.

When the fire came again, erupting in a cone from the rod, I flicked away. Two Knives closed in from the side as the Saint was forced to go around the spell. Eyes following the arms, I let the knife-wielder commit to a cut from the left before half-stepping out of the way, hand snaking up to catch the extended wrist and *snapping* it. There was a scream, but I slapped her open mouth and filled with ice. She began choking until Light bloomed and melted it. It even streaked down to unsnap the wrist. No matter, I was already past her.

"Damnation," the spellcaster cursed, seeing me close the distance in the blink of an eye.

A sphere of what looked like liquid flame formed around him, but what was fire to me? I gathered power and struck at it, ripping off a chunk of the protective sphere to get at the terrified man beneath. Instinct warned me and I listened. Leaping above the flames, I narrowly avoided being run through by the Saint – though, twisting halfway up the arcing jump, I shaped a spike of rime and sent it howling after Two Knives. The heroine flickered, as if she'd been an illusion all this time, and what should have torn through her abdomen instead put a hole in the ground twenty feet behind her. Displacement? Useful trick. Too useful to be anything but an aspect. I landed in a crouch.

"Keep away from her, kids," the Saint ordered. "She's a few years ahead of what you can handle."

My eyes flicked to the sky. Of the five glamoured markers I had placed, three were left. I'd have to play with these a little longer, lest they pursue the Hunt. I grimaced. I'd drawn on Winter enough already that anything more was going to starkly affect my judgement instead of just reinforce bad instincts. *Until the markers are gone, I told myself. Then retreat.* I drew deep, and this time when the Saint struck at me I drowned the world in ice. Massive spinning blades tore through the air and ground, though I felt them shatter within a heartbeat. The hound had teeth. No matter. The creature with Two Knives had retreated to protect the thing that wielded Light, but the spellcaster was vulnerable. I wove around balls of flame effortlessly, parted a burning wall with a flick of my sword and found the human behind it staring back defiantly. It had gathered sorcery before it, a hundred hanging needles that burned the very air around them.

"Dodge *that*," the human hissed, and they flew.

Laughing, I formed a gate that swallowed them into Arcadia and closed it just as swiftly. The human was casting again, and I

could feel death coming. Light, from the side, and something more dangerous from the hound. I shaped glamour with but a thought, mine own silhouette striving for the spellcaster as I leapt up shrouded in nothingness. The illusion was broken by a beam of Light, but the hound had caught the scent: even as I landed atop a ring of shade, she cut a wound into the air and ran atop it towards me. I broke the ring and fell as the other humans finally saw through the glamour, slow things that they were. Abandoning the spellcaster, I made for the Light-bearer and its protector. The knife-wielding thing shouted out a word in some foreign tongue that tasted of spice and blood, charging me with blinding speed. Ah, the arrogance of mortals. Gracefully, I stepped around the blow and simply left my sword in her way. It carved through her shoulder, blood spraying as the arm fell to the ground. I took a modified sharper from the satchel and shoved it into the stump, triggering the mechanism inside with a shard of ice. The detonation broke bone and tossed her away even as the Light-wielder shot another brilliant beam at me. My free hand caught it, fingers beginning to melt away, and I forced it to careen aside.

It had slowed me. The gout of flame I avoided with a mere half-step even as my fingers grew back, but the Saint struck harder. Holding the wound she had carved in the sky like a massive blade, she scythed through the side of me. I was quick enough it went through my shoulder instead of my head. In a heartbeat, arm and leg and flank were pulped. Winter hissed in fury, and they began to coalesce anew in ice.

"Not regeneration," the Saint frowned. "Creationally fixed body. Just pour power until it remakes itself. You've turned yourself into proper abomination, girl. If there's still any of you left in there."

"Irritating," I noted, voice echoing with the death of embers.

"Beat it, kids," the hound ordered. "This one's going to take a lot of killing before she goes down."

Already the Light-wielder was fixing the creature I had mangled. The hound was an irritant, she must be dealt with before the rest was tended to. I seized threads of glamour and sent them into her mind, but they... broke. That was no soul. It was a sword, and somehow more.

"You hold dominion," I said.

"Only over the one thing," the Saint grinned. "But that's usually enough."

My eyes flicked to the sky. Another glamourised marker had vanished. Only one left now. And when it did, I would... I frowned. It was hard to remember. The hound took advantage of my

distraction, striking anew. I let instinct guide me and steel rang against steel. She batted aside my guard but the spike of frost I shot at her throat forced her to turn her follow-through blow into a parry as I returned on the offensive. Cut high, swept away, but I turned with it and lunged at her back. She caught the tip between two fingers and *twisted*, the steel shattering. Frost filled the break as I withdrew, tasting her movements in the air. The footing gave her away. Or so I had thought: what should have been a strike at my arm was a slide forward instead, and when I tried a head-butt she met me with her own. We hit halfway through, neither hurt until she raked her fingers across my chest plate and cut through still boiling-hot steel. I let Winter loose, screaming cold winds blowing the both of us back. Some part of me insisted I look at the sky. The rest wanted to carve open that insolent hound and add her entrails to my cape. One was more pleasing than the other.

"Let us test it, then," I smiled. "The mettle of our domains."

Darkness fell, and came cold with it. The world fell away. Yet under an ink-black sky stood the Saint of Swords, radiant and unruffled. Unimpressed. I inhaled the scent of it, puzzled.

"Your dominion," I said. "It is not projected. Only within."

"Took me a decade of hard killing to get that down," the hound replied. "But there's always a fight to be found in Procer, if you know where to look."

My frown deepened and the cold focused on her, but all it did was cool the blade. It had been forged of great fires, I thought. What coldness I had to offer was insufficient.

"Gods, I'm going to feel this one in the joints," the Saint grunted.

She had no sword in hand, when she took her stance. I grit my teeth and poured all of my domain into her, but slowed was not stopped. She swung, and the light was blinding. Something... not broke, but it was wounded. Damaged. As I screamed the night fled, and I found myself kneeling over grounds rent asunder by our fight. Returned to Creation. The heroine was panting. *Shit*, I thought. *What the fuck was that?* I was feeling like myself again, but I was also feeling my heart beat. Like it actually mattered, like I was *human* again. The last marker was gone, I saw. And I sure as Hells wasn't sticking around to take another of whatever in that'd been. Seizing reins gone frail, I called back the Hunt. Fewer than anticipated answered my call, but I realized with ugly surprise it was not rebellion I was dealing with. The heroes must have killed some of them. At least ten were gone, maybe more.

I legged it. No two ways about it, I made like a proper villain and fled the field. The heroine tried to follow and almost caught

me around the corner behind a tent, scything straight through with another of those not-blows, but Zombie answered my call and landed just behind. We took flight even as the old woman cursed and carved another wound into the air, immediately running on it after me. Yeah, fuck that. I wasn't picking a second fight with a Named who could shrug off my full domain. I opened the gate in the sky even higher, seeing the Hunt take flight behind me, and went straight through into Arcadia. I didn't even stop there, flying Zombie far from the entrance. The Saint, thank the Gods, did not follow. I learned why when another four of the Hunt disappeared from the back of my mind.

I could not help but be thankful she'd chosen to whittle away at my trump card instead of trying to go after me. It might have been possible to trap her in here, but that smelled of the Saint cutting her way back out at the worst possible moment down the line. The Hunt gathered to me, having lost a few feathers, but Headsman had been a success. Not without losses, but I wasn't entirely opposed to the Hunt being thinned out before they inevitably stabbed me in the back. Larat was the first to address me after I landed, drenched in blood from head to toe. Someone was in a good mood.

"A victory, my queen," he said.

I looked up at the Arcadian sky and smiled. Sure, it'd been that. But more importantly, it had been a very good distraction. After all, the very moment I'd opened the gate for the Watch someone had come through. And while we were busy being loud and visible?

Thief had been on the prowl.

"All right, saddle up," I called out. "We need to find the Watch contingent before retreating."

We needed to hurry. The sooner we got back to camp, the sooner I could ask Hierophant why my skin was capable of bruising again.

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*danh3107*

Did.... Did the saint just cut through Winter?

>That's no soul, it's a sword.  
Jesus H christ she really is Shirou

*Allafterme*

Cat gone too deep to Blue & Orange morality this time. I don't think she could break off the fight by herself, bloody Saint of Swords probably saved her life 😊

*lavos*

Indeed, the irony made me stop reading and laugh a bit before continuing.

*Byzantine*

Saved her life and probably her mind, too.

*NerfContessa*

Which are one and the same, at the moment.

And yeah, Saint is a scary scary lady.

*ruduen*

If that's actually a domain of swords or a sword? Quite possibly, yes.

*maresther23*

Saint is the Sword of the Heavens, she has Domain over herself.

[sengachi](#)

That's almost as scary as Ranger's aspects in a way.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Wait a minute, I can see where this is going for Cat.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I like how you think, but if Cat takes the time to learn that trick Callow will be the newest and most Waste-blasted Principalities.

*stevenneiman*

I think it's a Domain power that's only inside her mind. But in a world with reality as malleable as Creation, "only inside your mind" doesn't have to be much more of a limitation than "a lone hero facing impossible odds". The result seems to be something a bit like Neo from The Matrix, from what I know of the movie. She has ridiculous powers that let her hack reality to achieve incredible things, but usually uses them to back up physical combat skills.

*grzecho2222*

And she won domain measuring contest with Cat

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

I told ya the woman is really made of sword, she even got a sword demesne.

N/A

Ah. Cat has at last encountered Royalty, one who wields the terrible blade of Want. Behold that the sanctioned action is to Cut, and learn.

*Unmaker*

For some odd reason I can't seem to Like this, so: Like!  
For those of you who don't recognize this: <https://killsixbilliondemons.com/> is hard to describe but quite amazing.

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

In 4 actual UBW

*Highwayman*

Finally, we see the Wild Hunt ride! Hair-rising as always, EE.

And it makes me giddy inside that Cat is more human again!

*Agent J*

The Wild Hunt was beautiful to watch. The sheer revelry with which they slaughtered their way through the camps was practically a religious experience.

Cat being more human, however, is less than thrilling. She's been drawing too deep from Winter's well in general, but especially in this chapter. We've been promised consequences due to this sort of recklessness. For the enemy to simply snap their fingers and accidentally "fix" her would be anticlimactic.

[\*hoyboy\*](#)

I mean, sure. If you're fucked up.

Being a normal person, ew.

*Yotz*

Only the aberrant deem themselves normal.

Also, do not presume that religious experience is always one of joy – the word "awful" means "full of awe" for a reason.

---

> For the enemy to simply snap their fingers and accidentally “fix” her would be anticlimactic.

Looking back at the entirety of the endgame of the second book, I can’t decide whether that would require too much wanton stupidity and horrible moral judgement on the antagonists’ part, or it would be an awesome way to let the Fate make them trip over each other.

*TeK*

Think of it this way: there are consequences, just different from expected. She drew too much, and so didn’t abandon fight with Saint, instead taking her ultimate attack, which damaged Winter, but not her. I can even see why: she attacks by sharpening her intent to kill, imposing her will onto reality. It’s not far-fetched to assume she intended to attack Winter Queen, or something along these lines and in doing so, accidentally spared Catherine.

*Unmaker*

“For the enemy to simply snap their fingers and accidentally “fix” her would be anticlimactic.”

But there are so many possible sequelae that are bad for Cat that that might be what actually happened. The angels probably want less of Winter in the world and less power for a Villain, so a slice off of Winter is not unexpected. What happens to the Hunt’s already dubious loyalty when Cat is not all of Winter? Turning Winter on itself is also probably something the divine sees as a plus, and such a twist is a very Heroic and Story-like thing to do. Speaking of Roles, Cat could have avoided getting a Name indefinitely as long as she truly wielded Winter, but now I think a Name is closer, which brings the conflict back closer to a story. And we know how powerful tropes are in this world. So I don’t see it so much a ‘fix’ as a forcing of Cat back to more traditional Good/Evil fighting.

*Joel*

Jesus, that blade is something. No wonder everyone treats her with kid gloves.

*Gian*

Did she just initiate a pattern of three with the Saint?

*Fern*



It depends on there being enough weight for the story to consider them rivals.

### [HappyNap](#)

Isn't cat already in a pattern with the White Knight tho? Something about neither Black nor the Mad Boy (whom i can't remember the Name for right now) not getting the Pattern of Three with White

### [shieldredblog](#)

No, Black failed to initiate a pattern of three because Fate was trying to kill him and set it up so his Squire would take over.

She lost the Name Squire before Black died or she even met the White Knight.

### [d\\_o\\_l](#)

Unclear, but probably not. It was a victory for the Saint in the context of their duel, but it was a victory for Cat in a wider strategic sense. I think the story needs to be a little more clear-cut to initiate a pattern of three.

### [Erfling](#)

Probably not since cat never intended to fight to the death, only occupy her long enough before retreating.

### [Antoninjohn](#)

To kill the Fey for real their story has to be destroyed like that Duke of Winter Cat killed so can Cat resurrect her hunt using her domain

### [Yotz](#)

Probably, but why? They'll outgrow their usefulness eventually, and less of them left in the moment of their sudden but inevitable betrayal – the better.

### [nipi](#)

I kind of expected fae to reset when their seasons turn came around again. Not sure how that would work with Cat. She use Calernias seasons?

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Vote for the guide!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Also what the literal storms? That was not what I was expecting and how much of Winter was lost? She obviously can still open gates so we know she has Winter still, but what all happened there?

And I feel like this battle was destined to be a loss, with Saint having forged her soul; Winter took Cat's, and, if Cat wants to get back on the same level as Saint I think our good friend the Beast will be coming back.

*ruduen*

I'm not sure if this is a loss or a tie, given the mutual loss of resources on both sides. Of course, given how experienced this particular hero is, I think that there's more to it than just setting up a rule of three.

Rather, I wonder if this leans more towards the Saint of Swords setting up a different type of story. If this becomes more of a story with Catherine dealing with an inner conflict between parts of herself (human, winter, etc.) or hits the stride of a redemption story with her losing the 'dark' parts of her name... Even if that's not what she wants, it leads to more points that the heroes can use and abuse during the fight.

Of course, with a redemption story, there's also the risk of a villain falling during the middle of it.

### [TheAtomicOption](#)

Oh wow, I think winter was just somehow... severed from Cat in some way. Maybe Saint did her a favor?

*taovkool*

Probably by accident. Like cutting out the source of her Winter power. Same thing Akua did back when she stole the Squire aspect with that goblin I forgot the name of.

*Quie Possibly A Cat*

Cat's not entirely cut off from Winter. She opened a gate out remember?

Nor is it really a favor. I mean, its probably good for Cat to not being going full Fae, since that has about a 100% chance of blowing up in her face, but she also is almost certainly weaker on the power scale now too.

*Raved Thrad*

I wonder if any of the baby Heroes died. It'd be a shame if that many huntsmen bought it without taking at least a couple of the gooders with them.

*Mr. Nobody*

Larat certainly had his fun.

*letouriste*

larat probably killed one

*taovkool*

Ballon (French pronunciation: [balɔ̃]) is the appearance of being lightweight and light-footed while jumping. It is a desirable aesthetic in ballet and other dance genres, making it seem as though a dancer effortlessly becomes airborne, floats in the air, and lands softly. The name is widely thought to be derived from the French word ballon (meaning "balloon"), though it has been dubiously claimed that the name was inspired by French ballet danseur Claude Balon, who was known for performing exceptionally light leaps.

Another dancing references. This time about mesmerizing light steps and leaps.

*taovkool*

Unless it meant a balloon or something, in which case, I am overthinking this a little too much.

*burdi*

the super light beam seems like the hound's strongest attack, she was panting after the the attack. so, her strongest attack incapable to kill cat and only wounded the winter. well, maybe cat will got a new Name when winter grip on her a little lose

*Anon*

Hmmm...well, I'd say Cat needs to get rid of the Winter-mind-affectation RIGHT NOW, but it appears the Saint may have already done that – either permanently, or just temporarily, with the giant beam of light implying damaged, not completely severed.

Which...has the potential for good and bad – good in that Cat may be human again, and as such, may now be able to (re)-transition back into a proper name...but bad in that Winter was power she desperately needed to throw above her weight class with.

Not to mention her being able to draw upon Winter's power being kind of key to her being the duchess of moonless nights and Queen of the non-unionized Fae... and a powerless queen draws no loyalty from the hunt.

Though technically, come to think of it, since swords are made from iron, the Saint's 'dominion' may be a natural counter to any fae powers.

I also feel Thief puttering around in the camp is going to end up badly, but we'll have to wait and see on that front, as Vivienne has survived before...and that could either lend her story strength to continued survival, or place her ripe for a 'betrayal' back to the side of Good.

Also, if Cat couldn't even kill any of the baby heroes with just a priest puttering around...that doesn't necessarily bode well for the Woe's odds – obviously there's an extenuating factor in the Saint, but...I dunno.

In any case, Cat's gonna need to find some way of creating a story about an inability to be cut/severed if she wants to not insta-die to the Saint, now.

*grzecho2222*

Cat already been "healed" of being "not exactly human" once and Creation dislikes repeating itself.

Also blade won't cut Cat if she cat(ches) it be clapping her hands on it or with her teeth (and I think she did something like that back in Book II(?) and it's very old trick

*Naeddyr*

I don't get where people in the comments have got "Creation dislikes repeating itself". That is antithetical to the whole setting, where everything is just repetition and iteration of Names and Roles.

*grzecho2222*

Creation dislikes repeating itself within boundries of one story would more correct, also

Akua in Epilogue of Book II:

"Creation did not embrace such tedious repetitions."

Same reason Tyrant always makes new plans and act so random, Stories repeat, but each part of one Story is diffrent from other

*Erfling*

Creation doesn't repeat itself within the same story

*burdi*

i agree with you

Cat's soul getting erode, slowly she will became a creature that wear her face but not really catherine foundling, the sign already there (she forgot her own plan to go away after 5 mark

gone, in the middle of fighting, unbelievable. and in the chapter 10 "I had been tired, and there'd been a few days a while back where I'd had vicious headaches")

after cat ripped off masego work, winter flow like great flood and cat or masego can't do nothing, it broke her body and made new one, her soul in winter absolute grip and its slowly erode her soul.

but now, the hound had wound the winter, she got her change finally (for worse or better)

### *Darkening*

Even the weakest named can take a beating before dying, look at what Cat did when she was a newborn squire, picking herself up off the floor with her torso cleaved open. She blew one of the heroes arms off, and would have easily killed all 3 if the saint hadn't kept interfering. With the priest around, possibly a hero priest and not just a regular one, you'd need to instantly kill someone via decapitation or exploding their heart or something, and given how cheaty the heavens can be, I wouldn't be surprised if resurrections got handed out before this is all over.

### *nipi*

If Im not mistaken Fae are vulnerable to iron not steel and most swords would be made of steel.

### *burdi*

i wonder, what will thief doing in the camp

1. kidnap malanza (that will surely make the army impotent)
2. poisoning food and water (seems like a recipe to get captured somehow)
3. steal something that cannot be stealed (seems like very possible)
4. to get information from the inside (she maybe success, so cat can stay a head)

### *haihappen*

"Steal" their commander? Sounds like something the Thief would be good at.

What else of (strategic) interest is there? Maps, Horses, Supplies? Influential nobles that can be used as bargain chips?

### *Darkening*

Wonder if Thief can put people in her 'bag' and what happens to them if she does.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

Literally everything. She stole a whole fleet once.

The Sun, too.

*Yotz*

5. To put in the camp something of her own. Or her certain close friend's own. Something like a dormant targeting beacon for Observatory, passive listening device, or onsite scrying tap.

*Yotz*

Or, if you prefer – to Steal their Privacy, Freedom, and ability to Speak Freely.

*TeK*

Or she can Steal their hearts, and the entire army will march home.

*Decius*

Dress like one of their junior officers and accept a field promotion.

*grzecho2222*

Pilgrim: Ladies and Gentleman I suspect there is a Callowan spy among us  
One guy standing next to only pale skinned person in room:  
Nonsense!

---

Grey Pilgrim: "Tell me... did anyone happen to kill a Thief on the way here? No? Then we still have a problem."

...I know the spot is more or less occupied by the Assassin, but now I want to see Thief transition into a Spy Name. Would even fit her current Role.

[taliesinskye](#)

Since we didn't see Masago's trick yet I'm guessing that Thief is marking targets for the Orbital Hierophant Cannon.

*grzecho2222*

This whole war seems weird like the pseudo-crusade of 1109 with two armies invading, hit-and-run tactics, defenders avoiding battle, invaders trying to take over city and failing but not being destroyed and monarch of defenders trying to win by tiring enemy and diplomatic pressure

[wyaldriddler](#)

Ohhhhhhhhhhhh. Well...

So, Procer might have just got a bit of a boost. What the hork am I talking about you ask? Well remember how the Alamans Prince was a dumb commander? The Alamans officers just got \*Wrecked\* because they were all grouped up when Cat came rampaging through and that leaves it ripe for a competent replacement to appear from the woodwork, mortal or Named.

Oops?

Also the Saint is TERRIFYING. Thinking about it, the Pilgrim should also have something similar, and in theory Cat should be able to learn how to do it like they do given that the Saint has mentioned a hint of a hint of similarity to Ranger in Cat's behavior.

*letouriste*

i dont think cat allowed the hunt to kill the people malicia want alive.she also want the less competents people in charge so i guess amadis is still alive along with some of his most stupid allies (like that alaman noble)

[taliesinskye](#)

She didn't kill the incompetent commander of the whole army, she just killed all the lower ranking officers. (Who might have been actually competent.)

[Antony444](#)

Well this can't be considered anything else than a defeat for the forces of Good. They have lost a lot of their irreplaceable officers for about fifteen Fey of the Wild Hunt. They didn't take down the enemy leader, they didn't kill Larat. They have the confirmation their accord with Daoine was worth absolutely nothing. Hundreds of common soldiers have died. Their camp is in chaos.

The only good things the Procerans should be able to see is that:  
A) they didn't lose a hero in this fight (so far as we know)  
B) the Saint of Swords has proven she can beat the Black Queen decisively

But even these affirmations unknowingly are lies. The Heroes were after all not the targets. The intervention of the Saint of Swords may have restored completely Catherine's sanity and crippled the insane winter-influence transforming her into a creature of pure evil.

And above all, Thief is in the camp and the heroes were certainly drawn out of position from whatever object/artefact/person she wanted to steal.

It makes me wonder where the Wandering Bard is, because it's absolutely not with the Army of Prince Amadis. There were too many opportunities in that fight for Catherine to die or to become something utterly inhuman. It's not usual for the great manipulator of stories to miss this opportunity...

The Battle of the Camps is already over it seems...and the ugly consequences of it are about to start.

*burdi*

she was banned by Hierarch, charge with treason. so wandering bard in nowhere

[hoyboy](#)

Great spin work, Mr. al-Sahhaf!

*grzecho2222*

Cat should decide what she is, because this is the n-th time she is going through some kind of transformation:  
normal mortal – normal villain – redemption hero (aborted) –  
mastermind villain – villain with good publicity – undead  
normal – undead villain – redemption hero/mass murderer  
(aborted) – practical villain – pseudohero (fight with Rider) –  
roleplayer – fairytale tragic villain/pseudo noble fairy –  
Black Knight/Dead King combo – four Cats – monster – Evil fairy  
queen – Practical Evil monarch with iron fist – leader of Wild  
Hunt – Tragic Villain

*grzecho2222*

This is not Protagonist Journey from Someone to different  
Someone, this is Lost in the Woods and We Already Walked Past  
That Tree level of inability to stay one thing

*Yotz*

This is a Changeling.

*grzecho2222*

Bard changes bodies, Cat changes her body

*letouriste*

“person she wanted to steal”

oh right, she can steal people now she think as a villain...



probably.  
would be really funny to see:) (and badass)

[Walter](#)

I think WB is with White Knight nowadays.

*Antoninjohn*

We are shown that sealed documents can be verified at the start with the Watch so I think the Thief is going to steal the documents of Princes dividing Callow among themselves then Cat is going to use that as evidence along with her own sworn Oath of truthfulness that Hellgate was built on Procer silver as an excuse to take Callow to force the other countries in the crusade to back off

*Draconius Sinister*

Cool chapter. Don't know why some are so amazed by the Wild Hunt's ride when we saw so little of that, with such little description, but what we see of it is pretty cool. I'm more down with the Saint of Swords fight, (though still unsure of her characterization) as that was a flipping fun fight scene, and we got maybe our best look at the pros and cons of Winter, and more importantly, how it affects Cat's mind.

[sengachi](#)

Saint of Swords cutting reality to be able to fight in the air is the kind of utterly ridiculous overkill only legends get away with. I love it.

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Well, Catherine herself can create panes of shadow mid-air and gates to no-sell the enemy attacks; what separates them is skill, not raw power.

*Metrux*

I don't think so, Cat can do that because this is common for Fae, and her power is manipulation of an element, while the Saint just straight up cuts reality to do something she shouldn't be able to. It's the difference between having a ranged attack and attacking so strongly that your shockwaves are a true attack.

*warriormonk19*

Not so. Cat could manipulate shadows ever since she was a Squire, and Black can fight by using shadows to wield multiple weapons.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

EXCALIBUR! Beam sword ftw!

*Author Unknown*

I really hope we get to see Procera's reaction to this from their PoV, or maybe from Thief's PoV as she watches them from the shadows. If for no other reason than to see how many princes need to change their underwear.

@ All of the people complaining about Cat being 'cured' of Winter: She wouldn't have been able to open the gate to escape if she wasn't still in Winter's grasp.

*Yotz*

Amen to that on both cases.

*grzecho2222*

Funny thing is that we don't know what in Winter got Sworded. It could be the leashes and now Cat will merge with Winter or even funnier it could be the part that was supposed to Winterize Cat and now Cat is instead Foundling Winter Granny Weatherwax style

*Blue*

Her body is no longer a construct. That's what got damaged. She's possibly human again, which means Winter is probably not going to be able to heal those chopped off limbs anymore. Plus side is she likely won't be as lost to Winter's influence on her mind.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Her regeneration got swords.

[tpdbooks](#)

I really enjoyed the subtle shift in writing-style as Cat became more fae throughout the chapter. You could really see her transformation by the steady increase in melodrama and typical villain remarks that she was putting out, not at all like the normal her

Great job!

*Neuromute*

Pretty good showing Saint, but still only a middling practitioner of the art of cutting, a far cry from Mathangi Ten Meti Murder the Gods and Topple Their Thrones.

### [Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

And yet even the Sword if Maybe pales in comparison to Meti herself, powerful though she is. The mere fact that the Saint still needs a sword to Cut shows her lack of mastery of the Art of Cutting.

*oldschoolvillain*

Actually, she specifically didn't have a sword in hand for her ultimate.

### [sengachi](#)

I wonder if Triumphant might ever kill enough demons to qualify for the name Kill Six Billion Demons.

### [sengachi](#)

I wonder if Triumphant

*SMHF*

Great chapter! It's nice to see The Saint living up to her name! The thing is though, you don't get this powerful by doing push ups... unless you're Saitama I guess! And while Good side is generally OP, The Saint must have paid a price for this kind of power.

So like Cat's aversion to wards, she probably has a weakness of her own.

*Raved Thrad*

It just occurred to me that this chapter is the very epitome of the 15th living up to their motto. With phase 1 being the slaughter of the enemy and phase 2 being Thief doing what she does best, Catherine's side just literally applied "kill them and take their stuff" as a principle of warfare.

*Nairne .01*

I bet Robber would agree with you.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

I keep wondering not only about Robber's possible promotion to the winter court but of Cat's erstwhile girlfriend.

*grzecho2222*

Robber still needs his musical battle with Bard, given that he is an artist that creates new songs and comedies all the time, while Bard plays truly once? And most of time she only recreates old ideas

[Евгений Пермяков](#)

So... Queen of Air and Darkness ? Huh.

*letouriste*

"she cut a wound into the air and ran atop it towards me.  
Holding the wound she had carved in the sky like a massive blade,  
she scythed through the side of me"  
omg:o

btw, looks like she will be free of Winter influence for the rest of this war. this is good for strategy but bad if the heroes go straight for her. for her mind though, this is a nice respite:) and she could even get a Name in this state

*Jessica Day*

So the crusaders are being forced to split forces and stretch supply lines and they maintain orders via scrying... And they now know scrying might pull down the wild hunt.

A terrifying position to be in vs an army that teleports.

[taliesinskye](#)

I think you have to scry the Hunt in order to invite them in, which is why Cat arranged for the Watch to be there.

*grzecho2222*

I have a bad feeling Vivienne will get caught and will have unfortune meeting Prince Arnaud what will be the catalist that will make this The Uncivil War. It is almost certain that one of the non-Heroic leaders will heck something up so badly that it will cost them their weight in Story and so far he the best (or maybe the worst) candidate for that with Amadis being "just" overly power hungry, Rozalia being too militaristic, Adeline being too normal and I don't remember other 3 even appearing

*Forrest*

Honestly, while everyone is talking about how they don't want Cat to get off free from the grasp of winter... I more so don't want to see her get nerfed again. We've already been at the point where she was far less capable than just about anyone else she was around. I might even point out that this is book 4, out of 5. Yes, power in this setting tends to come at a price, but she already paid that price. Just seeing her flounder again would be pretty off putting in my opinion.

Also, I don't know how ms blade saint was completely unaware that Cat was being a diversion from the wild hunt wrecking the army structure. She could have advised the other heroes to go stop the

rest of the wild hunt while she was dealing with Cat. Though it is nice that it worked, despite apparently being more of a diversion for Thief to come in.

*grzecho2222*

When you are diversion for a diversion for someone that is probably also a diversion

*Thea*

If she could have killed Cat, there wouldn't have been a need to stop the Hunt. Now, consider what we've seen of the Saint's personality so far...

*the verbiage ecstatic*

Yep. The Saint is definitely canny, but I think she prefers the straightforward approach to problem solving. Why bother being strategic when you are really, really good at killing things?

If the Pilgrim had been on the scene, this probably would have gone differently for Cat, and not in a good way.

[Walter](#)

My guess as far as what Thief was here to steal is 'all their supplies'. We know Cat wanted to cut off their resupply, if Thief yunks their existing provisions they would be hosed.

[Andrew](#)

>Zombie was chomping at the bit, which admittedly was better than chomping at grass

The expression is "champing at the bit," which kind of ruins the second half of the sentence.

Amazing story, just caught up, too many thoughts to leave in this review though, I'll probably take them to Reddit.

*TeK*

Most likely a typo.

*grzecho2222*

Cat loves her magical murderponies

*MetruX*

I actually think he was LITERALLY chomping at the bit, since this is no common horse. If that is so, think of it :B

## *Agent J*

The difference is negligible and, outside this idiom, “champing” as it’s used here is pretty much obsolete in modern English. Many professional writers, be they novelists or reporters, can be caught using chomping instead. To the layman, ‘chomping at the bit’ brings forth a similar image in much greater clarity.

And I say that to say this; language is fluid not static. What matters most is effectively conveying the idea. Like with the whole ‘literally=figuratively’ debate, I believe chomping on the bit is an acceptable substitute.

## *Azqa*

I am extremely curious to see what artefacts Cat & Co. have made from the heroes they’ve killed, given her slip to the Saint.

## *Unmaker*

I don’t see anyone else mentioning this: The SoS said that it took her time to contain her domain to her body only. That implies it is a higher power than just letting your domain spill out. Since Cat can’t help but let Winter loose sometimes, that makes Sword win the clash of Winter versus Sword because the SoS has better control of her domain. Which is something that Cat should have picked up on immediately, but Cat’s brain was a little too Winterized to figure that out.

## *werafdsaew*

An alternative interpretation is that it took time for the Sword Saint to acquire her domain at all.

## *aran*

Saint’s ability kind of reminds me of Mathangi Ten Meti “Murder The Gods And Topple Their Thrones”, noodle vendor and student of the principal art of Cutting (<https://killsixbilliondemons.com/comic/wielder-of-names-5-99/>).

## *Raved Thrad*

Interestingly enough, “kensei,” Japanese for “sword saint,” was one of the names (or is it Name?) people called Miyamoto Musashi, the author of The Book of Five Rings. In his chapter The Book of Water, he writes:

“...once you take a sword in your hands, you must be prepared to cut apart the enemy, whatever the means. Whenever you parry, hit, catch, strike or block the enemy’s attacking sword, you must know the opportunities to cut the enemy in the same movement. It is essential to attain this. If you think only of

catching, blocking, striking or tying up the enemy, you will not be able to actually kill him. More than anything, you must be thinking of carrying your every movement through to the kill."

Or, as one translation I remember goes (paraphrase): "Always remember that your ultimate goal is to get the enemy to die."

That sounds like a pretty good description of what Saint of Swords is doing with her Satsui-no-Hadou, or "Surge of Murderous Intent."

*Engineer*

So, if your willpower is strong enough you can actually alter Creation? Was this why Triumphant was so powerful? She purely thought about destroying anything and everything in her path with no doubts at all and this insane believe coupled with being a Named allowed her to beat the shit out of a continent and caused the immortal elves to run away?

If so then then Cat has the potential to become the most powerful entity in Creation. All she needs to do is strengthen her willpower (maybe read Napoleon Hill), reawaken her Name and fuse it with Winter so that it becomes truly a part of her (no detrimental personality effects sans the psychotically insane belief that she will destroy any every and all dumbasses who stand in her way be they Gods, Devils or all the Armies in Creation)

If Named like Ranger, the Saint and Elves can achieve this effect, Named who don't have access to Fae abilities, it stands to reason that Cat can achieve this too. Boosted with her Fae power and she should be able to outclass both of them.

[wyaldriddler](#)

The scary part here is that Elves can do this themselves to a lesser degree than Ranger and Lady Swords, but we've encountered none of them which are named.

*tbarim*

Hmmm, so we've got a woman who's effectively an all cutting sword. Should Cat be looking for a sheath, or the handle?

*oldschoolvillain*

The pilgrim seems to be the handle so far, and Cat just had a run at being the sheathe. Didn't go so well for her.

*grzecho2222*

Puntastic question

editor

Typo "I pivoted, caught the hand still holding the blade with my other pne" should be "my other one"

Max Scherer

So got she weakened again? Man i hope she gets a new name. I like this about the story and that she is only Winter is somehow really boring....

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## Chapter 12: Cambré

*"In a finite world, one's gain (victory, large cave) inevitably means loss (dead female, enemy grows) for another. There can be no peace (looking away, knife already in a corpse) when the very nature of Creation is contest (not enough meat, talking)."*

– Extract from a theorized translation of 'Remnant and Ruin', one of the few goblin texts ever obtained

"This should not be possible," Masego said, sounding obscurely pleased.

He was in a good mood, though I did not share it. The frequency at which I ended up lying on table while he fiddled with my guts and soul was quite frankly depressing. At least this time I had pants on, only my upper body bare.

"We keep this up for another year," I said, "and you'll have seen me naked more often than Kilian ever did."

The dark-skinned mage sighed, glass eyes rolling inside the sockets. Ugh. Full turn, that would never be not creepy even glimpsed only through an eye cloth.

"Your insistence I 'buy you dinner first' is absurd," Hierophant said. "The only food available here is Legion rations, which you already own. I think. My attention might have waned when we had that afternoon where you explained to us how kingdoms worked."

Ah, that'd been a Hells of an affair. The afternoon session of 'We Are In Charge Now And Why That Matters' had not been a favourite of the Woe, since the two people who actually needed the explanations had been less than interested in actually hearing them.



"Sometimes, Zeze, I feel like you only want me for my body," I drawled.

"Ridiculous," he sniffed. "Your soul is far more interesting. Your physiology is worth two treatises at most, it is unlikely to be a reproducible phenomenon."

"Get me candles and wine, at least," I suggested. "It just doesn't feel special otherwise."

"I thought you didn't drink wine any —" Masego frowned. "Wait, is this another sex thing I don't know about?"

For someone raised by a personification of desire, he could be surprisingly innocent. No, maybe not innocent. That implied he'd been sheltered, which I really doubted was the case. Ignorance born of disinterest. His blind spots were usually willing and damnably stubborn.

"Masego, I'm offended you would even imply that. Get your mind out of the gutter," I chided him, smothering a grin.

He looked mighty suspicious, but did not argue. He'd learned the hard way not to engage on this particular battlefield. I cleared my throat.

"So what's the damage?" I asked.

His brow creased.

"You're changing the subject," he muttered. "You always do that when you were lying just before."

"Calling me a liar is technically treason, you know," I pointed out.

"And that's bad, in Callow," he nodded slowly. "Even if you win."

Yeah, Warlock and the incubus had not done wonders for his moral compass. It was a work in progress.

"So?" I pressed.

"The Saint of Swords appears to have, for lack of a better term, cut Winter itself," Hierophant said.

"That much I'd guessed," I said. "I mean, practically speaking, what does that mean? Because I was having a Winter fit before she beat me like a goblin stepchild, but after I was back to normal. More or less."

"Temporary state of affairs," Masego said. "If you were hoping to maintain your hold on the mantle without being subject to principle alienation, you were sadly mistaken."

I coughed. I supposed it was too much to ask for that the Saint fuck up along the same lines as Akua had when she'd returned my full Name to me.

"I bruised, after the fight," I told Hierophant. "It faded before I got back to camp, but it actually hurt for a while. That hasn't happened since Liesse."

"I've already told you she cut Winter," Masego said, sounding befuddled. "The implications should be clear."

"Oh, absolutely," I lied. "But I need you to put it in layman's terms so that I can explain it to other people. Like, say, if I needed to tell Archer about this."

"She's actually quite well-versed in arcane dialectics," Masego noted. "Lady Ranger covered the workings of sorcery very well while teaching her to slay mages."

I wrinkled my nose.

"Lucky her," I said. "Black never went in depth."

"Uncle Amadeus never did have what could be considered a proper method in this," Hierophant shrugged. "As Father tells it, his approach has always been having a wide array of tools to employ against enemy weaknesses."

Which only helped me so much, I thought. Unlike my teacher I did not have several decades of scrapping against all sorts of spellcasters under my belt. To avoid running into nasty surprises, I'd largely delegated that kind of fighting to Masego himself.

"Juniper, then," I said.

The blind man bit his lip.

"I dislike using a metaphor, but so be it," he said. "Think of your mantle as a cape. Much like your body itself, it is a fixed object in the eyes of Creation."

"Which is why I can rebuild it from scratch when I lose parts," I noted. "Which does happen more often than I'd liked."

The mage's head bobbed in agreement.

"The main difference being that your body is a shape, while your mantle is a pattern of power," he said. "That power is, of course, finite. Not in the sense that using it spends it, but along the lines that the cape remains a cape – it does not grow or lessen, as a living thing would."

"So she cut the cape," I guessed.

"Essentially," he admitted. "You might say she cut out a corner of the cape. The pattern itself being fixed, the rest of the power thinned itself as a whole to recreate that corner."

My fingers clenched.

"Are you saying I have less to call on, now?" I said.

"Well, yes," Masego frowned. "Which I believed impossible, as power does not simply disappear, but evidently in this case it has. It is not unprecedented for heroes to violate Creational laws that apply to everyone else, but this is rather blatant even by their standards."

"She was a pretty straightforward old bat," I grunted. "So why did I bruise?"

"In the absence of Winter's full influence, Creation assumed you to be human again," Masego said. "With all the consequences that apply."

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a headache. That made it sound like my actual body was basically a trick played on Creation, which was exactly the kind of thing I'd been terrified of hearing for the last year. Fuck. I *really* wanted a stiff drink right now.

"So if she cuts me again in that manner," I said. "There'll be a window of opportunity where I'm mortal again?"

"You are still mortal," Masego said. "In the sense that you can be killed, at least. I give decapitation a better than half chance of working, though for obvious reasons we cannot test this. You would, however, lose the ability to reform for a span of time. An increase in fragility, though passing."

He didn't sound too happy about being unable to experiment with the removal of my head from my body, but I'd learned to ignore it when he was being an ass by accident. I rose to a sitting position as Hierophant got up and began methodically putting away the silvery instruments he'd used to have a look inside me. I didn't feel a great need to reach for my shirt, folded on a lower table to the side. Being half-naked in front of Masego was like baring my ass to a potted plant – there was no real interest on the other side.

"We're getting close to the pivot for the campaign up here," I told him, rolling my shoulders to limber them. "That means a pitched battle, and likely revealing our shared trick."

Hierophant smiled.

"Good," he said. "I've been itching to prove the theory."

I grimaced. That proof was likely to kill a lot of people, but then there was only so far I was willing to go to preserve the lives of an invading army. Getting my own soldiers killed when I could avoid it wasn't on the table.

"Before that, I'm going to need you to mess with their scrying," I said. "We want them cut off from the Principate when they feel the pressure mounting."

The dark-skinned man shrugged.

"It is possible to accomplish," he said. "Their formulas are... rough-hewn. Easy enough to muddle. Yet doing so will require most my attention."

"That's fine," I said. "We've got a few more days left until it comes to a fight, by Juniper's reckoning."

"I could simply use the connection to kill their practitioners," Masego suggested. "It would require less sustained effort on my part."

I breathed out slowly.

"Do it," I said. "But spare at least five of them. I need them able to scry the Principate after the fight."

"This ought to be amusing," Hierophant chortled. "They've yet to properly master defensive wards against the law of sympathy."

"Try not to be too brutal," I sighed.

"An interesting limitation," he decided. "I will take it into consideration."

Well, at least he wasn't going to draw it out for kicks. Wasn't in his nature. That was really all I could ask for. I slid off the table and picked up my shirt, slipping it on as he finished his clean-up.

"I would wish you a good night," Masego said. "But you don't really sleep anymore, do you?"

"Might get some reading done," I said. "Reitz is a pain to learn."

"I am pleased you are expanding your horizons," he said, patting my shoulder awkwardly.

I couldn't help but smile. He really was trying, wasn't he? I pushed back one of his tresses fondly and bade him goodnight. My tent felt emptier for his absence, and the books I had piled up in a corner were a less than attractive prospect no matter what I'd told Masego. There were only so many histories you could read

until they all kind of blended together. With a battle on the horizon, Juniper would either be sleeping or planning – either way, not to be disturbed. Vivienne was still presumably making her way back from her little jaunt in the crusader camps and Indrani was both away and probably busy bullying Robber. Larat was, well, *Larat*. I dropped into the seat I'd once 'liberated' from a fae stronghold, savouring the decadent cushioning. It was a strange thing, feeling lonely in a war camp still thriving with activity even at this hour. I missed Hakram like one of my own limbs, the ache having only grown over time. It should perhaps worry me, I thought, how much I'd come to rely on him as a touchstone for my sanity. In the corner, draped over another seat, the Mantle of Woe waited silently.

"I grant you leash," I murmured. "I grant you eyes and ears, tongue and feet, at my sufferance."

Akua Sahelian strode out of her prison with unearthly grace, clad in red and gold. I kind of resented that even with a gaping hole in her chest she remained stunningly beautiful.

"It has been some time," the Diabolist mused. "Longer than usual."

"I'm not speaking with Hasenbach before things are settled on the field," I said.

"Is that my only value to you, dearest?" she teased. "Another pair of eyes on your foe?"

"I'm not sure what you're trying to accomplish with the pet names," I noted. "It takes a little more than sweet talk and curves to get me going, Akua."

She laughed, clear as bell. I really had to commend whoever had taught her that, it made her sound almost pleasant.

"You believe I am attempting to use the fact that you are twice bloomed?" she asked, looking genuinely curious.

Genuine meant nothing, with that one. She could make it sound like she actually believed the sky was yellow if she tried.

"Bisexual, Akua," I said. "The word is *bisexual*. Seriously, what is it with Soninke and making everything sound like bad poetry?"

"Your own people have the unfortunate tendency of using simple terms for complicated matters," she chided.

Fluidly, she sat in the seat across from mine. She didn't actually need to, of course. She was little more than a soul, and the physical seat made no difference to her position. But

villainy of the old breed did have a way of prizing style no matter the situation, I'd give them that.

"Darling, to have interest in mere gender is hopelessly rustic," she sighed. "Power is the only valuable measure. The superior looks of my people are simply a reflection of our ability to have them. The true worth of them is *implicit*."

"You'll excuse me if I don't take advice in that from the get of High Lords," I replied, rolling my eyes. "As I understand it, your take on break ups usually involves poison."

"For lesser lords, perhaps," Akua spoke with open disdain. "It is gauche to use anything but a dagger if there was real affection. Poison is a political tool, Catherine. When employed within one's direct circle, it represents a lack of faith in one's abilities."

"More ritualized murder from the Soninke crowd," I drawled. "There's a shocker."

"You must learn to discern between enmity and dialogue, if you are ever to rule the Empire," Akua said. "Your lowborn origins are not so much of a hindrance as you might think, but your Callowan roots mean you must never be anything but exquisite at the Great Game if you are to be seen as more than a violent foreign thug."

"I really don't," I snorted. "Want to rule the Empire, for one, but also need to learn what you're talking about. Any culture that requires regular intervention by mass-murdering demigods to function doesn't *deserve* to keep existing."

"Then you declare war on the High Lords, my heart," Akua said. "As your teacher once desired. There is nothing but horror awaiting you on that path."

"There we go again," I noted. "I'm not your anything, Sahelian. Except killer, I guess, I'll own to that one. It did make my year."

"What other heart can I claim, dearest?" the Diabolist smiled, lightly tapping the edge of her wound. "You have bound me and taken me into your service."

"You're a tool, Akua," I bit out. "In all meanings of the word."

"And you think this is ungainly in my eyes?" the Soninke laughed. "That is only your due as victor."

It was an accomplishment, I decided, that even as a powerless shade she could still unsettle me. Best not to linger on the subject.

"Talk to me," I said, "about goblins. You were aiming to be God-Queen Bitch of Calernia, you must have taken them into consideration when planning."

The dark-skinned beauty studied me with a too-wide smile.

"They have approached you," she said. "The Council of Matrons."

"That's overstating it a bit," I said. "But inquiries were made, a few months ago."

She folded her hands in her lap.

"And now you speak to me," she mused. "Understandable. Among your most trusted, the two goblins are ignorant of the inner workings of the Tribes. Those that would know most are your two Taghreb, the bastard and the Bishara, yet their understanding will be... limited."

"Yours will be too," I said. "But you always had a way with digging out secrets, so you're worth hearing out."

"If you are to understand goblins, dearest, you must first grasp that their core nature is that of *scavengers*," Akua said. "Never have they risen in rebellion when the Empire was strong, and even in weakness they are patient."

"They don't fight armies if they avoid it, I already knew that," I frowned. "Which, considering their size and fragility as a species, is kind of a given."

"It runs deeper than this," Diabolist said. "Goblins will eat anything because they can never assume they will be able to forcefully claim what they need. To be one of their lot is to know from birth that most other life on Creation is larger and stronger. That death is always around the corner. Morality is, to a goblin, at best a distant concern. Bare survival always comes first, and in its pursuit they will commit acts that would given even a High Lord pause."

"Considering the neighbourhood, I can hardly blame them," I said.

"You do not grasp my point," Akua said. "The mindset is not a consequence of Praesi aggression. It does not ebb and flow with threats. It is the starting point of *every single goblin ever born*."

"Yes," I said patiently. "And Praesi think *demons* are a valid solution to, well, anything ever. My point is that they're not being unreasonable in thinking that way."

Akua smiled.

"You believe they've never dabbled in diabolism?" she said. "My dear, the Sahelians have known for decades that one of the primary ingredients in munitions is powdered devil. Our alchemists never managed to reproduce the process involved, but it is a certainty. Now, consider that goblinfire burns all things born of Creation. What do you think *that* recipe involves?"

My heart clenched.

"You can't be serious," I said. "They're using demons? How would that even work?"

"My people have studied both alchemy and diabolism for over a millennium," Akua said. "And we have absolutely no idea. Munitions are only created in the deepest tunnels, and those that take part in the process never see the light of day. There is a reason goblin mages are so rarely seen among the Legions: as a rule, they are sent below and never return."

Well, shit. Had I been throwing around burning demon juice at my enemies this whole time? Fucking Hells, that was going to take a while to process. I leant back into my chair.

"All right," I said. "So the Matrons are not to be trusted."

"This does not mean that they cannot be used," Akua said. "They never plot uprising unless they believe the Empire is on the verge of collapse, and that their own people might be drawn into the matter. This implies Malicia's hold over the Tower is not so solid as one might believe. The Matrons would not risk fighting an Empire united behind its Tyrant."

"Ashur sent a war fleet to seize the Tideless Isles," I told the shade. "What few reports I've managed to get on that say they're hitting anything near the coast that doesn't have walls."

"No a threat to be underestimated," Akua agreed. "Yet as long as the cities hold, the might of the Empire is not overly affected. Mere foreign incursion would not be enough to move them. Has your teacher returned to Praes since our... lively debate?"

"You mean that time where you murdered a hundred thousand of my countrymen," I said very mildly. "At which point I ripped out your fucking heart and Black wrecked your doomsday weapon."

"Yes," Diabolist lightly said. "That. Quite the eventful day. Whatever did happen to the wights, anyhow?"

I did not reply. I simply applied my will, and her hand rose up to plunge into the wound. I had her tear at her own insides, patiently listening to her wretched screaming as she clawed at herself. After a while, I withdrew my will.



"I tend to disapprove of torture," I said. "But we're all cutting corners these days, aren't we?"

She stayed silent, panting.

"Your *victims* were released and buried," I said. "Even if I'd somehow been able to stomach keeping them, half of Callow would have risen in rebellion at the news. Now, prove yourself useful. Black has not returned to Praes since I carved out your soul and made it clothing. What do you get from that?"

"There has been break between him and the Empress," she got out. "She would have him killed if he returned, or at least that he believes this."

"Unless they're running a game," I pointed out. "Getting the opposition out in the open to cut them down in one stroke."

"If that were so," Diabolist said, "the Matrons would not have approached you. They must have reason to believe the split is not feigned."

Mhm. That made sense. And it meant that, down line, I might be able to find an ally of convenience within Praes.

"Back in the box, Akua," I said. "And if you ever again speak so casually of what you've done, I'll sit down with Masego to figure out if shades can lose limbs."

I withdrew all I had granted her, and she vanished into thin air. I closed my eyes, tired in a way sleep could not remedy.

This battle wasn't even done, and already I had to prepare for those that would follow.

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[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

Go vote, people

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Stormblessed*

Somehow this book provides more insight into Akua in so many ways that the other books did not. It almost (I do stress the almost part) feels like we really never understood Akua and the Old Praesi way of thinking.

*RoflCat*

We've always seen her from Catherine's POV, which is almost always when they're facing off.

So when Akua is being this...obedient?...Well, it's kinda like gapmoe. You know, the grumpy delinquent turn out to have a soft spot for small animals sort of moment?

This time the whole bitch queen who wanted to rule the continent is ok being a slave to her victor is....quite a gap.

...Well, unless it turns out Akua was planning something inside the cape and has been playing along, biding her time...

As a person who enjoy shoujo ai/yuri a bit too much I personally hope her subservience is genuine though, might even be interesting if she ends up being a semi-official member of the Woe at some point.

---

Please, no. She's a bad enough person on her own, and her next incarnation is still a toddler. I just hope that if she ever recruits a hero with a proficiency for soul-searching, she'll saddle them with the task of finding the kid and teaching her to overcome the phylacteria's influence.

*Mr. Nobody*

There will be no next incarnation as long as her soul is bound to the Mantle of Woe.

*dalek955*

Don't be so sure. Before Cat killed her, she did the same soul-separation ritual she used herself on some random toddler, then rewrote the separated soul into a copy of her own. That's the 'next incarnation' — was talking about.

*RoflCat*

Said soul is currently in Thief's pocket, so unless the baby can somehow live without a soul, there's no next incarnation.

*dalek955*

Same ritual Akua used on herself, remember? She's established it is somehow possible to live and even bear a Name with an external soul.

*Nostradamus*

There is no overcoming the influence. It isn't influence. The baby's soul was plucked out. It's now an empty shell awaiting a new host. Had Akua's plan succeeded, she would

simply *be* the toddler. All her memories, personality, everything would remain fully intact. She wouldn't even be Baby Akua, she would be Akua with a Baby Body. Think Tanya the Evil.

*Nivek*

Iron sharpens iron. Akua lost and therefore serves until her new mistress significantly stumbles. It's that simple.

*haihappen*

Running theory of mine is that Akua is still the same, a Sonike highborn who sees other people only in terms of usefulness as a tool to get what she wants. And in this case, I much speculate that she is hatching at least a dozen plans on how to turn the situation around and either getting free, possession Cats body, or simply manipulating Cat to do stuff she wants until she can enact one of the former options.

Not one thing Akua says, or NOT says, for that matter, can be trusted. She will not factually lie when it could be discovered, as this would impede her usefulness as a tool. Being is useful tool is the only excuse Cat has to herself for granting her face time.

Cat's loneliness is an IN for Akua, and she has definitely picked up on that. Wanting to talk to somebody, and having somebody within easy reach... thats tempting.

*Rook*

Akua will lie, that's a given, but almost all of her words will be fully true. Falsehoods work best when they're not known, and too many too often make them easily noticeable as well as potentially losing Cat's ear. Not only is it a ridiculous amount of effort to try maintaining more than a very few select lies, the feasibility of it is questionable at best in the first place.

That kind of blunder isn't Akua Sahelian. For all her flaws, she's never been one to waste effort or make a move without a reason. She isn't a cudgel, she's a dagger in your back at just the right time.

Her lies are dangerous precisely because they're going to be obscured by so many truths that anything she says has a very high chance of being perfectly accurate. Cat can't afford to disbelieve everything since too much caution leading to ignoring true statements can ruin you just as easily as lack of caution causing you to follow falsehoods, and she neither has the spare time nor resources fact checking everything

Akua tells her. Both Cat and Akua understand this, it's how this game is played.

No, it's going to be almost all truth up until a certain Pivot, and what makes or breaks this is going to be whether or not Cat can accurately notice the little inconsistencies and catch that moment when it comes.

*haihappen*

I said what Akua should not be "trusted", which has nothing to do with what she says is being true or factually correct. But yes, she is a dagger, akin to a coiled snake, and will strike the moment she thinks she can get away with it.

I just noticed Akua still has the Diabolist Name. Not surprising, actually, as she maintained it with her soul apart from her body before death.

But this has... interesting implications regarding her potential usefulness and the situations she could be aiming to produce: Her being granted at least a sliver of her former power by Cat, because the situation is desperate.

Akua may be the most secret (and not secret, since it is an open rumor that Akua's soul is bound to the mantle) and terrible/destructive weapon that Cat has: a bound Named at her command. Probably also the most unreliable one.

Is it a kind of a running gag that Cat has a trove of allies that she knows will betray her, and keeps saying that to their faces!

Larat: check

Akua: check

This one noble in Hedges that I cannot remember the name: check

(soon) Goblin Matrons: double check

### [Euodiachloris](#)

I suspect it's a High Lord thing. To Akua, all is still right with the world, even in her state. She still has behaviour templates to follow as one who has been defeated.

In short, most people would go nuts in no time having their soul ripped out, stuck in a stone and left at the whim of others. But, because of their own cultural quirks, the High Lord's and Ladies of Praes have a chance to come through it about as sane (and that's not saying much) as they went in.

Which kind of explain a why punishments in the Tower take it to the next level, as in the Hall of Screams. 😊

[sengachi](#)

Akua has nothing to gain by fighting back at this point. And no pride so sacred she cannot bury it for an advantage. So she will serve Catherine, and not scream and yell and throw a hissy-fit at her, because that's what gives her the best chance of being let out in the long run.

*Jonnnney*

We always saw her when she was top dog in her own eyes. A lot of what she did was because it was what villains were expected to do. Her personality was always second to her ambition and to the traditional actions of a villain. As a subordinate she is more free to act

*haihappen*

Nah, she is still the same.

Remember the discussion she had with her second in command during her Liesse Governorship, when she came into her new Name?

He blatantly admitted aiming to be her Chancellor or similar when she eventually ascended the tower, either to overthrow her later or level the field so that down the line, his descendant has a shot at claiming the tower.

And this is not something he is ashamed of, as it is a virtue in Praesi culture to be ambitious. Akua is very much not chastising him for it, as she has the very much same mindset, only grander in scale.

That is the Praesi way: From a position of weakness or subordination, you bide your time until you can seize your opportunity to rise to the top. All methods are good and fair in that pursuit. Iron sharpens Iron.

Fucked up, yes, but I guess this is very much restricted to the lords and nobles? I would be interested in what the run-of-the-mill Soninke or Tragheb peasant/commoner mindset is. An interlude about that would be awesome. Perhaps in how the actions of the high and mighty affect them and their opinions about that.

*danh3107*

It's amazing how much I hated living akua, but ghost akua is really growing on me.

Also goblins make napalm out of demons, and given what goblins do regularly in this story I'm honestly not too surprised. It's also FUCKING COOL

*nick012000*

Goblinfire's not napalm, dude. It's Chlorine Trifluoride.

[http://blogs.sciencemag.org/pipeline/archives/2008/02/26/sand\\_wont\\_save\\_you\\_this\\_time](http://blogs.sciencemag.org/pipeline/archives/2008/02/26/sand_wont_save_you_this_time)

grzecho2222

Again?

taovkool

From wiki:

cambré (plural cambrés)

1. (ballet) A bending at the waist in any direction, forward, backward, or to the side

Cambré is a classical ballet term meaning "arched." When a dancer is doing cambré, their body is bent from the waist and stretching backward or sideways with the head following the movement of the upper body and arms.

I have no idea how to translate this into the archetype of a story plot. The beginning of a spin or a feint? Too much speculation.

Bit of a personal question to erraticerrata, any particular reason for your fondness in ballet terms? Are you a dancer perhaps?

[oldschoolvillain](#)

It's the theme for the book – each of them had a set of interludes for the other teams running in events, and a set of chapter titles to match. What's curious is that the pattern seems to have been swapped here, and that the interludes are now the ones that are unconnected. Considering that it was Akua's interludes that were closest to the theme we're seeing, this . . . could be worth some concern.

taovkool

Wait, so the pattern might not be connected to whatever the hell Cat was doing, but instead it was connected to whatever the hell Akua was doing?

Those terms of endearments she kept using. Is Akua trying to play out a story of some sort? The only ones that came to mind are genies or guardian spirit a la fairy godparent. More than that, I have no idea. Is there a story about a guardian spirit fucking its owner over? Or at least, one where Akua was released from Cat's binding?

*Letouriste*

Pretty sure there is.

In one story they exchange places because of deceptions (forgot the name) and in at least several others the bound creature is released at their owner death (pretty sure this is even a trope) .

For the second case, I think the creature need to suffer a lot without having provoked such harsh actions (beatings etc...).

So, if cat mistreat severely akua without reason...Akua can expect help of creation to her escape (she need to be as subservient as possible in her attitude and to be on the good side of the readers. She need pity basically)

*Faiir*

This makes me think of gods above as idealistic readers, and gods below as those more cynical ones, both trying to affect the the story by submitting comments to the author..

Demons would be the trolls annoying the author and thus destroying the story, and angels would be the moral guardians insisting that the story follows their values.

In this case, EE using readers' comments to alter the story would have an in universe explanation!

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Cat needs to get laid. Badly. Preferably with our fantastic and literally fiery redhead, but I'd take Vivienne as a rescue Ship.

*Letouriste*

Well,now she is human again for a few days,this is the best moment for that;)

*grzecho2222*

A lot of people, orcs, goblins, fey, ogres, devils: "Suddenly feel dread"

[Walter](#)

"I grant you leash," I murmured. "I grant you eyes and ears, tongue and feet and...."

*Antoninjohn*

If the pattern of Winter is cut by the Gods Above to try and kill Cat she can weave it into a new form and given that when Cat's story of weaving in to new form is to take the power of her

defeated does and add them to her Murder Cloak of Work, Winter/  
Cat is going to get even stronger

*Antoninjohn*

Foes not does

*grzecho2222*

The longer the cape, the stronger she gets?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"There's no one around me and I'm kind of bored. Let's call up Aqua to talk about goblin politics."

That seriously can't bode well for her if that's the first thing she does.

*TeK*

She's so lonely, she'll even summon her archnemesis and accomplished mass murderer to chat. This is sad. I feel sad.

*Rook*

Well she could also numb herself by drawing on a Winter mantle that bleeds into her soul, or avoid the issues by drowning out the emotions in alcohol.

See, she's got plenty of options! Cheer up, I see no possible way this can end badly.

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

The alcohol option is out, since she's under oath not to drink on the campaign (and due to her fae mantle, the oath is inviolate). But yeah.

*Micke*

Considering the matrons have murdered at least one legion general, there's a goblin settlement in Marchford, and a goblin matron is the highest ranked commander at the other Callowan front, it would bode even less well if she ignored it until another military campaign was the only possible salvation.

[frolamiz](#)

Aren't Orgim and Black ranked higher than her?  
And I believe that Ranker is too deeply involved with the empire to gain much by betraying them, Sacker is a more likely traitor.



*Oshi*

It's more like there is no one I like around me so I can't avoid doing all the shitty things I have to be doing. Ugh let's get Akua over with.

*grzecho2222*

Cat: My dear enemies and Larat.

*TeK*

Well, all in all, revelation about munitions is not particularly stunning. We already know that angels can be used in pieces, stands to reason that demons can be too. I wonder, would her oath to not use demons/devils prevent her from using munitions.

*Oshi*

The remains of dead demons are not the same thing as releasing an actual one into the world to wreck havoc.

*grzecho2222*

"Her cloak looks so great with this white feather accents"

*Mr. Nobody*

Hopefully Cat will make a good sword out of the Saint of Swords. The old hag can even cut patterns of power, just imagine what a sword made out of her would do.

*Highwayman*

The Saint of Swords would be the rudest, most straight-forward sword in all of Creation, I'll bet.

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

You don't exactly want twisty, convoluted wordplay and Byzantine social plotting in a sword. See thing; cut thing; snark.

*grzecho2222*

What a cutting remark. Or "I fight with sarcasm sharp as blade"

[\*Walter\*](#)

Whereas Saint fights with an actual blade, also sharp as a blade.

*Rook*

It'll be so straightforward that she'll have two edges, no guard, and have a handle sharp enough to count as a blunt dagger by itself.

The ornery old hag ain't no scheming Praesi high noble. Her price won't be a sweet lie in your ear, it'll be cutting off your fucking ear as a warning shot.

*Nivek*

That bit about how Praesi use poison and knives to thin their inner circle seems limited. You should also have thrown in poisoned knives and knifed poison in that description. I have no idea what knifed poison even is but I have no doubt that the Praesi invented it at some point.

*nrsa*

Knived poison is obviously poison that was frozen solid and carved into the form of a dagger. That does actually sound like a fun way of killing someone

*Thea*

Well, there may be a solid poison shapeable into blade form. Should be easier and more applicable as small needles, e.g. for a blowpipe, but a knife might be possible. Somehow. Cut someone, blade dissolves a bit to poison them, and you hope it didn't dull so much you can't cut anyone else.

*Rook*

Please, a discerning noble wouldn't be as base as to let practicality get in the way of frivolous manners. Blowpipes are probably reserved as a commentary on verbosity, and a knife instead of a dagger would imply that your lesser political standing made the outcome clear from the beginning. A poisoned knife would only be acceptable to show acknowledgement of ability while also criticizing that your perspective is still that of a crude lowborn.

*Letouriste*

Clap clap clap sir. I totally can imagine a highlord saying this:D

*TeK*

It's actually cowardness and show of a lack of both self-confidence and true affection, if you use something else than your bare hands. Bonus points for killing someone by having sex until their heart bursts (probably would need to use poison). Truly romantic.

## [Absinthe with Mephisto](#)

Mantle of woaa.

*grzecho2222*

"Careless Whisper starts playing"

*IncognitoMe*

That's the second time the Ashuran attack on the Tideless Isles has been mentioned and it already stuck out to me in the Stairway Interlude.

They said there that the son of Magon Hadast is leading the assault and I am certain that in a previous chapter somewhere it was discussed that Malicia owns that guy.

You guys think there's a revelation later that that fleet from Ashur has been lying to their crusader allies and Praes is better prepared than expected?

Also, do you think we'll hear from the Pirate Queen villain again, that Black at some point strong-armed into working for the tower and that is based in the Tideless Isles? That one was in one of Cat's name dreams is a nice Chekov in my opinion.

*grzecho2222*

Malicia and legions left in Praes are definitely doing something and given that they are not marching to support Black, my guess is that whatever happened Crusaders fleet is at least not completely out of picture.

On the matter of Chekov Guns, there is also missing bell in chapel on angel island and considering Callowan obsession with bells (City of Thousand Bells, Order of Broken Bell, bell being kinda symbol of Callow and its royalty)...

*burdi*

So, thief already did her mission, whatever it was. I think it's about the absolute positioning from observatory, amazing as it is, it still needs a beacon, a sign to positioning its attack it kind like a GPS

*Letouriste*

Why do you think there would be only one mission? She got time during that battle, she could do several critical things.

Like capturing the princess general, stealing their supplies, hiding some beacons for Masego future spells, stealing the weapons of some heroes (unlikely), hiding some traps, stealing the gold that Prince Amadis uses for paying his troops etc...

grzecho2222

...shaving his dogs, deflowering his wife...

*burdi*

or shaving his wife, deflowering his dogs..

*Letouriste*

« There can be no peace (looking away, knife already in a corpse) when the very nature of Creation is contest (not enough meat, talking). »

That sentence is so...deep, and weirdly funny^^

Every talks with masego are pure gold:)  
And now I have a picture in mind of goblins doing horrors experiments with a creature literally tearing the fabric of the world apart by existing...gods, and I believed Warlock was the scientific madman in this story:o

[mindsword2](#)

Gods Above, I love Masego.

"I thought you didn't drink wine any —" Masego frowned. "Wait, is this another sex thing I don't know about?"

I have had to say thing almost exactly like this far too often to not appreciate it when someone else has to struggle through and still be the smartest badass around.

*Author Unknown*

Wow the whole munitions from demons and devils thing feels like getting backhanded by hindsight. It seems so obvious now, I can't believe I didn't see it coming. Probably because there are chemical means to accomplish most of the effects; good misdirection EE.

*Agent J*

And there's the fact that the Gnomes sent a yellow letter when gunpowder was being experimented on. Yet no one bothered to question what the munitions were made of. Or, at least, I didn't.

*Berder*

So we know Masego is astounded that part of Cat's mantle could be destroyed. Is it possible that it was not actually destroyed? And if not — where could that severed corner of her mantle have gone

to? And if the whole cloak could regenerate the corner – could the corner perhaps also regenerate the whole cloak?

My theory is that Akua now has a weak version of Cat's mantle. She was in close proximity when the event occurred.

(Perhaps a correction: Akua described an empire united behind its "Tyrant." Shouldn't she have said an empire united behind its Empress?)

[wyaldriddler](#)

She could have, but "Tyrant" is actually the proper Name for Dread Empresses and Emperors of Praes it's just not used often because of Helike.

*Naeddyr*

"Tyrant", when not referring to the Tyrant, is like "King"; Dread Empress is the Name. There's "Good Kings", but not all "Kings" are "Good Kings" (or "Bad Kings" or named in general). It's just a synonym for the ruler of Praes.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Really? Huh, coulda swore this was mentioned at one point in Book 3. \*shrug\*

*grzecho2222*

Or her cut off part ran away to some dark forest where it is cosplaying as necromancer

*tildor*

Call it heresy, but after all this time I still ship Cat and Masego.

*WuseMajor*

I wonder if Cat is gonna start arranging a contingency or something so that, when the Saint cuts off the rest of Winter, she'll end up human again and with a proper Name in the process.

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Erraticerrata, given that sappers are taught the spreads for goblinfire on various types of ground (with magically significant numbers in it), and that keeping notes on demons affects the surroundings, is diabolically charged alchemy the reason the sappers are typically perceived as mad, or the demonic essence is diluted enough to be safe in that regard?

[shaundrodgers](#)

Great chapter EE!

Catherine's feeling of "UGGHHHH fuck all of this" was delightfully palpable. It was nice seeing some more banter with Masego and Akua little tidbits about Praesi social niceties was both horrifying and intriguing.

I started reading last year and im loving the new book so far!

To you the best, to your enemies your worst.

*RanVor*

Damn, Ghost Akua is so creepy.

I have a feeling something bad is going to happen in an instant Masego's attention is diverted.

[onedollargum](#)

The cloak was cut and the power diminished, which was thought impossible. What if it was impossible to simply lose that power? What are the chances that the metaphorical cloak joined her actual cloak? What if Akua has a shred of Winter, now?

[onedollargum](#)

In relation to the opening text: Cat's loss, Akua's gain.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Winter is still Cat's. I'd worry more if Cat binds another woman to her mantle, though. Winter, guardian, death, war, taking, grief, crows, blood... the The Morrigan

*DocTao*

So, when will Black get on with things and get himself a new Squire?

*grzecho2222*

New Squire will most likely Hero to be mirror to Cat or Robber since we know that goblins can be traditionally Named, Also given that Black will probably stop being Black some time soon (be it by losing Name, changing it or getting killed) new Black Knight would arise and given that all three known Squires have one thing in common (deep dislike toward some aspect of Empire) and Robber is the most martial of three people that we know that display it (Robber, Pickler, Ratface)

[vuthuha912](#)

Not now, a war is no condition to adopt another child. This new Squire should be a Praesi and as heroic as Cat. A Praesi so that they have a motivation in fixing Praes and a hero to actually help and not just using him for power like Malicia

### [TheAtomicOption](#)

I'm confused as to why people think Akua might have part of the cloak now. I do wonder what happened to the part that was cut off though. IMO the most likely candidate to have taken control of it in some way is the heroes—and that would be a really scary prospect that could result in another nasty tradeoff during the big battle later. 😞

### [sengachi](#)

"In a finite world, one's gain (victory, large cave) inevitably means loss (dead female, enemy grows) for another. There can be no peace (looking away, knife already in a corpse) when the very nature of Creation is contest (not enough meat, talking)."  
– Extract from a theorized translation of 'Remnant and Ruin', one of the few goblin texts ever obtained

So while this is a terrifying look into goblin culture, but I'd like to go off on a huge tangent and note that this is kind of wrong from a game theory standpoint.

Oh total mutual defection and hostility is a very easy local optima to get trapped in, don't get me wrong. And I don't disagree with the statement in a narrative sense or in a realism sense, that's stuffs been said before, will be said again, and it makes sense why people come to such conclusions.

But in any complex game theory scenario with finite resources, especially one in which competition expends resources, intelligently cooperative agents almost always win out.

When modern AI programmers write game theory optimizers (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-017-02597-8>) they don't write them to cooperate or defect. They just write them to \*optimize\*, whatever that may mean. And you know what the fascinating thing is? For complicated scenarios with intelligent adversaries? \*Especially\* if you can communicate with your adversary? 'Optimal' always means cooperative. Not unconditionally cooperative, of course not. But smart cooperators beat out smart defectors by such a wide margin that it's all but taken for granted that cooperation is optimal in game theory. (At least, in game theory scenarios complicated enough that learning can happen).

Although, I should note that cooperation breaks down and defection becomes valuable when three main things happen. (Well, when a lot of things happen, but here's the three main ones).

Also it's worth noting that these things feed into one another in a *\*big\** way.

A) A terminal scenario exists and starting resources are imbalanced. If actors can murder or subjugate other actors or in some way "kill them, take their stuff", and someone starts with enough resources that they can just soak early-game counter-defection losses, they can just take over the game. And ruling the world is optimal.

B) Limited quality, quantity, or expansiveness of communication combined with impermanent group structures. If communication is restricted in complexity, hostile actors can easily spoof cooperative signals. If communication is costly or outright capped, hostile actors can restrict their actions to being malicious but not quite malicious enough to warrant people sharing information about them. And lastly, if these things are true and what information is shared isn't universally accessible, hostile actors can move to greener pastures when eventually they are identified as hostile, either by individuals or by local groups.

C) Inherently exploitable groups exist. This goes without saying of course, if a group of actors who can't effectively fight back against defection exist, of course they'll be exploited. But it goes beyond that. The existence of exploitable groups causes the proliferation of defection schemas in general and the breakdown of deontological cooperation schemas, which results in cooperative groups fracturing into local cooperation schemas rather than global cooperation schemas, and then those groups tend to get ordered into a hierarchy of exploitability.

So stepping away from the game theory tangent ... the goblins are kind of wrong? "There can be no peace when the nature of Creation is contest" is just dead wrong. Finite resources do not push towards mutually assured defection, in fact they push towards the exact opposite. But at the same time ... sometimes the bloodiest knife comes out on top and there *\*are\** reasons for that.

... Fuck Errata, you have the best chapter openers, I hope you know that.

*TeK*

I have to disagree with you there. While I would not argue game theory with you, it's math, and math is not always applicable to the reality. Much less to fantasy. That aside, I think the epigraph refers more to the "conservation principle". Basically, to gain in one place, you must lose in another. Cooperation is a very loose concept. For example, you got limited food, so you need to reduce your population. Even if all agents cooperate towards their mutual survival (without reducing the population, which will mean loss for some agents),



they, at best, will just even out their expected lifespan (which will be very small), and eventually everyone loses. And if they cooperate towards the survival of group as a whole, while technically everyone wins (if they are lucky), one can argue that given that they leave the game, they lose one.

[sengachi](#)

Actual game theory applies mathematical models to reality in much the same way biology population models do. Very, very well.

Also that's not what cooperation means in game theory. It's a very common misinterpretation, but a wrong one. Cooperation isn't "all individual good subverted for the collective good". It's "opening oneself to the possible consequences of betrayal to avoid the sure consequences of mutual conflict". And intelligent cooperation is mutually deciding upon and taking steps to reduce the risk and cost of that potential betrayal, specializing individual's actions to optimize resource output in ways that make a collective more efficient than a collection of individuals, and leveraging large group size into being able to win pissing matches with intransigent defectors, etc, etc.

High-level cooperation isn't communism. It's bureaucracy.

TeK

Thanks for explanation. I really need to update my knowledge on game theory.

[sengachi](#)

No problem. Always happy to share. 😊 Game theory is really fascinating and it's a crying shame that it typically only gets presented as the one-off, no-priors, no-mutual-information, no-communication, no-overlapping-goals, two-party Prisoner's Dilemma. It's like, yeah, sure, take out everything that makes game theory applicable to real life and actual people and present that as the quintessential example of the field why don't you. That's not underselling the discipline at allllll.

(I am very salty about this, sorry).

[Warriormonk](#)

Is the damage to Winter's mantle permanent? Or is it simply a temporary drain on the rest of the mantle while it repairs the damaged/cut off part? It would suck if it was permanent.

On the other hand, the novel strikes a good balance between the endless quest for gaining personal power and character development/other practical matters of power (Black's tactics, Malicia's politics)...

Also, Ubuu, I'm pretty sure that Black and Malicia wouldn't kill each other as we saw them come to a fragile sort of make-up at the end of the last book. Although, Black may somehow change in his Role to fit into Cat's vision of things/how the world should be.

*warriormonk19*

Also, I think you meant to say 'obscenely' instead of 'obscurely' in the first line.

Masego said, sounding 'obscenely' pleased.

*crescentsickle*

I think that Akua is planning for a really long game. I believe that she sees the only way for Cat to succeed in what she wants is to don the mantle of Empress. She may not want it, but it may be the only way she can force the Deoraithe and the Orcs not to fight, to settle the Goblins, to pacify and reform the Soninke and Taghreb. She believes that either Black and Malicia will end each other or will fall to Cat in a three-way power struggle.

At that point, Akua is hoping to have served Cat for so long as a former-rival-turned-loyal-but-still-probably-traitorous role that she automatically qualifies as Chancellor without Cat being able to stop it, and for her to assume the Role to allow her to escape Cat's prison for her. Then she makes her own play, whether to just rule Praes, gain the title from Cat in a peaceful manner (because Cat doesn't want it), or violently obtain it.

[benthelynx](#)

Rereading this I'm surprised, with the oath Cat made, that Akua is not worse off than she is. I mean having your soul bound to a cloak is bad, but it's not "will be remembered in a thousand years" level of bad. And Cat's pretty bound at this point to fulfill oaths like this to the letter.

[vuthuha912](#)

Very cute Akua but there is something that you've not considered: They are avoiding each other because being in the same place hurt too much and it is easier to not think about it. Black just ghosted the Empress because he disagrees with her but does not want to challenge her outright so he just stays in Callow and works on the defense. He might want to do something productive while having a cold war with his best friend. The Empress

obviously wants him to 'come home' to Praes whether to show Praes she still has his leash or to mend things with him – this is not clear.

A separation if you consider their partnership as a sort of marriage. I am not sure Akua actually see enough normal partnership to know that just because someone is no longer working with you, doesn't mean they will try to kill you.

Why are you talking to Akua, Cat? Write a diary or scry Black. You never know when it is the last time that you speak together, especially in a war. I am sure you don't want the last memory of you two together to be you stabbing him in the gut while he gave you the knife. It wasn't that bad what he did. He doesn't talk with you about the plan for the flying fortress but most of his actions are for your benefit. You know he loves you dearly and you love him. Why can't you guy just talk it out? Make him understand that having agency is important to you and such, asking about his plan and trying to cooperate with each other. He might even tell you about Praes if you asked.

Black, please talk it out with Cat. You are a grown-up and her caretaker – you need to be there for her. She is not okay right now. You need to ask for forgiveness and give out an olive branch. You did just that with Malicia despite her being the one in the wrong.

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## Chapter 13: Élevé

*"Civilized men disapprove of murder, of course. Unless it involves banners and great numbers: then it becomes one's patriotic duty."*

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

We knew Thief had succeeded days before she returned. The crusader host had begun a hard march south, at a harder pace than they'd ever taken before. Malanza was working her soldiers to exhaustion, and we knew exactly why: Vivienne had emptied their stores. Larat had gated General Hune and her army at their back once since then, to break the supply lines again, but they'd not even bothered to send an army to chase the ogre's soldiers away. The implication was that the foodstuffs coming from Procer were too few and infrequent to feed the number of hungry mouths she now had to deal with, and Thief confirmed as much when she stumbled back into camp.

"Heroes were busy with you or your minions," Vivienne said. "I had almost a full hour before someone noticed the stores were emptying."

"They didn't pursue?" I asked.

"They tried," she shrugged. "But they had nothing that could see through my aspect, apparently. Or at least no Named that *could* and came close to me."

And with that, the preparations for our battle were done. We had Princess Rozala Malanza's army exactly where we wanted it: tired, undersupplied, and forced to march on Hedges or starve. There was serious debate among the general staff about retreating even further south to stretch those advantages out, but in the end we decided against it. Any further and we were entering the heartlands of the Barony of Hedges. Assuming we won the battle, some defeated soldiers would flee into the countryside and the last thing I wanted was a few thousand deserters ravaging the region out of desperation. The Army of Callow folded back into a single entity, with the addition of a thousand members of the Watch. That brought us to slightly over twenty-two thousand soldiers, in whole. Against over fifty thousand crusaders, twelve – perhaps eleven if I'd mangled Two Knives enough, but I wasn't relying on that when they had healers – heroes and who the Hells knew how many priests. Enough that scrying the crusader host directly had been a wash for months, anyway, and given the sprawling stretch of their war camps it had to be a least a few hundreds. My side boasted a few sharp knives as well, at least: Hierophant, well-trained mage lines, five thousand of the finest heavy cavalry on Calernia and Pickler's vicious war engines.

The first enemy banners came in sight midmorning.

Yellow striped across red, with three white lions. That was the Prince of Orne's own, if memory served, and the lesser banners beneath it kept to those same three colours. In the Principate, the heraldry of lesser nobles beneath a prince had use of only that's prince's palette. That led to an orgy of improvisation, most of it patently absurd to look at – like the red lion with a yellow pig in its mouth set on white I first saw not a half-hour later. The vanguard was pure Alamans. First came the horse, with rich armour and richer pennants, then a mass of five thousand fantassins. I'd not forgotten the lecture had given me on Proceran soldiery. Most their armies were levies raised and kept only for the length of the latest war, poorly equipped and barely trained. Vulnerable to shock tactics, why was why Procerans tended to put such an emphasis on light cavalry. Peasants with shitty spears tended run when a wedge of glittering charged at them. The second kind of soldiery was the one before me: fantassins. Former levies who'd lost everything in the wars or gained a taste for the soldier's life, and now served in

companies of their own making – though usually on the take from one prince or another. Leather and mail armour, wooden shields and longswords. Most of them were also carrying javelins, though, and that was more worrying. A well-thrown javelin would punch through a Legion regular's mail if it came from close enough.

The last was principality troops, the personal armies of the many royals of Procer. Heavy infantry, mostly sword and board soldiers though their shields were lighter and smaller than Legion standard issue. They also had archer companies, which might get nasty. Legion crossbowmen tended to shoot further and stronger than any archer not using longbows, but I had relatively few of them and the rate of fire for a properly-trained archer was better. Juniper had raised crossbow companies when forging the Army of Callow, but in skirmished like that numbers often carried the day and those wouldn't be on our side. The last principality soldiers were the cavalry. Light horse, most of them, since only the Lycaonese relied on heavy charges and there were none among the opposition. Our last count had the opposing cavalry at almost eleven thousand, more than double the Order of Broken Bells. Baroness Ainsley's two hundred knights did little to even the odds, though they were still welcome.

The enemy vanguard stayed a mile away, not even remotely inviting an engagement. I wasn't surprised. We'd waited for the crusader here for a day, and Juniper had my army at work the entire time. Field fortifications had been raised, trenches dug and siege engines set over low hills of beaten earth. Attacking us in our entrenchments without numerical superiority was suicide. Not that it prevented a few hundred enemy horse from parading out of crossbow range, banners waving in the breeze. Juniper sent out the Watch to clear them out, and they retreated after the first volley – which, sadly, killed no more than a dozen.

"Trying to gauge longbow range, you think?" I mused, eyes flicking to the Hellhound.

I was astride Zombie while she stood by her command table, surrounded by her staff. Easy for *her* to do, I thought bitterly. If I was on the ground, I wouldn't even see beyond our reserves. Everyone was so fucking tall, it was really unacceptable.

"They should already have a notion," the orc growled. "Not like it's changed much in the last few hundred years. No, they were just arrogant little pups out to posture."

And they'd lost half a line of their buddies for it. *And that's why you don't let nobles run an army*, I thought. Or at least not Proceran nobles. The Old Kingdom had done fairly well relying on its own.

"I dislike just leaving them out there," I noted, gesturing at the five thousand infantry in the distance.

"Bait," Juniper said. "There'll be heroes, I bet. And if we sent enough soldiers to swat them away, we'll weaken the fortifications for when the real army arrives. Let them come."

I sighed. She was probably right. It didn't make any more pleasant to stew in the sun while the crusaders lumbered towards our battle. By noon, the amount of cavalry in the distance had doubled. The spread of colours among banners had expanded. Blue, black, green. Wyverns and dragons and horses. Our own were less... exotic. The Fifteenth's banner still flew, with my own personal heraldry besides it: scales, with the sword and the crown. The Order of Broken Bells had its own as well, but aside from that the only departure was the flock of starlings on blue that belonged to House Morley of Harrow. The infantry swelled as the hours passed, and before Noon Bell was at an end the enemy had fully arrived. I puffed at my pipe, watching the mass of shining steel ahead. There weren't as many on the field today as there'd been at Second Liesse, but there were more *soldiers*. It was going to be a very different kind of battle.

"You think they'll open with Named?" Juniper asked.

I shook my head.

"They've got veterans on the other side," I said. "Heroes that have been around for long enough to know you don't open with Named. The first will come out the moment we start winning on one side of the field."

It would take careful managing, we both knew. Heroes could not be left alone. Most of them would scythe straight through even hardened infantry and their mere presence could turn a rout into a stubborn line of defence. On the other hand, my side didn't have the *numbers* to hammer down every hero that popped up. In a contest of Named, I was short more than a few. And Thief hardly counted, considering she wasn't a fighter. Hierophant and I could punch pretty hard, but on the other hand if our army started *needing* us to win then it became essentially guaranteed that some hero would cut us down. Best case, we'd be driven off the field, but best case wasn't something to count on when there was the Saint and the Pilgrim on the other side.

"Priority's teasing out whatever they intended to use as the northern passage if we blocked them," I said. "That's too dangerous an unknown to allow Malanza to keep sitting on it."

I'd gotten an oath about the opposition not calling on angels, but the Pilgrim would never have agreed to that if his crew didn't have other weapons to wield. With Praesi, it was the sorcerers you had to worry about. With the Procerans, though? My money was on the priests. I leaned forward, watching the crusaders in the distance, and frowned. Was that? Yeah, no two ways about it. They were moving carts and pitching tents.

"They're making camp," I told Juniper.

The orc snorted.

"How prudent of them," she said. "Malanza must think there'd a decent chance it'll take more than a day to exterminate us. I doubt she'll be going for attrition with her boys' stomachs going empty, but she'll be generous in trading soldiers."

"*Our* camp is the largest concentration of foodstuffs between here and Hedges," I said. "If she's desperate..."

"She knows we can gate out if it gets to that," Juniper replied, shaking her head. "No, this is just her hedging her bets. We'll see the first skirmishers moving out within the hour, mark my words."

The Hellhound, for once, was proved wrong. She'd not misread the military, as it happened, but the political. A party of four riders under truce banner rode out, stopping halfway between our camps. I went to meet them. I could have brought Juniper and Hierophant, or even Baroness Ainsley as the ranking noble with the army, but that would just be posturing. On this field, I was the one making decisions for my side. Zombie trotted out cheerfully, the sun pounding down at us until I sat in the saddle across from the crusader delegation. There were some familiar faces there. The Saint and the Pilgrim, though they were at the back. The old woman discreetly sliced her finger across her throat when I glanced at her. Charming. The Grey Pilgrim inclined his head in greeting and I did the same, before taking in the other two. The man was much older than the woman, at least late forties. Prince Amadis Milenan, at a guess. To my surprise, he was good-looking. I'd expected some caricature of a Chancellor, but instead what I got was very well-groomed older man with fair hair and a chiselled jaw. The other – Princess Rozala Manlanza, most likely – was maybe a few years older than me. Dark eyes and darker curls, with the kind of wicked easy smile that belonged more on Laure tavern girl than foreign royalty.

"Afternoon," I said. "I'd say welcome to Callow, but I see you've already made yourself at home."

I punctuated with a nod at the army behind them.

"Queen Catherine," the older man said, bowing ever so slightly. "I am Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre."

"So I'd guessed," I said. "I already know the two greyhairs in the back. Should I assume the curvy one measuring me up is Princess Malanza?"

"Are you trying to seduce your way out of this, Black Queen?" the woman in question asked, sounding amused.

"Unfortunately I have a strict non-invading Callow clause for people I let into my bed," I said. "I'll take that as a yes, by the way. You took your sweet time getting here, Malanza."

"My supplies inexplicably disappeared into thin air," the princess drawled. "Slowed us down some. I don't suppose you'd happen to know where they went?"

"Must have been rats," I said sympathetically. "Callow's had a vermin problem, these last few months."

"What a coincidence," Malanza said. "We've come to remedy that very issue."

Shit. Now I kind of liked her. I'd probably feel a least a little bad about putting her head on a pike down the line. Prince Amadis cleared his throat.

"I must implore you to excuse the uncouthness of my general," he said. "The prospect of battle wearies her, as it does all of us."

"I'm not a stickler on etiquette," I smiled. "Trying to sell chunks of Callow, though? That does get on my nerves a bit."

Not a trace of dismay passed on the princes' face, though I knew he couldn't be pleased about the Watch turning on him. Duchess Kegan had been less than impressed by the man, as it happened. He'd promised her both Laure and Denier when she'd pushed, which she'd taken as meaning he would have double-crossed her the moment he could.

"Preparing for peace is hardly treachery," Amadis said. "You are outnumbered in both Named and men, Queen Catherine. Let us not spill blood unreasonably. I have terms of surrender to offer, should you be willing."

I glanced at the Grey Pilgrim, whose serenity was unruffled by this. Did they seriously expect to fold *now*?

"You would have to abdicate, naturally," the Prince of Iserre said. "But I would title you Princess of the Blessed Isle, and grant you the eastern half of the lands currently in the rule of the governorship of Summerholm."

"Huh," I said. "And you heroes would respect those terms?"

"We would," the Grey Pilgrim said, sending the Saint a quelling look when it looked like she'd speak up.

"It this the part," I mused, "where I'm supposed to be thankful about you trying to make me your marcher lord at the frontier with *Praes*? Let's not even touch the part where you're carving up Callow between your supporters, because then I'll lose my fucking temper and we're under a truce banner."



"You cannot win this war," Prince Amadis sharply said. "This must be obvious by now."

"Malanza's face is blank," I said, pointing at the princess. "That's because she's trying not to smile. That should tell you more or less what I think of your offer. Now, here's mine."

I let out a long breath.

"Go home," I said. "I'll even provide enough supplies you don't starve on the way out, though you'll have to pay for them and there'll be a 'I shouldn't have fucking invaded another country' markup. You'll find nothing here but death, so just go home and settle your pissing match with Hasenbach out of my homeland. If you cross the passage, I will not pursue."

I glanced at the princess of Aquitan.

"That holds for after someone runs him through," I told her. "Leave, and you will not be harassed on the way out. I don't particularly want to fight this war, Malanza. It ends the moment you let it."

"Are you threatening me under peace banner?" Prince Amadis Milenan calmly said.

"I'm telling you I'm about to stop being nice about this," I told him. "I've bent over backwards to limit the damage, but if it comes to a battle a lot of people are going to die for very stupid reasons. And to be blunt, they'll be yours more than mine. We could avoid that entirely and both be better off."

"This is a crusade, Catherine Foundling," the Saint of Swords said. "Not a petty invasion. You do not make *truce* with holy war."

"There's no point in talking to you, Saint," I sighed. "You're Ranger with a shiny coat of paint and a socially acceptable pretext for killing."

The old woman's face darkened.

"You're going to lose a hand for that," she said.

"Amateur," I dismissed. "I've spent years dealing with Wastelanders, you second-rate bully. You think you've got a single threat that can shake me? I used to answer to a woman who uses a fucking demon as a gatekeeper has an entire hallway of forever screaming heads. Your notion is bad is her *starting point*."

I barrelled on before she could reply.

"I'll keep to the terms I agreed on with the Grey Pilgrim," I said. "Where are we falling on prisoner exchanges?"

"No guarantees," Malanza said. "Should there be worthwhile trades to make, you will be approached under banner."

Translation: she was sitting on any men of mine she caught unless I got my hands on someone high up enough the ladder it would be politically inconvenient to leave there.

"There doesn't have to be a battle," the Saint said. "You and me, girl. Here and now. We settle it the old way."

I glanced at her skeptically.

"Last time we scrapped you beat me like a rented mule," I said. "I'm not getting anywhere near you without a mage company and half a dozen ballistas. Pass."

"Cowardice is an ugly thing," the old woman smiled.

"The chorus of the side with the bigger swords," I shrugged. "If that's all, I have an army to lead."

"Such generous terms of surrender will not be offered again," Prince Amadis warned.

"I'm feeling generous too, Proceran," I smiled. "So when I sent your head on a pike back to Salia, your soul won't be bound to it."

And on this particularly diplomatic note, I spurred Zombie away and returned to my host.

Within the hour, skirmishers on both sides advanced.

---

### *Antoninjohn*

Mango has already been seen to send Corruption down magic links, how effected will the Crusade be when that happens to all there mages at the same time

### *Darkening*

Does he even have Corruption anymore? I mean, there was some left after the end of Liesse I imagine, but I'd have expected Cat and him to have a long talk about the appropriateness of binding demonic essence into yourself without telling anyone.

*Jeffery Wells*

It was never said whether he collected it back afterwards. I suspect not, for a few reasons. First and foremost was how well it was foreshadowed in the first place. Failing to do so in the Akua arc and then pulling it out again later would just be bad writing, and the writing here has been stellar so far. Second it's a trick he's already used. Masego is meant to be the worker of wonders, pulling the same trick more than once, unless he's forced to do something relatively mundane by Cat for strategic reasons, is just not something his character would do. You already see that the spectacular move of killing almost all of their mages is going to be little more than a footnote. Masego do the thing, Masego did the thing, not worth spending any story time on. Lastly it's definitely the sort of thing that would strengthen the crusade even as it weakens the crusaders' army. That's something Cat will want to avoid. If Cat would avoid it anyway there is no reason to write it into the story.

[taliesinskye](#)

Or perhaps all their priests? Loss of magical healing would cripple one of these armies in both morale and practical terms. They seem badly dependent on it.

*BryceWilliam*

it won't happen cause the anti-demon/angel truce. using demon corruption would kinda break that.

*Antoninjohn*

Not the Demon, the fragment of the Demon left behind from the drop of Corruption on his arm, it he was shown at Liesse against the other Demons

*Miles*

I don't think the heroes will recognize a distinction between "demon" and "Demon chunk" for the purposes of the treaty. And even if they do, the angels will use that as an excuse to interfere. ("We didn't use angels, we just used their feathers, songs, and interference")

*sheer\_falacy*

That would count as using demons. Actually, sharpeners and goblin fire probably violate the agreement too, that'll suck for Cat soon.

*Nairne .01*

Except, who knows how much knowledge the “forces of good” have about what goblinfire and sharpeners are made from.

*Yotz*

Given the number of priests and Heroes – and especially Saint and Pilgrim – I wouldn’t discard the possibility of them if not knowing outright because of The Hint From Above, then being able to sense/deduce something after treating the wound of one Cat used a sharper on.

If they indeed know, they would probably seat on the knowledge until the crucial moment to use the pretext of seeming treachery on the Cat’s part to summon a Choir.

On the other hand, miracle working can be considered a Divine Intervention by the same vein of thought, which either makes priests rather useless or makes Proceran side an oathbreakers long before first use of goblin munitions.

On the other other hand, it’s probably just dragonfire and has nothing to do with demons.

*stevenneiman*

@Yotz I think that the Grey Pilgrim is the only one I would count on being able to figure it out, and he can probably convince everyone else to keep it quiet if he doesn’t think they’re too much nastier than anything else. For all his hostility I do believe that the Pilgrim genuinely wants the rules of engagement to work out and set a precedent of cleaner warfare. As Cat pointed out that requires both sides to be capable of having as good of a chance as they had without rules, and if he demands that Evil lose its last-ditch WMDs, its cheap magical soldier substitutes AND its most useful tactical weapons in exchange for only the last-ditch WMDs of Good, that balance won’t be preserved enough for Evil to stick to the agreements.

*Jonnnney*

Unless the heroes wanna offer to stop using their equipment granted by the heavens I doubt they’d complain about materials derived from the hells.

*Yotz*

Never underestimate the power of one’s pretentiousness, especially if they carry a soapbox with them.

*Sylfa*

There’s a number of reasons that couldn’t possibly be used.

Assuming it works exactly as well as your implying: after winning they will denounce Callow and it's true villain queen that backed down on her agreements. So the continuation of the 10th crusade, along with the next few crusades at that will consider Callow to be evil.

But the problem is that it's demonic power, and they have many priests there to deal with it, so while it certainly would create a big distraction it wouldn't necessarily change much.

But again, the real problem is that she swore not to do so, breaking that promise would create a story about how the villain broke their promise and they are basically done for.

But again again, she's Fae now. Fae cannot break their promises, just look at her trying to reach for alcohol and her hand wouldn't even move. She cannot break the promise of not using demons.

But again again again, she's Catherine Foundling. She wouldn't unleash demonic essence in Callow even at the worst of time, she'd rather go with the Wildfire protocol and force them to retreat if they want their country to remain standing by the time the crusade is over with. And she absolutely wouldn't do that, she'd rather surrender and exile herself.

### *Darkening*

Well, that meeting went about as well as I expected it to. Interesting that the Pilgrim didn't say anything. I guess he knew there wasn't much point. Loved the bit between Cat and Saint. Kinda wish we could see a fight between Ranger and Saint now, bet it'd be a hell of a show.

*Mike E.*

Darkening...would be a helluva fight, but I'd feel bad for all the civilians within a 5-mile radius who suddenly had a drop in life expectancy. Recall that Captain and Black simply sparring without holding back on their Name strength nearly leveled some nobles castle.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Fun chapter!  
Even though we hardly saw Pilgrim do anything I'm still liking him.

Go vote for the guide!

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[taborask](#)

Hey, we're beating Ward for the first time ever!

*Morgenstern*

It's not the first time, happend a few times before.

[DroughtBringer](#)

The first time it happened the comments on the Ward chapter were people freaking out.

*ParadoxicalThought*

I just love when Cat gets snarky. And apparently she likes it too!

"Shit. Now I kind of liked her. I'd probably feel a least a little bad about putting her head on a pike down the line."

*Joel*

Damn, Cat, do you think maybe we could try to not to piss off the person who's very being revolves around cutting things? That Ranger comparison was vicious.

*stevenneiman*

I think part of Cat's story is bluntly telling people what they don't want to admit. Not only did she do that, she made the person who was supposed to be able to take her down look like a conceited, unsympathetic bully and not even an impressive one. That gives her a major advantage, as does the fact that the Saint might have been dumb enough to give her a Pattern of Three. The Pattern would be pretty weak since Cat did accomplish more of her objective than the Saint did, but the Saint did still "win" the fight.

*Jonnnney*

There is strength to be gained from having a rival much stronger than you. Stories are more entertaining when rivals are similar in strength. I still think a decent amount of Catherine's early strength came from Heiress declaring Squire to be her rival.

*Gunslinger*

Only Cat told Black that Akua was never her rival as her story didn't involve Callow

*Jonnnnz*

Cat already has her rival. Gods, demons, all the armies in creation.

*ethericsentinel*

Pretty sure that if anyone is the fated rival of the gods  
it's Anaraxes.

[Dragnor425](#)

Yay

Yotz

Indeed.

*burdi*

this is almost feels like when cat fought againts summer

*Big Brother*

Princess Malaza is now my second favorite part of the Crusade, just behind the Pilgrim. She's got the stones to sass Cat, and I feel like she's gonna find her way into some peace talks with Cat in the near future.

*IDKWhoitis*

I give it 50/50 odds she's taken prisoner in the following battle or she's there to replace Amadis after this battle concludes.

*Orçun Sevinç*

Malanza seems like the only one on that sorry lot that call defeat for what it is, close shop & head back home.

*Matthew*

She does need a counter to Saint and Grey Pilgrim.

*IDKWhoitis*

I'm sensing Ranger shows up for a good skirmish with the Sword Saint, like old times.

Or alternatively, lures them into Acadia, kites them to a different place, then back into creation. Afterwards she disappears back into Acadia. Heroes won't be able to jump out of Acadia if they are already back in Creation, just in the wrong place to participate in the battle or into a trap.

*stevenneiman*

Nah, those kinds of delaying tactics always end up running out at just the wrong time. It wasn't trapping the Saint of Swords in Arcadia that was risky so much as if was trying to keep her out of the way.

As a sidenote, I get a sense that she's not nearly as powerful as Ranger. She might use similar techniques, ripping apart reality to augment mostly melee combat skills, but Cat managed to escape her with only a minor wound to her power when the Saint was (as far as I can tell) genuinely trying to kill her. Also, the Ranger has existed for multiple natural lifetimes using an Aspect that ensures that she comes out of every battle that even came close to challenging her stronger, while the Saint has had at most 80-90 years of training under her belt and may or may not have had a growth Aspect.

[taborask](#)

It's hard to say. Cat also landed absolutely zero real hits on the Saint that whole fight, and had to get her ass kicked. There's no way to know the limitations of the Saint's domain, it might make her almost literally unbeatable

*Yotz*

I'd wager with Ranger you can beat her – theoretically, mind you – if you somehow manage to kill her faster than she kills you – which in itself is a feat of mythical proportions; while with the Saint you may not even bother – she's near completely immune to anything you can throw at her, and that before the Hashmallim on her shoulder. She may not be that deadly in short time span, but she just never stops, and there nothing you can do put her down – short of several Demon incursions, probably. How can I put this... Ranger is a 4/1 First Strike, while Saint is 1/4 Indestructible.

---

Remember that the way Laurence recognized Ranger's fighting style was taking a crippling wound to avoid a lethal one, it's quite possible she's the stronger one of the two in the terms of maximal possible power put into one swing.

*stevenneiman*

Ranger's Aspects are as far as I can tell the most powerful you could possibly get. Transcend allows her to survive things that should be impossible even for her (meaning you pretty much can't beat her on the first attack like you're saying), and Learn and Perfect together mean that any technique which doesn't kill her on the first use (which is all of them, again thanks to Transcend) she's just going to throw back at you better than you could do it yourself.



While the Saint's internal domain Aspect might grant her a lot of cool immunities and a shortcut to a similar kind of power to what Ranger has from sheer will, she's blowing an Aspect slot on that while Ranger gets it just by virtue of age, training, and will. And we haven't seen anything showing that the Saint of Swords is actually any tougher than Ranger, all we know is that Ranger likes to avoid attacks and that the Saint can block mental or spiritual intrusions by turning her soul into a sword. Given Ranger's personality, I wouldn't be surprised if she evades more for the challenge of turning life into a no-hit run than because she actually needs to for her own safety.

Both of them also seem to lack either the skill or possibly the motivation for storycrafting, though this might just be because they both have established stories they've never seen the need to change. Ranger is an incredible figure who can accomplish anything but can't be controlled enough to do anything reliable, but who can be used as a storytelling tool any time you write yourself into a corner, and Saint is the mighty cavalry where any trouble the protagonists have is because she's either busy elsewhere or is consciously leaving them to fend for themselves.

*Drd*

Ranger is half elf. I can't remember exactly how old she is but it's over 100yrs, though she could be a lot older.

*daniel young*

Pretty sure we had a chapter about her remembering stuff from a millennia ago at one point.

*stevenneiman*

I have to say, of all the questions I have about what's going to happen the biggest is what the Grey Pilgrim can do. I'm sure it's going to be ridiculously impressive just like the Saint, but I suspect that it's going to be a lot more different from the Saint than the Saint is from the Ranger.

[sengachi](#)

They Grey Pilgrim seems less like a super heavy hitter and more like the guy who comes riding over the ridge with the Rohirim at the exact right moment with a staff full of light to blind your flank.

Which isn't to say he can't throw down, I'll bet you he could take a Balrog if he had to. That's just not his purpose in war I don't think.

ALKATYN

Since he seems to be the equivalent of a high level priest I'd guess something like mass healing, inspiration, dispelling evil magics. But its always possible for there to be a subversion

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

From what I've gathered he's most likely a warrior monk/priest kinda hero. He's Levantine, and the Sage who was also from Levant from Ranger's side story was a melee monk type. His simple grey robes give off the priest kinda vibe so I'm guessing OP melee & healing abilities.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Grey Pilgrim was one of Gandalf's names, specifically his name in Elvish.

*TeK*

Gandalf reference is such a red herring.

*Hammerman*

Oh I expect at least a you shall not pass, if not a demon battle with a grey becomes white after he returns from dragging the demon out of creation into hell.

*stevenneiman*

Typo thread:

"I'd not forgotten the lecture {someone} had given me" I don't remember who told her about this

"Most {of} their armies were levies"

"Vulnerable to shock tactics, [why->which] was why Procerans tended to put such an emphasis on light cavalry"

"Peasants with shitty spears tended run when a wedge of glittering {steel} charged at them"

"but in [skirmished->skirmishes] like that numbers often carried the day"

"I was astride Zombie while [the->she?] stood by her command table"

"wicked easy smile that belonged more on {a} Laure tavern girl than foreign royalty."

"[It->Is] this the part," I mused, "where I'm supposed to be thankful about you trying to make me your marcher lord at the frontier with Praes?"

"I used to answer to a woman who uses a fucking demon as a gatekeeper {and} has an entire hallway of forever screaming heads. Your notion is {less} bad [is-than] her starting point.""

ALKATYN

Peasants with shitty spears tended run when a wedge of  
\*glittering\* charged at them.

Juniper had raised crossbow companies when forging the Army of  
Callow, but in \*skirmished\* like that numbers often carried the  
day and those wouldn't be on our side.

It didn't make any more pleasant to stew in the sun while the  
crusaders lumbered towards our battle.

Your notion \*is\* bad is her starting point."

Within the hour, skirmishes on both sides advanced.

[taborask](#)

I don't think he reads these. Looking back through old  
chapters, all the typo's are still there

*lennymaster*

Eratica properly waites for puplishing. Not much use in  
correcting mistakes now when he can just wait for an editor  
he properly has to use one way or another to do it for him.  
Also it is properly an incentive to buy the books.

[Barthumphries](#)

For those like me who post the typos we find (that weren't  
already published), seeing typos that don't get fixed is a  
disincentive to buy the books.

[Barthumphries](#)

We'd waited for the crusader here for a day  
Change "crusader" to "crusade"

about you trying to make me your marcher lord at the frontier  
with Praes?

Change "marcher" to "march"? I'm not sure, but I don't think  
this is the correct term.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Marcher lords are lords of the Marches – border areas. It's  
traditionally used for the Scotland-Northumbria and the  
Wales-England borders.

In short, patches of land that regularly change hands between  
countriess and which are heavily fortified with a plethora of  
watchtowers, bastle houses and keeps, all meaning that they  
play host to many petty lords to look after all stonework and  
pay to keep eyes watching and watchfires ready and waiting.

## Barthumphries

Shouldn't she be a Marquess, Marchess, Marquis or something?  
Hunh, after checking wikipedia, apparently Marcher was a  
Welsh title: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh\\_Marches](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_Marches)

### *Amoonymous*

Got some grammar suggestions (suggestions in [brackets]):  
"Peasants with shitty spears tended [to] run when a wedge of  
glittering [cavalry?] charged at them."

"...but in skirmishe[s] like that..."

"The other – Princess Rozala Ma[]llanza...that belonged more on [a]  
Laure tavern girl..." (originally "Manlanza")

I'd also recommend "you've already made your[selves] at home"  
over "yourself" as she's speaking with multiple people, but I  
could see arguments against that.

" "[Is] this the part," I mused..."

This is one I'm unsure of but believe should be correct:  
"...and there'll be a[n] 'I shouldn't have...'"

"demon as a gatekeeper [and] has an entire hallway of forever..  
Your notion [of] bad is her starting point."

"So when I sen[d] your head on a pike back to Salia..."

Mostly small typos.

Thanks for the chapter!

### *Soronel Haetir*

Hi-ho, hi-ho  
a killing we will go,  
with swords and staves and hand grenades,  
hi-ho, hi-ho, hi-ho!

### *Highwayman*

"... I won't be getting anywhere near you without a company of  
mages and half a dozen balistas."

This. This is so refreshing. Even after all she's accomplished,  
after every thing (Fae, demons, other Named...) she has put her  
sword through, Cat still has the humility (though snarky, but it  
makes me love it even more) to outright admit irwhen she loses,  
even to a hostile party.

Stop writing Cat so well, EE. You only make it hurt me more when something happens to Cat T\_T

### NZPIEFACE

Man, Saint really doesn't get it.

[\*ahd\*](#)

The Saint of Swords? She can't imagine a world in which beating the Black Queen like a rented mule and then using up Callow to fuel Milenan's ambitions isn't the right and just and proper thing to do. Because! Crusade!

Apart from that, I like her.

*Engineer*

When phrased like that her stupidity is painfully clear. Damn. She really is a thug.

*danh3107*

She's a decently likeable thug

*Engineer*

... Fair enough.

[\*ahd\*](#)

Thug is an acceptable lifestyle choice, it's all about who you beat down and why.

Given the Angel of Feasting On Your Entrails speech, and that "let's spare everybody the battle and I kill you here" offer, there's a small but not zero possibility that with enough evidence, the Saint could be persuaded that going around Callow is the right and just and proper thing to do.

If at that point Malicia has fallen from power and Ranger (is still alive and) decides Black is worth rescuing, we may just get that Saint of Swords vs Ranger death match.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Only now is the time for Cat to balance out all the hero's with a new winter court.

*WuseMajor*

She didn't seem particularly happy about using this war to fuel Milenan's ambitions, honestly. I suspect she's mainly here to kill Cat and then destroy the Evil Empire and the

only reason she's with this army instead of cutting a friggen Eight Lane Highway through Callow into Praes, with a slight detour to murder Cat and destroy her castle, is because she knows that someone would get a lucky shot in before she made it.

So, yes, I agree she's a thug with Heavenly Backing but she's not entirely stupid.

*Jonnnney*

Yeah, she is here because of the crusade and to prevent the Praesi Super weapon from ever being rebuilt. She doesn't care in the slightest about the lives, let alone ambitions, of the princes of procer

*grzecho2222*

I disagree, she acts like total moron here. Pilgrim said it. The Weapon isn't the only problem for Good. Praes has been doing this for ages and with current problems won't make another one soon. Callow turning Evil is much more of a threat. But Cat being queen isn't the cause of it. Fact that Callow has been protecting west from Praes and only getting stabbed in the back and laughed at for it is the main reason. They got conquered by their worst enemies and gotten no help for the rest of Good. Procer started rebellion with madman that killed a lot of innocent people (civilians and people of mixed marriages) and tried to brainwash entire city. They got invaded by another dimension and madwoman of mitological scale. And whole this time they got help from this one orphan girl, who literally fought demons, angels, devils, undead and gods for their sake, one that spent most of her time making them safe and helping victims of war. And now when finnaly they had fixed most of problems and stabilized the land, that moment Good is invading THEM and not even to attack real evil people in Praes, but to kill one person that saved them and to divide Callow among hated Procer Princes. Said girl also made peace with local Hero and is protecting people from stupid nobles. Now think what will happen if their queen goes to talk to negotiating party and ends up misteriously dead.

*grzecho2222*

Also no small part of their knights power comes from being good. What chances are that their "Prayer turned armor" will work against Heroes and priests? Now where they can get another source of empowerment with all of this Legion mages on their side? Broken Bells becoming order of Dark Knights?

*Yotz*

Harbingers of evil, henchmen of the Black Queen,  
warriors of corruption, men and women of honor!

### NZPIEFACE

No, I mean, she doesn't get that most villains don't really like getting their asses handed to them.

*Anon*

Hmm....well, if I had to guess, the 'Cat makes named aspects into items' will come into play somehow, otherwise, I don't see much room for her to stall the 12 Named off – especially considering how devastating Saint will be on offense, and Pilgrim on defense healing all of the wounds the 'good guys' take.

Otherwise, starving out the Procer army is a good thing, but unlikely to last long enough to not have the other side start razing – it's either that, or they push for a decisive victory within a few days.

Curious to see if Melanza makes it out alive – it's called the princes' graveyard – plural, not singular, but someone's gotta keep alive to bring Hasenbach to the table without making Cat look like a crazy evil murderer type.

But then that gets back to the Pilgrim and the Saint – I don't see Ranger interfering on Cat's behalf, and Saint has already been shown to trump Winter once. Cat could try to strand the Saint in Creation somewhere with a gate, but that risks backfiring, as has been already stated.

Otherwise, it's....bringing a shitton of spikers with her, I guess?

In any case, curious to see how the thinning of Winter's mantle will affect Cat's judgement now, once the battle gets underway.

*burdi*

The saint had beat cat like rented mule before, but she doesnt seems to overly afraid of her so i bet cat has plan on how to beat the saint

### sengachi

Oh shit. Put in that context sending unnamed Named up against Cat really just feels like giving her ammunition (literally) to use against the big Named.

*Morgenstern*

Remember the clause about not raiding Callow....? 🤔

---

Procerans are making camp, and the army of Callow has been digging in for some time, so it's probably the Battle of Camps, not Princes' Graveyard. Also, Catherine mentioned having to reveal absolute positioning, which is a shared attack for her and Masego, while the artifacts are probably already known to the heroes, since Catherine herself let it slip in the fight with the Saint of Swords.

### *Engineer*

I do not believe Catherine is outnumbered in terms of Named. Remember, heroes have been getting their asses kicked and their souls "claimed" for the better part of a year by her. I bet the Dead Company will feature soon....

### *sheer\_falacy*

Using the trapped souls of dead heroes is exactly the sort of villainous scheme that always backfires, though. It's gonna be a hard line to walk.

### *d\_o\_l*

Not necessarily. If that were her master plan, it would be guaranteed to backfire. As long as it's just a ploy in her larger plan, it's much more likely to work.

### *Naeddyr*

Then it falls under the "the magical weapon will find a way to betray you at the worst possible moment" teaching from Black. There really is no way for Cat to use the bound souls of Heroes in a traditional way without it backfiring spectacularly. Fuck, the best I can think of is to make them artifacts of Functionally Good: things like shields that shield civilian cities, swords that kill in self-defense, reverse mythology.

### *nerferf*

There might be no dead company after all, We were shown that she is able to make artifacts out of aspects so she may just have an stockpile of random things

I mean that makes more sense given cat isn't willing to use undead willy nilly given the lines that would be crossed and how much harder to get them to give up it would make them

### *nipi*

Typo:  
"why was why Procerans"



*nipi*

"Legion crossbowmen tended to shoot further and stronger than any archer not using longbows"

Must be a heavy crossbow then. The way I understood it crossbow bolts tend to get wobbly at greater ranges due to their short length. So they loose a lot of penetration at greater ranges.

*Onono*

Longbows in war are normally heavy/war crossbows, only trained yeomen are capable of drawing these. They are so heavy on the draw that they cannot be accurately aimed, but provide volley fire superior to any other propellantless ranged weapon.

Not comparable with normal bows or normal longbows, which allow target shooting.

*Miles*

I have a bad feeling that the heroes are going to free Akua with how much Cat is taunting them about that soul

*Author Unknown*

Saint seems a bit too cocky. Sure she beat Cat when the fought, but... She is the Saint of Sword: if she couldn't come out ahead when crossing blades with a transitory Named only a few years old, she wouldn't have lived this long.

Thing is, shes spent all of her decades roaming around an area considered to be a magical backwater. I don't think she is as ready to face the kind of magic Cat is bringing to the table as she thinks she is. She undoubtedly has a number of tricks up her sleeve, but I think this ends with her strapped to a table while Hierophant figures out how her domain works and/or Cat gets a new sword.

*beleester*

The Saint managed to cut a \*domain\* in half. She managed to cut a hole in the sky, then wield it as a sword. She's not just a swordswoman, she fights on a conceptual level, like something out of Fate/Stay Night. I wouldn't be surprised to see her parry Hierophant's spells, cut her way out of wards, or maybe cut one of Warlock's meteors in half.

In general, don't underestimate "master of one" heroes. They tend to be creative enough to apply their one trick in places where you wouldn't think it possible.

*Snowfire1224*

I think it said that she supposedly cut through magic, so that might not be a good idea.

### Walter

If I was Saint I'd mostly be worried about Ranger showing up to attack her. The Woe don't seem like they pose a threat to her as long as her gang of heroes outnumber them.

### *Author Unknown*

People keep speculating that Ranger will show up, but Ranger isn't on Cat's side. She is on her own side. She doesn't care about Cat, Callow, or the Empire. Just Black. And maybe the rest of the Calamities.

Moreover, this is the same ranger that walked Arcadia every year to pluck out an eye for jewelry. If she wanted to fight the Saint of Swords she has no reason, nor inclination, to wait until Callow was attacked. It isn't like the Saint is as hard to pin down as the Queen of Summer.

### Antony444

Loved this chapter, we always knew the propositions of surrender from both sides were going to be rejected, but it was extremely funny Cat insult the Procerans and the Heroes...

The Saint of Swords is a badass, but she didn't display a lot of intelligence in this parley. Of course Cat was going to refuse a duel with her. Accepting would have been a death sentence for the Queen of Callow, given how the Heavens have the habit to always screw things in their favour.

The great battle is about to begin, but while the Light has a huge numerical advantage, they must win quickly or they will die. I suppose the first skirmishes are going to show how bad an idea it was to go after Cat instead of protecting the experienced officers. Heroes can rally the men, but they are not necessary tacticians and strategists of the highest order.

Prince Amadis will not survive this battle, it seems a certainty now. Likes Malanza banter, let's hope she survives the battle to come...

### don

Hey, in case y'all forgot, the Dead King made noises like he's ready to play...

I'm guessing that a deus ex mortis will be the reason Sword Grannie pulls back from Callow. To be honest it's the only thing I see working, unless she somehow gets in the way of an unrelenting storm of ballista bolts and her sword arm gets tired.

I really hope Erratic breaks down and fixes some of these typos instead of ignoring them. Usually I don't mind but they're bad enough to be immersion-breaking here. I recently re-read the story, and I was able to overlook most all of the other chapter's typos, but damn are they bad here... well whatever. Great story either way.

### [sengachi](#)

I think I'm starting to understand Cat's strategy better. Which is kind of stupid of me really, Black's told us a dozen times how you fight heroes.

With heroes who are your equals you never get to pull the ultimate tactical reversal on them. Or execute that perfect strategy. If a single point of action means their destruction or your victory they *\*will\** fuck it up. Fighting heroes isn't about landing the perfect knockout punch, not unless you've gotten pulled into some nemesis deathmatch (and that's a bad place to be). It's not even about exhausting them until can't fight anymore, because they will be given a divine second wind at the worst possible moment for you.

No, to fight heroes you need to win small victories. Things which add up, and add up, and add up. Nothing which individually earns them a narrative comeback or underdog bonus. Nothing that the gods could possibly justify interfering in without ruining the whole game. Just small victories which are *\*earned\**. So that when the final fight comes, they heroes have lost before they've ever reached the battlefield. So that there is nothing short of direct divine intervention which can save them, because everything that could be done was decided months ago, during each of your small victories.

And that's what Cat's been doing.

Target their officers. Not their high leadership who are irreplaceable, or their Named who are so individually important. Just their officers. People whose military expertise and leadership will be sorely missed by Procer but whose lack isn't enough to end the game.

Target their supplies. Not enough to starve them outright, that would be countered. But enough to force them to a fight of your choosing and preparation. The gods won't shut *\*that\** down.

Take angels off the table early, so that when the end comes and only divine intervention will save the heroes ... divine intervention is already off the table.

And I'll bet absolute positioning is something in that spirit. Not some all-destroying weapon. That would break too many rules of fighting heroes. But something that will *\*hurt\** Procer in a

way that's \*earned\*. Something that will allow Cat to disengage or force Procer to pull back. Not a game ender, but another solid, earned victory that eats away at the heroes' ability to win.

*Draeysine*

I agree. Absolute positioning sounds like something that can do many small changes that add up in a battle. I'm thinking small gates that move people around to a different side of the field. With Hierophant targeting with the observatory and Cat fueling it, sounds possible.?

*Yotz*

Speaking of small changes. How about opening several hundred thousands of very small gates inside people skulls sounds for you? Or we can go for their bowels and drink their suffering like a fine wine! ...Well, like a beer swill in this case, but you catch my flu, I suppose.

I know that would be against all that "we must win but not MURDERIZE them", but quite a notion to entertain, n'est-ce pa?

Honestly, the ability to open portals on a whim opens so much options it's not even funny.

How about opening a gate to Arcadia, stockpiling ammo, molten lead, Very Big Rocks, whatever on the Fae side, then opening gate from Arcadia to the battlefield – but, say, a mile above it, and just drop the stockpiled crap down? Or just repeating the trick Cat used in the Prologue to create temporary one volley killzones? Or opening Gates horisontally under the feet of enemy solders, dropping them somewhere unpleasant – like a lake of pure HATRED in some Lords forsaken part of Arcadia? Buck me sideways – I feel stupid just by suggesting such obvious implications, and dread something a person of true ingenuity can invent...

*Adurna*

How does your GM keep up with you? -.-'

Fun ideas though, if likely not possible on such a scale and of limited value against experienced heroes.

[taliesinskye](#)

Most of those portal ideas wouldn't work because the portals open to the same place and position on the other side. If you wanted to dump rocks on the enemy's head through a portal you'd need to be standing a thousand feet in the air when you opened the portal, and get the rocks up there somehow. Open a portal straight downward and you just find

yourself standing on fae grass, not over wherever in faerie you want at whatever altitude.

*Yotz*

I seem to remember there is a Hellgate that opens several dozens of feet above the ground on the Hell side. So you can stand on the ground, push someone through, and that someone will fall from on high on the other side, being unable to go back.

What exist, can be replicated, I posit.

And yes, this comment being written after the Grand Reveal of what Absolute Positioning truly is.

[John Smith](#)

Lot more mistakes in this chapter than usual. Missing words, etc. It was nice to see Catherine shut Saint down, though.

*Decius*

There's a good opportunity to promise food and either safe return passage or Callowan citizenship to any deserter. The loss of their food supplies can't be easy to hide.

If the "good guys" start threatening to kill deserters their morale drops significantly; if they appeal to the Crusade they become more vulnerable to pointing out the political forces in play, and if they accept the desertions they lose the war.

*Bookworm*

I was thinking about how she can possibly defeat an army like this without killing everybody using some dastardly ploy, and realized that she has already done it. The supplies are gone, they are, or will be, desperate for food. All she has to do is slow them down enough that they cannot get to Hedges in time to resupply through pillage. Force an engagement, then retreat probably via gate, harass, make it impossible for the opposing army to march at any appreciable speed. Hit and run tactics to win the day. Unless, of course, the story behind the invasion demands a pitched battle. This is my Evil-lite option.

Alternatively, there is a Neutral option. With Thief able to Steal large amounts of goods at once (like a walking, talking Inventory bag), I was wondering why she didn't just threaten to remove the supplies from Hedges if they march on it. They will be forced to fold and retreat because they cannot feed their army and any civilians they "liberate", and Thief can just restore the food supplies after Hedges is no longer threatened. The threat alone makes continued invasion along their present axis untenable, to be kind. Now would have been the ideal time to

threaten such action (although I would have threatened more along the lines of fire to mislead about the use of Thief). Of course, this option requires the opposing side not to be complete imbeciles and understand the impossibility of successfully leading a starving army.

There you have it. Two possible ways to stop this axis of advance with minimal bloodshed, the latter method being the more humane method. Of course, I am almost positive that neither option will be used, but hey, it's always fun to postulate what you would do in a similar situation.

Bonus thought: it is still possible to do both. Give a bloody nose to suss out any trump cards, make them feel the lack of food more acutely, then offer another truce talk asking them to pretty please leave or we take all the food away. Minus you, Prince Amadis. Your head is going on a pike either way. Hopefully during battle so Good doesn't have to sacrifice their morals for the lives of their people. Yay, I like this one.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

My big fear of just using starvation as a tactic is of a possible miracle, like Jesus with the Bread and the Fish ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feeding\\_the\\_multitude](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feeding_the_multitude)) or a similar story of finding food for a large amount of people.

### [BarthHumphries](#)

Entirely possible. This is a Crusade, after all.

*editor*

"Your notion is bad is her starting point."  
Should be "notion of bad"

*Jonathan Rodriguez*

The dialogue here was so amusing. Loved it. Catherine is such a well-written badass.

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## Chapter 14: Arabesque

*"So spoke His Dread Majesty in the wake of battle, even as the High Lords praised him: 'Speak not flattering untruths. Another such victory and I will rule an empire of ghosts.'"*

– Extract from ‘Commentaries on the Campaigns of Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second’

It began.

When Juniper had sent our skirmishers out, we’d been able to scrape together four thousand including the Watch. Crossbowmen, human and goblins, with one thousand deadly Deoraithe longbowmen at the back – when the enemy began returning fire, these were the ones I wanted the lightest casualties for. They were too useful and too few to waste on opening exchanges. Malanza sent forward nine fucking thousand men, and we were pretty sure that wasn’t even all she could field. The opposition apparently had much the same thought as we’d had, because the first wave to come in longbow range wasn’t principality troops: it was levies. I sucked in a breath, eyes making them out perfectly regardless of distance. Men too old and too young, with hunting bows instead of the kind of weapons a battlefield required. Some even had slings, which Juniper noted out loud some Arlesite principalities were known for. The Watch nocked, drew and fired without a word. At least a hundred levies died in the first mass volley as the Proceran skirmishers advanced, closing range. Conscripted peasants taking arrows so that the personal forces of princes would not. The sight of it had me gritting my teeth.

“It’s sound tactics, no matter how much you glare,” Juniper said. “Gets the people who can properly return fire in range without losses.”

“I know,” I said, fingers clenching. “I know it is.”

But how many kids and greybeards who’d just died had actually *wanted* to be on this field? I couldn’t know for sure, but Principate rulers had full right of conscription as their Gods-given birth right. They didn’t even to justify it, not like nobles had in the Old Kingdom – where only foreign invasion had granted that temporary privilege to aristocrats. The sickening thing was that many of them probably did want to be there. Because priests and princes had told them this was a holy war instead of Hasenbach trying to kill two problems with one stone or Amadis and his cronies making a play for the throne. I wasn’t so much a hypocrite as to damn them for it. I was well aware that the main reason my own army fielded only enlisted was that I’d had neither the funds nor equipment to raise and keep the amount of soldiers a general conscription would have brought. My fingers remained clenched anyway. Making decisions where part of my forces were openly deemed more expendable than others hadn’t grown any more pleasant with time, that unspoken admission that some lives were worth more than others.

“More kids than I’d thought,” my Marshal said after a moment, eyeing the enemy through a scrying bowl. “That’s interesting. Either she’s sounding out whether we’ll flinch at killing those,

or they came closer than we thought to scraping the bottom of the barrel."

"Hasenbach's problem is a surplus of fantassins, not a lack," I said.

"These aren't fantassins, Catherine, they're levies," the Hellhound said. "Those boys we're putting holes in look like they should be working fields and trades, not fighting in a war."

I frowned.

"You think they're having manpower issues?" I sceptically said. "So far, between the three armies, they're fielding about one hundred and twenty thousand men. Their population can take that. We know that for a fact, you've read the same reports I have."

"On parchment, maybe," Juniper grunted. "But looking at them now I have to wonder. The civil war hurt the south pretty bad and they didn't even have a full decade to recover. The north was spared, but it has to keep soldiers on the walls to deal with the ratlings. We might need to consider the possibility that Hasenbach didn't forge her Grand Alliance just to keep her borders secure. That she might have needed the troops as well, and that if she loses enough soldiers some parts of Procer will collapse."

My reflex was to disagree, but I forced myself to stop and think. There was some sense in that. The First Prince's issue with fantassins was that she had several armies' worth of them floating around without a war to fight or skills to ply in peace time. I'd taken that as meaning she had manpower to toss into the flames, but that was not necessarily be true. It might not be a surplus of people so much as surplus of the *wrong* kind of people. If Juniper was right and killing levies meant scything through the same men and women who should be keeping Procer functioning... Well, there was a chance that down the line principalities would have bow out of the crusade because they literally could not afford more losses. Which was a mixed blessing. Parts of the Principate withdrawing would ease off the pressure on Callow, but it might also lead to internal instability in Procer itself. Which, in some ways, would be helpful. Procer, if eating at itself, wasn't mucking around in my homeland. But it also gave Black and Malicia a much freer hand, which was almost as dangerous. *And if the instability takes Hasenbach off the throne...* Honestly, I wasn't fundamentally opposed to that. The chances of the next First Prince or Princess being as dangerous as Cordelia Hasenbach were fairly slim. On the other hand, I knew Hasenbach. I'd made a study of her, we had a personal relationship. Whoever replaced her would be an unknown and that carried risks.



There were already too many of those in this war, and wind picking up a third of the way through the tightrope was bad news all around.

While I'd been wrestling with the thoughts, the skirmish had turned bloody. We had range and rate of fire on the enemy, but they outnumbered my people by more than twice over. The first half hour was a one-sided massacre. Between the Watch and the crank crossbows, we carved a red swath through the levies. But then the professional soldiers of the the enemy got in range to shoot back, and I stirred uneasily atop Zombie when I saw wooden shafts begin raining down. Goblins were a smaller target than humans and my men were spread out loosely according to Legion doctrine, while the enemy remained in tight packs. That helped some, keeping the exchange of lives at about parity even with the lopsided numbers. The hard truth, though, was that Malazanza could afford to trade her entire skirmishing contingent for mine and walk away with a strategic victory.

"Juniper," I said.

"Another two volleys, Foundling," the Hellhound said.

"We're barely denting the principality troops," I sharply replied.

"Levies we kill now aren't covering the first wave against our palisades," the Marshal of Callow replied. "It's a worthwhile trade."

Another two volleys, like she had said, and then the horns sounded the retreat. The Watch, I saw, had not lost so much as a single man. When the enemy had advanced, they'd retreated equally and kept killing all the while without missing a beat. If Ratface's discreet following of Deoraithe spending over the last year had not made it clear how ridiculously expensive training and arming them was, I would have been livid with envy. As it was, I was merely very jealous. The enemy skirmishers had little stomach for pursuit. They'd killed and wounded nearly a thousand of my crossbowmen, but at three times the cost – and most of those dead, not just bleeding. Juniper's order to withdraw was coming just ahead of the point in the cold lay of arithmetic where the skirmish would become costlier than it was useful.

"Marshal," one of her aides spoke up. "Enemy cavalry is moving."

My eyes flicked to the side. Malanza had been traditional in the arraignment of her forces. Three thick waves of infantry in the centre, with four thousand cavalry on each side and another four thousand in reserve at the back with what looked like a few thousand principality troops. A hard-hitting reserve that she could pour into whatever breach her foot managed to make. The cavalry contingents on both sides were on the move, though.

Riding ahead of the crusader host, converging on my skirmishers from the flanks. Only at a trot for now, but when they got close enough they'd charge.

"Probe?" I asked the Hellhound.

"If they don't hurry the fuck up, our soldiers are back well within siege range before the horse gets anywhere close," Juniper said. "That'd be... costly, for her. They might be trying to bait out the Broken Bells."

"Talbot could hit one of the flanks hard and withdraw before her foot gets there, or even the other cavalry wing," I noted. "This seems like..."

Trumpets sounded from the other side, and after a few moments of milling around the enemy skirmishers began to pursue.

"That's," I began, but closed my mouth.

What the Hells was Malanza up to? She had to know that if her archers got in killing range of our trebuchets and ballistas it'd be a godsdamned massacre. Even if her cavalry hit at the same time. We'd lose crossbowmen, sure, but a heavy formation of advancing enemies would be a sapper's wet dream. And she'd lose twice as many soldiers when her people broke and fled, especially if the Broken Bells sallied to hit them on the way out.

"Juniper?" I tried.

The orc did not respond. She'd gone utterly still, eyes fixed on the approaching enemy. She barely even breathed or blinked.

"Her infantry isn't moving," Juniper said.

"I can see that," I replied flatly.

The meat of Princess Malanza's infantry had yet to move, still standing in the distance.

"Her infantry isn't moving," the Hellhound slowly said, "because it doesn't *need* to."

Which made no sense to me. Not with the forces the enemy had set in motion. Cavalry and skirmishers, this close to our engines?

"Full retreat," Juniper barked at the closest horn blower. "Break formation."

The officer blinked, then sounded the calls. I did not know the orc's reasons yet, but I did know better than to gainsay her instincts when it came to battle. The crossbowmen scattered and legged it as the Watch ceased firing and put their supernatural

swiftness to full work. What was the play here? Already the Deoraithe were in siege range, and the goblins among the crossbowmen weren't that far behind. The greenskins could scuttle quick as spiders no matter the terrain. *It's not about the forces, then*, I decided. *They still matter, but only as part of a larger tactic*. Something was missing, and that thought was a familiar one. Juniper and I both had it before, when wondering why Rozala Malanza would try to take her army through a narrow passage my men could hold the end of. And the conclusion, I remembered as my blood ran cold, was that she'd had something up her sleeve we didn't know about.

Three heartbeats later we learned.

From the beginning, we'd dismissed the notion that the crusaders would use their priests the same way we did mages, for sorcerous artillery and shock tactics. Brother and sisters of the House of Light were not supposed to take the lives of others. We'd theorized there would be some willing to break those vows, and that they would be a threat to deal with. But aside from this, we'd believed the priests would be a purely defensive and support asset. Our failure, Rozala Malanza taught us, had been one of imagination. Ahead of the retreating Watch, panes of light bloomed. At least forty feet tall, though thin. *A fence*, I realized. *They are fencing them in*. Pane after pane formed, boxing in our retreating skirmishers in the span of time it'd take me to light a pipe. An opening was left, at the back. Where the enemy bowmen paused and put their formation in order, as on both sides of them the Proceran cavalry began to charge.

"Tell Pickler to fire at will," Juniper barked at the closest mage.

The message passed and the twenty heavy ballistas fired their stones. The first volley hit the fence at a high angle, and the stones broke without even visibly affecting it. The trebuchets threw their load in the moment that followed, arcing high over the fence straight at the enemy archers. They never reached the crusaders. More fences formed over their heads. Some rocks shattered, others bounced off. The broken remnants remained on the light, as if it were a physical thing. I gestured for another mage to attend me.

"Get me Hierophant," I said.

The rectangular silver mirror in the man's hands shivered after he got out his incantation, revealing Masego's face. He was currently with the mage lines, and already I regretted not having him at my side.

"Hierophant," I said. "You see the fences?"

"Miracle work," he said. "Interesting use of priestly powers."

"Shut them down," I said. "*Now.*"

He nodded, and after a shiver all the mirror showed was my own reflection. My fingers clenched as I watched the first volley from the Proceran bowmen hit my skirmishers, all on the left wing. *They're concentrating their volleys, I thought.* Annihilation tactics. They did not intend to leave any survivors. My soldiers returned a ragged volley of their own, save for the Watch. Throwing hooks above the fences, the Deoraithe found physical purchase and began to climb. I had hope, for a moment. Until the fences above the Proceran archers angled to drop the remaining stones harmlessly in front of the crusaders and disappeared. They shortly after reappeared above the fences keeping my skirmishers boxed in, cutting cleanly through ropes and hooks. Fuck. The colder, calm part of me noted that they'd had to dismiss some fences to add them elsewhere. That implied there was a limited amount they could make. Commanded by Masego, my mage lines gave answer. Seven massive spears of lightning began to form above our fortifications, strengthening with every heartbeat.

"Pickler," Juniper growled behind me, standing in front of a scrying bowl. "I want continuous fire on those archers. Don't stop even if it doesn't go through."

On the other side of the field, sorcery flared up.

Hierophant had torn through their mages for two days before they stopped trying to scry, and it has cost them at least twenty practitioners. They had easily ten times that many left, though, and Archer had confirmed at least one of the heroes looked wizardly. If it came to a sorcerous pissing match, I would still bet on my own men. They'd been taught rituals by Hierophant, and more than a third were both Praesi and Legion-trained. Procer was a magical backwater, if it came to trading blows they should come out on the losing side. Which was, I saw as the enemy sorcery took shape, why Malanza had ordered them to do nothing of the sort. Praesi magical shields tended to be translucent and tinged blue, when not entirely transparent. The Proceran equivalent was opaque and yellow. Four layers came down in front of the fences even as the spears of lightning shot out. My mages were better, as I had thought. All four layers broke under the screaming storm of lightning. But by the time the sorcery reached the fences it had been weakened enough they merely shuddered under the impact. Layered defence, the cold part of me noted. Clever. The rest of me bit my lip until it bled, as I realized the crusaders were just going to slug it out like this again and again until all my skirmishers were dead.

"Juniper," I called out, the orc turning to meet my gaze. "Broken Bells?"

She cursed virulently in Kharsum but nodded. The horns sent out our five thousand knights into the fray, palisades opening to let them stream out. Would it be enough? No, I already knew. It wouldn't. But it might lower the damage of this from disaster to wound. Talbot had his knights form into a wedge the moment they had the room, galloping out to the left to hit half the enemy cavalry even as Pickler's engines hammered the fences above the crusader archers repeatedly. They held anyways. I knew better than to get my hopes up, and my pessimism was rewarded when the forward sides of the fences keeping my skirmishers contained winked out. They reappeared in a long diagonal in front of the advancing Broken Bells and my fingers clenched once more. Not a single of the knights died, but the length of the fence was unbreakable and forced them to take the long way around. Keeping them away long enough that the enemy horse would reach my skirmishers unimpeded. With a mixture of grief and pride, I saw that my crossbowmen were in formation and returning fire. They took the losses from the enemy archers, ignoring them for a hard volley into the tip of both Proceran cavalry contingents. Horses fell and screamed, men went down. The charge continued. The remainder of the Watch split in half, heading for the edges of the fences on both sides.

Masego, I knew, would not take lightly that he had been thwarted even once. The lack of lightning spears forming in the sky to answer the yellow shields that had come down a second time heralded that he would have gotten... creative, and when my old friend unleashed his wrath he did methodically. A jagged shard of red light bloomed and struck the first shield. The yellow sorcery shattered, but the shard remained. Another shard formed, and struck the back of the first shard like a hammer on a chisel. The second shield broke. It was working, but too slow. The Watch was getting away but the Proceran cavalry hit my skirmishers and it was a massacre. They tore through the first three ranks like wet parchment before the momentum was even slightly slowed. Another shard formed and the third shield broke when it hit – and then the fourth shield as well, a heartbeat later. They were accumulating strength, I grasped. The light fence shuddered but held. In the handful of heartbeats before the fourth shard formed and hit, at least a thousand of my men died as I watched in silence. When the light finally broke it was too late for them to even run. The riders were already among them.

"Pickler," Juniper said quietly. "All ballistas are to fire into the cavalry. Keep the trebuchets on the the archers."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. The orc's face was grim as she met my gaze. The siege engines, we both knew, would kill our crossbowmen as well as the cavalry. But those men had been dead the moment the Proceran horse reached them, the cold part of me assessed. This way, at least, the ranks furthest back could be salvaged. The salvo pulped soldiers and horses alike when it hit.

Theirs and mine both. I felt wintry, vicious rage well up in my veins. For a moment I indulged the wind-like whispers and the poisonous comfort they brought, but then I dragged my mind back to clarity. Pickler managed another handful of hits on the enemy horse, but less than a hundred died from them. They were already retreating and cavalry was hard to hit with mostly static engines. Especially when fences bloomed to cover their retreat, as Malanza smoothly arranged. My surviving men fled back to the palisade. We had sent four thousand onto the field, Juniper and I.

A bare thousand returned, more than half of it Watch.

"We have," Juniper spoke into the graveyard silence of the general staff, "underestimated Princess Malanza."

In the distance, trumpets sounded again and the Proceran infantry began to advance as the forces that had engaged pulled back. In front of them, seven lone silhouettes took the lead. *Good*, I coldly thought.

I was in a killing mood.

---

SMHF

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[DroughtBringer](#)

You beat me to it. Nicely done!

[Captain Obvious](#)

may she never return.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Wow...

That was brutal.

Seems likes Cats going to be going to toe with 7 heroes?

That's quite a bit, but should be interesting at the least.

They've been unnamed at this point, so I'm expecting that they will not be that powerful so long as Pilgrim and Saint aren't there.

Also go vote for the guide! We're at first and we can't let Ward overtake us!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Adra*

Remember we're in a universe where the Conservation of Ninjitsu is a physical law

*danh3107*

I think would've been more correct to say you underestimated the crap priests can get away with apparently. What they did directly led to loss of life, what are vows if you only adhere to the letter and not the spirit?

*pah*

*ALKATYN*

its a holy crusade, if cheating is ever justified thats when

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

Its not much different from healing. They're allowed to heal soldiers just fine, even though the soldiers are obviously gonna go back and kill people.

*Anon*

I mean, as far as things go, the priest are relatively okay, from a spiritual perspective.

They're preventing an 'evil' force from escaping to kill more 'good' guys – and they're not harming anyone (arguably, at least, considering the walls re-orienting to cut off escape routes probably had a few possibilities for death when they cut through the ropes)

They're not harming anyone directly, which, unless their oath is complete and total pacificism (which it likely isn't) they're fine.

And honestly, if the priests were really as hobbled as Cat apparently had thought, there wouldn't be that much of a reason to bring that many of them with the main army in the first place.

*Faiir*

Yes, they're literally stopping evil.

*nick012000*

>if they were really as hobbled as Cat believed, there wouldn't have been much reason to bring them along in the

first place

The vast majority of the deaths during pre-modern warfare didn't come from wounds in battles, but from diseases, both as a result of wound infection, and as a result of poor hygiene in their camps in general.

[onedollargum](#)

Your vows let you summon kickass shields, that's what XD

In any case, sheparding a flock seems like a pastor's job. Even if it's sheep to a slaughter.

*RanVor*

That's exactly the kind of hypocritical self-righteousness you'd expect from the servants of the Gods Above.

*Raved Thrad*

Didn't Malanza leave off on discussing terms for prisoner exchanges? I'm betting Cat will now prioritize murdering those priests.

[blitzbasic](#)

You could argue that healing people that fight in a war afterwards equally leads to a loss of life, and that is obviously fine. I don't think that the spirit of the vow is "don't do anything that could impact a war".

*Darkening*

Well, that was a great use of crowd control effects. Nice to see technical pacifism in full swing with these priests.

*Skraeling*

I didn't kill him. The bullet did. And I didn't fire the bullet, it was fired when a firing pin hit it. all I did was pull on a small piece of metal.

*TeK*

I didn't kill the man. He died himself, when his brain shut down, because he didn't had enough blood, after it had flown through the knife-shaped wound in area of his neck. Which'd appeared accidentally, a chunk of metal in form of the knife tearing his skin and flesh, because due to electromagnetic forces, some particles had repulsed others. I was just moving my hand. Honestly, I'm the real victim here. My white priestly robes are all draimed in blood because of this knife. Curse you, blacksmiths!



*Naeddyr*

Ouch. Thanks for the chapter!

*Antoninjohn*

Cats going crucify many priests and a lot of church's are going to burn for this

*agumentic*

Not really. All's fair in love and war, and those priests didn't do anything Cat's mages wouldn't.

[superkeaton](#)

Ah, I was wondering how tricky the priests would get.

As it turns out, decently.

*Type*

Wow... this is going to be a battle to remember. If this is the opening move of the Crusade's army, however revealing one of their trump cards so early in the battle seems unwise. Although the damage they did is considerable as Catherine has already lost a little less than a seventh of her army all told, including a large chunk of the watch and the majority of her crossbows.

[sengachi](#)

If they had managed to completely destroy Catherine's mundane ranged contingent before the battle, when Procer already has such a massive advantage in that area, that might have been the entire battle right there.

*burdi*

if cat win by logic strategy it will not her  
she always win by following her instinct  
what make her dangerous is not because she has the winter power  
or because she was named

but because she is catherine foundling, thats what she said in book 2..i cant remember in what chapter but thats when she was about to fight demon with limp feet and spoke to archer

*stevenneiman*

I think it was actually after that zombie goblin stole her Name. But I can't remember exactly when that was.

[MurkyTruths](#)

The battle of the camp's is about to get good....

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

See, this is why stuff like Bonfire makes sense. There's no reasoning with Good. So best be the very best monster you can be and render Good's people willing to rise in rebellion rather than go to war Vs. Evil. Being Soft Evil got Catherine every Hero in six countries after her head anyways. What, another sixty woulda popped up if she got brutal?

*Orçun Sevinç*

Isn't that how Triumphant (may she never return) get shafted? People could only take so much terror before they consider themselves dead anyway and there is no putting the gene back to lamb after that

[vuthuha912](#)

Well. Japan did surrender after 2 atomic bombs but who knows if that is the best situation.

Bonfire might be a little too bloody. Burning the town is just too much and you lose moral high ground with it but if you use it to ... you know ... torch the granary/steal them – assuming that you know where people keep them. Obviously, you can force the army to return home to take up farming to avoid starvation. It might also mean that the reserve Cordelia keeps in case of emergency (what kind of general goes to war without some sort of emergency grain reserve) will have to be used. If Cordelia keeps pushing for war (guarantee that her people will die of starvation) or does have a grain reserve hidden somewhere (underestimate the consequence of war and logistics) then I don't think you should consider her as a partner. People like that completely disregard human lives and have zero common sense and should not be considered potential rulers in any capacity.

It is still wiser to attack the supply line and cripple your enemy's ability to wage war than to face them head-on when they have superior numbers. Cat decisions are quite reasonable. It is less risky but still achieves the same outcome. Didn't Black fucking buy his way out of a rebellion? It is a lot more practical to me.

*TeK*

If I remember correctly, if you push Good to far, you got 300 000 angel-hardened contrite battle zombies forming the core of the host, around which every other Good nation and every Hero on Calernia unite. Or you got a continent-wide rebellion,

backed up by over seas empires, one of which is even partially led by a Villain. World needs balance.

*stevenneiman*

What you need to do is make it safe to be anything but your enemy. Don't go on the offensive, don't kill civilians, but make sure that any host that enters your kingdom leaves in expensive tatters with nothing to show for it. It works for the gnomes and it can work for you. Just so long as you're damned sure not to piss off the gnomes, that is.

The biggest mistake anyone can be is to become the force that must be resisted, because it always will be. Whether it's gnomish WMDs, Praesi demons, or Proceran angels, you won't like the results.

*Pipiemman*

Anyone have a thought as to what would happen in Cat gave a hero a title of Winter? We've already seen that even the Heavens have to obey the story when they were forced to bring Cat back to life, so if a story could be arranged to "name" a hero, I feel like it would have to go through.

*the verbiage ecstatic*

I'm guessing it would work, but that it's substantially harder than just killing them.

Generally in literature, when someone bestows a title, the recipient has a choice to accept or reject it. The only "titled against their will" stories I can think of involve hereditary destiny: tough luck, Arthur, you pulled the sword from the stone, confirming you as the long-lost son of Uther, so you are the king, like it or not.

So Cat would have to either somehow set up a story like that, or set up a story where the hero willingly accepts the title / acknowledges it as just.

Hard to use that as a battlefield tactic. Might work to pick off an especially dangerous hero... Cat arguably laid the groundwork for flipping the Saint by playing the "you're a cold-blooded killer who just happens to wear a white hat" card, but I imagine following that through to a successful conversion would be quite a challenge, and the odds are good the Saint would just run Cat through anyway as kill #1 on her murderous rampage.

*stevenneiman*

Pretty sure she didn't actually plant the seeds of a conversion for Saint, just stole her self-righteous momentum.

Remember, reducto ad absurdum is a battlefield tactic in Creation, just as effective as it is as a debate tool here. Now Saint isn't the mighty and noble hero, she's an arrogant, self-righteous bully and a kinda pathetic one at that. And, not so coincidentally, she was dumb enough to inconclusively beat Cat on their first meeting. She might have gone out to spread terror among her enemies, but I wouldn't be surprised if fishing for a Pattern of Three wasn't at least part of Cat's objective.

Anon

I'm...perhaps a little confused – could Cat not have opened a portal to Arcadia to quickly shift her troops out of the kill-zone? Or did the Priest's wall prevent her from opening a gate inside the 'protected'/fenced in zone?

I guess I was under the impression Cat didn't need physical access to the location in order to send up a gate, given that they'd earlier discussed jaunting off to Procer to wreck havoc on the undefended towns therein in order to pull the crusade back and/or force concessions from Hasenbach.

Otherwise, I'm wondering how much power this drains from the priests in question – yeah, they likely have named support, but if what Cat's saying about the training disparity is true, they have to be maximizing things to keep up a 4-tiered wall, PLUS the fence itself, continuously active despite it being hammered – though to be fair, the number disparity is probably playing a role therein – since the wall itself is non-lethal, it lets ALL of the priests go in, rather than 'only' the few that would be willing to break oaths.

In any event, Cat and Juniper got caught with their pants down – I'm kind of surprised they hadn't theorized how non-lethal application of magic could still be utilized in order to. It definitely feels like Melanza, at least, was taking things seriously from the get-go.

And now Cat's down to 9k troops, and Melanza has only lost a couple thousand (if even that) of her worst. Looking a little more desperate, and desperation doesn't generally tend to go the villains' way.

In any case, time for some hero fights, though I almost want to see more of Juniper's tactics at work...unless the Prince's graveyard turns out to be a later encounter.

[poignardazur](#)

I was expecting them to at least mention the possibility of portalling through Arcadia, but I don't think that would have made sense. Any attack like that is potentially a bait to get

Larat and/or Cat in range of the two big guns. Cat can only afford deploy gates if she's reasonably certain an ambush won't be waiting at the exit.

*Anon*

I don't necessarily disagree, but not having the gates even come up as a possible escape (hell, even to get out, say, another thousand or what have you) was a bit odd.

In reality, it probably would brush up against Cat's warning regarding named villainous intervention being 'necessary' leading to a hero screwing it up somehow, but at the same time, she had a good chunk of time to get her army out before the cavalry fell upon them, which makes it less of a 'necessity' that the heroes could pounce on.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Cat was in the fortifications w/ Marshall J. Larat's location was not disclosed, but he wasn't with the skirmishers. Neither can make a portal that far away from themselves, that we've seen, Cat just learned how to "tie off" a gate she'd made, otherwise she's gotta maintain it as long as she wants it open.

*Metrux*

Besides neither she or her fae being able to open portals from a distance, this is a trump card, if you will remember. She is keeping it close, that she can use portals for small teleportation instead of just full march through impossible times.

About they attacking Procer, you really think she wouldn't be herself going? The whole idea was for HER to be there destroying until they couldn't take it anymore.

It probably didn't come up because it's plain impossible, so why would you think about it? It's the same as thinking that thief could've put the stolen sun in the knights path, in the situation it's virtually impossible, so why bother wasting words on it?

[onedollargum](#)

A number of hypothetical reasons why taking the losses is preferable/unavoidable:

- She (or some of her high-tier and possibly traitorous minions) has to be there to open the gate.
- Such gates aren't perfectly precise on a micro, tactical level.
- Making a gate might take too much time.

Using a gate is tantamount to using an aspect. With so many heroes aligned against her that's a bad move.

-Catherine is the Duchess of Moonless Nights, and the time is early afternoon. It might be that manifesting a gate at this time of day simply isn't feasible.

-Procer has an as-of-yet unknown trump against gating.

### *Antoninjohn*

The priests are not using their own power it's given to them by the Gods Above, the issue is to be a priest requires taking oaths not to kill people with that power but to heal people, the priests of the Gods Below can use power to kill people but that requires sacrifice the Good side can't, but as you can see Good is currently cheating which will probably bit them back especially as Callowens hold deep grudges

### *MetruX*

Just a small thing, there is no priest of the gods bellow. Not even a church for them. It is explained in book one or two, I'm not sure now, that no one sends prayers or asks things from the gods bellow, it's a different kind of religion.

### *Daemion*

A portal wouldn't have helped at all. The priests would have simply put a barrier in front of it.

### *agumentic*

She explicitly can't. It's possible to calculate what place in Arcadia corresponds with whatever place you want to be, go there and open a gate from the other side, but it takes time, and might not actually be faster in short distances. All this happened in the span of minutes, with Hierophant busy trying to break the shields.

### *the verbiage ecstatic*

And on the Proceran side, why are they sending out the heroes? They just had a successful play, that Cat doesn't have an answer to, and the longer they keep up with attrition tactics, the more their numbers help them. Heroes perform best when the tide of the battle turns against them: they should keep wearing down Cat until she finds a way to flip the dynamics, and THEN the heroes should be deployed to counter her.

### *Draconius Sinister*

Well, that's a bit upsetting to see. Excited for when Cat hits back though.

*Anon*

As an addedum...come to think of it, the re-angling walls are a pretty good trick – assuming the wards can re-orient at will and are easily adjusted in a short time-frame (which they did here, at least), that's battlefield control on a similar (And roughly equally effective) scale to Cat's gates, only inverted.

It probably won't work as well now that Juniper can account for it. but it did what it needed to do – which was nigh-disable cat's mobile ranged component. I'm kind of curious as to what Juniper and Cat DID think the priests could do, given how flat-footed this caught them.

At this point, all that's needed to be done is to pick off the siege engines and/or maneuver around them, and Malanza can just throw bodies at Cat's army until Cat's army is decimated. Masego and the Mages may be able to work some magic and outmuscle the priests' defenses (as evidenced here), but the priests have numbers, and can heal anything that's not an instant kill-wave.

Now I'm really curious as to how the tide can be turned – Cat's got worse odds now, which (on some level) may help given her story so far, but at the same time, unless she can avoid the Sword Saint long enough to kill off the rest of the heroes and a ton of mundane soldiers (of which she's already promised to not break out the truly nasty stuff), this was a savage blow.

Also interesting, in a detached sense, that this attests to Malanza's 'meh' to the prisoner exchange.

*Dylan Tullos*

Anon:

Cat can't afford a "win" that leaves her army broken. This is only one Crusading host, and the First Prince has plenty of reserves.

She has to win decisively, preserving her forces, while Malanza is quite happy to suffer heavy casualties as long as she wins. Now we've seen that the Princess knows what she's doing, that just got much harder.

Malanza has no reason to agree to a prisoner exchange. She has the bigger army, so trading one for one could only be a disadvantage for her.

Princess Malanza is fighting like Black. She has superior forces, so she's fighting methodically, picking apart Cat's army one piece at a time rather than launching an all-out assault. Attrition works in her favor, which means that Cat has to gamble and try to make a decisive attack.

## *Metrux*

Previously there was plenty of priests at war, it's just they never directly participated, unless to counter big ass evil rituals, all the other time they stayed around and healed people.

## *Rook*

Strong opening move by the crusade, but maybe not the smartest. It might actually end up beneficial in the grand scheme of things for Callow.

The reason being that it's a tactical loss but a strongly favorable narrative. Malanza just put their backs to a *\*literal\** wall and struck with overwhelming force. Usually a good move, but maybe not so much when the narrative pattern of your opponent revolves around baring her fangs when up against the wall and disemboweling said overwhelming force.

Fighting for the name of Squire, the training exercises at the academy, marchford, liesse, the arcadian war, second liesse – every single story Cat has been a part of has started with backs to the wall and an opponent with bigger guns, and has ended in the underdog sacrificing an arm to unceremoniously tear out the opponent's throat.

The first strike looks good on paper yeah, but it also just railroaded the story into a setup where the next move will almost certainly be Cat hitting back twice as hard. Very similar to Black signing Captain's death warrant with a series of tactical victories but a narrative defeat, except in this case it seems like Malanza accidentally set up and stepped into the trap of her own volition rather than any clever play by either party.

Only question is it's not entirely clear whether Cat herself will actually realize this and capitalize on it. Winter flaring up her temper might actually work to her advantage in this case.

## *Anon*

I don't know if Cat's connection to her name is strong enough to empower such a narrative at this point in time, though.

Winter might be, since it also has been a part of Cat's journey through several such encounters, but the Saint has already been shown to match and out-cut Winter once already – and relying on any one aspect as a villain is a surefire way to have a hero find a way around it.

Remember too that Cat has artificially hobbled her arsenal in order to make nice with Hasenbach at the end of this all – at least, that's the plan so far.



*Rook*

The good part of this is that it has nothing to do with Winter, it's been a part of her story since she was the Powerless Orphan. This kind of narrative advantage is relevant in all cases, but especially in the case of battles between named – the mantle is just icing on the cake. Remember the Lone Idiot ended up being a fairly powerful opponent on the back of nothing but the rule of three, and Captain of the Calamities died at the hand of a barely relevant middling Hero by force of story alone.

Which is actually very convenient that they chose this very moment to send out seven of their Named. It's a perfect opportunity to take a hold of the flow of the story to erase a few of them as her own opening salvo, and firmly turn the tide back in her own favor.

[benthelynx](#)

Which would be spending that advantage, and probably setting up a counter counter narrative. But it's so early in that not doing so is probably letting that advantage dissipate.

*RanVor*

Yet another excellent chapter.

Could Cat be in for a Terribilic victory in this battle?

*Saragh*

Does anyone else look at this and think this is a classic story in Callow?

A horde of poorly trained conscripts supported by noble elites pouring across the border aided by powerful rituals and magic. Facing them is an outnumbered army lead by Callow royalty and with the knights of the kingdom behind their queen.

Ignore the names for a second and look at the story. Now consider the idea of seven villains attacking five heroes in front of massed armies.

*Jonnnney*

Gotta say I'm disappointed in Catherine. They had a day and I prepare and they didn't have a single trick to play? I wanted to see if goblin fire could burn through a miracle instead they put up a fence and Cat decided to ask Masego to try and break the fence and three thousand of her people died. I understand it's just the opening volley but I seems kinda meh. I may have missed it but did the Mages didn't any fire nor did our named kill anyone

*Daltos*

They still needed to retreat through there, goblin fire would've just blocked them off even more so since they would've had to wait for it to burn out since magic just gets eaten up by it, and that's ignoring the fact that they probably would've had to go through a good amount of their stock to do so since that had to be a long fence to pen up a couple thousand people.

*Metrux*

Unless I am terribly equivocated, she agreed to not use anything of the complete destruction sort. Goblin fire is sure to be included. The thing here is how fast it happened, when she finally understood her people were already being killed, so they couldn't prepare anything in time. For using the day before? Now you must ask yourself this: if priests were always in wars against Praes but never did anything like this, what do you think they did? The answer is surprisingly easy, give it was said plenty of times before: the protected from or dispelled massive rituals. So she neither could have a ritual prepared, goblin fire used or time to do something else. All in all she got out of it better than most people would've.

*werafdsaew*

Cat agreed not to use demons and not to target civilians. Everything else is fair game.

*haza18*

The watch is actually so badass, trying to grapple their way out 😊

*Author Unknown*

Priests are scary. I wonder if their no killing rule applies to animals. If not, given the way those shields cut, they could just create one a foot or so above the ground in the middle of Broken Bells and take out Cat's entire cavalry contingent.

It may not have been wise to unleash the priest so soon. Not unless they have a whole lot more tricks up their sleeves. They hurt Masego where it counts: his pride. And you can bet he is going to be spending a considerable amount of time developing a counter. Unless Malanza thinks she can win the entire war here, she may have overplayed her hand.

It hurts to see Cat lose so many. Not just the people; crossbows are expensive y'know.

*Metrux*

You know, this made me think something rather interesting. Priests were used by the old kingdom to disable Praesi use of massive rituals, but Hierophant is especially a breaker and controller of miracles... Maybe those priests will see something they wholeheartedly did not expect >;)

[benthelynx](#)

Typo ish comment: this sentence required rereading for me. "But it might lower the damage of this from disaster to wound." It might help it was written as "a disaster to a wound"

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

Your probably right, but it works both ways me thinks...

[benthelynx](#)

It works, but feels clunky? Clumsy?

*stevenneiman*

"They didn't even {have} to justify it"  
"but that was not necessarily [be] true" alternatively, "might not necessarily be true"  
"Malanza had been traditional in the [arraignment->arrangement] of her forces."  
"when my old friend unleashed his wrath he did {so} methodically."

*Draeysine*

Man... these are some next level D&D tactics. Wall of force weaponized.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

Wait, does the no killing rule apply to Miracles? Because that would be the Gods killing people, not the priests killing anyone.

*Letouriste*

Good question:o

*esryok*

On multiple occasions Ashen Priestess erased people from existence or reduced them to ash. In particular, when she erased those Stygian magisters it was described as a miracle. Seems like killing is permitted at least some of the time.

*Luis*

This has painted a target on the back of priests now that will never wash off. think about it. There is a difference between medical personnel and combat personnel.

Priests most likely had a protected status as only healers and people who could kill undead. Classically evil armies would probably not care, but any formation with priests would automatically be suspect. Now they will be factored into troop formations and tactics. Any commander not wanting to walk into the trap Catherine did would make a point of trying to avoid it and there is no guarantee that the priests in the enemy army would not operate like this moving forward so....taking out their capacity to do so would be a military priority, like trying to shut down ballistas, and mage lines. so targeting priests would be smart, just like targeting mages is now.

[shieldredblog](#)

Also it has some interesting implications for the overarching story. If the Crusade uses miracles against soldiers, its reinforcing Callow as justified being on the side of Evil. Making the citizens of Callow, who already grew up under the thumb of tolerable Evil rulers, see the Heavens as against them.

Even if the Crusade wins, instead of Heroes rising to free Callow, the narrative could change enough that rebel Villains rise up to free Callow instead.

*Dylan Tullos*

Luis:

You make very good points about the distinction between soldiers and medics.

However, only a Crusading host is likely to have a battalion of priests to work military miracles. In wars between Good nations, the House of Light remains neutral, and priests serve in their traditional role as healers. This military innovation is only likely to apply to wars between Good and Evil powers.

As you say, Classic Evil doesn't care about the rules of war, so this won't change anything for them. It's only Practical Evil that will change its behavior towards priests, and I think that it will work out as you predict. Practical Evil commanders will treat priests as military assets from here on out.

Maybe there will be a future distinction between "fighting" priests and pure healers. The healers could wear a distinctive uniform that sets them apart, and armies would avoid tricks or face the reasonable consequence of having Practical Evil target all priests without distinction. If they have separate units of priestly medics, clearly distinguished from the soldier-priests, then there's no reason why we couldn't have priests as

combat personnel without losing the traditional immunity of healers.

shieldredblog:

Everyone in Liesse is dead because of a "tolerable" Evil ruler. Malicia decided that their lives were less important than getting her hands on a superweapon, and she sacrificed them without hesitation.

Practical Evil is still small-e evil. It's just smarter about it.

[shieldredblog](#)

I'm not saying it justifies anything to us, the readers. The on the ground citizen of Callow is a different story though. All their going to see is Callowen soldiers run down because of weaponized miracles.

Miracles serving Proceran interests at the expense of Callow.

[shieldredblog](#)

A rather large group of people just threw away their diplomatic protection there. If you fight, your soldiers. Hopefully a road somewhere gets some new mile markers.

TeK

That got me thinking. First of all, Callow has it's own House of Light, which is heretical by the views of Procer (more militaristically inclined, as it is), second, those panes of light, they can CUT PHYSICAL THINGS. What if those panes appeared not vertically, but horizontally in the midst of army? I mean, it's the same effect, ultimately. You can even create them not in the midst of the host, but, say in front of charging cavalry. I mean, you don't kill people that way, they kill themselves! Totally not murder!

*Letouriste*

Probably too close of a weapon to justify that to heaven eyes

[Walter](#)

I dunno if I agree with Cat's suspicions re: the levees. These guys are out of Procer already, and whether they survive or not will be gone for years. I don't think killing them can make Procer collapse. They wouldn't have been permitted to leave their farms/homes if they'd been crucial.

[shieldredblog](#)

Considering the Dead King is about to throw his hat in the ring, it probably does actually.  
Not that they know that.

I think there's a good chance that the Pretty Prancing Princes of Procer simply don't value mere peasants enough to understand the damage they're doing in the long run.

[Walter](#)

If Dead King acts the big question is where he will go. We know he had a hard on for Triumphant, but that's about it in terms of his personality.

[shieldredblog](#)

No question.  
He's marching out of that Hellgate that Warlock locked.

*MetruX*

The thing here is that what a nation needs while in war is not the same as when in peace, they can be necessary but still taken because while war raged you need less of them. So when peace comes you need some more, but if you lost too much... Then you can't provide for all the people who came back from said war.

*Moondoggie*

Classic Warhammer Empire play.

Net of Amyntok their skirmishers and follow it up with a Reiksguard charge. Nice early game pick.

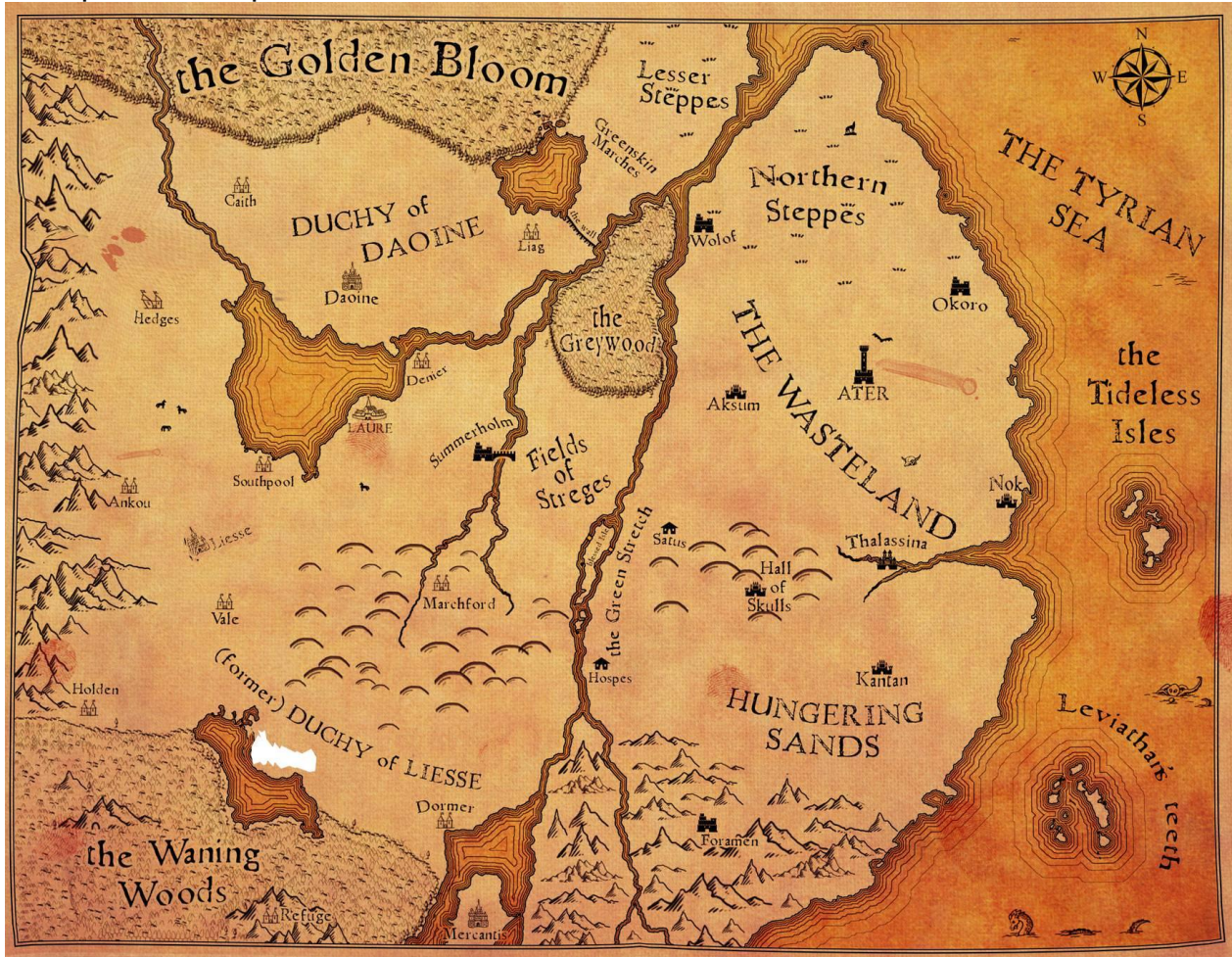
*nobodi12*

An updated map of Callow

*nobodi12*



An updated map of Callow



*Letouriste*

The white mark is kinda ugly on such map^^ a red cross would be better

*MetruX*

I think the white mark rather nicely personificating what happened. It has a breaking contrast that reminds us of why it is how it is in the map ;3

*JJR*

That's where Liesse ended up and a trio of demons deppressed/maddened/disordered a large chunk of land, right?

---

Last chapter Harrow was mentioned, it's not absensed.

*nick012000*

And once again I'm reminded of how implausible the geography of that map is, with a river running between two oceans. The only way I can see it being even remotely possible is if some giant

spell cast near Wolof made the water start flowing uphill for a while, creating the division in the river there, before it started flowing downhill again towards the south.

*TeK*

It can be technically plausible. You got big lake, where mercantis at, and it's possible that sometime after river goes out of it, it splits and goes in the direction of Praes and Free cities respectively. Or maybe even, in the point of splitting, there's some water-generating magical phenomenon. Plus, you know, it's magical world. As we all know, gravity does not work when presented with a classical element of void. So yeah, a wizard did it.

*nobodi12*

mercantis sits in the ocean not a lake.

*TeK*

What? Had you actually looked at Calernia's map? Here it is: <https://ibb.co/b9DLMF>. Or you can just look at the "Art and Maps" button at the top.

So going back to question in hand, if Mercantis sits in ocean, than Caspian Sea is an ocean too. And it's not even a sea!

*nobodi12*

But I would love Erratica address this problems and give some explanation along the lines of: it is praesi fault.

*JJR*

Can I give it a try?

Time was there was a river that began in the mountains south of Hospes and flowed north all the way to the Tyrian Sea. This annoyed the Praesi; as it had a tendency to get in the way of their favorite pastime, invading Callow. Sure, they could always force the initial crossing well enough (phase 1 always works) but inevitably some Heroes showed up to wreck the bridges, or tunnels, or logistical trebuchets and forced the Legions of Terror to surrender or face starvation. One invasion the Warlock decided to get clever, he would create a ritual that would make the river flow south instead of north. If there's no river it can't get in their way after all. Alas his ritual worked too well; and the entire river was compelled to flow south. not just the water coming from the source. To this day a river flows out of the Tyrian Sea to the north and



uphill as it travels southward until it reaches where the ritual was enacted and splits. One branch drains into the bay around Mercantis actually flowing downhill for a bit. The other flows through the valley between the mountains, with only a small amount of regard for going downhill.

*TeK*

One thing about geography I would like to know the answer too, is why the apparently unbreachable Red Snake Wall can't be just circled around through the forest. Or why there is no river connecting lake on the border of Keter and Procer, and nearby ocean shore.

*JJR*

Depends on which forest you mean. If they try to go through the golden bloom elves will kill them (they kill anyone who isn't a Hero). Going through the Greywood would be more doable, but that would mean crossing a river twice. A river that seems broad enough to act as a better barrier than the wall.

*TeK*

By Red Snake Wall I meant the wall between Procer and Levant.

*JJR*

Oh, sorry. I thought I knew what I was talking about.

*Shoddi*

@nobodi12 – I was just about to ask you if leaving Harrow out was accidental or intentional. Then I put the “new” map side-by-side with the one on the Arts/Maps/Other page, and flipped between the two repeatedly.

I see what you did there. Well played, nobodi12.

*SpeckofStardust*

So everyone else notice that if the troops were withdrawn when Cat first suggested it they would have been pulled out in time?

[sengachi](#)

Nah, the priests would have just thrown up the fences half a minute earlier. A few more soldiers would have escaped, but the fundamental outcome wouldn't have been changed.

*Novice*

I see Princess Malanza is a Protoss player. Forcefield OP.

TeK

As long as she doesn't photon cannon rush, it's fine by me.

[maelos61](#)

The next chapter's name is 'Grand écart' I hope?

*Draconius Sinister*

Oi, so this question is kind of out of nowhere, but is it possible that Aspects are less abilities corresponding to how the Named operates or fights or whatever, but more a command from the Gods Above or Below as to what they will do in a given story: for example, the White Knight is meant to Ride into battle, the Black Knight is meant to Lead his troops and Conquer the enemy? This doesn't seem especially groundbreaking at first I'm sure, but it implies that Black and Cat have broken stories rather than beaten them or used them to their advantage. William was meant to Triumph over Cat. Funnily enough, this would mean that Hanno unintentionally broke his own story by learning how so many different heroes fought, rather than becoming his own sort of warrior and becoming the hero that Rides into battle at the last second and turn the tide. He is no longer the man with a last resort trump card, as Black examined, he's hamstrung himself by breaking his own story.

I have no real evidence for this save for that names evidently come from the Gods, and so do Aspects, and that all of the Aspects are imperative commands, evidently given to the heroes and villains BY the Gods.

*SpeckofStardust*

On the other hand if you look at when Black used Break on the doomsday weapon, It was noted that ""Destroy," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, and his Name pulsed." meaning that ultimately he was acting under his own decision and outside the story so far, as further evidence that his action ended Cat's Named transition. The Name's might be power granted and heavily influenced by the God's but they are able to be broken (and kinda tamed) to the person using them.

As shown by Black and a few other people.

deepee

pros and cons of sending undead pigeon puppets filled with goblinfire into the heart of the other army?

[vuthuha912](#)

Well. I like your tactic, Princess. Allow me to repay in kind by targeting your medics from now on.  
Seriously, Black targeted the healer first for a reason. Zuko from one of the fics I read just constantly fired at the enemy to prevent them from leaving their shield to do anything worthwhile? Can we do the same with these priests?

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## Chapter 15: Bravura

*"And so my reign ends as it began, with fewer allies than stab wounds."*

– Alleged last words of Dread Emperor Pernicious, the Imperiled

"Tell me about those fences," I said.

Hierophant had gained back a few pounds, enough that his thinned frame looked full again. How he'd managed that on army rations I had no idea, but the mystery was not a fresh one: he'd gone through both the Rebellion and the Arcadian Campaign without losing weight. I'd been half-convinced that it was a self-perception anchored deep enough that his Name enforced it, until he'd wasted away in the Observatory. He'd still come a long way from the bespectacled boy I'd once known. These days he looked, well, *dangerous*. There might have been little muscle to his frame, but he stood tall – taller than me, but then who didn't? – and the long trinket-woven braids going down his back leant him a certain panache. The black eye cloth covering his glass eyes matched the permanently dishevelled black robes that were the only thing he bothered to wear anymore, not that he'd even been prone to indulging in fashionable clothes. The power he now so casually wielded clung to him even when unused, half-felt wisps of sorcery never quite gone. Masego had been perhaps the most destructive of my companions even back when he'd been the Apprentice, but he'd rarely seemed anything but awkward and a little pedantic when he wasn't casting. Now, though? He looked like the kind of sorcerer you didn't walk away from fighting. It suited him.

"A lecture on the nature of priestly power is out of the question, I suppose," the dark-skinned man sighed.

"Ask me again when an army isn't marching towards us," I said.

"That's almost never," he muttered under his breath. "Very well. Though weaker – diluted, according to some theories – than the Light we have seen heroes wield, the essential nature of priest

miracles is the same. That is the stuff these fences were made of."

"Can it kill soldiers?" I asked.

"No," he shook his head. "As a reflection of oaths taken, the miracle should not be able to hurt anything living."

Well, that was something. From the way the fences had cut straight through hooks and rope, I'd have to assume it could wreck armour and fortifications if they hit at the right angle. That was... problematic. We'd raised the palisades in the first place because we needed them as an equalizer for crusader numbers. If they could just cut them down at will, that measure was gone.

"Next time the priests try the fences, can you just hit them directly to interrupt?" I asked.

Reluctantly, the mage shook his head.

"Mass sorcery at great distance needs a scrying tangent to be aimed properly," he said. "Unless it is fired blindly. Priests, as you well now, disrupt scrying."

So, unless Malanza blundered by putting all her priests in our field of vision and clustered together smothering the fences in the crib wasn't an option. This just kept getting better, didn't it?

"Then we need to have an immediate answer ready for when they do appear," I said flatly. "I'll need you with me for the brawl, so the mage lines will have to handle it."

I flicked a questioning glance at him at that, inviting him to pass judgement. I heard his left eye twist inside his skull towards me, but he did not reply. Right, subtle cues. Not his strength.

"Can they handle it?" I asked.

"They can cast the Ripper without me," Masego agreed, and elaborated when my eyebrow rose. "The red light constructs we used for the second exchange."

"That's..." I sighed. "I need a little more than that, Masego. Would wards work?"

"Against miracles, they are mostly useless," Hierophant noted. "The spectrums are too different, there is little overlap. We would have a great deal more success targeting their mages."

"Priests wouldn't screw with that?" I frowned.

"Unlikely," he said. "Remember the precision they formed those shields with, and at such distance. That cannot be obtained without scrying or other means of relayed direct sight. Having priests among them would make that impossible, implying the mages stand alone. I'll add that whoever designed that strategy has a keen understanding of all forces involved, which is quite rare even among Praesi. Rather impressive."

So either they had a very skilled wizard on the other side, or the Grey Pilgrim had contributed to Malanza's battle plans. I hoped it was the latter, because the enemy had enough advantages already without having someone even remotely in Masego's league to field.

"Order them to target the mages first," I finally said. "The fences will be trouble enough on their own, we can't afford for wizards to give them additional staying power. Inform Juniper's staff I gave the order, too, I don't want them in the dark."

The blind man nodded, idly tracing a circle of silver light in the air with a fingertip and inserting a scrying spell within. I looked on in interest for a moment, since that was definitely a new trick. I'd been under the impression there needed to be a physical anchor for scrying, but apparently Hierophant had figured out a cheat. I left him to it, leaning my elbows against the top of the palisade. The two of us were on a wooden walkway, between two rising slopes where Pickler's repeating scorpions would be pushed up when the enemy got close enough. We had thirty of those overall, a massive amount of siege weaponry even by Legion standards. It meant we were light on combat sappers, since those same soldiers had to attend the engines instead, but sharpers and charges weren't going to win us this battle. Not against fifty thousand hero-led Procerans. And, speaking of the devils. The crusader host had lumbered forward, its three infantry waves advancing slowly as the cavalry wings retreated to cover their flanks. In front of the first wave, though, the same seven silhouettes I'd glimpsed earlier were pulling ahead. Heroes. Three sword and board, I noted. Men and woman. Another I recognized from a previous fight, the same priest who'd engaged me as backup for the Saint. No sign of Two Knives or the red-robed mage, but I knew better than to assume a vicious crippling had been enough to keep the heroine I'd mangled out of the fight.

Hopefully she'd already had all three of her aspects, because if she hadn't she'd likely popped one out since designed to screw me over. Clearing out the heroes that had come into Callow over the winter had taught me that a hero having an undefined aspect just meant that the Heavens had the means to teach their hatchet men a trick to counter one of my own. They were rarely subtle about it, too, which was kind of insulting. It would have been polite to be less obvious in their attempts to stack the fight for their side. Of the last remaining three heroes, I recognized another. The man

with the hammer I'd ignored when riding with the Hunt. The other two were unknowns: one muscly, barefooted woman with a staff that could mean she was either a sort of priest or fighter. And a boy that could not have been older than sixteen, with a greatsword propped over his shoulder that was nearly as tall as he was. And didn't wear a helmet, because of course he fucking didn't.

"It is done," Masego said, coming to stand by my side again.

I nodded slowly.

"You remember our training?" I asked.

"Healers die first," he recited dutifully. "Then practitioners, then I must constrain the enemy to ease your task or prevent outside intervention."

"It doesn't look like they have a mage with them, but that just means they're holding the man back in reserve," I said. "Watch for that. And if the Saint of Swords ever tries to close distance with you..."

"Flee," he completed. "I must never let her be closer than ninety feet."

"And that's the conservative estimate," I grunted. "She didn't even use an aspect to smack me around, Masego. She starts getting serious, don't think in victory terms. Escape and containment, while we gather massive enough a response to force her back."

"You sound sceptical of our ability to kill her," Hierophant noted, sounding surprise.

My fingers clenched.

"I am," I admitted. "We're good, Zeze. Better than good. But her and the Pilgrim? They have decades of experience and accumulated power on us, and their Gods aren't shy about putting a finger to the scale. Don't think of it as us tumbling Summer again, because against Summer we had levers and rules. We're the green heroes taking a swing at your father and Black, in this story. We get cocky for even a moment and..."

I did not elaborate.

"Heads, pikes, the usual," Masego said. "I shall endeavour prudence."

We stayed in comfortable silence after that, watching the enemy advance.

"I think that I dislike them," he finally said, after a long moment. "These crusaders."

I snorted.

"Well, they *are* at war with us," I said.

The mage shrugged.

"So were Summer and Akua Sahelian, yet I never could must much antipathy," Masego said. "Even towards the Exiled Prince and his mercenaries. They were only creatures acting as their nature demanded, and that is a blameless thing."

"Is it really?" I murmured. "Just because something comes naturally to you doesn't make it right."

"A very Callowan view," Hierophant said. "Your people seek to overlay Creation with a notion of objective morality, which always struck me as rather absurd. If the teachings of any of the Gods were fully correct, Creation would not exist at all. It is, after all, a debate."

"The Gods can say whatever they like," I muttered. "The truest thing Black ever said to me was that, in the end, only we are responsible for our choices. Taking marching orders from Above or Below is just abdicating the rights your own life. The Book of All Things has this lovely little verse about that, you know. Choice. But is it really that if the only two answers are already picked out for you?"

"Free will," Masego smiled. "You always did obsess over that. I'm not certain such a thing can truly exist, Catherine, not in a world that was *created*."

"You're the one who wants to open up Creation to see how it works," I pointed out. "When you were in a fugue, after becoming Hierophant, you said something I still remember. *The godhead is a trick of perspective*."

"I believe it still," he admitted. "Now more than ever, as I have seen what became of you. How Winter's mantle alienated you from mortal existence. To think as a God, I suspect, is to be a God."

"And you'll try to get there," I said. "Seems meaningless, if it's not your choice."

"Perhaps I was simply meant to attempt it," Masego mused. "Because it is my nature to do so."

"Does it really matter?" I asked. "Whether or not that was writ in you from the start. All we can do is act."

"Perhaps not," he murmured. "And so I find myself disliking these crusaders."

"They killed a lot of my men," I said quietly, fingers forming a fist. "And we're only just getting started."

"Death is death," Masego dismissed. "But the way you carry yourself now, as if they put stones on your shoulder? This I hold against them."

I bumped my hip against his side affectionately, then leant against his shoulder. He allowed it without comment, which was as close as he'd ever come to openly returning the affection. I'd never quite get him, would I? How in the same sentence he could display both kindness and utter apathy.

"It's going to be a long war," I whispered.

"And we will win it," Hierophant said with bedrock certainty.

"And what has you so sure of that?"

He laughed quietly.

"Perhaps it is simply my nature," he said. "Go now, Catherine. Go and follow your own."

I moved away. Closing my eyes, I breathed in and out. Seven heroes, huh? Time to see if we could thin that herd a bit.

Opening my eyes, I unsheathed my sword and leapt down.

—

When fighting a group heroic Named, Black had once told me, two manners of adversaries could be found. The first was a proper heroic band. Should that be the case, coordination and weaving of skill should be expected. *Against a band, either dispose of the healer first or place an instantly lethal blow against the leader figure.* That would allow me to either inflict attrition or break coherence. The second kind of adversary was a mere grouping of heroes. No leader, no teamwork beyond the obvious, limited coordination. *Rarer, my teacher had assessed. Mostly seen in large scale continental wars or when an overwhelmingly powerful villain emerges, like Triumphant or the Dead King.* I was neither the most dreadful of empresses nor the ancient abomination that lurked within Keter, but here I was anyway. Fighting seven heroes as the host of Procer advanced behind them. They had been ordered to be prudent, I grasped. Three advanced towards me: one sword and board, the war hammer and the greatsword. Behind them stood the barefoot staff-wielder, and further back the last two with shields were flanking the healer. *This isn't about power, I thought. Power is the crutch of Named. Clarity and skill will win ever time.*



"I don't suppose," I said, "that we'll have a round of introductions?"

The hammer-wielder chuckled.

"What worth are those to the dead?" he replied.

"That," I said, "will make for a very ironic tombstone."

I let them strike first. The pair with the large weapons went for the flanks as the shield-bearer slowed to box me in. Eyes on him, I let my senses bloom. No Winter, just the inherent abilities that came with my body being a fucking construct. The mantle would remain inert as long as possible, since I was pretty sure the real reason the Saint and the Pilgrim had yet to show was that they were trying to bait out a Winter trance so I wouldn't think of retreat when they *did* arrive. The hammer went for my legs, and not even a heartbeat later the greatsword whistled towards my torso. Board arcs both, that they could readjust if I went forward. I did not. The thing with large weapons was that, once you'd committed to a blow, there was a heartbeat where it was very difficult to move. Where the muscles were busy dragging that large chunk of steel around. I moved towards the greatsword, adjusting to the arc and ducking under at the last moment. The boy wielding it grunted, shifted his footing and swung backward at the height of my hips. Without missing a beat I slid under, letting a hammer blow pass through the air where I'd been, and in a crouch passed behind the hero as my blade whipped out. His greaves did not cover the back of his leg. I rose smoothly from the slide as he was forced to kneel down, his tendons cleanly cut. Light bloomed inside the wound.

There was a heartbeat where I could have thrust the tip of my sword through the unprotected back of his neck, but I knew better. The sword and board man was already rushing me, shield angled up as he swung his blade. I did not parry, instead throwing myself on the shield and rolling over it, landing behind him. It threw his footing, and when the hammer-wielder tried to whack me I smoothly kicked the back of the the shield-wielder's knee and pushed his back. The hammer struck him in the shoulder, shattering steel like it was chalk. A curse, a scream, but I had more important matters to deal with. The first reserve was about to cut into the dance. The barefoot woman was stalking towards me, centre of mass supernaturally steady as she did. Ugh. Not a caster or a monk, then, a brawler. Wood or not, if that staff hit me I suspected I wouldn't enjoy it. Light bloomed, and the shield-wielder's broken shoulder snapped back into place. Without looking, I could feel all the moving parts. Hammer man was rushing my back, weapon already hoisted. Greatsword boy was going around to my left, warier now that he'd had a taste. And the one with the staff was smiling serenely as she advanced. I spat to the side.

"All right," I said. "Let's have another go."

I waited until sorcery bloomed in the distance to move. A whirlwind of flame erupted around the healer and his bodyguards, though before my view was blocked I saw light flare on the shield of one of the heroes. No kill there, but it should keep them busy for a bit. Masego was only getting started anyway. Hammer-wielder struck first. I knew the angle of it without looking and half-stepped out of the arc, but the man laughed.

"**Broaden**," he said.

The war hammer tripled in size, and there was no avoiding all of that. My shoulder was clipped and it fucked with my footing, keeping me in place just long enough for the greatsword boy to strike.

"**Pierce**," a woman's voice spoke from behind me.

Power howled. Ah, they were trying to bury me through concentrated might. Shame they'd not trained together sufficiently. It was a tricky thing, to keep myself in the way of both the thrusting staff point and the greatsword until the last moment. A handhold of ice formed just above my free hand I used it to hoist my whole body up, letting the golden-wreathed wooden staff impact the greatsword. It broke like it was made of porcelain, but I didn't get to enjoy that for long. The hammer-wielder was still on my ass, smashing down with his oversized chunk of metal as if the weight hadn't changed along with the size. I dropped the handhold, and the fall bought me a heartbeat as the swing followed me down. It was enough. I rolled to the side as the ground shook and chunks of wet soil went up in the air. The staff-wielder's naked foot caught me in my armoured chin but I felt the godsdamned steel *bend* under the impact as it sent me rolling. Fuck. That was one was dangerous, not because she was more competent but because she was *quicker* and quick was what my survival depended on.

The storm of fire winked out as I got back on my feet, all four heroes in the fray rushing me. A glance told me the healer and his protectors were completely untouched, but a moment later spikes of lightning began hammering down on their position one after another and just like that we were back in business. I watched my enemies approach, their angles and their speeds. Greatsword boy, I noted with amusement, was wielding the remaining half of his weapon like some sort of oversized cleaver. He didn't look all that happy about it. I circled slightly to the right, putting the hammer man between myself and the staff-wielder. And that meant... *Ah, there you are*. Sword and board feinted high and I took him up on it. Even as he flicked his blade down towards my throat, I turned my parry into a swing towards the side of his neck. His shield went up, and that killed his field of vision. Greatsword hero had to get close, now that

he'd lost his reach, and it was not his specialty. I flicked to the side and caught his extended wrist, twisting his sharply so he was forced to stand in the way of sword and board's attack.

**"Resist,"** the boy hissed out.

Light spread across him in the blink of an eye and I dropped him before it could touch my fingers. The other hero's blade bounced off unceremoniously. While the younger one tried to pivot so he was facing me again, I followed his movement smoothly and lunged at sword and board's throat while he withdrew. The shield came to knock away the blade again, but that hadn't been what he needed to watch out for. My wrist flicked, a knife dropped into my armoured palm and I rammed it through his eye from the open angle. Behind him I heard the hammer-wielder curse, since he didn't have a clear shot at me. Even as the hero I'd knifed dropped and began twitching death throes, my ears flicked. I hastily backpedalled as the staff-wielder leapt over the fight, landing where my shoulders had been a moment before. The wood whipped out, and my hasty parry was poorly angled. It went straight through my guard, denting my plate and tossing me away for the second time. Well, at least one was down and the healer still busy. Unless he could – no, I wasn't even going to finish that thought. I dragged myself upright and smiled at the barefoot woman.

"Round three?" I offered.

Her staff rose. I almost missed it, because it wasn't flashy. It was just a low ripple, a murmur of power. But my senses were no longer a mortal's, so my eyes flicked to the hero I'd killed. At his side knelt an old man in grey robes, who gently took out the knife. He then passed a hand over the bloodied face, murmuring a prayer. The hero's eyes opened and he let out a ragged gasp. There was no longer any wound on his face. The Grey Pilgrim rose to his feet gingerly, and offered me a rueful smile.

"Round three," he agreed.

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### *Highwayman*

Cat is like the boss of a raid that doesn't stay inside inside the boss chamber but instead comes out swinging at the raid party early.

Reminds me of how my party got wiped attempting Illidian, somehow.

*Joe Jms*

I'm sorry but something's been bothering me for a few chapters. The goblins had the opportunity to find a scorpion with a different claw pay have a mage modify it and they misset the chance to name him Hakram Catspaw

*Sanityfaerie*

The scorpions are all named after her \*foes\*.

*Levinus*

They named a goat Ratface's ex and he wasn't even in the room to hear it. Your point?

[sengachi](#)

Look, both Ratface and Aisha had to have exacted revenge for that at some point. And while for the goblins that was probably just good fun, imagine what kind of vengeance they could expect from the Deadhand. The Fifteenth's goblins "don't fuck with them" list is probably very short, but I'd expect to find Hakram's name on it.

*Levinus*

I hadn't thought of that. But when do we associate sense with sappers.

[ClickPause](#)

Cheating bastards.

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Grey Pilgrim once again proving that it's not the heroes that focus on killing who are most dangerous.

*naturalnuke*

Fucking healers.

*PingleBerry*

Always murder the white mage.

*Naeddyr*

Round three! the comment section echoed.

*PotatoMan*

Let's go!

Cap'n Smurfy

I love how we get the description from Catherine's perspective, yet I can just imagine how it must look to the heroes as she weaves through them, making them beat each other up for her.

Dainpdf

I can just imagine Black watching the battle, seeing the heroes attack, and mutter "Mistake."

Antoninjohn

Resurrection, really throwing subtly out the window here. You know the Gray Pilgrim follows the Choir of Mercy and is going to try and kill Cat no matter what for earthly gains while Cat is planning to give him Mercy in order to prevent more bloodshed/pain when she does that's going to be the ultimate insult to him and the heavens

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Heroes aligned with the Choir of Mercy cannot harm another being – that was mentioned back in book 1 or 2.

d\_o\_l

No, you're thinking of Compassion.

jonnnney

I don't think knife eye wasn't dead yet. The Grey Pilgrim arrived just in the nick of time as ordained by the great story.

Dainpdf

He's made rescuing young heroes a part of his Role. That makes him a terrible piece for Cat to have against her in this war. At least he blew this pseudo aspect early on.

danh3107

Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan, fuck round three

JackbeThimble

'And Then the Pilgrim was Garroted by his own shadow just as a portal to hell opened up above the other three heroes heads and half a ton of molten rock smashed down upon them.'

'Round 4' growled the hero with the great sword as he turned and cut sword-and-board's head off.

*Metrux*

I think you have a very undeterred imagination xD

*SpeckofStardust*

uhmm I don't think anyone on either side is going to stay dead this fight.

*DD*

Ok...flat out resurrection like that has got to be cheating.

*sheer\_falacy*

We already knew that heroes had resurrection available – it was very important to Cat in First Liesse, actually. There are presumably limits on it, but the Grey Pilgrim is very high end.

*Orçun Sevinç*

But considering how he suddenly appeared beside a dying hero, I bet that is Name-enforced and exploitable. Shank another hero at the other side of the battlefield and I'll bet good money he will be away from where it counts.

*Dainpdf*

He probably can't do it more than once – that wouldn't make for good narrative. Or every time he does it, it gets less effective.

*Letouriste*

What's a less effective resurection? Half-dead state? Zombified but still somehow alive?

*Metrux*

Maybe not the results, but the means/costs? He gets more tired, takes longer, that kind of thing... Until he can't do it anymore.

*Dainpdf*

They may come back seriously wounded. Or it takes longer. Or the healing (because the guy may have been still alive) is less powerful. Or his timing is worse, exposing him or others to risk.

*SpeckofStardust*

Considering all the things Cat had done to avoided certain death (including full on resurrection). It is well within fair play.

[Sagacitas \(@Sagacitas\)](#)

Names are fundamentally cheating from start to finish, that's kind of the point.

*stevenneiman*

I don't think that was resurrection. He was mortally wounded in a way that would have been quickly lethal, but I don't think he was quite dead yet. Pretty sure that it was just very quick, very effective, very timely healing.

[superkeaton](#)

I wonder if the Grey Pilgrim travels through the same off-screen Nowhere that the Bard does.

*SMHF*

"HEROES NEVER DIE!"  
Fucking Mercy mains! -\_-

Btw dont forget to wait for the guide guys!  
<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*SMHF*

Vote... I meant vote... -\_- Gonna take a nap now!

*Anon*

Well, I suppose it was to be expected that 'trainer of young heroes' would, on some level, include resurrection for a priest-type mentor hero.

Now, how many times he can do it is the question of the day – or at least, will he and the other heroes be able to box Cat in to draw on Winter and thus use Saint to tear her connection to the Mantle to shreds.

Like...unless Cat (and Masego) can continue to 2v7 AND somehow keep the Pilgrim from healing, things aren't looking so hot – granted, that's playing into the narrative of forcing Cat into a corner, but even that may not be enough.

*haihappen*

Do not forget that two members of the Woe are unaccounted for, and the heroes therefore need to be cautious. Thief may not be

a brawler, but did exhibit the possibility to yolk powers, or the manifestation thereof, away.

And Archer just screams battlefield assassination to the first hero that gets into the position to kill Cat. Dramatic reveal and all that.

[Walter](#)

They are probably fighting the unaccounted for heroes.

*Metrux*

The battle is not started yet, at this exact moment the only ones fighting are the Named, since the host was BEHIND the Heroes and Cat went forward to meet them. I don't think Archer will get a kill shot, but she or deadhand will for sure appear to help Cat... Unless they are doing something else of a secret plan we readers had no access to. But yeah, even with all five of them fighting Saint alone would be subpar, fighting her with several Heroes and Pilgrim... Suicide doesn't even being. She wasn't wrong she said to Masego that with Saint there victory is not to be aimed. But I think Masego wasn't wrong when he said they would win in the end...

[ahd](#)

Black taught his squire well.

[daegone823](#)

I really wish I knew the names of the new heroes so I can add them to the wiki page. If we never find out I hope erraticerrata tells us in the future as I am begging to know the individual heroic names.

*Rook*

The barely introduced hammer guy said it pretty well. What use are introductions to the dead?

Some of them will probably get fleshed out, but with so many of Heroes and the Pilgrim/Saint taking so much of the limelight as primary antagonists... Cat might pulp a few of them too quickly to learn their Names

Honestly I would say their odds of survival in the near future are proportional to the amount of screentime they get. I'd say the monk and sword+board have the best chances so far, what with monk being paid some special attention, and knife eye being the first rez

[daegone823](#)



I believe that the names help reader understand the universe or country from which they came from, they represent the best or worst that culture has to offer thus far all we have had presented from this "good" nation are a sword slayer, hero trainer, and a soothsayer. Not really much of a representation in comparison to Praes which has iconic names such as Black Knight(military), Warlock(Magic), and the Empress( maniacal plans), Chancellor (Diplomacy). Each serves a purpose whereas we really have gotten no indication about what these good nation stands for. Levant though has had a few representations of there warrior nation though, still that is a small piece of the puzzle.

*Metruux*

I think this is more a manifestation of the culture. We all remember Black talking about how Names change based on the culture that birthed them, like a culture that presides over secrecy would have secret Names. In Praes everything goes around the tower in a spiral of power, everyone and everything has a position, it is very orderly if you think about it, and thus their Named each have a specific position and role. For what we know of Callow the Names were MUCH more varied, except for two: the royal and the mage; every other Named changed from generation to generation, but they all kept to the "fucking the enemy more than they could fuck you", which is a very Callowan thing.

Thus, it seems a little senseless the Named we've seen, but we don't know their culture, neither the place their Names have between other Named in their cultures.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Did anyone else notice the discrepancy about Masego's scrying? Masego scryed Juniper without a scrying bowl back in Book 3 chapter 43, so the trick isn't exactly new. Somethings feels absent...

*haihappen*

Yeah, the demon is still unaccounted for. I can see a few possible cases it is used without dramatic implications: E.g., Black/Warlock drop it on the Stairway to make it disappear.

[Barthumphries](#)

It's a demon of forgetfulness. It has been accounted for, we just all forgot about it. :p

[onedollargum](#)

Those ones are the worst. It's hard to defend against point-blank existence failure.

*haihappen*

Error 404: Existence not found

or

Segmentation fault! Invalid access to reality NULL

or

\*sky turns blue and displays:\* This reality encountered a critical error! Please restart.

*MetruX*

But didn't he use a medium anyway? I think what she thinks on this chapter is that scrying always uses something as medium, while he just plainly wrote on air.

*Big Brother*

And at this point, maybe during this engagement, or at least before the end of the Battle of Camps, Cat will probably get her new Name. Something new, something powerful, that let's her stand toe-to-toe with the Saint AND Pilgrim in preparation for the coming war with the Gnomes.

Because that's coming, possibly at the moment the Crusade falls, because Pickler's siege engines are probably a little too advanced for their liking. Praes has already gotten two Red Letters, and you can bet the gnomes know Callow is a Praesi Protectorate at the moment.

*haihappen*

She will get a new Name only after the Saint has cut Winter to shreds and forcefully separates her from the remains, which most likely results in her body dying from the backlash. And then the Pilgrim revives her, because he saw the best intentions, even if tainted by dark methods. Which gets him killed, probably by the Saint. Which forces a clash between the Saint and Cat, in kind of a "you killed my mentor" pattern, but with the roles somewhat broken, but that wouldn't be a first, would it?

In that slash, a Name may emerge. Or after.

The "You killed my mentor" part may come in if the crusader host breaks her army, marches towards the vales and Black gets killed in the battle by the saint. But that would rob the White Knight of a mirror on the Dark side, possibly ending his story there and ripping of any possibly present plot armor...

Too many possibilities...

[chris S](#)

I don't think there's going to be a Gnome war. The gist I've got from earlier mentions is that when the Gnomes decide a nation gets too high tech for their liking, it's less of a war and more of a "entire nation disappears overnight" type of situation.

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Pickler's siege engines don't bother the gnomes as, at the end of the day, they're just particularly clever balistae. They're not game-changing. All the stuff the gnomes have taken issue to are things that could kick start an agricultural or industrial revolution. Technologies that could change a civilization, not weapons and magic.

*MetruX*

Actually not even that, their problem is not in advancement or any such thing, but in physics. If you advance in physics you can learn all kinds of nice things that can't be unlearnt... So they destroy anyone who comes close to the fountain of their power. If you create a magic tech to allow everyone born be the little bit stronger or faster, they wouldn't care in the least.

Also, there would be no war, even elves and dwarfs won't intrude with physics because they fear the Gnomes, Cat is good, Cat is great, but come the Gnomes she'll only die without doing a thing.

*Edrey*

zeze is watching and he can copy miracles now so the future looks promising

*Author Unknown*

"You remember our training?" I asked.

If only more people had this training...

[Absinthe with Mephisto](#)

A knife entering through the eye would have to pass through the bone behind it, then, if it somehow punched through the bone, it could cut through the frontal lobe if angled upwards, humans can survive this. If the knife goes deeper into the brain and hits the more wild parts of the brain that controls more primordial parts of our brain that controls functions such as breathing or one's heartbeat, this would kill our poor hero.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

If there is a single weapon that Cat can be expected to kill someone with, it is the knife. That's her truest weapon in this story, honestly. She made her first kill with it. She's been constantly upgrading how she uses and accesses them for maximizing their capacity for murder. The knife, even more than the sword, is Catherine's weapon. If she stabs you in the face, you are going to die, regardless of the anatomy of the blow. I'm pretty sure that Catherine's knife will be what kills the Wandering Bard, because there is so much narrative weight behind Catherine wielding that weapon that the only other option I can see is goblinfire.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Oh damn nice catch. She also ended her apprenticeship as the Squire with Black by stabbing him in the stomach, just as he did with her. I feel that adds to the narrative weight of the knife as a symbol of Cat's growth and evolution as a character and as a story -breaker too.

*haihappen*

It ended as it began: By shedding blood with a knife.

I am pretty sure she still has that knife, even it is lost or assumed to be destroyed, I dare think it is one of those items that has become a part of her, and will find its way back to her every time.

[Walter](#)

I don't think WB will die by a weapon. Her bodies are disposable. Killing her essence, or just making it stay away, will take story shenanigans. I think she 'dies' by being outwitted.

*Cynar*

How about a knife coated in goblin fire? Seems the perfect weapon to deal with a magic teleporting opponent, who seems to be fueled by high proof alcohol.

Upclose and personal, with the goblin fire robbing her of her default retreat. Also, combining goblin fire with alcohol sounds rather spectacular. 😊

*MagnaMalusLupus*

Maybe this is a bit of useless speculation, but I'm wondering if Cat won't get a new name like The Knife; as you've mentioned, it seems tied to her story heavily, far more than any other symbol. That being said, it doesn't denote leadership at all, which doesn't match her current position.

Perhaps becoming the first true Queen of Blades, as the other one was just a title rather than a Name

*Naeddyr*

The problem is that Names are about public perception, myths and stories and people thinking thoughts at you. WoE is that Cat wouldn't become "Queen of Blades" because A) it's not a name B) she's not associated with the original Queen of Blades at all. Besides, she's not even that good at swording, really.

Same goes for the Knife. Tell a random Callowan their new monarch has that Name and they'd go all "but why?".

Honestly I am actually still expecting Black Queen to lurk somewhere out in the ether waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Other variants such as Dread Queen or Dark Queen or Grim Queen or Winter Queen probably went home with a black eye or sprained ankle.

*Metrux*

My own take is that she won't have a regency Name, because she WILL resign. It's already too entranced in herself to let it pass. Thus she will have a name NOT suited to ruling, giving even more weight when she leaves the nation so it becomes better.

*Oshi*

Yes but the considering Cats physical strength this is very possible. It's likely he wasn't dead but close to it and that's why the Pilgrim was there.

*JackbeThimble*

The average dagger is longer than the average human skull. Much longer. If you get through the orbit you're going to pass through everything until you come out the back of the occipital lobe, at which point the person is going to collapse in massive shock shortly before dying.

*Metrux*

I think you don't know much about anatomy... Humans can survive a full spear through your cranium, but most would die of shock right there. Also, there is no bone behind the eyes, it's exactly why it is such a weak spot. You see, people want to cripple vision, sure, but wouldn't the nose and ears also be crippling and easier to hit? People aim at the eyes because, differently from the others, it is unprotected in the vitality, if it goes through the eyes, it hits directly at the brain.

But, none of this matters, we are talking about Named, people who can survive a grenade on the face, while still dying to an arrow through the neck. This is much more about the tale than the true damage dealt, a punch or kick can be deadlier than a blade, so if the story says it was a killing blow... It is. Otherwise, expect them to go right through any damage dealt.

*Iqueenofblades1*

Is it just me or are the chapters shorter than they used to be than the first few chapters of this book and compared to the previous book especially. Because I just finished reading the entire series again, and it seems like it to me.

I miss those long chapters 😞

*Mike E.*

Keep in mind we have steadily been getting 3 updates a week for quite awhile, so overall volume of prose is probably up even though each update may be slightly smaller.

*esryok*

EE's word count has gone through the roof since Patreon hit its targets. For the curious...

Average chapter lengths per book | words per week:

- Book I: 5,141 | 5,325
- Book II: 4,227 | 4,642
- Book III: 3,889 | 7,709
- Book IV: 3,804 | 13,657

*Pilgrim the White*

Grey will slowly warm up to Cat. Towards the end of the book he will resurrect Cat (as a human?) after Saint finally kills her.

*Letouriste*

I expect to FORCE HIM to resurect him:)

The only problem with that would be her story can't easily allow a second resurrection

*Lee*

Fucking priest

*Yotz*

...And so, I the pitch of battle so demonstrably and unequivocally stacked, I finally felt it – the call of oblivion, the tattering brink of madness... and the promise of power. Well then. I will not gaze into the Abyss only to feel it returning gaze – I'll pluck

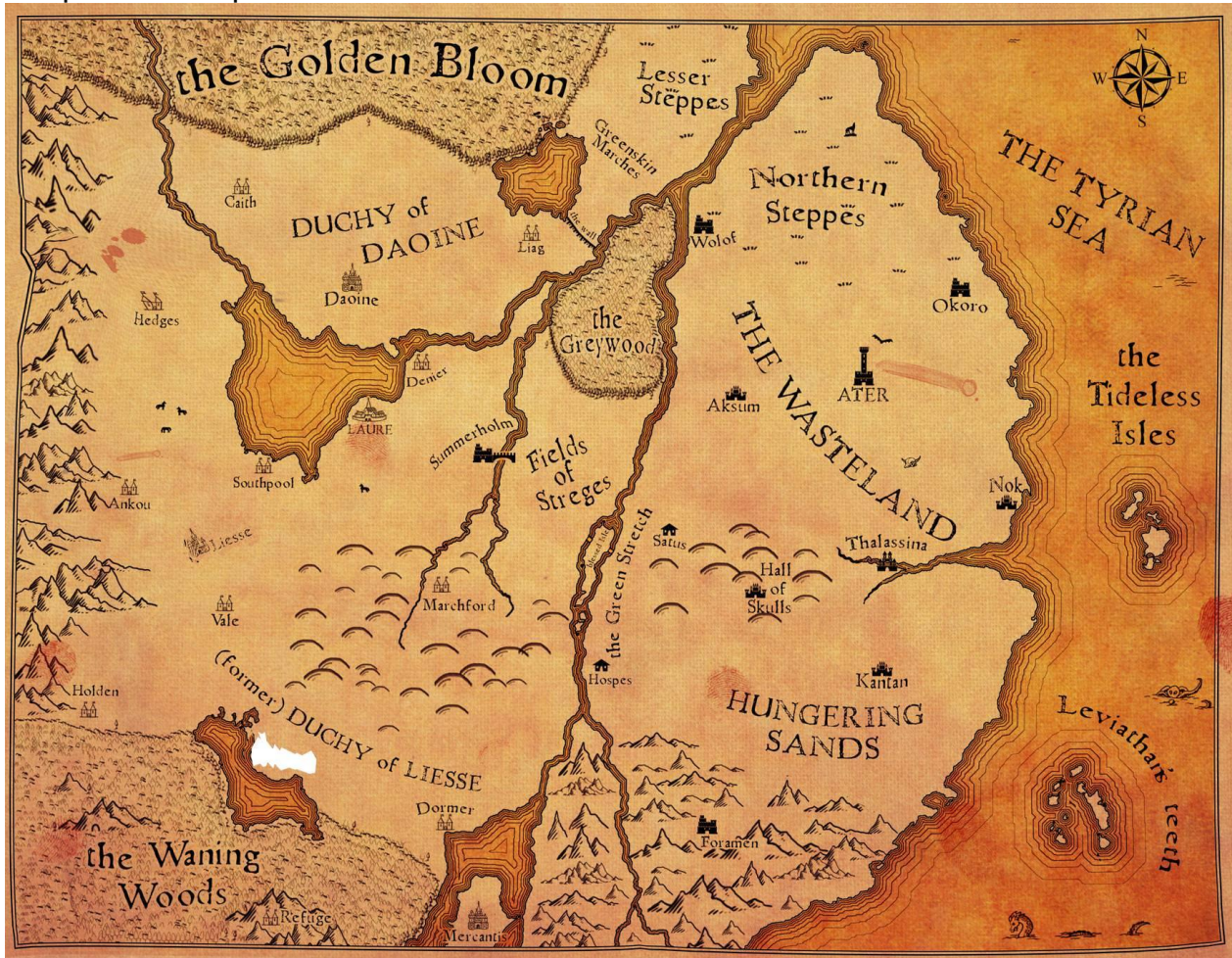


her eyes and make them my own.  
My lips trembled, then moved as of their own will, forming  
meaningless syllables of ancient blasphemy.

"Eye d'ee d'ee k'yu d'ee."

*nobodi12*

A updated map of Callow



*MagnaMalusLupus*

Well done, but I'm not seeking the Redflower Vales. Wouldn't they be on this, or am I mistaken?

*nipi*

Typos:

"Clarity and skill will win ever time."

"That was one was dangerous"

*stevenneiman*

"yet I never could [must->muster] much antipathy"

"Taking marching orders from Above or Below is just abdicating the rights {to} your own life"

"Clarity and skill will win [ever->every] time." or, possible though less likely, "over time"  
"[Board->Broad] arcs both, that they could readjust if I went forward."

[sengachi](#)

How do you target the Healer first when the healer is the fucking Grey Pilgrim?

[Walter](#)

You do not? Like, presumably this is the question generations of villains have been throwing up their hands at. Dude's rep is that when he throws down with villains while his pupils get away he never loses. That's a serious rep for an old man to have.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Rule One: Do not act incautiously when confronting little bald wrinkly smiling men!

*Snowfire1224*

Discworld. Thief of Time.

*stevenneiman*

Honestly, the scary thing about him is surviving this long as a mentor figure. They tend to have about the same survival rate as kamikaze pilots with terminal cancer, so for one to survive that well he needs to have both storycrafting skills and power.

*burdi*

Grey Pilgrim had to live so cat can get her peace with another country

but its not her first plan which isnt feasible anymore

after several dead heroes revived by Pilgrim, it is not impossible cat will "fuck it, better all of them dead than my own", so she will kill pilgrim first because she has no other choice and said "fuck with them all, let them come..i will burn them all, whether its god or all the army in the calernia, villains and heroes..they want to fucking with callow i will kill them every single one of them"

[hoyboy](#)

She should make sure to find a good dry cleaner who specializes in washing out the blood and ashes of her own people first.



*Metrux*

I don't think she CAN kill the Pilgrim. Not as she is now, anyway. Masego in a special occasion? Hakram while fighting for her? Yeah, but she herself is in no position for that.

[\*benthelynx\*](#)

He has used that aspect now. Not sure he can use it again as many times as he likes.

[\*Walter\*](#)

Heroes at this point:

- 1 Gray Pilgrim
- 2 Saint of Swords
- 3 Hammer Guy
- 4 Sword and Board who rushed Cat
- 5 Staff Lady
- 6 Greatsword
- 7 Healer's first guard
- 8 Healer's second guard
- 9 Healer
- 10 Mage ?
- 11 Two Knives
- 12 ?

Dunno how right that is, just a first stab at hero identifying.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

Is Red Robe the mage you mentioned? If not, that's 12

*esryok*

From context it seems like "red-robed mage" is meant to refer to the pyromancer Cat tangled with during Operation Headsman, though at the time he was described as a "short man with a leather coat and casting rod".

Pretty sure there's still one hero we haven't seen.

[\*Shawn Panzegraf\*](#)

Kinda want to call BS on that GP save:

You put a combat blade through the eye socket, and you've hit white matter in the brain. Even if magic can whoosh all that trauma away, there are distinct bio-electric patterns in there that are really, really important. Things that would be disrupted by that kinda of trauma.

It's a pet peeve of mine in the fantasy genre when "clerical" magic heals brain trauma, yet the healed experiences no memory

loss, personality change, or other side effects. Simply whisking all the damage away isn't enough to make that person mentally whole again. If the healer in question is capable of restoring stuff that intricate, then resurrection of anyone, no matter how thoroughly dead so long as a body remains should be trivial.

I find myself thinking about this a lot, because arrows in the eye are INCREDIBLY common in the fantasy genre. Followed right behind by knives, thrown mainly, then wielded. I grit my teeth whenever I read a healer hand-wave that away.

*JackbeThimble*

Dude. The main protagonist of this story doesn't even have a brain-she just uses fae magic to fake it well enough that the world acts as if she does. This isn't that kind of story.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

The difference is that in this story, there is the notion of a distinct soul that contains all of who one is and completely separate from the body itself. So long as they are connected, healing the body would be pretty straightforward for a sufficiently powerful divine individual. Plus, the Gods Above cheat.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Angels and/or Gods did it – and they tend to have the blueprints. 😊

*d\_o\_l*

I mean, it's literally described as a miracle in-universe..

*TeK*

What if his condition is just reversed back in time? No lasting damage to brain, no traumatic memories, he's all up and healthy again. Thought of that? And yes, resurrection can work on people who were dead for a lo-oh-ong time. Your problem, is one of a failure of imagination.

*Mlissa*

I now have, in mind, a scene where someone appears in the middle of the fight, right after the Grey Pilgrim healed the unnamed Named, to rant about how bullshit that was and why it shouldn't work using knowledge of modern biology. Everybody stops fighting from the sheer absurdness of it all. The Grey Pilgrim and the new guy get into a peaceful yet heated debate about medicine and History of miracles that ends up as a debate between science and dogmatism. All that while Cat, amused, sits on her folding chair and smokes her pipe.

Yotz

My two bits to the pot – we are talking about the world where [i]souls[/i] exist. Memory and cognitive functions therefore are delegated to spiritual realm purely, and any memory I II II I\_ and/or cognitive disorders would be a product of defective vessel for a subject's soul, thus making the removing them a simple process of repairing the vessel, id est – body.

And no – inborn defects, nor mental illnesses a-la schizophrenia do not fall under this case, cause being underdeveloped soul for the former, and damaged soul for the latter.

The point of arguing the miracle cure of severe steel poisoning in such world would be akin to standing on the high tower near Cori Celesti during thunderstorm wearing naught but a pure copper armour set, and proclaiming loudly that gods, in fact, do not exist and all religions are based on lies. I mean, you can get away with this if you are made of clay or something – but otherwise...

Now, if we are to discard the concept of soul altogether and accept that each and every human being is nothing more but a biomechanical turing machine, albeit a very complex one – you, monsieur Panzegraf, would be compleately on the money with general course of your statements. Otherwise – not so much.

PS: Regarding ASoIaF and consimilar – people who got themselves resurrected tend to accumulate certain... [i]quirks[/i], that's true, yes. But. Said curious fancies on their part are direct result of their souls being damaged by the aftereffects of death, or something from the other side impersonating the diseased, and doing it poorly. In the case of truly Divine Intervention first would be easely mended, and second would either out of options, or being done be design of Deity in question.

Yotz

PPS: Semblance of realism?  
Really?

...

Well then. Be on your own, vqrð nafjarðar, be on your own.

[sengachi](#)

I'm pretty sure Grey Pilgrim invoked the power of literal, actual capital-G Gods to make this happen, and if anything had complete and perfect enough knowledge of the universe's past to effect this kind of healing, it would be Gods.

Also you do have a point, and that point is probably why actual resurrection happens so rarely. Because it's *\*not\** just healing. It's way, way more than that on a mechanical level.

*Brian Heward*

Maybe it's still coming, but I'd expect using gates to deploy siege weaponry in the middle of the enemy's mage or priest lines would be a good counter to the fence problem. (Cat isn't the only one in her army who can use gates this would take 1 fae + a bunch of goblins, leaving the mages free to decimate troops elsewhere instead of the goblins and mages both firing into fences.)

The goblins have proven the effectiveness of this before. Open a gate, fire a few shots, if you start to get overrun close the gate, finish off the enemy in arcadia, reset to open the gate again in a new location.

It's really hard to defend against someone who can be behind you at any time when they weren't there a second ago and can ignore any walls, shield lines, or even troops surrounding your high value targets.

Even if the priests are fucking with scrying I'd expect opening gates blindly in the general area of the enemy's army would still work wonders. (Although from what I understood the priests can only defend themselves from scrying, not the mages.)

*nigeltheoutlaw*

Heroes are such fucking cheaters.

*Syst*

Is it possible to have a "Next Chapter" link at the top of the page?

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

You can also get to the next chapter via the sidebar on the right. It's not what you're asking for, but it entails less scrolling, so...

[shieldredblog](#)

Maybe I'm crazy but I find it odd that the Grey Pilgrim appeared from nowhere and essentially undid a fatal wound right after a off camera fight with an Absence Demon.

I always thought that his Choir of Mercy was strangely weak to Absence, as he's stated that he'd do anything to prevent suffering. What if he could Undo suffering?

That 500 year old demon is out there somewhere and we know that it's age will make it cleverer than most. No way is it going to die off camera.

Also Heirophant being around is another small clue. If the Demon has somehow corrupted the Hero, than he'd be needed.

*MetruX*

I don't think Masego would be here simply because the Demon is around, they wouldn't know it is, and this young mage is no hero, he wouldn't be at the right place at the right time to fight a demon. But, more than that, he is needed FOR THE VILLAINS to fight a demon, heroes can kill demons while villains cannot. We saw a bunch of inexperienced Named without coordination killing a demon of corruption as old as this one, so why couldn't the rest of the Heroes take it doen, with or without the Pilgrim?

Also, for all their power, demons are limitless and limited. The power of heavens and of the bellow stay always the same, but there is always more demons and devils being born... Don't you think the same numbers are dying? In the grand scheme of things demons are a pretty small thing, even if compared to their angelic counter parts, I can totally see demons abound dying off screen.

[shieldredblog](#)

This demon has a backstory though and if it was dead I feel like it would have been mentioned and made very clear. Also I meant ERRATICERRATA wrote Masego into the scene because the Demon was around, not that Masego knew the Demon was around.

[Euodiachloris](#)

If it died, who would even know? Betcha its death/banishment throws involve a "everybody loses all memory of this encounter and things and people lost to them" AOE.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Ugh,  
When you start making "This story's sub-genre permits X" arguments, you're basically just tossing any semblance of realism out the window. While the Guide's story-universe allows for a lot of patently unreal stuff, the fantasy elements that go against realism are generally well understood/definitively delineated from a Reader PoV. Magic has strengths and weaknesses, Aspects work along several threads of Commonality, etc etc.

In other words, it's realistic until it isn't. That doesn't mean it should be taken for granted that a wound which would generally be instantly fatal can be hand-waved away without consequence. (I read the people survive penetrating wounds like this post. To retort: No, people really don't survive having made-for-war

weapons driven through their eye sockets with sufficient supernatural strength to go clean through, rather than crunch through, the bone behind the eye. The force of such a blow would do brain damage, before you even GET to the stabbing.)

Heroes healing the non-fatal with bursts of Light is fine. It's what Guide Heroes DO. It's almost a commonality they all seem to share. Shaving this close to the death-line is an ugly precedent IMHO. Good already has enough mechanical advantage over Evil. Requiring Evil to Decapitate At Minimum to be sure of a kill is a bit too far for me.

That's just my humble opinion. Won't stop reading over it or anything.

### *oldschoolvillain*

It was mentioned way back that villains live until they're killed, while heroes have options for resurrection. And the Grey Pilgrim has already been hinted at having a direct line to his choir, high power white magic could absolutely undo a fatal blow so soon after it had been struck.

### *TeK*

Heroes can literally go back from the dead, but Villains can go back AS dead. Dread Emperor Revenant as a shining example, Dead King is, probably the other, not to mention those angry undead Praesi High Lords who thought that death should not remove them from the line of succession. And Aqua and her baby-soul failsafe measure.

I don't understand what is impossible with resurrection if you got a universe where people can turn themselves into undead abominations AFTER decapitation, and then go on and STOP being undead abomination, returning to being alive. Did that went well withh you? Or is it fine, cause she's a protagonist?

### *Unmaker*

Cat knows for a fact that the Gray Pilgrim is the type to show up at the last minute and save any hero that he previously mentored. I hope that she is truly Black's pupil and her killing the kid was to deliberately draw the Gray Pilgrim out for some planned nastiness.

### *Phantom*

This chapter made me wonder how the heck does the villains in the past even managed to defeat the heroes or conquer the world when the heroes are so overpowered with abilities and skills in the first place.

TeK

How to you defeat someone OP? Just be more OP.

Shawn Panzegraf

Not getting what I'm saying,  
I don't have any beef with magical resurrection. It's a staple of the fantasy genre. Particularly among the "forces of Light." I started talking about a) That it bugs me that brain-healing via magic never seems to come with any consequences given you're talking about the seat of consciousness being meddled with, and b) That there's a difference between the healing of a life-threatening and/or mortal wound, and resurrection itself.

In other words, if the GP resurrected him, fine. He's a high-end mentor type Hero. That's in his expected power range. What I was mainly saying is it's a bit much for me if a dagger to the brain gets called "simple" wound-healing. Beyond that, I was only talking about how there never seems to be any complications with brain trauma in the fantasy genre in general, and that simply mending the biological damage isn't the same thing as making that person the same as they were before said injury.

Given we don't even know what the GP did to mend the sword-and-boarder, it's a moot point anyways. I kinda took the junior Hero gasping as he was fixed to mean he was resuscitated, which implies he was resurrected, but that's a subjective interpretation.

It was commentary about a sort of sequence of events often seen in the fantasy genre at large I was talking about. Not ranting about the Guide as some glaring offender of the principal anyways.

Oh, and for those saying there isn't bone behind the eye...what those of us talking about penetrating bone behind the eye mean is the channel of the socket behind the eye narrows considerably once you're past the actual eyeball. For something to go through the eye and penetrate any distance, it would have to push through bone to either side of the penetrating object. Unless you're talking about the narrowest of stilettos, most things people pierce the eye of a combatant with (including daggers, and DEFINITELY arrowheads) are wider than the channel of narrowing bone. It's not a matter of an actual barrier behind the eyeball, it's the bone to the rear-right/left of the eyeball that has to get a furrow scraped through it to do the deep penetration. Make sense?

aran

"Broaden," he said.

... not denying that it was useful right then, but seriously? An entire *\*aspect\** just for enlarging your weapon?

JJR

This is what he used it for at that moment, this does not mean the aspect is restricted to weapon enlargement. Another use might be to increase the size of defensive armaments. Using it regularly means you could get away with carrying a 1/3 sized shield and pump it up to full size only when needed. More offensive applications might be to target flaws or holes in enemies armor/defensive fortifications and rip them open.

A more abstract one, suppose he needs to learn how to do a new thing fairly quickly. Maybe he could Broaden his Horizons.

[daegone823](#)

Apparently it was similar to bleach where the weapon weighed the same for the hero even though others would feel a heavier force. Defies physics a bit but whatevs its an aspect and maybe it can also be used for other things such as shield or for bladed weapons enlarging a small weapon wound while still inside a villain. Gin Ichimura(bleach) showed that it wasn't the size of the weapon that mattered but the speed at which enlargement took place that made it dangerous.

I don't know if you were looking for an explanation but here's one.

stevenneiman

Compensating for something?

aran

I feel compelled to make an Order of the Stick reference at this point: <http://www.giantitp.com/comics/oots0114.html>

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## Chapter 16: Pirouette

*"When the abyss stares back, wave. Offer refreshments. Being impolite to the abyss is never a good idea."*

-Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

"Oh, *come on*," I complained. "I know I don't have a lot of room to argue about healing, but that knife was tickling the back of



his skull. Even I wouldn't walk that off so easily, and my body is basically lies and mirrors."

There was some shuffling from the opposition, either because of the reminder I'd just killed one of their crew or because grievances at how fucking ridiculous their powers were weren't what they'd been expecting. If they'd been waiting for despair, they were out of luck. Not that I was particularly pleased my work had been literally waved away by the Pilgrim, but that the heroes would be almost absurdly hard to put down wasn't exactly a surprise. The Heavens had already thrown their second-raters at me and I'd chewed straight through them over winter. They were done fucking around.

"You could still surrender," the Grey Pilgrim offered.

Instead I sighed and tapped the side of my helmet. The sliver of power was enough to activate the dormant rune.

"Spell formula stable," Masego said. "No divine interference."

"Confirmed resurrection," I said. "Pilgrim's come out to play."

Thief had warned me that last-moment rescues were his specialty so it wasn't coming out of the blue, though after actually landing that blow I'd expected the hero to actually stay down afterwards. At least the first part was going more or less according to plan. Smacking around the greenhorns some had forced one of the real monsters to intervene before I dug a little too deep and Winter took the helm. I almost felt like shivering at the idea of facing the Grey Pilgrim when in a state of mind where monologues felt like a good idea. Akua might have been right that playing it up for Creation added some hurt to the swings, but there was a reason I was wearing *her* as a cloak accessory instead of the other way around.

"Noted," Hierophant replied. "First contingency beginning."

"Skip straight to second," I grunted. "I think we underestimated how much trouble the old man would be."

Which was a Hells of a thing to say, considering we'd planned for him being in the same wheelhouse as Warlock. But if I was reading this right, swinging his miracle dick around wasn't the Pilgrim's game. He was more a metaphorical full hand on the scales than the kind of Named that tossed around burning mountains. *And that's only eight out of twelve accounted for*, I thought. *Saint and at least one mage are still waiting in the wings.*

"Understood," Hierophant said. "Sunrise Final is-"

Power flared, and his words cut out. I glanced at the Grey Pilgrim, whose staff was wreathed in light.

"Rude," I said. "You could have let him finish. Regardless, I'm reconsidering my stance on single combat. Theoretically, if I agree, do I get to pick my opponent?"

I met the stare of the man I'd stabbed and winked on the same side my knife had gone through. He flinched.

"She is temporizing while her ally prepares his strike," the Grey Pilgrim told the other heroes. "Prepare yourselves, children. After that blow is weathered is the moment to strike."

Gods, but I hated fighting smart opponents. Banter would have kept William and his crew busy for a few minutes, at least. It didn't matter, in the end, because I hadn't spent the last year busying myself sorely with the affairs of rule. While they'd been assembling their armies and heroes, I'd been training the Woe. And the one amongst them I'd spent most time on was Masego, hammering in the basics of battle that he'd once ignored in favour of simply smashing everything in sight with sorcery. The first thing I'd taught him? A well-worn adage from Theodosius the Unconquered himself. *Swiftmess is the lifeblood of war*. Before the heroes could further prepare, Hierophant struck. Dawn rose from a sun unknown to Creation, the terrible heart of Summer shining down on the cluster of heroes. Even from where I stood, the heat was overwhelming. Wind picked up even as the Named before me winked out of sight, swallowed by scorching light. The Princess of High Noon had been one of our most vicious enemies to deal with, but we had gained much from her defeat: even this pale imitation of her power made mockery of the kind of sorcery we usually called on.

Within the blaze, a star was born. Shining atop the Grey Pilgrim's staff as he stood unruffled, his loose robes untouched by wind or heat.

"As there was first light, there will be last," the old man said. "Under radiant star was the first of mankind born, and it will shine long after our time is past. Transient we, yet unbowed by the passing. I refuse your verdict, usher of mysteries."

With a thunderous clap, the blaze was parted. A corridor opened, leading straight to me, and the heroes rushed down. I rolled my shoulder. Half the knockout punch was delivered, I was my responsibility to take care of the second half. The barefoot staff-wielder was first across, blindingly fast. Behind came the usual triumvirate: greatsword, war hammer, sword and board. Not the same as before, for the latter. Apparently coming that close to dying had shaken the man, because it was now another. The sorcery came down around me, too close to a ward for comfort. I grimaced. I'd have to suffer through, at least until the time to withdraw came. Stance wide, I raised my guard and waited for the first of the hunting hounds. She thrust high, towards my throat. Batted aside, but she was better with her weapon than I was with

mine – a spin was all it took for her to be smashing down at my pauldron. I took it. The steel shattered like clay, but the impact wasn't strong enough to screw with my own blow. It carved a wound across her cheek, narrowly missing the nose. I got in close to sucker punch her belly, but she parried the blow and I was forced to step back to avoid having my ribcage caved in. Light bloomed on her cheek, the healer's work.

It healed nothing.

Masego had fought demons at Second Liesse. One of them had been a demon of Order, what Praesi called a Beast of Hierarchy. Their essence, as I understood it, was a perversion of laws. Hierophant had learned to mimic that, to a very limited extent. Inside my killing grounds one law had been established: Light had no effect. The barefoot woman withdrew before I could exploit her surprise, damnably well-trained, and then I had to deal with the second wave. Greatsword – what was left of that weapon, anyway – went for the left side. Hammer for the right, the fresh sword and board keeping me boxed in. I almost smiled. They'd had a limited amount of training together and it was showing: that made it the second time they were trying that tactic on me. Last time I'd gone for one of the sides, and they weren't idiots: they were expecting as much. Instead I barrelled forward. The hero's shield bashed forward to keep me in place for the others to hit, but they'd learned the wrong lesson from the last time. It wasn't that I *couldn't* break their formation, just that I hadn't *chosen* to. My armoured fist hit the shield and it dented, the man wielding it crying in pain as it broke his fingers behind it. It was a good opening to slice his throat, but the other two were at my back so there was no time. I ran into him, the two of us falling to the ground as weapons whistled behind me.

Instinct led me to throw myself to the side instead of wrestling on the ground. It saved my life. Summer's dawn had not only been broken by the Pilgrim, it had been wielded: he shaped it into a beam and threw it at me. His aim was perfectly angled, enough that it didn't touch sword and board when he stayed on the ground. Behind me, earth exploded in desiccated chunks. Time was running out: I couldn't engage four heroes *and* the old man simultaneously, that'd just get me killed. I'd have to get aggressive then.

"They damaged the Light," the barefoot woman said in heavily accented Lower Miezan. "Careful."

It was the right move, telling her comrades healing mistakes was no longer an option. It was also the wrong one, because for a heartbeat they were surprised. I shot back towards the boy with the wrecked greatsword, ducking under a swing and catching the wrist. Hammer-wielder would have smacked me away, aiming for my hips, but a flex of the legs had me putting my feet on the boy's

chest while the hammer passed under me. For a heartbeat I was vulnerable, and that had the staff-wielder on my ass. *Not quick enough, for once*, I thought. My thighs tightened, and using the boy's own chest as a counterweight I ripped his arm off. There was a spray of blood and an anguished scream as I fell into a roll, the staff smashing down where I'd been a heartbeat before. Left with a bleeding arm wielding the remains of a greatsword in my free hand, I threw it in the hammer-wielder's face before he could aim another strike. He was horrified enough to take a hand off the hammer to push it aside, and that was a mistake. I landed the roll on my feet, angled my stance and smoothly rose. My blade thrust in an upwards diagonal into his throat. He opened his mouth, trying to gurgle out a word – aspect, probably – but I smacked the pommel and the sword went straight through his spine. It was an uglier death than a clean decapitation.

*"Enough,"* the Grey Pilgrim said.

He pointed his staff at me and a star came to life. The beam hit a pane of force three heartbeats before it would have incinerated me, both of them exploding deafeningly. Gods bless Hierophant. Sword and board was getting back on his feet, greatsword boy still screaming about his missing arm – seriously, what a wimp, I lost limbs all the time and you didn't hear *me* yelling about it – and staff-wielder was... back on me. Godsdamnit. I threw myself to the side, swiped at her feet and got treated to a kick in the face for it. While I was rocking back she flowed into a thrust at my throat. Ah, experience. She'd gone for that too often, I'd expected it this time. I caught the tip of the staff with my hand, feeling the steel give and the palm bones break, but I kept my grip on it while I slashed at her throat and she tried to withdraw for a parry. Blood spilled on the ground. Two down, though it was anybody's guess for how long.

***"Sever."***

Masego's miracle vanished. So did my sword, my hand up to the wrist and the armour over it. Fuck. I backpedalled hastily as the Saint entered the fray.

*"Aspect already?"* I said.

My hand formed again, though much slower than it should have. And it remained ice instead of looking like flesh. That was a problem.

*"Your little mage's trick was impressive,"* the Saint of Swords said. *"But time to wrap this up, if we want it over before sundown."*

The lack of sword was more a problem than the severed limb, ice or not. A flick of the wrist had a knife falling into my palm, but that was rather cold comfort against this particular monster.

"Fine," I said. "I've been thinking on how to beat you anyway, Saint."

The Grey Pilgrim, apparently uninterested in banter, sent another fucking star at me. Hierophant, bless his soul, split it in four and forced it to shoot in four different directions.

"Have you?" the old woman drawled. "This ought to be interesting."

I could not help but notice none of the heroes I'd put down were getting the resurrection treatment. Was it just comprehensive healing at the last moment, then? Too little to go on to be sure.

"One swing," I said. "If you can take that, I'm probably out of luck."

The heroine laughed.

"Well," she grinned. "Give it your best shot."

Ice formed a sword blade out of my knife as I shifted my grip. Steadying my stance, I allowed the power of Winter to gather in me. Motes of blue emanated from my frame. To my surprise, the Saint actually bothered to get into a stance of her own. Huh, she was taking me seriously. That was kind of flattering.

"Welp," I said, and run away.

I legged it as fast as I could, which was very considering my mantle. They really must have taken me for a complete idiot, if they'd thought I'd stick around to fight a crew of heroes *and* the two old beasts. I heard the air howl behind me as the heroine cussed me out in Chantant, leaping onto a platform of shade to get out of the way. I tapped the side of my helmet as I leapt back down, running as fast as I could towards the relative safety of the palisade.

"Masego," I said. "I need you to-"

"Dodge," he screamed through the spell.

I threw myself to the side, and idly reflected that the smoking wound in the ground to my left could easily have been my corpse. Lovely.

"Mage lines on her," I continued. "Artillery too. Gods, everything we can throw."

The sharp tang of lightning filled the air as what must have been no less than thirty feet behind me exploded in a screaming storm. I did not look back.

"She just ran *through* that," Hierophant said through the spell, sounding somewhat offended by the notion.

Engaging the heroes far away from the fortifications had seemed like a good idea at the time, but I was perhaps coming to realize it might have been a tactical mistake. The air howled again and I leapt onto an angled platform, immediately leaping onto another to remain above ground. Where there was now a hole. Shit. A handful of Pickler's engines began firing, but I wasn't holding my breath for scorpion bolts stopping that one. I heard the screaming wind of another strike coming my way and shaped a platform, but it was immediately hit by a beam of light. *Fucking Pilgrim*. I had to reach for Winter and slap down half a ton of ice behind me, not that it stopped the Saint for more than a heartbeat. I gave part of my attention to the little bundle in the back of my head that was Zombie, ordering her to take flight and guiding her towards me.

"I'm not hearing her anymore," I said through the link.

"Put wards around her," Masego replied stiffly. "Can't talk, she's cutting them as fast as--"

The spell cut out again. *Fucking Pilgrim*. My damnably short legs devoured the remaining yards as quickly as they could. Seriously, you'd think Winter would have the decency to give me another few inches when rebuilding my body from scratch. Fine. I'd cope. I should get there without – *don't you fucking dare blow it now, Foundling*. Naturally, the Heavens rewarded my hubris by a neat little box of yellow opaque shields appearing around me. No rescue was incoming from my mage lines: the moment those had appeared, I'd felt sorcery bloom in the distance and shoot towards enemy lines. I was regretting the tactical decision of aiming my casters at the enemy's, right about now. I opened the floodgates, let Winter course through my veins and smashed through the shield in front of me the exact samemoment the Saint of Swords scythed through the one at my back.

"Seriously, what does it take to put you down?" I called out.

"*More than you've got,*" the old woman hissed.

I was on the move before I even began speaking, but not quite fast enough. I lost my left leg up to my knee before I could dodge, though by the time I came out of a roll it had formed again. Fuck, I was digging into Winter way more than I'd wanted to this early in the fight. We'd have to use our trick as soon as I got back, even if that made it less effective than it could be. I leapt up onto a platform, a beam of light hitting a pane of force that blew them both up again a heartbeat later. I decided then and there Masego was getting a raise. Which shouldn't be hard, considering I wasn't paying him. The Saint carved through the platform, and my other leg that still had armour on it, but I

was already in motion and I landed on Zombie's saddle. Awkwardly enough I almost fell, which would have been a very humiliating way to die, but my mount flew up and finally we made it out of the Saint's range. For now, anyway. Already she was cutting the sky to run up that same cut.

"Masego," I said, tapping the side of my helmet. "Get *all our godsdamned mages* to hit the target I'm marking."

There was no reply, because the spell was cut – *fucking Pilgrim* – so I'd have to hope he heard me. Weaving glamour into a glaring red arrow pointing at the Saint even as she moved, I guided Zombie into a sharply angled descent towards the palisade. Darkness formed into an orb above the Saint, and a heartbeat later a smaller beam shot out of it to hit the location I was indicating. To my vocal disgust, she somehow *parried* the fucking darkness. Gods Below, what was it going to take? After scorpions reoriented to fire on her, the Saint finally withdrew. I knew better than to believe that would be for long. She'd be back with the first wave of crusaders, which shouldn't be long. I'd been a little too busy fighting for my life to notice, but enemy archers had gotten close enough to the palisade to begin firing and the infantry wasn't far behind them. Zombie landed at Masego's side and I got off, slapping her rump as thanks for saving my own. She whinnied, which I definitely hadn't told her to do, and smugly trotted away.

It was telling that, at this point in my life, even my undead horse was sassing me.

"Hey, Zeze," I panted. "We having fun yet?"

"I've contained demons with the Ivory Globe," he replied, panting as well. "*Demons*, Catherine. She just cut out a door and kicked it open."

"Yeah, we're not going to be fighting her head on any time soon," I snorted. "Not unless we have a mountain range at hand to collapse, anyway."

His glass eyes flicked down to my bare feet, the movement visible even through cloth.

"What happened to you boots?"

I gestured vaguely backwards.

"Oh, they're somewhere back there," I said. "Along with what used to be my legs."

He snorted.

"One of those days, is it?" he said.

"Well, at least I don't have to bluff an angel," I mused. "So there's that."

We shared a smile.

"You ever see what happened to the heroes I killed?" I asked.

"They were not resurrected, last I saw," Masego said. "I suspect what the Grey Pilgrim uses is merely a much more powerful version of priestly healing, not true resurrection. Which seems logical, as that is usually the province of purely healer Named."

And the old man definitely wasn't that. His little light show had carried quite the punch. I adjusted my cloak around my shoulders, which did little to hide the fact that I was barefoot in the middle of an active battlefield. The crusaders were bringing ladders to the fore, I saw. If there was ever a time it was now.

"Our turn," I told Masego.

The blind mage smiled, and a whispered incantation had a water-filled bowl appearing in the palm of his hand. He'd not made it, of course. Materializing something even this small would likely kill him. It'd been brought out of a personal dimension, if I had to guess. Within the carved wooden bowl was dark water, the same that could be found within the pools of the Observatory.

"Let's hope this works," I said, glancing at the enemy army. "We're in the shit otherwise."

"The formula is-"he began.

I interrupted him by plunging my hand into the water. I went straight through, but did not reach the bottom of the bowl. My eyes fluttered closed as Masego whispered soothingly in the arcane tongue. Absolute positioning, he'd called this. I could feel my mind... expand. Beyond a perspective a mortal could bear, but I was hardly that anymore was I? One spike of painful clarity after another went through my forehead as I saw them whole. Calernia. Arcadia. The juxtaposition of them.

*One end*, Masego's voice whispered into my ear.

I knew it well, that place. I'd fought there twice, once against the Duke of Violent Squalls and the second time against the Diabolist. The Fields of Wend. A depthless lake filled with moving glaciers, sprawling as far as my not-eyes could see.

*And another*, Masego reminded me.

I could see the battlefield before us, from above. The armoured multitudes advancing towards palisades, like toy soldiers on the ground. Devices of wood and metal firing bolts into men, the shining silhouettes advancing with the host. So many of them.



*Align*, Masego whispered.

And so I did. Gates, I called them, but that was the barest understanding of what they were. There were no words in any tongue I knew to express it, but instinct bridged the gap. In the sky above the army of crusaders, a circle a mile wide opened.

Through it poured a lake atop their heads.

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*Snowfire1224*

So hears what I'm thinking cat will do to defeat saint: get her to cut herself to peices

*List*

Isn't this just asking for a miracle intervention though? The priests deploy their shield and the water drowns the Callow countryside. Saint then Moses cuts them through the slush straight at Cat's army. The worst that happens is that they maybe get bogged down in the mud a little? I dunno I'm just not all that impressed with it. Why didnt she open a font of lava from an active volcano over their heads instead? Much more immediate destruction even if the priests used their shields the heat would still go through.

*Charles*

Think about how much water weighs. A cubic meter of water weighs 1000 kg. "A depthless lake stretching further than her enhanced eyes can see" is dropping on them from the sky, and it means that basically every person is getting struck with thousands of kg moving pretty fricking fast, immediately before being knocked down and drowned in their own armor. Even if the water drains away reasonably fast, there's still going to be a lot of it for more than the 60 seconds or so it takes people to drown, even setting aside the fact that it's likely to knock the wind out of them as it hits.

This is not "bog them down" levels of water.

*Jeffery Wells*

It's not just water, either, but water at freezing temperature. I can tell from personal experience (once fell into a glacier-fed lake that was about 3 degrees above freezing) that I've cold water completely said you of energy instantly. A bunch of soldiers in armor will drown in seconds

without immediate, direct rescue. The heroes are powerful, but that's insane.

*stevenneiman*

It might actually be the lack of drama. A flood of lava means inescapable death, and you know what happens to villains who use supernatural means to (literally or figuratively) rain inescapable death down upon their Good foes. Now think about fighting in the rain, and how bad it would be if you get that to its logical extreme while the people you're fighting against have dry ground. Being a successful villain is often about getting what you need without ever quite giving the story an excuse to turn lethally against you.

*Hammerman*

Not sure a sea of icebergs a mile wide falling on the sun power in Pilgrims staff will give anything but a thunderclap of steam 14 miles wide. Should be exciting.

*My very own name*

Well, you have to consider that the lake also contains glaciers and shit. If that fell above the army, it wouldn't be exactly easy to shrug off.

*werafdsaew*

There is a limit to how many shields the priests can deploy, and I doubt it's anywhere close to enough, especially since you need to make it airtight or else gravity will screw over. And divine intervention is off the table due to the rules of engagement.

*Bonesawer*

I think people are drastically underestimating the amount of damage water does when falling in sufficient amounts from high up. When a regular human falls into water, there's a 50% chance of dying from falling from 30m up. I would assume that the water is falling from higher than that, and the force applied to the people is going to be higher since the ground is keeping them from decelerating relative to the water.

In addition, the "water jet" effect is easy to ignore but extremely deadly. Anyone outside of the radius of the portal is going to be scythed into by extremely pressurized jets of water caught between the immense pressure above and the ground below.

Another factor likely to kill people is the simple pressure of the water once it has landed. All of this is ignoring the additional kill-factors of the ice in the water, the speed that

the water will be shooting out of the portal (since she opened it underwater), and the temperature of the water.

To be clear, just a simple pillar of water falling from where the portal was opened would kill everyone within the shadow of the portal and a good deal of people outside of it. This is far worse. Heroic intervention is going to be 100% necessary to save the army. Honestly, this is going to be very bad for her own army as well.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

You had me up until "Dumping lava on them doesn't make the villainous fall several times more likely while also causing countless other problems that water doesn't".

*jesdynf*

Maybe it's juvenile, but I'm hoping Black was somehow able to scry that fight between Catherine and the Saint, and I'm hoping he cried a single manly tear when he watched his student bait and \*flee\*.

*stevenneiman*

I think I figured out Masego's personality in his new Name. He sees the world as being composed of two kinds of things: things he can understand with his brand of ivory-tower logic, and bullshit. Hence, his Name is one capable of turning the ultimate example of one into the other, the mysticism of miracles into magic he controls.

*Phantom*

I hope the heroes did not do what Jesus did, by literally splitting the sea into two.

*Someguy*

While Saint of Swords cutting the tide in half and surviving is extremely likely, that does not mean things will go well for the side of "Good" the un-Named "crusaders". The Named may be fine standing behind her as she does so, the rest of the invaders will still be washed away, frozen, hypothermic or squashed by falling glaciers.

*lqueenofblades1*

Moses did that. Not Jesus. Jesus would turn the water into wine. Cat would love him.

[Barthumphries](#)

Well if you want to get technical about it, Moses made the physical motions for the waters to divide, but it was through the power of Jehovah that the waters actually divided. 😊

Just helping keep the story straight. 😊

[daegone823](#)

No Hammer guy and staff girl I wanted to learn more about your hopes your dreams I hope someone mentions you in the future a passing soldier, a grieving widow, an orphan declaring vengeance. I wasn't ready.

Please author at least mention their name a hero is nothing without a name.

*Luis*

This feels like a trap with a lot of layers.

1. The weight of a tons of water is gonna hurt a lot of people. Wreck formations, and damage equipment.

2. Water is heavy. Drenched people are slower people.

3. Mud is slippery. Fighting an offensive battle against an entrenched opponent in mud is a very bad idea.

3. The water is already cold. That much cold water on everyone plus Catherine's ability with manipulating ice can lead to massive hypothermic injuries. Think mass casualty frostbite with minimum effort from cat. shivering opponents can't fire their bows or swing their swords too well.

4. Water is an excellent conductor of electricity and Masego and Catherine's mage lines can cast electrical attacks.

*Alivaril*

I'm honestly having trouble seeing how the enemy army would survive this one short of full-fledged divine intervention. Someone mentioned lava, but that's just superheated rock and actually moves rather slowly. THIS has splash damage and is much, much deadlier than a gigantic hell-meteor in general.

An umbrella-shield would deflect a comparatively tiny amount of the water and would likely shatter soon after, assuming it's not straight-up invulnerable to physical attack (which their walls clearly aren't) – and then have yet more water crush those below.

Turning it to steam? Again, yet more water from above, assuming it didn't outright cook the surrounding area. Water contains an awful lot of thermal energy by the time it turns to steam.

Saint slicing the world? Her cuts in the sky are solid enough to run on. No vacuum suction here. If she could cut out a circular vacuum-portal large enough to defend the army, she'd be using it for offense already.

Hell, Saint even made good on her petty threat to remove Cat's hand. If that's permanent, our hero has already made her usual sacrifice on her climb to power.

### *Speck of Stardust*

The thing is that the water falling is happening between the 2 camps, both camps are likely going to be fine. That said a massive number of dead incoming.

### *Trebar*

Oh. I have reached the end of what is currently written. Looks like I'm going to have to wait like everybody else now 😞

### *General Chaos*

And so begins the Tale of the First Lakeomancer

### *Skivverus*

So, fifth-plus time rereading this, I decided to do (some of) the math.

Mile-wide portal translates to a cross-section of a bit under twenty-two million square feet.

With close-enough-to-Earth gravity, that's three hundred fifty million cubic feet of water in the first second, going past a billion if it sticks around past two seconds.

Divide by the number of soldiers in the Proceran army, and we have at least seven thousand cubic feet of water per soldier. For comparison, an average human takes up about two and a half cubic feet of space.

Alternatively, you can think of it as "every Proceran soldier gets their own personal nineteen-foot-tall freezing raindrop" (six meters, for the metrically-inclined).

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## **Interlude: Kaleidoscope**

*"Spoken like a man I'll have raised from the dead just to execute a second time."*

– Dread Emperor Malignant III

They'd meant to make a lake, but that was not what Juniper was looking down at. After the flow was cut the currents had slowed to a crawl, then settled, and what had once been a plain was now cold marshlands. Dotted by a handful of glaciers, for now, but eventually those would melt. *Not in time for the battle to be*

affected, the Marshal of Callow decided. The massive chunks of ice could be relied on to block field of sight, but they should not be taken as a more than temporary cover. Not with the calibre of Named on the other side. With the sun beginning to set down, the marsh was empty save for shallow waters and corpses or not. Earlier in the day she'd sent the Watch to harass crusaders trying to fish out survivors, but she'd had to call them back when the heroes took the field again. Juniper licked her fangs behind closed lips, the ridge inside her mouth allowing easy access to clean. She'd been told by Aisha that the way it made the mouths of orcs look to human – too broad, too prominent, almost animal-like – was one of the reasons so many of them assumed her people were thoughtless brutes. It was, her old friend had said, an unconscious judgement. The Hellhound did not mind. There'd been many judgements made today, some more harmful than mere human stupidity.

She still remembered the moment she saw the gate open in the sky. The primal awe the sight had shaken her with, that reminder that she was a very small creature in a very large world. That there were entities striding amongst mortals that could flatten them with but a word or a gesture. It'd been difficult to gauge how many Procerans died the moment the water hit them. At least two thousand, she suspected. The gate had not been so high up in the air that gravity would turn it into some divine blow, but the sheer weight of the mass of liquid made that largely irrelevant. A hammer flattened an ant even if you were barely swinging it. All that power, wielded by a shifty sorcerer and barefoot woman who'd murdered a demigod. That'd always been Catherine's walk, hadn't it? The fine line between absurd and terrifying. A single moment and the entire lay of the battle had changed. Proceran advance had immediately collapsed, thousands fleeing the sweeping tidal wave pointlessly. The died anyway, drowning in armour. Another few thousand were still lying at the bottom of the marsh.

The crusaders had been struck with horror, but there were people on the other side who'd mastered their panic. Within two heartbeats, mage fire and white-hot heavenly flame had erupted in the centre of the cascading waters. Tons of liquid turned to scalding vapour, but the edges had kept pouring down. Slowed but not stopped. When the first glacier went through, it was split in two by the fires and further broken apart by what Juniper was fairly certain had been the Saint of Swords merely swinging her blade. It'd limited the damage caused by the massive ice structures, but then they'd been swept by the current too and began crushing everything in their way. Another two heartbeats and fences of light formed themselves across the portal to keep the water in, as the heavenly flames winked out. It hadn't been enough. They lasted barely a heartbeat before shattering under the weight. From beginning to end, the entire affair lasted for eleven heartbeats.

Then the Grey Pilgrim struck.

It had defied easy description, and not only because anyone looking directly at it went blind in the aftermath. There'd been... a star, perhaps that was the only way to put it. Only instead of a distant radiant light it had been a *knife*. It carved through an edge of the portal, and the whole thing shuddered. Then it went straight through the other side and the sky blew up. A ring of power spread for miles, boiling hot rain falling across the battlefield for the better part of an hour afterwards. The fairy gate was broken, though now there was a strange circle-shaped glimmer above both armies. Juniper had not been pleased, at the time, but neither had she been furious. The gate had not been meant to be kept open for much longer anyway. Her mistake, she now realized, had been thinking in terms of mortal war. Her Warlord's spell had taken the day away from that mould, and price had to be paid for such great power. Especially when that power was broken by a foe. *There is a reason the Carrion Lord does not unleash the Warlock at the beginning of every battle*, she thought. *And now we learn it the hard way*. The exercise of a villain's power always left them vulnerable, and the backlash for this unmaking had been particularly brutal.

Catherine was not dead, they were fairly certain. Juniper had mages drag her out of sight and examine her the moment after she collapsed. But she was unconscious and... dreaming. The orc had been told that the queen's body was now made of the stuff of the fae, but she had not truly grasped what that meant until she watched Catherine Foundling's body shift around like a puzzle box. Square blocs of flesh erupted her chest, short spikes bent bone and muscle in every direction and Juniper had grown nauseous watching her commander's face melt down to the skull and reform with an eerie keening sound. She still felt ill thinking about it. Orcs were flesh and bone, instinct and feeling. There was almost nothing of any of that left in Catherine. What had struck Hierophant had been subtler. They'd thought him fine at first, as he remained standing where he'd been. Only when he'd not replied to a question had the soldiers noticed that he was perfectly still. No longer even breathing. There was now a permanent rotation of two mages by the man's bedsides weaving spell to mimic what his lungs had ceased doing. His heart still beat, at least. Neither of the two had woken up in the three hours since the Pilgrim had attacked them.

That left the Army of Callow very, very vulnerable.

So far there had been no attempt at a heroic assault, but there was no telling how long that would last. An issue compounded by the fact that none of Juniper's mages could tell her when the two most powerful members of the Woe would wake, if they ever did. The army's fortifications had withstood the waters well at least. The wards held, and the only place the palisade broke was on the

left flank when a smaller glacier chunk hit the wall. Mages had been able to keep that contained with shields, enough that the entire battle line didn't flood. It had been rebuilt since. *Was this what you feared, Catherine, when you forbade Bonfire?* Part of Juniper still believed that plan had been the best chance at a winnable war they'd had, but now she was being forced to admit there was more to wars with Named than tactics and strategy. It was a bitter pill to swallow to admit that she'd had a weakness in her thinking, but now that she knew of it she must fix it lest she make mistakes in the future. Juniper spat into the shallow waters filling the ditch before the palisade, then turned around. She was in overall command, now. And there were things to be done, the first of them having a conversation with a woman she despised.

For once, the Thief was easy to find. The thin woman was lounging outside the tent where the remainder of the Woe slumbered uneasily, propped up in a folding chair and sipping at a silver flask. Juniper sniffed out the scent. Brandy. Even her taste in alcohol was shit.

"Marshal," the Thief drawled. "I had a feeling you'd be coming."

And still she drank, Juniper sneered. *Vivienne* might have grown on the Warlord and the rest of the Woe, but the Hellhound had never taken to her and never would. The Thief was the worst parts of her people crammed together in a single arrogant frame. The orc had learned to set aside most the dislike of Callowans she'd been taught as a child, admitting to herself that they were no worse than the Soninke save perhaps for the occasional petty moralizing. But this one, she was a reminder of why it'd taken the orc so long to like Catherine. She was hollow in the bone. Orcs and goblins understood, without ever needing to be taught, that the heart of the world was kin and clan. The Legions had taught Juniper that kin did not necessarily mean blood, or clan her own people, and it was that shared understanding that had brought her close to Aisha – who had, herself, been forced to learn to divorce the loyalties of her childhood from those that were truly deserved. The Taghreb were perhaps the closest thing humans could come to reasonable. They understood tethers. Soninke, like Callowans, had no such loyalty in them. Instead they worshipped at some abstract altar of principle, a mortal-made god of meaninglessness. Climbing the Tower, saving the Kingdom: there was little difference save in petty details. The years had taught Juniper that though the people might be fools, individuals need not be. That the things she found so disgusting gathered mostly at the top.

But Vivienne Dartwick was the incarnation of everything she despised about Callow.



An admitted thief, one who took but did not contribute. Were she an orc, she'd have ended up in a cooking pot by now. And while she professed high ideals, unlike Catherine she didn't even have the decency to bleed for them. The Thief was not a fighter, only a parasite. Like a tick she had nestled over new warmth when her previous host died. And had made herself useful enough since that she could not simply be carved up and eaten like she so richly deserved. Just looking at her made Juniper want to bare her fangs. The antipathy, she knew, was shared. The occasional contemptuous looks shot behind Catherine's back made that eminently clear, though they were both professional enough that they worked together without trouble. Or had, anyway, when Catherine was awake. Without her between them the Hellhound had a feeling the knives would finally come out.

"War council is to be held," Juniper growled. "You will attend."

The Thief's brow rose, almost mockingly.

"I am not a member of the Army of Callow," she said.

"You're a spymistress," the orc said. "A hoarder of secrets. Now is the time to spit them out."

"I know quite a bit that you don't, Marshal," the wretch agreed with an easy smile. "But little of import to the battle. Which seems, regardless, not in the process of being waged."

Juniper's blood ran hot, but she ground her fangs. She would not be baited so easily.

"We do not know when she will wake up," the Hellhound said.

"Which makes most planning irrelevant," Thief replied. "Without Catherine and Masego, we lack the teeth to go on the offensive. Plan your defence, Marshal. You do not need me standing at your table as a prop displaying your influence to do so."

That the tick would so familiarly refer to people she'd once sought to kill had the orc's fury spiking. She knew that humans did not have the same understanding of blood feuds, but that insolent girl should be in *pieces*. Already once a traitor, she would turn again. It was only a matter of time.

"So instead of having some use, you'll just sit there and get drunk," Juniper scathingly said. "What a Named you are. I'd get as much use out of a fucking tavern girl."

"Do you often fuck tavern girls, Marshal Juniper?" the woman asked smilingly. "My word, I had no idea. Still, this is a little bawdy for idle conversation don't you think?"

Juniper's fists clenched. Without ever moving, the Named had changed from a lounging wastrel to an amused aristocrat. She was making an *effort* to be infuriating.

"I will remain here," the Thief said, "and watch over them. If you do not believe there are agents of Malicia in this host, you are a bloody fool. My hours are better spent keeping an eye out for a knife than repeating numbers you already know for an audience of officers."

There was much that Juniper wanted to reply. That having her at the council would allay fears, serve as a display of unity. That a fucking spymistress had no right to gainsay the orders of the Marshal of Callow, especially not on campaign. But there was no point, so she held her tongue. Turning around without another word, she left.

She had a battle to win, with or without help.

—

Rozala slumped into her seat, exhausted beyond belief. Night had only just fallen, but she knew the work would continue through the dark and unto dawn. In the first few hours, when chaos and panic had spread across the host, she'd desperately struggled to restore order. There was a very real chance the crusaders would have routed, if not for the heroes. They'd walked among the soldiers, helping and healing and soothing away fear. The Princess of Aequitan was still sure at least thousand levies would disappear overnight. After the tides stopped and the scalding rain ceased, the reports had begun coming in. Even now it was hard to tell how many had died, over less time than it took to boil a kettle of water. Early estimates were at nine thousand dead and at least half that out of the fight.

Rozala Malanza closed her eyes, and dealt with the truth that she had just commanded the most disastrous military offensive in living memory.

And the battle had begun so well. The Heavenly Fences had allowed her to trample nearly a seventh of the enemy army within the first hour, badly crippling the enemy's ranged abilities: without the crossbowmen, the casualties involved in taking the palisades from the Army of Callow would have been greatly lowered. The siege engines would have taken their due, yes, but the Fences would have limited the damage. It would have been a rough affair, no two ways about it, but most definitely a battle she could win. And Rozala had made plans to hit hard and fast enough at least part of the enemy's supplies could be seized before they retreated through a gate. Enough that starvation could be kept at bay at least a sliver of the way to Hedges. Now there was most a mile of frozen marshland between her army and the enemy's, and her men were two days away from beginning to boil grass to have

something to fill their stomachs. There was a very real chance she would have to order horses butchered, if it came to that, and she could already hear the other royals howling about their expensive war horses getting the axe to feed mere peasants.

The dark-haired princess shivered. Part of it was that she was still drenched and cold: after the first reports, she'd handed the reins to her officers and gone with the rank and file to drag survivors and wounded out of the water. It was the least of what she owed for today's debacle. The other princes and princesses followed suit, even Prince Arnaud who she doubted had ever done a hard day's work in his life. It'd been a given they would, after word spread she'd gone out personally. They couldn't be seen to care less about the soldiers, could they? The thought was uncharitable, but not necessarily untrue. Rozala's mother had always taught her that command was her right, but also her responsibility. A general who spent lives frivolously was just a butcher, and the Malanzas were no such thing. Ambitious, perhaps, but their roots were that of ancient and famous generals. Her distant ancestor Lorenzo Malanza had been the one to conquer the northern half of the Dominion of Levant for First Prince Charles Merovins. His splendid victory at Tartessos was the subject of song to this day. And she had shamed that memory, she thought with a grimace. By her failure, but also the other reason her hands were trembling.

Gods, she'd been so small. And no great beauty either, with that strong nose and those razor-sharp cheekbones. She'd talked like a sloppy commoner, all insults and insinuations where the situation demanded poise. And Rozala had not been able to hold back, trading verbal blow for blow with the same nonchalant woman who had just *dropped half a lake from the sky*. The knowledge of how easily the Black Queen could have killed any of them had the heroes not accompanied the delegation would haunt her thoughts for years to come. What kind of a woman could do something like that, just speak a word and nigh-instantly slaughter thousands? The princess was not unfamiliar with war, but this was... something else. A titan stepping on ants. She did not blame those who would desert in the night. And now she understood the fervour in the First Prince's eyes, when she spoke of the evils in the east. Rozala reached for the bottle of *eau-de-vie* she'd sent for, breaking etiquette by pouring her own cup and downing it in a single gulp. The liquor warmed her enough that she did not send a servant for a blanket. Neither did she change out of the wet clothing, though. Let her visitors remember where she had spent her hours.

The Grey Pilgrim was the first to arrive. Rozala rose to her feet, and bowed with genuine respect. The old Levantine had saved hundreds of lives after personally destroying the Black Queen's weapon, wreathed in Light as he spread warmth and healing wherever he went. The former had been the most important of the

two. How many would that have lost to the deathly cold, if not for the pulses of heat?

"Chosen," the princess said. "I am in your debt for your toil. Any boon in my power to grant is yours to claim."

A dangerous thing to offer Named, she knew, but looking at the exhausted old man who looked like was folding into himself Rozala did not hesitate. He had saved lives in her care, and Malanzas did not leave debts unpaid. The Pilgrim looked at her through eyes gone rheumy and clasped her hand with wrinkled fingers.

"You owe me nothing, child," he whispered. "Would that I could have done more."

"Through winter and summer, my word stands," Rozala formally replied in the old Arlesite oath. "So long as the Heavens watch and Creation withstands."

Whether he ever asked the favour of her or not was irrelevant. She would not allow kindness to go unanswered. The hero smiled sadly.

"This is not the first or last tragedy this war will bring," he said. "Steel yourself, Rozala Malanza. The worst is yet to come."

"A prophecy, Chosen?" Rozala asked.

"An old man's intuition," the Grey Pilgrim said, shaking his head. "Darkness grows. I fear greater evils than Catherine Foundling are yet to come."

The dark-haired princess' blood ran cold. Worse than the monster who'd faced half a dozen Chosen on her own and brought down the sky? She could think of few greater evils in existence, save for the Tower itself and the Kingdom of the Dead. Neither thought was comforting.

"I hear your guidance," Rozala said, bowing her head in thanks.

"May I?" the hero asked.

Uncertain what he meant, the princess nodded in agreement regardless. The glimmer of light was barely visible, but warmth washed over her. Permeated every part of her body, chasing away cold and weariness and fear. Like she was sixteen again, fearless and ready to rise against Hasenbach to avenge her mother.

"It will be a long night," the Pilgrim said, panting lightly.

She helped the elder into a seat afterwards, seeing his legs shake, and broke etiquette again to pour him a glass of liquor and press it into his hand. Chuckling ruefully, the Levantine sipped at it. He made a face.

"Eau-de-vie," he said. "The things you Alamans drink. Ah, what I would not do for a good pear brandy. It always tastes like Alava."

One of the great cities of the Dominion, Rozala recalled, nestled among tall hills. Famous for its orchards and its herds. It had held on a decade longer than the rest of Levant when the Principate invaded, and even after the city was besieged the inhabitants preferred to burn it and flee into the hills rather than live under Proceran rule.

"Your birthplace, Chosen?" she asked, returning to her seat.

"Levante is where I drew my first breath," the old man replied. "But Alava is where I grew to manhood. It is where I will die as well, if the Heavens ever allow these old bones to rest."

"Creation will be lessened for the loss," the princess said, and to her surprise found she meant every word.

"Creation will go on," the Pilgrim smiled tiredly. "We are never quite so important as we like to think."

She would have enjoyed quiet conversation with the man a while longer, but it was not to be. Prince Amadis Milenan strode into the tent, his embroidered tunic pristine and his hair perfectly coiffed. It was not enough to hide the tightness around his eyes. Behind him was a short man in a leather coat that went down to his knees, covering loose trousers and shirt of coloured silk. The Rogue Sorcerer, as he called himself. Of the Chosen, it was him Rozala knew best: they had spent long hours together planning the battle and his role in it as leader of the wizards. She had found him genteel and polite, surprisingly so for a man whose Name implied a certain uncouthness. The princess began to rise, but Amadis held out his hand.

"No need," the Prince of Iserre said. "Not after this kind of day."

The princess hid her surprise. She'd half-expected that after today's debacle he would seek to undermine her position with recriminations. He still might, regardless of this unexpected olive branch, so her guard would remain up.

"Princess Malanza," the Rogue Sorcerer greeted her, inclining his head before taking a seat.

"Chosen," she replied, just as courteously.

Amadis let out a long breath after sitting down, a long moment passing before he spoke.

"This was," he said, "not the way we had anticipated this battle would go."

An understatement if there ever was one, Rozala thought. The use of we did not escape her attention. Blame was not being put solely on her shoulders.

"The failure was mine," she said anyway.

"We'd prepared for many things, Your Grace," the Rogue quietly said. "But the sky opening up to drop a lake was beyond our predictions. There is no fault in this, save in believing that our opponent would not be so monstrous."

"I agree," Amadis said calmly. "I cast no doubts on your competence, Rozala. Your initial success is proof enough of it. There will be no talk of removing you from command."

The Princess of Aquitan inclined her head in silent thanks. *Did this shake you enough you are taking this seriously Amadis?* she thought. *Or are you simply keeping me at the head of the host to scapegoat if the situation further worsens?* No matter. For now, it was still her battle to fight.

"I must begin, then, with a delicate question," she said. "This... gate. Should we expect another if we attempt a second offensive?"

If so, this campaign was over. Rozala would not throw away half a hundred thousand lives for pride, even if refusing to do so ruined her. They had learned the enemy's trick, but the enemy would have learned theirs as well. There was no guarantee the Pilgrim would twice succeed in breaking the gate. The two Chosen traded glances.

"That is a complicated question," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Against most other villains, I would say that forceful shattering of the gate might actually kill them. The amount of power and involvement in crafting such a thing is staggering, and the break would lead to vicious backlash."

"Yet Catherine Foundling is not merely a villain," the Pilgrim said. "She is a titled Duchess of Winter. Perhaps the last fae of that realm, if I interpret the Augur's words correctly. She is no longer human, in a sense. What would destroy the likes of the Warlock or the Carrion Lord might not affect her at all. Her nature has grown other."

"We have seen neither the Black Queen nor the Hierophant since the battle," Prince Amadis noted. "To be frank, I was expecting an Imperial offensive while we were in disarray. We might very well have lost the battle if one had followed."

"I'll concede that much," Rozala said. "Yet there might have been other limitations at work. I am no scholar of sorcery, but it occurs to me that such a great blow – even if it had not been shattered – might have incapacitated the two of them for some time. The duration, however, is beyond my ability to theorize. We may very well be facing another gate come morning."

"We'll know it's coming, this time," the Rogue Sorcerer darkly said. "It's not impossible to contain the flow until the gate itself can be broken, though I'll admit it'll be difficult."

The princess put her hands in her lap, resisting the urge to brush back her hair.

"There are too many uncertainties," she said. "I am reluctant to commit to an assault when everyone I send might be drowned. And that is without addressing the difficulties of an assault. Wading through the marshlands will be difficult, and it might be weeks before the soil drinks the water whole. That means having to march around it, and likely splitting the host in two."

"A probing attack come morning, perhaps," Prince Amadis suggested.

*Even a probe could see a few thousand men die screaming to find out the answer to a simple question,* Rozala thought. The alternative, however, was retreat. Through hostile land, while so low on supplies they were barely worth mentioning at all. The Black Queen had offered to provide food for a march back, but there was no guarantee that offer would still hold after today. And if it did not, the amount of men she'd lose to a small-scale offensive would be a pittance compared to what hunger would kill. That was without even considering the reports that the Duchess Kegan's army was crossing the river far to the north. The numbers there were said to be over ten thousand, and the Deoraithe were infamous for their skill at *la petite guerre*. Harassment and ambushes, without ever giving battle.

"This is not the kind of decision that can be lightly made," the Princess of Aquitan said. "And not without knowing all the facts. I must recommend we send an envoy to their camp to find out if the queen's terms still hold."

Amadis' lips thinned in displeasure.

"Surely you're not suggesting retreat," he said.

"I am reluctant to even consider it," Rozala admitted. "Yet if the Black Queen is unharmed and the terms hold, it may be that we have no other choice. We cannot dally. Time works against us more than they."

"I would accompany your envoy, if you permit," the Grey Pilgrim said, breaking his silence.

He looked half-asleep, even now. The princess kept her scepticism away from her face. Had the Chosen not tried to take the villain's life but a few hours ago? Still, she did not pretend to understand the ways of Named. For their sort, attempted killing might be no great enmity. The Prince of Iserre watched everyone at the table silently, then slowly nodded.

"Envoy will be sent," he agreed. "And to speak with only the Black Queen, so her state may be assessed. Should she prove incapacitated, however..."

Princess Rozala grimly smiled.

"Then we will settle the score in full," she said.

Malanzas, after all, did not leave debts unpaid.

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*Joel*

Catherine, I know you're a tired eldritch abomination, but now is not the time for a nap!

Also, this was a good way of handling Cat's plan. It backfired enough to take her out of action, but there's no doubt that it devastated the enemy army.

*ALKATYN*

The backfire also explains why we don't see these kind of things more often, and why this wouldn't result in a major backlash the way akua's weapon did

*RoflCat*

Assuming the crusaders get their attack on, I feel this'll just lead to Cath's heroic last minute arrival/awakening with power up.

After all, we've seen proof in Liese that being a villain doesn't preclude you from playing a heroic role in a Story (even if the Above will be pissy about it)

And a certain term come to mind: Apotheosis.

*Bookworm*



We will probably see her awaken in time to act in some fashion because that seems to be part of her Story (both in plot and meta) but she is also a Villain. That means that there is going to be a price. Only Heroes get freebies.

[Barthumphries](#)

She'll lose a significant part of her army, then wake up. The only real question is whether or not Malanza will awaken Winter when Cat returns as Warlord.

*Dainpdf*

Warlord is an orc Name. Cat is not getting that one. Queen is still out there, and she has missed it twice before (pattern of three anyone?)

*Metrux*

Yes, warlord is out of the table, but so is Black Queen. It's been plainly stated that, after it was broken last time, her ver nature changed. She can't go back to that.

*Dainpdf*

Yeah, but she's lost the opportunity for a Queen name twice. Both in Liesse. Pattern of three. She gets a queen Name in Liesse.

*werafdsaew*

People are still going on about Cat getting the Warlord name? The WOG already denied that possibility very explicitly.

*Dainpdf*

Cat got her apotheosis when she killed Akua. She may get a Name out of this deal, though. Maybe.

*Yotz*

In her house at L'Iesse, Black Queen waits dreaming.

*Raved Thrad*

Black Queen Catherinethulhu? 😊

*Dainpdf*

The Queen in Black.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

They will write plays about her that will drive people mad! But only the Goblins will dare perform "A Zombie-Goat on the Roof".

*Yotz*

Kilian: You sir, should remove your pants.

William: Indeed?

Cat: Indeed, it's time. We have all laid aside modesty but you.

William: I... wear no pants.

Kilian: (Terrified, aside to Cat.) No pants? No pants!

*Raved Thrad*

Is this a scene from "The Swordsman's New Pants?" 😊

[Zaicora](#)

If you're going with lovecraft, nyarlathotep would be more accurate.

[tyizor](#)

So are we going with the Sleeping Beauty meta-story now? Oh boy, what a ride.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

At this point Cat's army runs away while the crusade starves and freezes.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Rozala Malanza is probably one of my favorite characters now, I really hope she doesn't die.

*BryceWilliam*

She's one of the few people Cat can kill and not worry about making the crusade worse. She doesn't read high enough in power or weight to really be Cat's 'enemy' she's more June's, but its not June's story. So I doubt she has the negative weight to hold any real staying power. My bet is she dies when June does some sick ass attack on the enemy commanders and wipes out a lot of leaders or she dies on a cross by Cat's orders.

*Jakob Israelsen*

Wasn't she told explicitly by Malicia not to kill Rolanza or Milenan?

*Yotz*

Not so “explicitly told”, as more like “strongly suggested” – as in “I suggest you to buy that insurance option. After all, it would be tragic if something happens to your lovely shop, or your beautiful wife, who in twelve minutes will pick up your two wonderful children from the school on her usual trip to the grocery...”

*Dainpdf*

No staying power doesn't mean she dies. Only means she gets shunted to the background once her part is over. Pity she feels horror at Cat. She'd make a good person to turn.

*HandyCapped*

I'm on the fence on that. She led a massive invading army to all but butcher and wring dry the land of her “enemy”, but still has her horse high enough to consider it a ‘debt’, when her victim(That Cat undoubtedly is, even if she is slugging back) dares to defend herself. With “monstrous slaughter of men” – to say the least. As if that wasn't on the menu the whole time.

*Jeremy*

Well... shit.

WAKE UP CAT!!

*Morgenstern*

I vote for Thief playing Black Queen once more, she did it before... though, admittedly, not to fool the likes of a Grey Pilgrim... and probably glamoured, which could prove tricky. They DO still have “Larat” and the other fae, though, if any of those should be willing to glamour something while the Queen sleeps and thus cannot order them to... hmm...

*soonnandnaanssoon*

The Water is Still in that marshland swamped with the dead no?

[daegone823](#)

A mountain of corpses killed by a giant weapon + a necromancer who loves raising enemies, wonder where this has been used before recently.

*Alex*

10 bucks says Cat wakes up as the Crusaders are about to win and she raises every dead soldier for miles to fight for the good (?) guys.

[daegone823](#)

Cat new name the Undying, or the Broken, the Shattered Queen,  
maybe the Amalgam

Yotz

The word you seek is "Deathless".

*Flameburst*

Her aspects will be Live, Die and Live Again

*Ethereal*

Witness!

*Sykomantis*

It has to be one word.

Live, Die, and Resurrect

Yotz

Live, Die, and NOPE.

*Raved Thrad*

I'm still holding out for "Death Knight."

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

I wonder if this will become in time Calernia's version of the  
Dead Marshes ([http://www.henneth-annun.net/events\\_view.cfm?  
evid=184](http://www.henneth-annun.net/events_view.cfm?evid=184))?

[daegone823](#)

Okay so at least we know of one of the named the rogue sorcerer,  
I wish they would have said some throw away lines like:

"Too bad about hammer guy

Hammer guy

Yeah you know the, The Righteous Protector, the guy with the  
hammer."

Maybe Cat learns a new aspect or transitions at this point winter  
was injured before now it was broken. Time for something to take  
it's place. Aisha and Juniper ship sailing or ...?

[Barthumphries](#)

He had his chance to join the story and threw it away. Let's  
not bring him up again.

*Dainpdf*

I don't think she's getting rid of Winter that easily.  
Especially when she's the last thing it has a hold onto.

*Alivaril*

I wonder if – and hope that – Catherine is having some helpful dreams. She doesn't sleep anymore due to Winter nightmares and I'm honestly starting to miss her having a Name. The sort of raw power she's been displaying lately just isn't as satisfying as her Aspects were – tracking which ones have been used, looking forward to Struggle or Take flipping a fight with Hero-tier BS of her own, etc.

...It's both a good and a bad thing that the Grey Pilgrim is going along; he'd see through any glamour intended to imitate Catherine, but he might also have come to his senses as far as the Crusade is concerned. An individual with that kind of power is one you want on your side when the Dead King comes knocking. And who's to say the Callowan army wouldn't burn their own supplies out of sheer spite should they start losing, or that Thief wouldn't \*Yoink\* the supplies again?

It'd honestly be better on multiple counts to play the narrative and heal them. If they continue the slaughter, they'll ensure their inevitable demise. If they don't, the Crusade can retreat without further losses and he can shove Cat toward redemption.

Plus, whoever heard of a villain being killed while they were weak from some ritual? That's something that happens to Heroes, ones who awaken in the nick of time.

[daegone823](#)

I know what you mean I miss the whole name dreams that foreshadowed a new type of enemy she somehow had to interpret her teachers past actions with her present circumstances. Still Chatrine has progressed a great deal still maybe she could have some named dreams about past fae battles so she can get an understanding of her current predicament. Fae more than any other race have dealt with narrative problems and they could help her in understanding the bard who has proven to be an extremely old name.

[Alyxe](#)

I am glad Grey Pilgrim might go, as well.

Why? After that comment about dying in Alava, I am kind of hoping that was Vivienne with Chekov's Brandy. Shared drink... shared knife...

*Raved Thrad*

Well, we've seen fights between heroes and villains; I wonder how a fight between heroes would go, and if the heavens would intervene somehow.

*ALazyMonster*

I know what you mean about wanting Cat to have a name I think it would be awesome if she got a name that was explicitly about giving fate itself the finger. I mean this is more or less something that she does constantly. The first thing that comes to mind with I wish for this is something like Riku from the back story of No Game No Life where he literally ended all the gods as a way to end war.

*Dainpdf*

Any finger a Name could give Fate would be ironic. Roles are woven of Fate, after all.

*ALazyMonster*

Fair point, but I like to interpret the way that roles have been explained as they are patterns and the way they work is based on what people think of the stories that go with a name. The difference in my interpretation is that fate is the will of the gods (above or below) and a role is more how mortals perceive a name. A Name that is directly opposed to fate would be one who opposes the choices of the gods and their agents. Where my original thought from (the idea of Cat getting such a Name) this came from her talk with Archer about what she wanted, since all named want something. I believe Cat said something like "I want to kill anyone who wants to drag us back into a story"

*Dainpdf*

Well, what Name you get doesn't always represent what you want – just ask Hierarch – but I get your point. I still think "fuck fate" is more Black's thing, and moreover more about what one does with a Name than the Name itself, but it is an intriguing idea.

[amargosamountain](#)

"Any finger a Name could give Fate would be ironic. Roles are woven of Fate, after all."

The fuck is this supposed to mean? Any finger?

*Dainpdf*

You would do well to note I was answering this:  
"I know what you mean about wanting Cat to have a name I think it would be awesome if she got a name that was explicitly about giving fate itself the finger."  
I meant any affront a Name could give Fate would likely end up ironic or otherwise ineffectual.

*Dainpdf*

Pretty sure "willing and capable of slaughtering thousands on a whim" did not help convince the Pilgrim that this fight is futile. He knows worse is to come, but this is still necessary for the Greater Good.

*JackbeThimble*

A fight for your existence is not a whim. The crusaders had slaughtered thousands of her men minutes before and she gave them every possible opportunity to avoid bloodshed altogether.

*Dainpdf*

Yes, but she is not exactly stable (and he's not only seen proof of that but tried to use it), and if she did have a whim she could and would kill thousands.

[Absinthe with Mephisto](#)

Malanzas do not leave their debts unpaid.

By switching to Mastercard today you can save 15% off of any hero merchandise.  
try it out today for free!

We can not be held responbile for any losses that incur at the hands of thieves and tyrants.

*Bonesawer*

I think you mean Malanzacard

*burdi*

come on, time for a new Name for chaterine foundling

[tyizor](#)

Part of me is a fan of this spelling of her name. It sounds so sarcastically civil.

[don](#)

I'm less than impressed by this outcome. It leaves things open to dragging on, damages Cat even more than before, and all before even considering what the Dead King is up to.

Is this story turning into a slow tragedy with a crippled protagonist at the end, Taylor Herbert-style? Our main character rides off into the sunset, still breathing but functionally irrelevant? Or even worse, dies with her 'goal' fulfilled, the bullshit calmed down and Callow safe but no personal gain and tremendous personal loss?

Fuck. That.

That's off-putting, and cliché', and done to death these days. Stories where the protag gets the bittersweet ending, crippled and rendered meek – I tend to skip to the end, go, "That's nice," and lose interest in further contemplation of them. In Worm, after that ending, the epic battles all seem... lesser. They lose impact on re-reading, even if the world's saved and all that.

I love this story, and yet with this chapter I see a hard turn pointing towards that end. And that would be – not sad, because that implies inciting emotional impact – it would be depressing. I would feel apathetic, ultimately. And that *is* sad.

*werafdsaew*

Pretty sure that is not where the story is going. For one Cat has infinite regeneration.

[\*don\*](#)

It doesn't have to be a *physical* crippling, though Cat's already limping everywhere so there's that. It could be capability-crippled; like if now opening gates is problematic, and then she can't do it at all, then she gets her regen shredded some more – maybe then she gets a sideways power-bump, like with her ability to take Aspects and turn them into one-time consumables, but that gradually loses its performance value, and then it becomes politically untenable for Cat to *keep* her crown and stay around long enough to actually steady the boat, so the job goes to a compromise candidate, etcetera, etcetera. I can map that line of descent in my head crystal-clear I've seen it so many times... The first time I ever ran across it was with the Narnia series, and fucking hells I hated how that series turned out. Or Avalon and Arthurian myth, or the Mockingjay series, hell even Harry Potter has a fairly lukewarm outcome for Harry. Family man and middle-management, hooray! ...Actually, the family man part is great. But seriously, after all the pure shit he could at least be a bit better off than Robin William's version of Peter Pan. And on, and on.



Hero or villain, the 'whittled down into normalcy' is terrain that is completely fucking mapped out by generations of stories. And I've always hated it. The only thing worse is 'Accomplish your goals, then die!' which is *\*also\** fairly common.

It's not the crippling, it's the meaninglessness of it all. The wheel turns, and our narrative river always empties into the comforting sea of mediocrity we all are supposed to identify with. Hey, Protagonist is one of us now! Or Dead! Yay, we can feel special in our shared lack of specialness now!

Narnia is shut away forever now. There's no fucking Camelot anymore. No. NO! Screw that – give me an Honor Harrington, whose badassery is not only legend, but she's now an Admiral and busy STILL BEING SPECTACULARLY AWESOME in the background of the newer books even when she's not the focus of them. THAT is an outcome I can get behind.

*Dainpdf*

Uh... So what you want is a happy ending? Or a wish fulfilling one, I guess?

Bad news: at least as she is now, that is not what Catherine wants. She recognizes she is toxic to the country she loves, and she wants to get out as soon as she can countenance it. Whether she *\*can\** ever do so remains to be seen. Black and Malicia are sort of the example she's trying to avoid. Stay in power long enough and you become a cog in it.

*grzecho2222*

There are also bad endings, but I would admit that "normalcy" kinda became new "Happy Ever After" and been kinda overdone. What happened to endings where everyone loses or where it turns out that whole thing was pointless or heroes win, but victory is meaningless or where heroes stay heroes or bittersweet endings? But I think that it is a little too early to be angry about ending, since it can be anything from Cat fulfilling her long dream of stabbing Fate itself to Cat pulling 180 and telling that all of this was first part of her plan (the one mentioned in summary)

*werafdsaew*

Like I said, not this kind of story. For one has power reduction *\*EVER\** happened in this story even once? What doesn't kill a Name makes them stronger, not weaker. Everything points to her waking up in the nick of time with new powers.

*Sanityfaerie*

Actually, yeah. She had one of her three aspects as squire destroyed by the demon thing. She spent a short while undead, without access to much of her Name power. Arguably, becoming a winterthing was a loss as well, at least over the short term. She cut a piece of winter carved off of her by the Saint. A big part of her path has been "get crippled. Adapt and overcome."

Of course, for just that reason, I'm pretty sure that she'll come out of this one with some sort of power-up, or at least an interesting lateral move. I'm not real worried about her being crippled permanently

*Sparsebeard*

If you can edit, I would, it's pretty bad form to spoil other stories in the comments...

[don](#)

There's no edit function. That said, Worm's been around for long enough now that it's a bit like spoiling Iron Man 1 or 2. Though 3 might be pushing it.

*Letouriste*

You can't edit comments and yeah this is pretty bad forms. I paused my reading of worm when only the last two books were remaining because that started to be as depressing as the first few chapters...i'm not surprised of how you say that finished.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Dude. I liked your comment before I finished reading it, and I can't take that back, but spoilers. Seriously. Don't do that. EE, some help here? Please?

*lennymaster*

Oh, come on! I barely read half of Worm and I only got so far because I held out hope that it would not end exactly that way. Anyone could see that the story would go that disgusting bittersweet semidefeat way within the first few chapters. Yes, I do not like spoilers, but there are spoilers and there are SPOILERS. This was the first kind and I cannot bring myself to become upset about it. Especially not about Worm, the DC of the webserials.

*lennymaster*

"DC of the webserials." meaning completely overrated, senselessly cruel towards its Heroes, badly written Villains and completely failed plotlines.

The only decent character they ever created was the Joker, and they have been sucking on that corpse for ages now instead of making something new.

Wow the comparison between Worm and DC seems ever more fitting.

*Dainpdf*

Uuuuh... I really don't want to discuss Worm here. Just let me note I very much disagree with you.

About the gravity of the spoilers: there are always new people coming into the webserial scene. It's not that large.

Plus, the spoiler was not even of any argumentative use in that post. The comment effectively just says "please don't write this way because I hate it. By the way I also hate this other serial because (spoilers), which is similar".

*John Galt*

@lennymaster. Worm's ending was predictable; you still shouldn't drop spoilers for another work. Also, while you have a couple legitimate points, you sound like a self-important hater. Especially with the last line. Wasn't aware that your personal opinion of a work dictated whether spoilers were ok or not. – FYI, "Sorry for the spoilers" anywhere in there and I wouldn't have written this.

*ALazyMonster*

I have a feeling that it's not going to end with some sort of martyrdom for Cat because early in the story Black and Cat had several talks about how that is a pathetic ending, so have some faith I doubt Cat is slowing down at all.

*Dainpdf*

This is not the place for discussing Worm, so I'll limit myself to saying I believe you missed the point of that story. As much as I can say that, given that I'm also only a random reader.

*Yotz*

Amen to that.

*JackbeThimble*

Sorry man but I don't think any web serial author is ever going to hear 'This Reminds me of Worm' as a bad thing, with good reason.

## *Rook*

It should probably be noted that Cat isn't the type to be so proud as to have all her contingencies ride on her being in play, and both Archer and Adjutant are still cards left to be played. They still haven't shown up at all during the battle.

That being said, gonna call it now. The Crusade is still going to slaughter a massive chunk of the Callowan forces – including possibly one of the Woe or similarly major character – before Cat and Hierophant wake up. That'll be the trigger that leads to Cats new Name or whatever transformation afterwards, having something to do with loss.

Lose her morals, lose an aspect, lose her limbs, lose her humanity, lose her mentor and father figure. it's part of who she is. Everything she gains she bleeds for, nothing is given for free; and the only thing she has yet to lose is Callow and her companions.

That greater Evil than Catherine Foundling that Gandalf here is sensing? It's not going to be a Mary Sue out of nowhere, it's going to be whatever is left after another piece of Catherine Foundling gets carved away.

## *Yotz*

But what happened to all the pieces getting carved off? It wouldn't be called 'Chopfyt', that's for sure...

## *Raved Thrad*

It's not that I dislike her – I love how much nuance her character has developed – but if one of the Woe were to die I think the one whose death would have the greatest dramatic impact, short of Masego or Catherine, it would be Vivienne. Not only is she a Heroine, as the story paradigm defines her, but she Believes. She does what she does because she sees that no one else will, and she supports Catherine because Catherine is doing what no one else is willing to do: protect Callow and her people. She may not be a fighter, but I can see her, knife in hand and screaming her hatred at the heavens, fighting like a cornered rat, cursing her killer or killers for thinking that what they're doing to support the suffering and subjugation of innocent Callowans is anything near heroic.

And if she doesn't immediately die, I can see her dying in Catherine's arms. Now that would be something: for the great martyr of the 10th Crusade (or maybe just the first one?), on the Callowan side, to be a heroine who died fighting invading heroes. Who knows? It might just be the turning point that has peasant levies showing up with old swords and hunting bows and wood axes to show up to turn out the invaders.

James, Mostly Harmless

Sound the warhorn loud and high  
From the Fields of Streges to Harrow's halls,  
Let all of Callow their slogan cry,  
And rise and follow Catharine!

Yotz

...this is all your fault, you know...

-ahem-

Only thumps of my heart tell me that I'm alive,  
Through my half-melted eyelids I see the Dawn's flame,  
And I see it, Gods save me, as I open my eyes –  
Great Unspeakable Horror that bears no name.  
They came as a landslide, a flood, thick and vile,  
They trampled through us as they crushed us to mud;  
Our banners and crests rest upon refuse pile,  
For they killed everything, drenching earth with our blood.

They came as a landslide, a flood, thick and vile,  
They trampled through us as they crushed us to mud;  
Our banners and crests rest upon refuse pile,  
For they killed everything, drenching earth with our blood.  
Through the stubble yet smoking of burned wheat field  
I may sneak yet away, steal the boat and grub;  
To become sole survivor, all I need is to yield...  
But I sneer as I order myself to stand up.

Only thumps of my heart tell me that I'm alive,  
Through my half-melted eyelids I see the Dawn's flame,  
And I see it, Gods save me, as I open my eyes –  
Great Unspeakable Horror that bears no name.  
I see shadows, and ashes, and stones, cold and dead;  
I see nothing that left here for me to defend –  
But my sword I hold still, I'm cloaked in dread,  
And remains of my shield does not burden my hand.

All I know now – that my land will not die when I leave;  
There is no way in Hells I will drive them away,  
But I know – from now on they have no right to live,  
They have no right to breath, to see that bright day!  
So I lift my bent warhorn, and I straighten my back,  
And I call all the soldiers, both present and gone,  
And I scream them "Stand up!", and I scream them "Attack!"...  
If there no one 's alive – then the dead will march on!

grzecho2222

We warriors, we soldiers, we knights  
We fought under banner so bright

We defended lands of west from evil  
Our foe was warlock, demon and devil

In time of misery we stood alone  
Our army turned into field of bone  
In shackles we lived for twenty years  
Fate we were sourly forced to bear

Lady with soul dark and dark as night  
Has ended with murder this sad plight  
With chaos and death she saved her kind  
Better Dark Queen we couldn't have find

But now Heavens have called their brats  
Who lived lives in peace and grown fat  
How loudly of Good speaks this breed  
To mask their pride, ambition and greed

But now we march under banner of night  
They will face us turned into force of blight  
They will learn the true meaning of dread  
When they will rise to aid us while dead

*Raved Thrad*

(You're a terrible influence, you know that?)

Come, ye sons and daughters of Callow! Come  
To muddy field and shallow grave, come ye to hold the  
line!  
Death comes a-calling, with work for hands all wet and  
stained  
With the lifeblood of those who march to war!

Rise with the dawn, to loved ones' lamentation, and  
dreams of swords!

March, ye sons and daughters of Callow! March  
To the side of Callow's queen, of blackest night and  
darkest moon!  
War comes to Callow, in stamp of boot and jingle of  
hauberk  
In gleam of blade and glint in invader's eye!

Stand in your ranks, to the chattering of teeth and the  
blaring of horns!

Fight, ye sons and daughters of Callow! Fight  
And die, and get up to fight again, to shed the blood of  
the conqueror!  
Rack and red ruin are your lot, 'till Death has made up  
his number  
And the land is glutted in blood once again!

Fight, and die, to a long day's blood-letting, and a red nightfall!

*lennymaster*

Wow, I can totally imagine it!  
But that is probably because I do not like her and I would love for Robber to take her place as Saboteur or something in that vein.

*werafdsaew*

I doubt any of the Woes will die, for the simple narrative reason that they are the next generation of the Calamities, but they haven't exceeded or matched the Calamities yet. So until they do, they have to keep rising.

*Dainpdf*

I would be somewhat disappointed in that. Not in the writer – it is a perfectly valid path to take – but in Cat. She has said before she wants to stop with the carving at herself. If this story is about her crystallizing in that Role, and being unable to move past it, it would fit. But I don't think it is.

*Nethermore*

Yeah, with 15000 taken out of the fight there had to be a price to pay. I just hope it's not another reduction in power, because that shit is getting old. Being forced to sleep through such an important part of the battle should be punishment enough.

Also, at first I think everyone guessed the Grey Pilgrim was just playing white, but evidently he's tacked a bunch of high-powered healing spells onto his blue deck full of counterspells, redirects, control magic for spells, future sight and probably teleportation. As long as he isn't distracted major magical workings are going to be punished severely.

*Yotz*

'Illusions of Grandeur' it's called.  
Trix was one hell of an Evil deck, with a very capital 'E'. Without a little charitable miracle of Donate there will be a corresponding hell of a price to pay for it, though.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Called yourself Grey but playing blue trickeries. As expected from filthy control decks. Real man go 1 color only!

*Yotz*

Precisely!

Blue FTW.

*Dainpdf*

We *\*were\** told his shtick was last minute saves and disruption.

*Dainpdf*

Plus, at least he's not playing Dredge like Akua.

*werafdsaew*

*\*Another\** reduction in power? Cat's journey is a journey of exchanging lesser power for greater power. When has this reduction ever happened in the story anywhere?

*Antoninjohn*

Archer and Robber are now ready to execute the first part of her fallback plan, it starts with the remaining supplies. After these battles it's time for Cat to take over all of Calriena

*Anon*

Eh.....I get the progression from a narrative sense, but both Cat and Masego being insta-KO'd by backlash feels kind of....wonky.

The Grey Pilgrim already performed literal resurrection, stole a bunch of spells from Masego, and was utterly pushing in Cat's offensive. Having him be able to perform offensively on an equal to, if not greater level than the Saint, just feels....cheap. Like, if the backlash from the spell burning itself out had knocked Cat out that'd be one thing, but this....unless the pilgrim's got a literal star inside his staff similar to the duchess of the morning sun, the heavens probably showed their hand, a bit.

Granted, I imagine the pilgrim will want to gauge Cat's 'reason' for killing so many people, and worse comes to it he'll prevent her from being assassinated by Procer forces during the visit, but....I dunno.

Otherwise, I am curious – if the original plan was to make a lake (which would have definitely killed off most, if not ALL of the army, rather than 'only' kill 9000 and wound another 13,500) killing off so many of Hasenbach's people in such a manner isn't likely to make her capitulate – it's more likely to have people see Cat as true evil, and demand another crusade, and another, and another.

Melanza feels more and more like she'll hold onto this grudge til her dying day – which makes her survivability seem less and less likely.



But depending on what exactly Cat is dreaming of, I imagine we'll see either the Dead King, or Triumphant (may she never return) start to make waves....incidentally, I wonder – if Cat claimed all those souls with the use of Winter's power, would that add to replace some of the 'power' that the Saint had cut away?

(Also, I forgot about last chapter, but whatever happened to the Duchess of the Morning Sun? Last I recall, her energy was being drained and used by Cat for....something?)

*Byzantine*

Pilgrim isn't saying it, but I think what he did crippled him too. That kind of power does not come without a price.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Exactly. He looks hammered.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Though his demands to see Cat are obviously for recon. I'd deny them for that very reason even if she was whole.

*BroadAxe*

You forget that the heavens do not play fair, AND you forget that the saint of blades and the grey pilgrim are in a sense named with much the same amount of success as Cat, except they are WAAAAAY older. He is quite littreally "the mentor" that completly overpowered guy that shows up and saves the new heroes so they can become epic heroes, while he himself is far beyond that.

[benthelynx](#)

In some ways that was a defensively used ability.

*Tragedyofphilosophy*

I think the Pilgrim got a massive power boost for context, he's always there right in time after all, this was acting in complete perfect Harmony with his purpose.

I doubt he can pull that kind of feat off under normal circumstances.

*Joeobjoe*

Why indeed, Grey Pilgrim by all rights should've been completely backed into a corner, unable to do anything as all those men die. Pulling that last minute burst of extreme power at a cost was completely unforeseeable.

In all seriousness though, it's good to see an example of what happens when you do press a hero into an unwinnable situation. Gives more weight to Black's insistence on his rather esoteric hero killing techniques.

*Dainpdf*

The Light has been shown repeatedly to be super effective vs sorcery, for one. Also, we were told just last chapter that it was *\*not\** literal resurrection. People can and have survived metal being shoved into their head. What the Pilgrim did was "just" very powerful healing.

As for displaying power comparable to the Saint, he disrupted one thing his power was super effective against and then almost collapsed, while the Saint cut through the demon containing bubble without missing a beat.

*Morgenstern*

To be fair, "demon-containing" does sound rather specific. In that it targets DEMONS. Saint is no demon, is she...

*Unorginal*

It can contain demons, it's not geared only towards demons. Note how Hierophant mentions that the ward-schemes have held against demons rather than saying they were for demons. Masego isn't the type to settle for sub-optimal spells if I've read him right.

*Dainpdf*

From Masego's reaction, I would assume it wasn't a specific demon container.

*Raved Thrad*

I remember all the imprisoned Summer fey being called to her side when Catherine started her parlay with the Summer Queen. Masego has a small fit when his wardings break and High Noon is released by the Queen's call.

*Raved Thrad*

Bindings, rather. Not wardings.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Pilgrim basically flipped around the mini Sun Masego dropped on him and the greenhorns which made miracles impossible inside its bounds. That's what he's been flinging around this entire time and he essentially spent it breaking the fairy gate.

As an aside I feel like that glimmer in the air left behind is going to be rather important later on.

### *Darkening*

Yeaah, this area is already pretty close to that forest where the barrier to arcadia is thin enough for the wild hunt to come out and play regularly, and now Cat just punched a giant hole in it. I imagine that's gonna have effects.

### *Dainpdf*

I thought this was a Light thing. The Light has been known to repel sorcery (the runes in Callowan knight armor, the priests making scrying impossible, etc).

### *Anna*

To think the war could be over by this time tomorrow. Alas, won't happen. Poor Cat, things never go quite right enough for her.

### *Edward Tumbaga*

I wonder if Black's army will leave their position and join Catherine's army via portal. Larat can gate Black's army, destroy Malanza's, then the combined forces can meet the other army under Klaus. It will take many days for Klaus' army to march to Malanza's location and the combined villain army will have destroyed Malanza by then.

### *Decius*

Thief, being a good spymistress, is going to make sure that the envoy sees exactly what she wants them to: A wounded but still capable Duchess of Winter.

The Grey Pilgrim will, of course, see through the ruse. He will also be convinced that the correct choice for the Crusade is to retreat, and later to take Cat up on her offer to help assault the Tower.

### *grzecho2222*

They do have one short part-fae girl, who was getting wierdly small screentime, whose death to assasination on negotiations would spark series of catastrophies

### *Morgenstern*

Also true. Although the Pilgrim has met Cat in person several times now. He'd probably not be deluded by that, either.

### *Burnsy*

They talk about murdering thousands of people by bow as if it's something to be proud of, then judge Catherine as a monster because she did it with one blow.

They know she offered repeatedly to help them if they'd just stop invading her country and they still see her as the bad guy.

I cannot stand the hypocrisy of these people, least of all because it's so goddamn realistic.

*Anon*

Agreed on the hypocrisy note – though it does perhaps bear mentioning that Melanza was actually considering Cat's offer of foodstuffs if they did retreat.

She'll likely never get over her loss of so many men though, despite being willing to lose similar, if not the same, amount of men in sieging Cat's army.

*White*

Indeed, the hypocrisy is sickening. In the same breath the Princes go from talking about what a great gambit Rozala had to kill thousands of crossbow men, to calling Cat evil for having the temerity to fight back. They just used miracles to assist in slaughter and yet the idea of Faery Gates turned to the same end is somehow sickening?

I'm disappointed in Rozala and Pilgrim. Especially Pilgrim.

Finally, I think it's kind of amusing that the crusade is still counting on taking supplies from Cat's army. Between thief and goblin munitions, the only edible thing that will be left in that camp come victory will be the bodies the crusaders had to walk over. Even if Cat's not there to pull the trigger, Juniper is too sound a strategist to allow the Crusader's to regain supplies.

*Raved Thrad*

Yeah, the arrogance and hypocrisy are irritating, but then it's a testament to the author's skill that they can evoke such emotional responses from us, I think. It's starting to sound strident and annoying, though, every time the crusaders and heroes are basically complaining about how Cat and the Callowans (ooh, nice name for a band!) refuse to just lie down and die. Every time they meet, Pilgrim has basically said, in more ways than one, "You're evil and an abomination, you know that, right? And if you don't, well I'm telling you that so you can feel bad and want to die. Would it hurt you so much if you just stood still while I ran you through? You know, so that everyone will be happy."

### *Pilgrim the White*

You see too much from Cat's perspective. Invaders used miracles, true but they still used soldiers to kill soldiers. That's war, it's ugly but it's known. Cat just killed thousands outright in seconds and they were powerless in front of it. Don't look at it like one side killed x amount the other side also x amount so it's equal, context matters. Think of it like Usa droppin the effin nuke. It's evil by our standards of today, no doubt.

Also Cat is a villain and you gettin surprised by Pilgrim referring to her as evil is just... Not to mention he simply says "greater evils than Cat are on the way", that should be taken as a compliment .... Pilgrim is the most level headed and reasonable person on both sides of the story .

Don't let the narrative cloud your judgement.

### *Lucas*

Not only that but monster is also a way of saying she is really strong.

### *Slide*

Don't you know that once you believe you've been sanctioned by the gods above, whatever you do in their name is instantly the 'right thing' and 'right way' (TM). And anybody who opposes you is automatically 'evil'.

Holy Wars have no hypocrites.

And random aside I think it's sweet how Thief is standing guard over Catherine. Also interesting to see how differently Juniper and her see things. And how they have no room to see each other's viewpoints. Eerily like a mini good and evil unable to see eye to eye.

### *RanVor*

That's pretty much war in a nutshell. "When we kill your guys, it's righteous and justified. When you kill our guys, it's vile." It's not limited to heroes in any way.

### [StiozZ](#)

The difference between a terrorist and a revolutionary is a matter of perspective.

### *Raved Thrad*

Or conquerors and liberators.

### *Dainpdf*

There are ways and ways to kill. Some would argue there is a difference between ordering people to the battlefield and deploying a weapon of mass destruction.

For one, Malanza needs some approval from her people to raise soldiers and do what she did. Cat, as far as the Princess knows, just has to will it.

I will concede that what Catherine's did is, in my opinion, not \*that\* bad. It's still terrifying and monstrous.

*BryceWilliam*

If Cat wakes up and doesn't have a new Name I'll cut off my pinky.

"She's having some weird dream"

Every fucking time she gets Name related changes its from a fucking Named dream, she's gonna wake up just as their about to lose horribly and be the fucking Faerie Queen or some shit.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Pretty sure next chapter will be about that, I think this is a dramatic moment enough for a Name to be awoken. My 2 cents is that it will be related to sacrifice and gaining knowledge, 2 things Cat are familiar with.

*Anon*

Normally I'd agree, but Cat's already been shown to get 'wonky' when her Dominion is affected, and the Grey Pilgrim just carved the sun (a metaphorical aspect of Summer) straight through her gates.

That, and 'dreaming' seems to be more an assumption of Jupiter and the Mages based on Cat's body warping around, and not some mystical insight into Cat's mind.

Plus, if Cat were to be 're'-named now, IMO it would be moreso Creation trying to re-assert dominion on her to prevent Arcadia-based shenanigans from getting too out of control, than Cat getting a full-on Fairy 'name'.

*danh3107*

I know this sounds bad, but honestly, I don't care if it's creation trying to re-assert control over Cat. This fae abomination thing has just gotten really old and boring, real quick.

[\*benthelynx\*](#)

For you perhaps. I like it :p

*Agent J*

Boring for some, maybe. I greatly prefer this to having some random name slapped on her as a power boost. Especially if it comes at the cost of her free will. When she gets reNamed, I expect there to be greater narrative weight than merely a losing battle.

Like if the Heroes break and call on an angel to Judge her and she gains a Name to Reject their Judgement. Or if the Gods Bellow spit out Triumphant and her Hellish Legions as answer to the Gods Above and their Righteous Crusade, once again turning Callow into a battlefield for the eldritch to settle their squabbles and Cat has to gain a Name tear them all down and reassert the Laws of Men over her sovereign domain.

The Queen of Winter should not get a name until it is narratively appropriate. And this battle doesn't have the narrative weight for a name gain to be satisfying.

*Raved Thrad*

If the heroes or crusaders (lots of priests there, who knows?) call on an angel, then they've just broken the terms of the fight, and all bets are off. I wonder how heroes breaking their word affects the narrative...

*Dainpdf*

I suspect she won't get a Name now. We haven't even had time to really explore her powers yet.

If she does get a Name, I assume it'll be Queen of some sort, and in Liesse. Because she was already offered that name there twice. Once when received an offer by the angels, and once when she was about to accept Malicia get Akua's weapon.

*Agent J*

That's a very interesting point. I just noticed that Cat has rejected or lost both the names of a Heroic Queen and a Villainous Queen. A third Queen title popping up in Liesse would likely be Neutral, keeping in line with Cat's Fuck the Gods motto and allowing her to carve her own path outside the purview of the squabbling gods.

*Unorginal*

We know Greyknight is not possible, (from a WOG) because there is no cultural inertia, no drive behind the formation of a Name there and in much the same way its more than likely that the same could be said of any neutral queenly

name. We haven't yet found an ingrained cultural drive to create the grey\*whatever name.

Unless something in the story lets her step around that... then no dice. There won't be a grey-queen name.

### *Burdi*

whatever template that is become of catherine's body is broken thats why her body confuse how to remake her body because the file is corrupted

cat need to make a new file for her body blueprint so it can has a form

and the good news is that there are a chance for cat to make her height added a few inch

so her leg can became longer so she can run faster if needed

### *Raved Thrad*

"Instead of a Carrion Lord, you would set up a Black Queen. And I will not be terrible, but I shall be beautiful as the morning and the night! And tall! I will be tall for once, dammit!"

### *Raved Thrad*

The sheer arrogance of the crusader forces never ceases to astound me. Basically, Malanza was going "How dare this monster kill so many of my soldiers! My self-image is in tatters! I'm so hurt and offended I need a safe space! It's not like I killed an entire seventh of her army by hemming them in with priest spells and mowing them down when they couldn't run, right?"

Welcome to the horror of war. Go home, maybe you'll live to tell your children of the time you tried to invade and chop up another person's home kingdom, y'know, "for the good of everyone."

Except the dead. The dead don't care.

### *Unorginal*

Give her a little credit, it wasn't up until now that she believed she was doing a \*good\* thing by invading Callow. For her, she was confident this would merely be the avenue through which she might someday gain revenge. She had no illusions about the 'goodness' of her campaign.

And it wasn't arrogance. Catherine's troops may be better but the problem with elite-small forces (and they don't even qualify as truly elite.) is that they have this inability to absorb losses. The Crusader Army would have won in almost any world where Named didn't exist. They've got men, officers, priests and (admittedly shitty) mages to spare while the loss



of every single soldier in the army of callow is keenly felt, much less the harder to replace officers and mages of callow.

We've also been spoiled by the fact that we're readers. Maz had no idea that this could conceivably happen, she's Proceran, they don't do Named often and this magnificent wrecking ball of a move has for the first time in her life made her aware of just how small she is in the grand scope of things. No one deals with that well, especially someone who's always been so confident that they are important and no reader here including myself would be dealing with the situation any better if they were to fill Maz's shoes.

Maybe I'm a little sympathetic because of how this sudden realization hit me in real-life too, nearly died in an industrial explosion (chemical storage facility, TJ, China.) that destroyed windows of my apartment several kilometers away and knocked me down from a standing position. If I had walked too much closer I would be dead as well, every fire-fighter on site and more than a few police officers in a nearby station were pretty much vaporized instantly when water mixed with whatever the fuck was inside the warehouse.

#### *Unorginal*

Addition: Worst part about that entire fuck-up was that somebody had decided to bribe local officials to look the other way about the storage conditions in the warehouse and so when the fire-fighters arrived no one bothered to tell them that it was a warehouse filled with industrial chemicals.

#### *Raved Thrad*

I have no idea how I'd react to that, but I get that it affected you greatly. I have nearly died a couple of times, all because of something stupid I did (though whether or not it was ultimately justified is something I'll leave in the air :P). To just barely escape instant, ugly death, however, without warning and due to no fault of your own, that's something I have managed to avoid so far.

#### *ParadoxicalThought*

Malanza sounds like a Lannister with all this talk of always paying debts

#### *Nguyen Hong Hai*

At least the lady got actual talent to back up for it and do note that while Cat got a dependable and loyal crew to rely on, Malanza got stuck with a bunch of motleys and backstabbers,

also drinking the Goodness Kool-Aids for who knows how long so this is as good as vanilla human can reach.

*grzecho2222*

I'm not sure if talking about debts is smart when your plans made Black Queen an arm and legs

*SpeckofStardust*

To be the spoil sport here, I think she'll get up when the gray pilgrim due to here fae survival instincts (we all no she wasn't born with any)

[Antony444](#)

It's amusing how much the Procerans are terrified of Catherine when they have the Grey Pilgrim able to shatter gates of this power, the Saint able to cut icebergs with a simple sword and heroes able to survive in conditions where a soldier is absolutely dead meat.

Catherine's price for this power is basically to turn herself in an eldritch abomination. The heroes have just to survive and get older.

I'm a bit surprised though the Crusaders think that if two of the Woe are out of the way, they can start a new battle and win. They have heroes, it is true. But their numerical advantage has been in great part completely annihilated by this tidal wave. Worse, you can do all the speeches and heavenly blessing you want, the fact is the troops took a monumental beating and certainly won't be in the mood to march again the next morning.

The army of Prince Amadis needs a lot of food, fire, sustenance and comfort right now, not another battle. On the other side, they have an Army of Callow which has just lost its vanguard but whose main body and fortifications are intact.

Worse, Larat is alive. In the worst case, Juniper can always order a retreat a day or two south and the supplies of Malanza will be further depleted.

They have the Army of Daoine in their rear, either to block the Stairway or to fall on their levies fleeing from this massacre. The Procerans have just lost quantities of officers in the camps, and the regimental structure has just been pulverised. They are a few days away from complete starvation and even a victory may not change this situation.

You can have the angels on your side, but now unless the next miracle is an entire supply convoy the chances of victory are next to nonexistent.

*Letouriste*

Why hakram And Archer were not present? I know hakram was taking care of liesse but an army take precedent and cat could have made

a gate for him (the invaders have taken their sweet time to arrive) and Archer was spying on the heroes right? So she should be around.

### *Storyaddict*

First I thought why another interlude? It just got interesting. Now i see it as a great way to showcase the aftermath of the gate. Superbly done!

Truly satisfying was the fact, that despite all their cheats, the so called „good“ side was beaten back by solid tactics, like cutting the supplies, affecting morales with a terrifying gate and the sheer surprise of it. It came to pass at a cost but still.

To all those crying for cat to get a name please reconsider, for any name comes with drawback when the Named is not acting in the spirit of the name. Black queen is squeamish about bonfire? Power loss. Offering retreat after invading her country? Power loss. That is not a villain in the eyes of creation. Her being part fae allows for more power, as the backlash of the portal interruption would have killed even Black, AND she can act outside of the typical villain vs hero circus in creation.

Has cat only used the power of a duchesse and not a queen? Because nighfall said, a queen needs a court.

Please stick with the winter stuff and the eldritch abomination. Its way more intresting. Go queen of winter!

### *Dainpdf*

Well, Black is not particularly powerful. He's particularly cunning. But yeah, apparently the backlash would have killed the Warlock, and it almost killed Mas ego (gotta remember it was split two ways).

On the topic of binding, I'd say being fae binds her tighter than any Name could.

### *Raved Thrad*

On second reading, a couple of things stand out to me: first is the quality of Rozala Malanza. I cannot say whether or not she is a \_good\_ person, but it is clear she is an honorable one. Of all the scheming Proceran nobles tied up in this game of thrones (or game of houses, depending on which fantasy series reference you prefer), she strikes me as someone to follow and die for. She reminds me of the Atreides from Frank Herbert's Dune novels. The very fact that she's not willing to just order her soldiers to their deaths, and that she actually got her hands dirty trying to rescue and help people after after Catherine and Masego's Summon Icy Lake spell hit. Her inner monologue indicates that she felt

she had to shame the other nobles into doing so; that right there indicates that she has a clear idea of what kind of leader she wants to be.

Second is the oath between Malanza and the Pilgrim. While they can't seem to get over their "we're here to kill and enslave you, it's for your own good" attitude towards Catherine and the rest of Callow, I'm hoping this gives her and the Pilgrim an out. While I don't see the Pilgrim being able to personally abandon his personal quest to root out the evil that he sees in Catherine, Malanza's willingness to suffer personal and political ruin to uphold her oath opens the possibility to Cat convincing the Pilgrim to tell her, and by extension her army, to go home.

As for Malanza swearing undying enmity towards Catherine, well, that would make for a wonderful story of two people caught up in conflict due to their heroic flaws and natures: Catherine's is that she does what she does, up to and including the most monstrous of deeds, because she's trying to stop the suffering of her people, while Malanza, from what we've seen here, is driven both by her personal honor and what she sees as personal debts. Honor and obligation, the Japanese concept of giri. Greater tales of honor, personal triumph, and tragedy have been written with less.

[benthelynx](#)

I'm going to be disappointed by the lack of zombie goats in this battle.

*grzecho2222*

There are thousands of dead in ice cold swamp (first Name dream happend in swamp) who may rise their objections toward Prnicess's tactics

*Phantom*

I felt that there's a few discrepancies in this chapter that maybe akin to plot hole unless someone can help to explain or clarify it.

First, is that I find it quite illogical for the heroes to still even be able to do anything when the lake water was pumping out. People around the mages, priests and heroes are drowning and yet the priests were still able to cast spells while in water? While drowning or swimming? Can they even do that? That applies to the heroes too, slashing glaciers and shooting beams, while they are maybe doing it while probably standing on water? Last I read, the lake's ice waters were able to reach all way to the army's fortifications, the ones in the direction that the heroes heading towards. Which under the water rush that still had enough force that make some parts of the palisade broke.

If I read it this way, it just make sense how the heroes and soldiers were not flushed to the front of the fortification already or crushed under the water volume pressure. What's more the chapter didn't even explain how the hero could even do what they did but just stating that they did it...

Second, shouldn't the gate Cat opened under the lake be just like any other typical portals she had opened before? Maybe slightly larger, but she opened gates big enough for armies to pass through and this time, it only allowing ice water to pass through.

If that's the case, there's been a lot times where she had opened gates near heroes or allowed them the chance to do so. Shouldn't the heroes just be able to knocked her out before is they just disrupt her opening gates?

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Priests weren't anywhere in sight when the army started advancing, so they're likely to have been in the back of the host. As for the gates, there must be a difference in investment into a smaller gate to a random unoccupied part of Arcadia and a mile-wide hole in the sky opened with a dimension-scrying ritual away from the caster.

#### *Phantom*

That may possibly apply for the priests, but I doubt it would still be possible for the heroes who were almost directly under the water drop though

#### *grzecho2222*

Battlefield turned into cold swamp full of corpses, first Name dream happened to include cold swamp full of undead, what are chances that something happens to dead or worse (for Good) that something will use this similarity to escape from Cat's dream?

#### *narcoduck*

I'm betting on a Name dream (the symbolic soul-searching quest), but not what we've been used to. As others have pointed out, Cat's trial to become the Squire involved a swamp full of the undead because she has "this belief that nothing worth having can be had easily" (Book1:Chapter5 role).

But Cat isn't human anymore. She is a Dreaming Fae; "A madman [who] thinks the world other than what it is, and in a mortal that is a harmless thing. Not so in one who molds Creation to their will, as all Named do."

—King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

I think we're about to see the Enemy Without (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/EnemyWithout>); Good Cat and Evil Cat are about to come out to play, and we'll see whatever happened to Cat's Beast of a Name after Winter's coronation in her soul.

[BarthHumphries](#)

Typo thread:

The orc had learned to set aside most the dislike of Callowans  
Add of after most

She knew hat humans did not have the same  
Change hat to that

The Princess of Aequitan was still sure at least thousand levies  
Add a after at

and she could already heal the other royals howling  
Change heal to hear

but looking at the exhausted old man who looked like was folding  
into himself  
Add he after like

Come on, people, just make a typo thread first thing each time.  
:p

[BarthHumphries](#)

The Princess of Aequitan was still sure at least thousand  
levies  
Add a after at  
Whoops, i meant after least

Aze

Y'know there is a missing member of the Woe : maybe we will see  
Hakram pull out a 'Ride of the Rohirrim' while Masego and Cat  
sleep, he has a few thousands soldiers if I am not mistaken

And I really hope that the Wild Hunt will not start their  
expected betrayal now that their Queen isn't there to stop them

*thegreatfeed*

I just loved that subtle tipping of the scales by heaven. A moral  
destroying attack results on the crusader front becoming United.  
And that arrogant mazela willing to take the retreat deal but  
still thinking of vengeance.

[BarthHumphries](#)

Morale destroying. They presumably still have their morals. 😊

### *Archaic*

While I don't think Cat is necessarily going to get her new name straight away, I can't help but see some parallels to a certain myth that might indicate where a new name could come from. So... stop me if you've heard this one before.

Orphaned at a young age, they are taken in by a person they quickly start to see as a father figure. This mentor doesn't just try to teach them the way of the sword, but also to instill in them certain values which will be invaluable to them once they take their place as a leader of the country of their birth. In particular, attitudes to war which can almost be boiled down to using war as a tool to achieve a final lasting peace (specifically, under one's own rule). They do not suggest that might makes right so much as they imply that one must harness (destructive) might to enforce/implement the cause of the right.

Put up against a number of threats to their homeland, one of their most prominent and foes is a strong and assertive magic wielding woman who comes from a background of nobility. Through their actions, this foe plunges the protagonists homeland into virtual civil war. This individual had a kind of special tie to our protagonist, and is strongly associated with the fae.

Establishing their credentials to rule over their homeland, our orphan pulls a special sword from a stone. But this particular sword was special to them only in this context. It was not the weapon that our protagonist would eventually be best known for (and notably, their acquisition of that involves a large body of water...).

The orphan eventually discovers their "real father", and inherits their birthright. By the time they've established their rule over their country of birth, the orphan has surrounded themselves with a group of followers, including several renowned warriors whose mere name strikes fear into the hearts of their enemies.

Due to their possession of a certain thing with fae origins, our protagonist essentially has the ability to recover from any wound, with time. They don't even truly bleed. But when this is suddenly and unexpectedly taken away from them, they're able to be grievously wounded. Being taken away to the lands of the fae, they return in the hour of their country's greatest need, acting to defend it against invaders.

Or to put it more bluntly....it sounds to me like Catherine is the Once and Future Queen.

### *Jack*

"We'd prepared for many things, Your Grace," the Rogue quietly said. "But the sky opening up to drop a lake was beyond our predictions. There is no fault in this, save in believing that our opponent would not be so monstrous."

Man, these guys have no idea how many plans she vetoed before coming onto one as 'nice' as this, do they?

*Rodrigues*

In this context I think monstrous is referring to 'super strong'

*Raved Thrad*

So, better than Amazing, but not quite Unearthly? 😊

*patrar*

When will you learn, Cat? The Wending Heart was never a good place for you. You killed your 'father' then lost your heart the first time. You lost control over your name and body the second time. Now this.

Is this a Rule of Three battle of attrition between Catherine Founding and the Wending Heart? Hopefully that awful lake is now permanently drained dead.

*Max Scherer*

This chapter shows why i hate the good side. They are so fucking hypocritical. Yeah she killed thousand, but they would do the same and its war and they are invading. So yeah fuck the good site.

[vuthuha912](#)

You know Princess. I would be angry too. But you really should consider whether continuing the invasion is worth the manpower. May I remind you that your army consists of priests, farmers, craftsmen, and veterans? All of these people can come back home, work the farm, work the forge and revitalize the economy that was wrecked by the civil war. A few decades more and the population will recover. What are you guys doing in the middle of a foreign country that never attack you before? The morale of the army is quite down right now. They must be homesick too. Just let your men go home to their families.

Let the East deal with their own problems. You are in no position to guarantee a decisive victory. Even if you manage to win, it might not even be worth it. Stopping Evil is not as important as the economy.



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## Interlude: Kaleidoscope II

*"Fear is the mother of character. Without it we remain children until death."*

-Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

Vivienne had once spent a few days running a shell game in the streets of Southpool, when she'd still been an apprentice under the Guild. It hadn't been about the coin, for she could have made a hundred times the coppers from burgling a single noble house. Her teacher had teased her about it, calling her a petty hustler instead of a thief, but what she'd learned had been well worth a few sardonic comments. Confidence tricks were about sleight of hand, but also about reading the other side. Gauging how much of a taste you had to give them before the fleecing, how much you could squeeze out of them before things got ugly. She'd learned more about diplomacy over those three lazy days than through years of lessons. It was why she'd pressed to be the one sent to speak with the Proceran envoys, that and the undeniable fact that if Marshal Juniper went instead it would be a bloody disaster. The orc had a place as one of the larger cogs in the kingdom's machinery, but she was useless in all matters not military. That the Marshal of Callow seemed under the impression that her judgement off the battlefield should ever be seriously considered was just a mark of the greenskin's arrogance.

A child that screamed 'kill them all and eat them' every time you glanced at them would be about as useful.

Thief had been forced to lean on the open trust Catherine had shown her in the past to be nominated, and the heavy-handedness had won her no friends in the general staff – which essentially ran the camp while Cat slumbered. The usual deference shown to Named by mundane apparently thinned when said Named had been late to join the cause. Callowans listened to her, and her role as spymistress of the kingdom meant she had most everyone's ear, but there were few of her countrymen high up in the ranks save for Grandmaster Talbot. For all that the rank and file of the Army of Callow drew increasingly from her people, the senior officers were still largely from from the three legions Catherine had brought to her banner. Vivienne saw no need to take issue with that. Officers died and retired, and the Legions promoted strictly from within the ranks. Her countrymen would keep rising up the ladder until 'Army of Callow' was more than a name. Any halfway decent thief knew that patience was as useful a tool as action, and Vivienne was a better thief than most. More

importantly, after securing her role she'd had free hand to deal with the envoys as she wished.

First off, there would be no talk of allowing them into the camp. Let them remain outside under their banner with the morning sun pounding down. They'd shown up around Morning Bell, so Vivienne had let them stew outside for another hour. There was no guarantee she would manage to fool the opposition, and the longer they stayed there the better the chances of Catherine or Masego waking up. She'd not dared to let them wait longer than that. If she did, it might be recognized as the temporizing it was. An hour should just be taken as an insult instead of betraying the relative weakness of the Callowan position. She'd gone out alone to meet them, afterwards. Vivienne knew she could master her own body language if she concentrated, but anyone else was a risk. The two men were still standing when she arrived, and discreetly she studied them as she drew near. One was obvious, the wrinkly old man they knew as the Grey Pilgrim. The other was known to her as well, as it turned out. The distinct nose marked him as a relative of Prince Amadis Milenan and the long curly locks were distinctive enough she recognized them from a sketch her Jacks had obtained. Jacques Milenan, a younger cousin to the Prince of Iserre. His mother was... from an Alamans royal line, though she could not recall which one at the moment. The man was supposed to be high in Milenan's council. Which meant they were taking this seriously.

While she'd assessed them, they'd assessed her. The Pilgrim's face was perfectly calm, a mask she suspected he'd worn for so long there had come to be some truth to it. Vivienne knew something of pretending to be someone for long enough the deception grew roots and leaves. Thief swaggered forward, producing her flask and pulling at the brandy inside. She sloppily wiped her mouth after and silently used her aspect to trade the flask for an identical one that was the same drink, only heavily watered. Now she just had to let her breath do the lying, and they'd assume her to be less sober than she truly was. The Wandering Bard had taught her the uses of fooling others into thinking you an incompetent drunk.

"Greetings," the Proceran said, inclining his head. "I am--"

"Jacques Milenan," Thief interrupted lightly. "I know who you are, crusader."

"And you are the Thief," the Pilgrim said calmly.

He was leaning on his staff, Vivienne noted as she approached. Genuine tiredness or a ploy?

"That's me," she chuckled, making sure the breeze carried the smell of brandy.

She drank from the switched flask. The mundane envoy did not quite manage to hide his disdain.

"Request was made to treat with the Black Queen herself," the Pilgrim said.

"That's funny," Thief said. "That you think you're still in a position to make demands, I mean. I was under the impression a fifth of your army got wiped and you were one week away from beginning to dabble with cannibalism."

"Has the queen refused to receive us, then?" the Pilgrim asked.

"Your side sends some spare kinsman and a man who tried to kill her, then expect Catherine to come out to make small talk?" Vivienne snorted. "I thought high-handed arrogance was a Proceran specialty, Pilgrim."

"If you will not treat in good will, there is no need to treat at all," the Milenan said flatly.

She shrugged.

"So walk," she said. "How much good will do you think you've *earned*, princeling? You invade our kingdom, attempt murder of our anointed queen and all the while plan to carve up our lands to dispense as favours. If every last one of you dies drowning, I will not shed a damned tear over it."

The old man's eyes narrowed. Not because of her words, at least not exactly. Because he'd been able to tell she was speaking the truth. He'd not expected a former heroine, if she'd ever truly been that, to say as much. The very reason Vivienne had said it: she needed to confirm whether or not he could still discern truth from lies, and the sentence was incendiary enough it should garner reaction. *Good*. She had confirmed it. *Bad*. He still had the ability, even when visibly tired. That complicated things, not that she'd expected the Heavens to provide relief. She wasn't hanging with a crowd on their good side, nowadays.

"Negotiations with a lieutenant would not be binding," the Pilgrim said.

"I can speak with my queen's authority," Vivienne said, and it was technically true.

She watched the hero closely as she spoke, trying to find out if that would register as lie. She'd never actually said that Catherine had given her mandate today, and in theory it wasn't impossible for the Queen of Callow to grant this particular authority to her one day. The old man's face remained unmoving, but that told her nothing. He was too clever to be caught through a visible tell twice.

"My instructions," Jacques Milenan said, "are to treat with none but the Black Queen herself."

"Black Queen's not coming out for the likes of you," Thief said, another technical truth. "Come back with your cousin or Princess Malanza and the matter will be reconsidered."

If that worked, it might get them through the morning before the enemy realized a game was afoot. If it didn't, well, all they had was suspicions. They had to be wary of a repeat of yesterday.

"This is not how proper diplomacy is conducted," the Proceran stiffly said.

Vivienne toasted him with her flask.

"You'll note my Name is not 'the Diplomat'," she replied, and took another pull.

She could feel the Pilgrim's eyes on her. Searching, measuring.

"Then I would request audience with the queen personally," the old man said.

"Unless you've suddenly gained a principality or right of command over the host, your function here is purely decorative," Thief replied. "As far as I'm concerned you have no right to make that request."

The hero sighed.

"I am willing to provide healing to wounded in exchange for the audience," he said.

"Chosen," the Proceran said. "Surely you cannot be serious."

Thief drank from the flask again so her face would not be visible to read. This... Would Catherine and Masego qualify as wounded? She was not certain they would. And if they didn't, she would be revealing their state for no gain. It would also mean taking the man at his word, which she hesitated to do. She'd ran with William's crew long enough to know some of the more pragmatic heroes had notions about whether promises made to the Enemy needed to be kept. On the other hand, if those two could be healed most of the army's problems went away. That, she decided, was worth the risk. The flask left her lips.

"An oath to the Heavens," she said. "Of my own wording."

"No," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"Fine," she conceded, idly waving her drink. "We can word it together."

"You misunderstand me, child," the old man said. "There will be no healing."

"No audience either, then," she shrugged. "We'll expect an answer within the hour about whether or not Prince Milenan or Princess Malanza will be coming."

"That will not happen either," the Pilgrim said calmly. "You have betrayed yourself."

Vivienne's heartbeat quickened, but she kept her face smiling.

"Have I?" she drawled. "Then, by all means, take another swing. After you're driven back, expect the cost of supplies to rise accordingly."

The old man met her eyes with equanimity.

"You were a heroine, once," he said.

"And just like that, you lost my interest," Thief said. "See you around, gentlemen. I'd recommend your backers check on the state of their coffers before ordering an offensive. My heart would just weep if the price of retreat was destitution."

And with that last lie ringing in the air, she turned and swaggered away. *Shit*. She'd been had. She'd put a good face on it, but on someone like the Grey Pilgrim the odds of it fooling him were depressingly low. *Fuck*.

Time to see how well they could bluff with an empty hand, then.

—

"She will be incapacitated," Tariq said. "Not dead, for the Thief still had hope, but the Black Queen was hurt by the shattering of the gate."

Princess Rozala considered the matter with due seriousness, to his approval. The young woman had been robbed of true morals by her uprising, but her mother had instilled her with a sense of honour and duty that allowed some small sliver of them to remain. She was forgiven this, for the fault was not her own. Children could not help what they were taught. Tariq held great hopes that the horrors of this war and the others to come would allow her to grow into the woman she could have been. It was a small thing, in this sea of darkness, but every speck of light drove back the night. It did not matter that the candle was small or passing, only that it burned. It was good to remember old wisdom, in days like these. The well-worn truths helped bring perspective to it all. Creation was imperfect, and would be until its very last breath. All the Heavens required of their children was to leave

it a little brighter than they had found it. *A hundred thousand pebbles make a tower, one piece at a time.*

"Then we resume our offensive," Princess Rozala said quietly. "Gods forgive us all, if we are wrong."

The old man stilled his tongue as the Princess of Aquitan began discussing marching orders, watching the men and women at the table. These four, two princes and two princesses, were the mortal heart of this crusade. Or at least the part of it here in the north. Prince Amadis Milenan held the most sway, and it was to him the First Prince had granted command, but the Iserran had become almost self-effacing since the butchery of yesterday. He deferred to the general of the host in all things, and in him Tariq read both fear and cunning. The possibility of defeat, before thought absurd, had shaken him. Yet he was also subtly inviting Princess Rozala to overstep her authority, to further isolate herself from the other royals of the host by giving unpopular orders. Even now that he had glimpsed the abyss, the man schemed. The rot went deep in this one. *Though we be flawed instruments, we may yet serve greater purpose*, the Pilgrim chided himself. Imperfection was not sin but the very design of the Gods. Salvation without temptation was meaningless. The failure of a man to recognize his weakness should be met with pity and not blame.

The other two royals were smaller flames to these two, he would admit. Princess Adeline of Orne was young in a way that had little to do with age, and still bleeding from her brother's death. He grieved with her for the loss, though he'd not known the man. The wake of his passing was recommendation enough for his nature. The princess sought alliance with Princess Rozala, and Tariq read admiration in Adeline's heart when she gazed at the other woman. There could be friendship forged there, if trust bloomed, and they would both be happier for it. The Pilgrim half-smiled. Perhaps a helping hand could be leant to the matter. The last was Prince Arnaud of Cantal, and what the old man glimpsed there had surprised him. Laurence was a creature of pure instinct, having spent her lifetime blurring the boundary between thought and act, and her intuition was a sharp thing. Yet the Pilgrim had doubted her, when she'd said that one was the most dangerous of the lot. No longer so now that he had gazed within. All that lay there was patience and the utter absence of emotion. Tariq watched as the man blustered, speaking foolishly of sweeping advance, and how all the others dismissed him in their eyes. Even Prince Amadis, who thought himself the cleverest of them all.

All the others had warmed to Tariq, after Laurence acted as offensively in councils as she could. Offered him trust, treated him as the man of reason holding back the reckless Saint of Swords. All of them save Prince Arnaud of Cantal.

"I trust the Chosen will participate in the assault?" Prince Amadis asked.

Face never betraying that his attention had waned, the Pilgrim nodded.

"I have already spoken with Laurence," he said. "Save for the Rogue Sorcerer and the Forsworn Healer, we will split with the armies and fight with the soldiers."

Queen Catherine had brutalized the children, but not beyond repair. Antoine's arm had been reattached, and another greatsword found for him to wield. With the coming of dawn, Tariq had been able to Forgive the death of Mansurin. The young man, displaying the famous fortitude of the Champion lines, had only been spurred to greater zeal by his stay Above. Little Sidonia, with her laughing eyes and quick wit, would have to remain under shroud of preservation until tomorrow. The Pilgrim still ached at the memory of seeing the young heroes reaped like wheat as he was held back by the Hierophant. He and Laurence had known that the best chance to spare lives was to slay the Black Queen early in the battle, and that to draw her out the children were the one bait she would not refuse. He regretted it still. Resurrection left a scar on the soul, always. No one could be ripped from the embrace of the Gods without finding Creation and faded and brutish place for the rest of their days, even if the memory of the Heavens was withheld. The Pilgrim excused himself as the council ended, paying due courtesies before returning to his own.

He found Laurence standing by the marshlands madness had made, repeatedly taking her sword an inch out of the sheath and sliding it back down. She was uneasy, then. Tariq came to stand by her side but did not speak. She would do so herself, when she was ready.

"I don't like this," the Saint finally said. "Feels wrong."

He did not contradict her. Though Tariq had been granted insights, they were into the souls of mortals. Laurence de Montfort's strength had come differently. Her sword had reached the Heavens, and by touching the divine with steel she had attained a sensitivity to the lay of Creation he had never seen the equal of in all his years. If she was troubled, there was reason for it.

"She may rise," the Pilgrim said. "The shape of it is there. Wounded or unconscious, those she loves besieged, she may return to offer salvation at the darkest hour."

"And that's not a villain's story, Tariq," the woman grunted. "She's hard to predict, and that'll get people killed. You're sure about what you saw?"

The Grey Pilgrim let out a tired breath.

"What Catherine Foundling craves above all is peace," he murmured. "On chosen terms, perhaps, but peace nonetheless."

His heart had broken a little to see it. That even though she had butchered all that she was, the little girl within was still desperately grasping at the light she'd once glimpsed Above.

"She killed thousands," Laurence said. "And she'll kill more, if she squeaks away here. Compassion's not my wheelhouse, but whoever made her into what she is deserves a slow and painful death. She's been twisted. No one sane would ever do what she did to her own soul."

The child herself, the Pilgrim suspected, would be infuriated to hear someone speak of her that way. Her embrace of her own mistakes rivalled any flagellant's.

"It is going to be a long war," Tariq whispered, the weight of the years heavy on his shoulders.

"Longer for us than most," Laurence replied, barking out a laugh. "We'll be part of the five, old friend. You can be sure of it. I already feel the pull."

The Pilgrim looked up at mockingly sunny skies. There would be a time, after the war turned here and the Red Flower Vales broke, where the Heavens would assemble their sharpest blade. The ancient forms would be observed. Five heroes, sent into the breach to quell the howling dark. Young Hanno would lead them, for the Seraphim had shaped him to the duty. As for the faces of the others, they could only guess. That charming young Valiant Champion was likely, as she'd followed the White Knight before. And there would have to be a practitioner. The most powerful of these was the Witch of the Woods, should she survive her confrontation with the Warlock. *And the two of us*, the Pilgrim added silently. *Relics of an age already past, dusted off one last time.* There was always a price to pay, to end the rise of Evil. Tariq hoped it was the two of them instead of young lives cut down before their prime.

"She'll be there too," Tariq said. "She always is."

"Surprised she hasn't dropped in yet," the Saint admitted. "But it doesn't smell like a brewery, and that's fairly telling."

"That worries me as much as your unease," the Pilgrim said. "For if she has not yet appeared..."

"The worse is yet to come," Laurence finished. "There's a cheerful thought."



She sighed and stretched her limbs.

"Well, no point putting it off," she said. "Let's go kill some people."

So spoke Saint of Swords. The Regicide, to the Principate. The Smiling Iron, to the Chain of Hunger. The Fool-That-Cut-Nothing, to no one still living.

"Let's put an end to this war," he replied. "Before it gets worse."

So spoke the Grey Pilgrim, whose names were too many to number. Fleet-foot and Patient Hand, the Kindly Stranger and the Peregrine.

Silence followed and legends went to war.

---

*JD*

You have some skill, Thief, but you'll need to wake up earlier than that to get one by the earthly personification of Wise Old Man

*danh3107*

And lo were my balls blue once more...

But instead of pure blue ballery this interlude is more like being edged, because damn if it wasn't a pretty good chapter.

*naturalnuke*

I love it.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

I like how they're acknowledging that Cat doesn't have a Villain story. That's most of what her setup for this book has been.

[wyaldriddler](#)

I like Tariq, but not even he can see the full picture, though he seems to be kind of trying.

Also Gods Below Thief, you had ONE JOB! :V

Ah well, makes things more interesting.

### oldschoolvillain

She had one job, and she did it damnably well. She just has the unfortunate position of being a lower level than the Pilgrim.

#### *Sniggs*

I dunno, I kinda thought she did a really shit job myself. She arrogantly walked into the meeting vs. a guy with limited mind reading abilities without even putting together the basics of a plan. Did she even consult Juniper, Aisha, Ratface, et al.? The former would have given her advice on when to keep her mouth shut instead of using back-alley bluffing techniques, so it'd have been harder for Thief to get caught in a lie. The latter two would have helped her anticipate likely strategies (like a healer offering them healing...), so Thief could have had a script to work off of.

Instead she got baited in via a pretty low-level greed play on Pilgrim's part, had to weigh the pros/cons on the spot (huge tell right there), and then finally accepted a "deal" that Cat would never in a million years have gone for. Letting a god-tier status Hero waltz into your base of operations to heal your redshirts? Really Thief?

I was supremely unimpressed with her. Not that it's necessarily her fault, since she's kinda low-level in general and inexperienced with these plays in particular, but her "I'll just wing it" arrogance was a tad infuriating.

Also, now that Cat's crew has determined that Heroes' cold-reading/mind-reading skills are both somewhat common and tend to be ridiculously effective at high levels, maybe it's time to start putting some contingencies in place? Like AI-in-a-box style ones? You can't get caught in a lie by the supernatural lie detector if you don't speak to them in the first place.

#### *Decius*

Thief's mistake was in bargaining for an audience. The right response to the offer of healing would be "I will tell the queen of your offer, but it will not be accepted unless you are willing to make an oath". Then go back, think out of sight of the guy with stacked Sense Motive, and work out what oath to demand that will have the desired effect (Grey Pilgrim makes Heroic Effort to recover Cat and Heirarch, and doesn't reveal their weakness in any case) without the demand of the oath revealing that those are the conditions.

But Thief thinks too quickly to not take the camp condition into account, but not quickly enough to outwit.

Alternately, work with mages on temporary memory alteration, and go out utterly convinced of what you want the enemy to believe.

*Hate from a smart phone*

it's not like she lied. Pilgrim saw a sliver of hope, that's all it took. That her bluff failed is more a testament of how ridiculous grey wizards are.

The alternatives would have been "normal people" vs Named and, frankly, Thief is the best at hiding stuff and, amongst the remaining staff, the best at handling "name" stuff overall. I don't think the other officers would have given such specific advices against healing bait.

And technically, she made them wait for a whole hour. So, not a complete fail. But then again, the weight of the current story makes such a wait inconsequential : at this point Catherine will wake when she is needed.

So yeah, Catherine would have certainly negotiated better, Hakram might have. Thief did a good try.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

Except it wasn't that she was caught in a lie, because she didn't actually lie. Her mistake was in thinking he could detect truth, where as he could actually detect emotion. He purposefully dangled powerful healing in front of her to see if she reacted with hope, despair, or mild interest, which would correspond to incapacitated, dead, or perfectly fine. It's a neat trick. He's also an asshole.

*Morgenstern*

Also, second what MagnaMalusLupus said, of course. 😊

*Morgenstern*

Redshirts? o0 She never ONCE considered healing \*redshirts\*. The only thing she greedily considered was forcing him to heal \*Cat and Masego\*. Those two are NOT redshirts in any sense any longer, even though they have not reached the level of the Calamities yet...

*usernamesbco*

She should have opened with acknowledging Cat was alive, and telling them what they really needed to worry about was whether Masego pulled through, because if he didn't Cat would brutally murder them all. Technically all true, and a good enough deflection.

When Pilgrim offered to heal him admit Cat would probably allow that, but Viv wasn't going to tell her he offered because Viv didn't trust him.

*Adra*

I can't really bring myself to blame her. We pretty much got confirmation in this chapter that Pilgrim has maxed out ranks on Sense Motive and a WIS-based class.

Also, if I read that right, his Forgive aspect can do the true resurrection that Masego was talking about a few chapters back.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Grey Pilgrim is true min-max here, although like Black we still haven't seen what his trade-offs are.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

One of Pilgrim's "blindnesses" is he is so focused on fighting the EVUL gods that oppose his GUD gods that he cannot see the evil that his side commits. If Procer conquers Callow, it could quite possibly be worse for Callow than when Praes conquered them.

*mavant*

That's not really a weakness in the munchkinry sense, so much as a personal weakness. The Black Knight trades reduced personal power for aspects that are useful in leading an army. The Pilgrim has extraordinary personal power both in direct combat (super lasers???) and in healing (one resurrection per day, even of someone who died a day or two prior?) and in diplomacy (Sense Motive maxed, as observed elsewhere). So what's his dump stat? Or is he too pure for tragic flaws?

*Ex*

As a Wise Old Man, Pilgrim doesn't necessarily have flaws or a dump stat. His actual tradeoff is that he has to die shortly after appearing on screen in order to further the story. Overpowered mentors exist for that purpose.

*TeK*

Thinking RPG-esque here, but he seems pretty well rounded on pretty every stat. So his dump stat might be luck, or it's being NPC, who can't act outside of scripted actions.

*grzecho2222*

He seems to lack anti-mob attacks, he deflecks, parries and has attack against single person but it seems like he has nothing against bunch of normal mortals

### Warriormonk

It is possible that he doesn't have any tragic flaws. It's not like all Names have access to the same amount of power, or must give up equally as much as they gain. Black Knight vs White Knight would be a fairer comparison to make, as opposed to the Black Knight vs Grey Pilgrim.

If you think the Grey Pilgrim is OP, think about the Dead King.

### *Quite Possibly A Cat*

I think that confirms he's a bit of a LOLHAKZ!!! sort.

### *Raved Thrad*

Does Catherine still have Take? If so, wouldn't it be fitting revenge for her to Take that away from Pilgrim? "I'm going to raise each and every one of my people you killed here. And then I'm going to make all your dead Rise. And then I'm going to show you what happens to people who invade my kingdom."

### *RanVor*

Unfortunately, she doesn't have aspects anymore.

### *Raved Thrad*

Sigh. Well, at least we can still look forward to the second part. A swarm of thousands of undead! Procer faces a zombie apocalypse! 😊

### *darkening*

Maybe she can make an artifact out of him to do it though. that's the power that replaced take after all.

### *Metrux*

That's not really a new power, and neither a replacement. She has replaced no aspect, because she is still transitioning into a new Name. This is just the result of her studies with Masego, learning to harness her Mantle as fae. Otherwise, yes, she can probably make some temporary artifact out of him, since all her artifacts made this way are temporary and limited, while still been usefull.

*Morgenstern*

Nah, "Take" was replaced by the Hunger of Winter. Winter devours (aka takes) everything. It just devours a bit more than Take ever did... including Cat's Name. Oops. But hey, she has Fae powers now, instead, that she only BARELY learned to control/exploit yet, so what the heck. She's way more powerful now. She just needs to be wary of the restrictions/pitfalls coming with being fae and allowing Winter too much reign, that's the trade-off, not losing less powerful aspects... She has everything she had before, including the self-healing, and MORE...

*Jonnnney*

Her entire training in diplomacy was running a shell game for 3 whole days. I sure as hell can fucking blame her for being too arrogant to even ask the opinion of a single living soul before trying to outwit a hero with 60 years of experience.

*MetruX*

I don't disagree she did wrong, but you're not seeing the whole picture. She WAS trained in diplomacy by the other thieves in the guild, she just noted that she learned more in those 3 days than all the years of training.

*Lance*

Would not be surprised if cat is part of the five

*Yotz*

Cat and Masego, I'd wager – they need a practitioner. Although a negligent possibility, it would be so glorious to see the Hierarch being the Fifth instead of the Bard.

*Raved Thrad*

I can just see the Hierarch quoting the laws of Glorious Bellerophon at their enemies, and Cat facestabbing them as they mill around in confusion.

*Blue*

Nope Catherine, The Dead King, and Triumphant , when she returns, will form their own party, and take apart the gods above and below because the gods are the real evil. Think Zion in Worm. All those granted powers but why??

[anigaming](#)

A part of me really wants the emotionless prince to be Assassin. Also, given how much the old heroes think the worst is yet to come, I'm betting either Masego or Cat come out of their stupor with something nasty. I'm curious what it will be though.

*forsheen*

I think they know that "Dread Empress Triumphant may she never return" is coming back from hell.

*Misterspokes*

The emotionless Prince is the Saint of Swords.

*Looking Glass*

No, the emotionless prince is a man, Prince Arnaud of Cantal. The Saint of Swords is a woman named Laurence.

*Stormblessed*

Tariq is kind and it makes him all the more dangerous.

*WuseMajor*

Iirc, the Choir of Compassion is supposed to be the highest of the heavens and the most powerful.

[ayon96](#)

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*Lucas*

Great chapter.

I like how the heroes can see that Cat doesn't have the usual villain story of obtaining power for power.

[ftaku](#)

"ShE KiLLEd ThouSaNDS" well duh it is war and she had to. Wonder how many the Saint of Swords has killed, it is probably more

*danh3107*

bUt NOt aLL At OnCe seems to be the main thing they're freaking out about

*The Chosen One*

Yeah, but if you think about it, walking onto the battlefield and drowning thousands of soldiers one at a time, with a bucket, might actually be more disturbing.

[vuthuha912](#)

Yeah, It is not that awful. If you think about it, Napoleon shoots at the ice to drown his enemy to achieve the same thing. Also, most naval battles can result in the same kind of casualty.

*werafdsaew*

> She may rise...she may return to offer salvation at the darkest hour.

Waking up in the nick of time with a powerup confirmed!

> She'll be there too

Ranger?

*danh3107*

Bard mate, they mention the brewery smell.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Nope. Someone that the Heroes have worked with in the past. Someone who has always fought hard – possibly harder than anyone else – to preserve the cause of Good. Some of the readers hate her, but she is, always has been, and always will be a Hero.

The Wandering Bard.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

I love the acknowledgement that the two Heroes give, and the mentions of the behind the scenes machinations that the Pilgrim has set in motion. All this time he's come across as a genuine All Loving Hero rather than a murderous Leroy Jenkins granted heavenly power. But all this time he's been working the Princes like Malicia or Cordelia. He's starting to show his dastardly side, and once a Hero gives a hint of that, they get a death flag with Catherine's name all over it. This, I think, was alluded to here – Saint said she could feel the pull towards her part in the final Five Man Band, but the Pilgrim made no such statement. I wonder – if the choice was between killing Catherine, or saving her so that she could take his place as a Hero in that group, which would he choose?

That said – something BAD is coming, and coming fast. Dead King? Maybe. Probably. He's been theorized to be the counterweight to the Wandering Bard, and according to the Heroes who appear to have worked with her before, she only shows up when the worst is about to occur. She might be down in the Red Flower Vales, fighting Black, but I doubt it. Showing up to the party to face



off with her supposed Counterpart? That smells like a Big Damn Heroes moment, and Tropes are where she lives.

*Mr. Nobody*

I've been saying this for a while now, but I'll say it again: Maybe the "Five-band man" pull she's feeling is because she WILL be part of one, though her role in the team is going to be "The Sword of Woe".(As an Artifact of Catherine)

Really, I just can't help but see Saint's confidence as a large death flag written "Aspect reserved for Catherine Foundling and waiting to be weaponized".

*RanVor*

Gods Above hate Catherine because her very existence defies them, and they're sore losers. They just can't stand not being in the right for once.

[Trikki](#)

Oh man, I haven't even thought about that yet, but . . . it would be SO awesome if Catherine received a "neutral" Name and became part of that Five Man Band of the Heroes, fighting Triumphant / the Dead King / whatever doom approaches. The interactions between the members of the group would be hilarious.

*RanVor*

Cat already is a part of a Five-Man Band. And I don't think it's possible, there's way too much bad blood between her and the Heroes to just forget everything that happened. Not to mention the Heavens would never allow their lackeys to team up with Cat.

*John Laing*

She's already got a title of fae nobility, which seems to be the closest thing to a "neutral Name" the setting's metaphysics can readily support.

*blarg*

Fae titles are divided by court. Her court, Winter, is the Arcadian equivalent to villainy, whereas Summer is the Arcadian equivalent to heroism. (Presumably the other two courts, of spring and autumn, have a similar dynamic.) She's not neutral in her power alignment, she's just the over-the-top fairy version of Evil instead of the regular mortal version.

*Metrux*

You readily forgot Ranger and some of her trainees. THEY are the neutral Names, although some of the trainees are either Heroes or Villains.

### *Taichi22*

The way I'm seeing this going in my head is Cat somehow shutting down both of the 5-man bands from the Gods Above and Below, either by brokering a peace or breaking their stories and killing them.

### *Yotz*

The Dead King starts the overwhelming invasion, throwing at opposition everything up to and including the mystical Teapot of Russ el Jameson.

Plot twist: the Dead Kingdom inhabitants are actually refugees – something (may it never return) is chasing them from their ancestral lands and Hells...

### *Raved Thrad*

That brings up an interesting point: for all their posturing now, why haven't the heroes ever done anything to try and unseat the Dead King? I don't see why they're so insistent that Catherine is a boil on the face of creation that needs to be lanced, when there's a sorcerer king with a kingdom of undead and a permanent gate to the hells at his command.

### [wyaldriddler](#)

At least four Crusades were launched at Keter. They all failed totally and made the Dead King stronger. This was actually discussed some time in Book 2 I believe.

### *Unorginal*

More than that even, hell one was eaten by a demon of absence and in story no one seems to remember it despite the naming schema missing one number. (I could be wrong about the demon though. if for so and so reason it's just simply taboo to bring it up or that is was so minor it wasn't worth mentioning.)

### *TeK*

Because since Terribilis II broke down Second and Third Crusade, every other one WAS about Dead King. They spent countless thousands of lives, without ever even breaching walls of Keter. Since Dead King is dormant for know, better deal with the threat, you can realistically deal with.

### *Trebar*

Also, necromancer. Each of those failed crusades got raised to increase the size of the Dead King's army. It's probably where he got many of those undead Heroes.

*Nethermore*

The Dead King as a counterweight to the Wandering Bard seemed unfair to me considering how Bard flits about and stacks the deck all over the globe apparently while the Dead King is just sitting on his ass, but when you consider that he's probably the only Named in his kingdom and repelled several crusades that totalled possibly scores of heroes by himself, things start to look more balanced.

Still doesn't keep the Bard from being insufferable, though.

*Morgenstern*

I rather think we're still seeing the effect(s) of Hierarch shutting down the Wandering Bard that the two old legendary heroes are wondering about here, as they do not yet know about it. Keep in mind that all this stuff is not all that far away in time, but rather in distance.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Oh, and also, Catherine is going to be PISSED when she meets Hammer-Boy again. Freaking bullshit hero Raise Dead powers.

*Mr. Nobody*

She's lucky it was just the Hammer hero. The girl with the staff took more effort to put down 😊

[daegone823](#)

Hammer boy rises again, thank you author for this sweet wish. i know you did not do it for me but it brings me joy to see that hammer boy will become something more than a throw away. I can see him facing Hakram in a hammer vs axe fight. One on one brawl.

*grzecho2222*

"Are you the god of hammers?"

*Yotz*

Oh, don't you worry – she will be back tomorrow, when 'once-per-day' inbuilt codex limitations on use of bullshit Aspects wears off.

*morrogin*

but then they have to resurrect the rest of the heroes that cat & co slaughter upon waking up

[Warriormonk](#)

The most frustrating thing is that Cat could be reviving her own people or Heroes she kills, as undead.

I wonder if she has experimented at all with this power, because when she was fighting through Diabolist's castle, she had a whole posse of intelligent undead mages that she'd raised.

*Unorginal*

That's a dangerous story to walk down. As long as she doesn't acknowledge that part of her power then the story won't turn against her but if she does then she becomes in part evil-overlady #1001. Not only that but she still finds the idea morally wrong (on some level) as per her upbringing as a Callowan.

*Captain Semantics*

My theory is that at least some of the heroes she's been killing off asbthey enter Callow (like in the prologue) got raised afterwards.

*Antoninjohn*

The Gods Above are really against Cat here not as much as they will later however when she realizes that the only way to have lasting peace is to take over all of Caleria and form it into the Imperium. To keep it steady and not have the Gods Above ruin it with rebellions she will perform a mighty ritual that will ensure her power over the land, however when the heroes break it the ritual meant to ward against Dread Empress Triumphant will instead allow her return, then Cat will unite the people against Triumphant and use propaganda of the returning Triumphant in order to try and stop the peace to discredit them. Remember the Bard talks about how the Gods Above support demon summoning Named over Cat, so the heroes will be supportive of Triumphant, if the people will have a choice Triumphant who will make you crucify your parents or Cat who won't

*TeK*

And the headdannons run free and amok.

[Walter](#)

Who on earth gave Saint a mocking name? How could they possibly have expected to survive such foolishness.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

I saw that as backstory.

She was a young girl desperately wanting to go to war with her older brothers, and made fun of for it. Until she came into her Name. After that Saint left and returned to find her town a ruin.

She was defeated and spent her time wondering her place in the world, spending every waking moment with her sword in her hand, becoming better until there was no one else that would match her skill. While training she came to inner peace and “scraped the heavens” granting her power she wields now.

They died not because Saint killed them, but because she wasn’t there to save them.

### *The Quietist*

“no one still alive” I’d guess the Dead King.

Yotz

>How could they survive?

By being obnoxiously powerful?

If one can neutralize the Saint with a trivial effort, one can give her pet name of “the little bitch” and get away with it.

The Dead King counts, being very much not alive, and a powerhouse on mythical scale.

grzecho2222

Goblins use names with “-”, or worse it could be gnomes

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

So waiting for Saint trash-talking the Bard for all the antics she caused. Also erratica has a taste and it is scary lady wielding swords.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter! One of my favorites thus far!

*Anon*

First off...this kinda feels like it could have been a continuation of the previous chapter – the ‘pause’ in release makes sense given that there’s a time skip of a few hours, but that being said, it does feel a bit ‘blue-ball-y’.

Aside from that...Arnaud merely playing the blathering fool all too well, or is the Absence Demon contamination having spread somehow?

The Saint's comment about Catherine's being 'twisted' is kind of amusing, to be honest – yes, Black and Malicia played large roles, but at the same time, if Cat really was a fulcrum, that's equally, if not more so, on Creation's head. I suppose the pilgrim could be going under the assumption that Cat's first death, when she used the angel to resurrect with the Lone Swordsman, is the glimpse of heaven she's searching for now....

I was hoping we'd get a little more 'heroic' insight on Thief's swapping sides – her betraying sides to join up with Cat is something that I can't imagine happens all THAT often, given the lines that get drawn, and how easy it would otherwise be for villains to corrupt heroic names. Add that to the fact that 'thief' isn't generally a country-associated role....

Interesting comment made by the Pilgrim in that none of the Procerans are truly 'good', compared to himself or Laurence. Even Melanza is noted to be decidedly lacking in true goodness.

Also, I'm a little confused...if the plan was to lure the kids out to get Cat killed early...why didn't the Sword Saint interfere during the fight? The pilgrim intervened instead, when the Saint had already been shown to be able to smack Cat around.

But in any event, the question is...how much of a powerup could Cat possibly get from her previous actions? The souls of all the men she drowned with Winter's lake could make up a suitable source, but that would risk 'committing' her to a much more villainous path if she starts using souls as a power up.

### *Metalshop*

The only power up she needs is inside her already, no extra action required. Masego said it himself, godhood is a trick of perspective. And Cat is now submerged in a dream so fierce it's warping her body, the first she's had since becoming what she is now.

Dollars to donuts she wakes up mean, with some new Winter trick.

### *Raved Thrad*

You know, that just might be it. It's possible that the reason the two old heroes were pulled into this conflict is that Catherine is on the cusp of godhood – not necessarily Godhood, but the fae royals might as well have been gods. Right now, her body is fluid; if her body is a construct, it begs the question, who created the construct? Is it short because that's

how Catherine sees herself? What is the template that it re-moulds itself from when it is damaged?

It's possible that the shape of her body, construct or otherwise (deified? apotheosized?), as well as her powers, will all depend on the dream she's in, and how that shapes or reshapes her mind and self.

[Walter](#)

Cat enslaves and slaughters wholesale. Her path can't exactly get 'more villainous'.

*Raved Thrad*

Slaughters, yes, but at what point has Catherine enslaved anybody? I'm pretty sure Hakram would have had strong words for her if she ever had.

[Walter](#)

Akua is the obvious one, but the Gallowsborne were slave soldiers, etc. Masego's henchmen at the observatory was one of Akua's too, right? "Serve or die".

*Raved Thrad*

Hnh. Well, when you're right, you're right. I have no idea why that didn't even register with me as slavery. I'm inclined to think it was the "...or die" part, but that makes no sense. I guess my sympathy for the characters (or a particular set of characters) is showing.

[Walter](#)

Yeah, I didn't start thinking about 'Cat from outside view' until Pilgrim showed up. If you don't know what we know about her she looks positively monstrous.

*grzecho2222*

Gallowborne are penal company and henchwoman was war criminal that agreed to basically the same. There is a really big difference between this and slavery

*Mr. Nobody*

Then you're saying neither the Romans nor Egyptians never enslaved anyone, because forced labour with captives isn't slavery, right?

*MetruX*

They aren't captives, they are people sentenced to death that she choose to extend life in exchange for work. Besides, while people are saing "she couldn't be more villainous", you must remember this ploy was first used by a ver famous HEROINE of Callow. Although things seem good and evil, they are Good and Evil, and every three episodes I have to remind people those are not the same. Also, Akua? She deserves this, and she isn't obliged to serve or even compelled to, she choose this after defeat, while all Cat does is keep her soul confined, with the bonus of being able to partly release a spiritual form of her. Honestly, pretty close to actual prison in our world.

[vuthuha912](#)

Yes, yes, move on, please. This is the medieval period. Cat is saving their lives. Their original sentence was execution but Cat doesn't want to kill her own countrymen so she sorts of makes a deal with them. The same thing with the Praesi that join Akua – she doesn't want to slaughter them all while her country still need the manpower

*Sortale*

Typo post:

"role she'd had free hand" \*a\* free hand?

"still largely from from the three" one less "from"?

"If you will not treat in good will" goodwill no space?

"it should garner reaction" \*a\* reaction?

"register as lie" as lying? as a lie?

"Then I would request audience" \*an\*audience?

"morals by her uprising" upbringing?

"instilled her \*with\* a sense" not sure if "with" is correct

"we may yet serve greater purpose" \*a\* greater purpose"

"Imperfection was not sin" \*a\* sin?

"The princess sought alliance with" \*an\* alliance? to ally?

"Creation and faded and brutish" "a" instead of "and"?

"remain under shroud of preservation" \*a\* shroud?

"there was reason for it" \*a\* reason? reasons?

*Muspellsheimr*

Strongly implied that Catherine will wake up before the battle is over.

Regardless of when she wakes up, I speculate the nature of her catatonia will finally grant her a new Name when she does arise. I do not believe she is capable of a heroic Name, but neither do I expect ot to be a villainous Name. I am reasonably confident it will be something new entirely.



Rook

I feel like the biggest bomb under the Crusade's feet is the exact story of five that usually comes to pass. Yes the shape of it's there, and yes the pattern is a damn strong one, but it's a very rigid one.

As the Warlock demonstrated against the Wizard of the West in the past and as the Pilgrim himself demonstrated against Cat just recently, a rigid force is terrifyingly strong but the backlash from the breaking of it is beyond terrible.

At the end of the day the problem for the Crusade is that Cat is using a Villain's methods while following a Hero's story. She's literally fighting for peace and to protect her loved ones. The Pilgrim admitted it as much himself.

If that ends up being enough to break the standard story of five, it won't matter if Cat turns into a monster. The feedback from the narrative alone is going to ruin the Crusade and everyone affiliated with it.

[shieldredblog](#)

Ya, i;m surprised that haven't stopped with the whole crusade idea already because the narrative for them is already failure. Of ten Crusades maybe two sorta worked? The rest all seemed to have failed hard.

RoflCat

Random thought: What if Cat woke up and made similar declaration she did in the Prologue? Sixth time's the charm yes?

With such declaration that she's willing to help them do their Crusade, then if they attack her then they'll basically be revealing their 'real' objectives.

Heck, she can even promise the Pilgrim similar expectation she had for Black to Praes with herself to Callow. A decade or so, to make Callow strong enough that it's not the piss bowl when Good and Evil have a pissing match, even under heroic surveillance (GUESS WHO'S GETTING NOMINATED!?)

A...less likely possibility, is Cat forming her own the Five, but not under the Above, nor Below, but of Creation's.

See, I get a feeling that Creation itself might have its own ideas, one that isn't align with Above or Below.

Like, say, it'd prefer this whole stupid Good vs Evil war over with, and guess who's the girl trying to break that story?

Yotz

Let's see – Cat is a given; Masego cares not for Good nor Evil, he just wants to decompile everything and tinker with a source code; the Archer is here for shits, giggles, and Masego's tight bollocks – Above and Below for her are just a positions during the intercourse; Vivienne is the Hero who fights other Heroes, and is in willing thrall of a Villain who plays role of the Hero – that, and the Thief being not very heroic Name to begin with, coming more from the dull everyday as opposed to the Ideals; Hakram is a Survivalist turned Bureaucrat – an a very fine one – all while retaining all the characteristic brutality of the former, he exists on the morality scale only partially compatible with Good/Evil dichotomy...

Less likely, you say?..

### *Raved Thrad*

"And that's not a villain's story, Tariq," the woman grunted.

It's possible that the reason Catherine has yet to succeed to a new Name is precisely that. She's a villain whose story is not that of a villain. Can it be that neither the gods above nor those below can see themselves giving her a Name, because they can't figure out which side she's on?

As for the institutionalized blindness of the "good" side, I think I get it now: it's when the Pilgrim tells Thief that she used to be a heroine. For him, there is only (nominally) good and (supposedly) evil. She is an enemy because she refuses to join in the march on Callow, never mind that she herself is Callowan. On Thief's side of it, however, she is a heroine. She is fighting for her people, her land, and those willing to do the same.

The conflict between the two sides becomes a matter of arbitrary sides vs that of methods. The gooders think (or maybe have confirmation, who knows?) that they're on the side of the heavens, so anyone who gets in their way, be they villain or soldier or peasant, is on the side of wrong and must die, if that's what it takes. On the side of "evil" we have people who use decidedly villainous methods to do good. It's the only reason that makes sense when the gooders keep complaining about how Catherine killed thousands. "Oh, we killed three thousand of them, it was a good thing. But she killed so many thousands of ours, what a horrible thing to do!" They cannot see that loss of life is loss of life, no matter the method or number: for them the only life with value, and thus counted as a loss of life when killed, are those on their side. On the other? Those are just casualties inflicted on the enemy. Not actual loss of life.

If some little girl were helping a Legionnaire to his feet and a crusader bowman shot her dead, they'd count that as a casualty inflicted on enemy supporters, and thus the enemy.

This is the most immoral interpretation of "good" I've ever seen. This makes the Kingpriest of Istar seem like a whiny little boy. And it just makes me root all the harder for Team Evil. Or maybe just Team Cat. My black heart trembles in awe at the merest thought of Malicia and what she can do, but shit, I wouldn't want to be anywhere near her.

On a tangent, I would like to see Ranger come and duke it out with the Saint of Swords. Heck, she could even die and the Saint live – that would just turn up the dramatic tension even higher. I just think it would be interesting to see who's really the meanest sword-wielding bitch in the land.

*TeK*

As per Godwin's law, I have to ask you to compare Praes to Axis, Crusade to Allies, and repeat your whining about "life for life" without batting an eye. It doesn't matter whether comparison holds. The loss of life is a loss of life, and you should feel bad about the tragic fate Hitler. Where's your heart, people?

*Raved Thrad*

Whining, is it? I'll remind you that Hitler was actively moving against the rest of the world. Callow, on the other hand, just wanted to be left alone. It's one thing to be exporting war to the rest of the world, it's entirely another to be sitting at home, looking at an invading force wanting to divvy up your land "for the greater good" when all you want is to get on with your life. Your whataboutism citing Godwin's Law would only work if Hitler had been peaceably sitting at home, ramping up his forces, and doing nothing untoward when the Allies invaded. Or maybe you think Cat's refusing to die and killing all the assassins they sent against her is an acceptable pretext for war? "We came here to invade your land, kill you, dispossess your people, and divvy up your kingdom. How dare you refuse to die and kill so many of our people?!? You must be a villain!"

*TeK*

WW2 metaphor is more apt than you may think. Cat's no Hitler, Malicia is. Procers plan to divide Callow between them is no different than Allies dividing Europe between US and USSR. Reichs armies consisted of conquered nations as well, even if Hitlers warlord ruling conquered country is not exactly as bad as Hitler, it does not make him good, or, ya know, exempt from the whole killing thing. Crusade is much more a prefentive strike, at least in respect to Callow, especially in the world where having Villain ruling a country corrupts said country. Some people of "liberated" countries actually fought the Allies. Now that I think

about, Callow really reminds me of Poland. Abandoned in the wake of Hitler's conquests, help denied, later invaded and partitioned by a mighty neighbor (Procer). Good Lord!

Admittedly, it's more of a joke that got a little out of hand, so how about I apologise for my uncouthness and we leave it at that?

*Raved Thrad*

Accepted. Your graciousness in offering apology is rare these days, especially on the 'net, and I honor you for it. I'll admit you got my dander up with that quip about whining. I guess it just shows how passionate we are about this story.

*RanVor*

I'm sorry to revive this conversation, but I feel compelled to point out that Malicia didn't want this war to happen either. The crusade is a preemptive strike against a blow that wasn't even intended to land. The comparison between Callow and Poland is more than apt, though.

*TeK*

Well someone's out to be the Hitler. And exactly against what preemptive strike that is Crusade is launched is told by Grey, I think. With Callow being lead by Villain, it's evil, with such a major bullwark turning coat, Procer is weakened, and when Procer loses, everyone loses. Continuing the metaphor, presume that Hitler was a tad more realistic, and understood that he can't win the wars to follow, so he stopped at his conquest of Poland, and solidified his positions. While Allies got their shit together and finally launched preemptive strike. Unfortunately, pissed off Polish people are angry at them for betrayal, so they actually resist the Allies.

*Yotz*

You need not to involve theoretical possibilities with Poland – during Warsaw Uprising Armia Krajowa threatened to kill any Soviet who they see in the city. That is, until the thing went south for them. Then they begged for assistance. While implying that Soviets must help them, die for them, then skeedaddle away as soon as possible, because noble Poles will not tolerate godless commies in the borders of their glorious land. Said borders including two thirds of the Ukraine on the

eastern side, half of the Baltic states, a chunk of Czechoslovakia, contested city of Danzig...

Not like this attitude was something new for them – guess what led Catherine the Second to make a toilet seat out the throne of the Polish kings?..

TeK

I did not glorify anyone. I'm very much aware of what Polish-Russian relationship were like. Unfortunately, I'm also Russian, and that makes my perspective tainted, so I try my hardest not to make any definitive statements, or, at all.

grzecho2222

I'm Polish and I as much as I think that are a lot of similarities between Callow and Poland, this looks less like WWII and more like WWI if it happened way earlier, during Bismarck. More shady politics and way less killing civilians.

Yotz

I concur. Though, Callow being a protagonist nation with a salad of different characteristics, I think many of Russian readers would see Callow as primarily Russia-inspired. More specifically – Kievan Rus. The Story truly is a universal constant where humans involved, I suppose.

But yeah – for all the good democratically elected mr. Schicklgruber had made (and he actually managed to do some), significant part of his philosophy, actions, and goals are seen today as outright Evil, which makes for an easy excuse to colour sides of WW2 with clean primaries. The Great War was, in contrast, an ungodly mess of everything and everyone. I dimly remember reading somewhere pilots actually keeping to idealistic knightly Code of Honor, behaving like ideal gentlemen of the Round Table, all while the Trenches were slowly rotting below, and generals actually being honestly horrified by the consequences of Ypres – and then proceeding to order even more of the same. A War of Arseholes it was, truly.

If it to happen earlier – in Bismarck's age – well, given that herr Otto was a very special character, who was noted for being brutally honest and machiavellian... It honestly seems to me, that he'd try to resolve the conflict entirely through

shady politics, actual shooting being a waste of resources, and all that.

TeK

I mostly used WW2, because it's pretty much the only war where bad guys and good guys are universally agreed, and yet both sides are not so clearly monochromatic in the slightest. I can't see how it's more like a WW1. Who's Franz Ferdinand in your metaphor? Aqua?

@Yotz

Callow and Kievan Rus couldn't've been less alike. Where did you see similarities?

grzecho2222

Russia and Prussia were both trying to buy support of Polish people, while fighting in Poland. All of it while Piłsudski (who has a lot of similarities to Cat, who is more brutal and more positivistic female version of him) was playing everyone including Japan to reestablish Poland as independent country in the best position he could. Assassination was just the catalyst for decades of political stress and it seems like we will see some rebellions before Crusade will end

TeK

Oops, thank you so much for filling this blindspot in my historical knowledge.

Yotz

@TeK

Land that stands between the enlightened Europe and authoritarian Horde, formally belonging to former but never fully accepted, divided in several nearly independent princedoms under the formal rule of the Great Prince; self-actualization as a 'Shield' between Europe and the Horde; The Yoke; trade route from Varangians on the North to the coalition of free cities of the South...

Don't know, some vague impression, probably nothing...

werafdsaew

To continue with the analogy, the dictator who's in charge of Poland agrees to step down and hold free elections, and allow the allies unimpeded passage to Nazi Germany. Her only condition was that Poland remains a free and independent country. The allies refused, however, because America was controlled by evil corporations who wants to divide Poland up for their oil.

*grzecho2222*

Piłsudski proposed to help White Guard (followers of Tsar) destroy Lenin and his Red Army, if they will agree that Poland is independent nation. They refused and told him that if he helps they will oppress Poland little less. He disagreed and in the end Lenin crushed White Guard

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Even if Malicia didn't want to use it, eventually she is going to get the knife and her successor will be one of the batshit insane villains who wants to be the next coming of Triumphant, and they WILL use it. That is, ultimately, Praes' story even more than its invading of Callow. No amount of politicking and poison will save Malicia from that fate – especially since Catherine resolved to take her down in order to make the Liesse Accords work. Whatever they happen to be.

*RanVor*

That's very likely. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) punishing people for things their successors may or may not do in the future is not an acceptable behavior in most civilizations. Procer is apparently an exception.

[hoyboy](#)

It's not about punishment, it's about taking a weapon of mass death and destruction away from the hands of an unstable society that will inevitably give rise to a leader willing to use it.

So they don't, y'know, kill millions and millions of people, petty things like that. How dare those asshole heroes get in the way of a villain's gods given right to genocide?

*RanVor*

If you didn't notice, this weapon doesn't exist anymore. Furthermore, the people dying in this war against nonexistent threat are the very same people who were sacrificed to allow its creation in the first place.

Also, by your logic, we should invade Russia because it's a nation known for spawning warmongering dictators and there's a shitload of nuclear weapons stored in there.

[hoyboy](#)

It doesn't matter, Praes has shown the capacity and willingness to combine their newfound efficacy and capacity to create super weapons in such a way that they're more of a threat than they've ever been before. Then add on the fact that Praes has other mass destruction capabilities by way of Warlock and you see how the rest of Calernia has every good reason to smash Praes into dust.

And yes, it would probably be a good idea to prevent a country like Russia from getting those kinds of weapons, if not for the fact that they already have them making removing them impossible. Despite my disagreements with US foreign policy, I do not think that nuclear weapons is something that we should just shrug and let countries pursue.

*TeK*

Praes had WMDs for a really long ammount of time. Malicia said so herself – she had five or six weapons of the same calibre as Liesse, at least two of which are leftovers of other Emperors. At it's core, WMD in-verse require ungodly amount of resources (which Praes has), a wealth of magical knowledge (onto which Praes has sort of monopoly amongst humans), and centralised goverment capable of combining the two. The possibility to create one was always there, and unless crusaders will butcher every living soul east of Hwaerte, it will stay that way. This Crusade is nothing more than poorly planed reactionism, that lashes out without any clear goal in mind, or, with goal, but said goal having absolutely nothing to do with their warcry.

The same with nuclear weapons. I personally think that nobody should have it, but the cat is out of the box, and creation of those is not really a big



secret, which is punctuated by NK developing one for itself. If nobody will have it, everyone will try to make one, to fill created power vacuum. So someone should have a WMDs, if only to dissuade someone less stable of creating one. And there is no country with which I would've felt save wielding such power singlehandedly. While Russia is bad enough, but we all know the only country to ever use nuclear weapons in wartime, eh? Current situation is a best possible solution, believe it or not. Checks and balances, isn't it right?

*MetruX*

I actually see the US as worse than Russia for having nuclear weapons, they are the ones who actually used them, they are the ones who created wars for oil and, before that, joined a war simply because they couldn't sell more guns without joining. Honestly, if you look at it objectively, the only reason the ONU and all countries in it haven't done something about the US is because we became all dependent on them, and raising something against they risks the use of said mass destruction weapons. So, while it was righteous to fight against germany and russia, when it was to fight the United States they were simply too powerfull for a take down, and no one wants to be taken down together with them.

*RanVor*

Ok, this conversation strayed somewhat far from my intended point, which is as follows: suspicion is not a valid reason for an invasion. I brought up nuclear weapons as an analogy to illustrate the fault in hoyboy's logic (which they promptly ignored). I didn't actually intend to discuss real-world situation.

*Silverking*

I think the best way to describe it is "tribalism"; the worst guy on our team is inherently better than the best person on yours because "we're the good guys."

*TeK*

Okay. I have an interesting theory, and I like to dream:

What if Peregrine's play is to make Cat's a Hero? Or not his, but someones (WB, looking at you). Ok, so first of all, the Black Queen is not a Black Queen, and she barely if not at all

qualifies as a Squire – so she has no Name. Second, it was omitted by Saint, that waking up in the last moment to save her people is not a Villanous gambit – so why should it be? She still has Light inside her, and if we believe Grey, resurrection leaves scar on soul, making person see Creation as faded and brutish place – and so she wants to make it better. Also I want to touch the Saints compassion towards Cat, I read people chastising her for hypocrisy – but I think that she and Pilgrim are seeing the makings of a great Hero inside Cat – yet one twisted and perverted against it's own nature, little girl turned into a greater evil she picked her knife fighting. She Who Fights The Monster at it's finest. After all, you always need to be polite to Abbys, and offer refreshments.

Next is the five finest of heaven sent against great Evil. We got to likely candidates (Dead King and Triumphant), and some much less likely. Theorised band is comprised of Hanno, Champion, Saint, Pilgrim, and possibly Witch. But nothing really stops Woe from becoming these five. Hear me out: we have no evidence that Hierophant is a Villanous name. We know for a fact that Thief is not automatically Villanous, and it'd been hinted that Archer is not in cahoots with Below as well. Adjutant is whatever Cat is, and so we come to fact, that Woe's alignment is almost wholeheartedly depends on Cat's one. So it's not out of question for them to turn into Heroes. It also may have been hinted that Thief does not shine as bright being a Villain, so there's that.

What I think is going to happen, is that Saint will die, but will sever Cat from her mantle, forcing her to come into a Name – a Heroic one. Since Callow is now led by Hero, Crusade loses any legitimacy (at least in respect to Callow) it had left, some completely unexpected shit happens – it always does – and focus shifts on Red Vales, where Black and his crew meet their end, but bite Creation in the arse one last time, killing Witch, Hanno and his crew. Black maybe is saved by someone, possibly Ranger, but perhaps losing his power/Name in process.

Shit goes down, and for the lack of better candidatures, Woe become the blade of Heavens, finally transcending all Calernian stories, where all races and nations and Calernia unite (with possible exemptions) against the final Big Bad.

*RanVor*

She already refused to take a Heroic name once.

*Raved Thrad*

Do you mean when the Hashmallim named her Queen of Callow?

*RanVor*

Yes, that one time she made it absolutely clear she has no intention of becoming a pawn of the Heavens.

*Mr. Nobody*

Yeah. Furthermore, as long as the name of this story is "Practical Guide to Evil" there probably will be no heroic Name for Catherine nor even an acknowledgement of Cat being some practical heroine misinterpreted by her enemies.

*TeK*

I will repeat the argument I made like a gazillion chapters ago: if you're playing the game so rigged, one side will always lose, and you are playing on that side, what is the most rational way to win?

*grzecho2222*

Cheat? Change game? While Callow is on the side of Good it is forced to play the Role of The Good Kingdom That Got Invaded, Oh So Sad, Where Our Heroes Can Fight Evil And Then Go Home, Black said it pattern of Callow is to be grasped and Cat wants to change this pattern into something else. Her becoming Hero would just make stronger.

*TeK*

Not really. While patterns are very strong inverse, they still have to be realistic, otherwise they will hurt the suspension of disbelief. Praes invaded as much because it's teh Evil Empire, as because it's starving. 20 years of conquest already established a pattern of cooperation and trade between two countries. Cat's becoming a Hero of Peace will only reinforce this new pattern. As for where to spend excessive manpower – there are so many ways to slaughter thousands of people that does not involve invading Callow. Invading Praes, for one.

I have a theory. Creation doesn't really need Good and Evil, it merely needs sides. So that there'll be conflict. It can be Good vs Evil, Capitalism vs Communism, Orange Shorts vs Blue Pants, Winter vs Summer, Ranger vs Everyone, you name it. Getting invaded is not an Only Good Story about Callow. For example, if Praes is Good, they wouldn't need to fight too, right? And they can make elves into enemies, or dwarfs, or Dead King, drow, mermaides, gnomes, the possibilities are nearly endless.

TeK

She refused it because:

a) Angels ask her to butcher her own people (Fifteenth)  
b) She still thought that she can work something out with Praes

c) She had a Name, and a Villanous one at that

Now she lost all hope in treating with Praes, at least as long as Malicia's alive. She has no Name, and becoming a Hero will actually fix all her problems (well not all, but really a lot), like, for example, CRUSADE, constant Hero insurgencies, corruption of her own people. She was willing to murder, torture, for her people, she even mutilated her soul. Is switching coat really that big of a price to pay? I'll be not suprised if it's part of her ploy.

RanVor

Except being a Hero in this universe essentially means being a slave to the Heavens, i.e. the ones who wanted her to butcher her own people.

[wyaldriiddler](#)

Yeah TeK if Cat gets a Hero Name of any form it pisses \*all over\* the entire premise that Erratic is going for here. He's too good of a writer to shoot himself in the foot like that, especially since at that point, he'd just basically be riffing and doing a new take on the worst parts of Worm.

Additionally I point to the Dead King and the Yantei. "Villainy" doesn't always lose in Creation so your premise that one side always loses is cast iron false.

TeK

Not really a strong argument when you try to get into creators head. Let me clarify something for ya: I'm not saying ghis will happen, more that I would like that to happen. I'm a sucker for the happy ending. And I really liked in Worm when Skitter became hero.

But I do understand that my wish for everyone becomig friends and living happily ever after is not going to happen here. Just, what exactly stoping Cat from becoming hero? And why can't Hero become a Dread Emperor of Praes, infusing two countries into completely new one? Given the peculiar Emperors out there, I won't be surprised that for some time the title of Dread Emperor had been held by a royal chamberpot.

[vuthuha912](#)

I don't know. Didn't Black have a chance to be White Knight but choose Black Knight because he wants to change his country. If it is as simple as having a Hero become the leader then Black might have just become a Hero, purge the Stupid Evil, establish alliances with other Good countries to make sure that Good stayed on the throne of Praes then retire knowing his country won't be fucked by starvation with 2 new 'reliable' trading partner. Maybe, it is against the law for Hero to be a Dread Emperor or Empress. With the number of emperors and empresses killed by Heroes, you think that Praes should have a hero as emperors already. The court in Praes will shank them before the throne is warm. They shanked Maleficent, Terribilus, Sinistra, and any other blokes that dared to fix the problems. It might be a groove in Creation that Praes will fuck itself as much as it fuck with its enemies.

Remember the 2 c\*nts of the Ruling Council that try a power grab in a middle of a rebellion – effectively ruining a chance for cooperation between the ruling power of Praes and Callow in the future. This is breaking the fishing rod for a small fish as far as I am concerned. It is too mind-blowingly stupid for anyone with an ounce of concern for long-term planning.

I remember reading somewhere that redemption arcs are more likely to end in the death of a villain than not. The Below might even encourage the death route of the redemption arc to stop their followers from deserting in mass. Honestly, Praes is stuck as an Evil entity thus all of their top position has to be an Evil Name.

It is not as simple as switching sides. The nobility of Praes can totally switch sides to Good to wait for a chance to shank their superiors. Yet, they didn't do it during the Crusade. In real life, many people totally converted to Catholicism to avoid prosecution and such. Renee of France did 'convert' on paper and continued to follow Calvinism in private. What exactly is stopping Praes from doing the same. Maybe, the Below is not happy with it and has a way of keeping all its subjects from trying to go.

*MetruX*

Okay, so: Practical Guide to Evil, a stor about a little girl, lost on the clutches of Evil, learning of the world until she becomes a true Hero. No, I don't see that coming. So yes, the Woes are whole behind Cat, no matter if Good or Evil, but the Woes are NOT the main point of her. The greater reason why she was still seen as Cat and not her Name is because she focus

more on the common people than the Named, the way she sees the world, Named are fulcrums but only common people can generate true change. And since the Heavens themselves put people as dust in front of this strange Good "morality", she will not align with them. She only chose Evil because any other choice would leave worse results.

Think about hte beggining, it was never a villain with a heart of gold, or with a internal good side... She was always neutral. Black himself sayd she never had in her what it takes to be a Hero, because Hero is accepting, Villain is breaking, and she wants to change, which means break. Now, think of her soul interior, two clones, Evil and Good, but none trully her, while her own vision of her power is a beast, a violent, cruel and AMORAL creature, neither good nor evil.

So, really, maybe a Hero would make a good story, but not this one. She is bound to be Evil or neutral by the end, and my only regret will be if she doesn't break the Heavens and their rules before she dies.

*Dany*

I wouldn't take Black's observations too seriously. He's invested in Team Evil out of sheer pride and invested in manipulating Cat into being a Villain.

[vuthuha912](#)

Not sheer pride but more likely patriotism and loyalty to one's family. I have been saying this from the extra chapter with Hanno's mother. It is really hard for an Evil citizen to move to a Good nation and start a new life. Black can pass as a Callowan since he is white but not his friends – Alaya, Wekesa, and Sabah. His entire family is dead, he only has them left. If he abandoned them and just go for himself then he can totally get as much glory as a hero. Didn't Black become extremely weak because he acts so unlike a Black Knight? He might do a lot better in Good Country with a different role with his kind of mind and talent. He wouldn't have to kill heroes anymore – turning them into allies and friends. He might even be friends with Saint of Swords due to their shared hatred toward Stupid Evil. See how charming he can be with Cat, I have no doubt he can make friends quite well if he is on the side of Good. With the state of Praes politics, it would not be particularly hard to fuck them over slowly and steadily. They are as inept as they can get.

Sometimes, your birthplace really can decide who you can be. Staying when the situation goes to shit can be pretty hard. I'll never blame any refugee running away from a war-torn

country or a dictator but I also know that there are people who willingly stay to help with the situation.

[daegone823](#)

So does this mean all the other heroes except for saint and maybe witch and hano have deathflags. Feel real sorry for them now.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

In theory, and based on Pilgrim's apathy on the subject, it could just mean that the other heroes get to go home before the Five do.

*Raved Thrad*

What? No! Blood for the Blood Queen! Skulls for the Skull Cloak! 😊

[frolamiz](#)

Correction: Souls for the Soul Cloak

*Raved Thrad*

Good one. 😊

[oldschoolvillain](#)

Oh, of course. Not a single hero beyond the Five is leaving Callow with their head on their shoulders and their soul in Heaven. This Crusade ends with Heroic heads on spikes and their Aspects carved out to make shiny new trinkets for Catherine to stock up for the next person foolish enough to take a swing at her. It was just a theory.

*Eevin*

"Compassion's not my wheelhouse, but whoever made her into what she is deserves a slow and painful death. She's been twisted." In the Red Flower Vales, Black senses the sudden impulse to be not-smug-at-all.

*Raved Thrad*

"All of a sudden, I felt like there was a blade at my neck, despite there clearly not being a blade. I got excited and looked about for Ranger, but she was not there."

*Yotz*

"By the way, please call the blacksmith – I need him to repair my armour. The codpiece deformed during that incident."

### *Raved Thrad*

This might be TMI for some, but as I understand it, the codpieces on medieval armor had space for erections. Because apparently some people got hard while dealing gory death on the battlefield, and it's not always quick or easy to get out of a full suit of armor.

### *Unorginal*

Cod-pieces were rare on armor though, they were an article brought over from civilian fashion and were rarely used because one: other (just as effective) alternatives for family jewel protection existed and two: it made sitting on a horse awkward as hell. So chances are good that the BK has no cod-piece.

### *Burnsy*

These two are going to get the shock of their long lives when Cat turns out to be one of the five (possibly dragging Maesgo along with her, grumbling and moaning).

Also GP needs to be nerfed in the next edition. Too broken.

### *Raved Thrad*

On second reading, one particular set of lines stands out for me:

> "She killed thousands," Laurence said. "And she'll kill more, if she squeaks away here.  
> Compassion's not my wheelhouse, but whoever made her into what she is deserves a slow  
> and painful death. She's been twisted. No one sane would ever do what she did to her own  
> soul."

I couldn't help but think of Catherine, in the voice of a certain beloved psychopath, saying "We do what we must because we can. For the good of all of us, except the ones who are dead."

### *James, Mostly Harmless*

What Saint and Pilgrim see as twisted Kat undoubtedly sees as acceptable sacrifices to protect her people. They cannot see that Cat does not follow the Gods Below but instead uses the tools and trappings they created for the good of her people. Frankly, this army reminds me of the Crusaders who sacked Byzantium because they were not the exact same faith as the Crusaders were.

### *Raved Thrad*



Not just acceptable sacrifices, but acceptable tactics. We've already seen that Catherine is purposely limiting what she can do, because she's not after the deaths of the crusaders so much as she wants the best for her people. She's playing a longer game than the two old fogeys, who seem to see only as far as "subjugate Callow, destroy Praes, feel good about ourselves."

Should the Procerans manage to depose Catherine, the best they can hope for is for the rest of Callow to grudgingly obey their new overlords. I see that as unlikely to happen. First off, they'll be imposing non-Callowan rule on Callowans, which the Callowans will not stand for. Evil Catherine (or her methods) may be, but she's a Callowan evil. Local girl done good by doing bad. And since the Procerans will undoubtedly be press-ganging Callowans into their army, if only to replace those already killed or fled, the situation tips ever closer to ruin. I can see them facing a peasant rebellion, getting mired in a Callow they thoughtlessly thought they could just parcel out among them. Whether the people rally for Catherine or they fight sporadically, disorganized, as a local resistance, they'll still be chipping away at the Procerans' men and timetable. And with such a narrative ongoing, who's to say that a local hero might not, heaven forbid, rise up to rally the countryside against the invaders, heroes and all? The heroes might shrug at killing people in an army commanded by a villain, but what happens when they start having to murder freedom fighter guerillas who just want the invaders out of their country? What happens to the crusaders' narrative then?

[Walter](#)

Callow won't rebel in the name of Praes. They remember Diabolist. If Procer liberates them they will thank them kindly, find a Fairfax heir under a rock somewhere, and proclaim a new day begun.

Callow may not rebel in the name of ANYONE. They lost a lot of people in William's rebellion, then Akua's genocide and now their forces are fighting Procer. I don't think they have the manpower to do anything beyond the current forces backing Black Queen.

[vuthuha912](#)

Of course, they won't rise for Praes. Do you think the Vietnamese rose for Japan when they kick France out? We are perfectly capable of playing two sides, okay. Callowan will fight both Procer and Praes. Procer is 'liberating' Callow as much as Japan is liberating Vietnam from France. We are not letting a foreign snake bit our hens. The same thing can be said for Callow.

[shieldredblog](#)

All Villains just use the tools and trappings the God's below created.

Unlike Angels, Demons don't command or offer aid. They have no scripture or churches that we've seen and dealings/rituals with them seem transnational, not personal.

We really have no idea what it is the God's Below are actually trying to do, except oppose those above.

[hoyboy](#)

Considering that the common denominator among villains is killing, mass destruction, and causing suffering I think it might have something with killing, mass destruction and causing suffering.

*grzecho2222*

Common thing among villains is creating something stronger than themselves (purposefully or not) Below seem like mentors that harass their students until they grow strong enough to fight back and then they are all smug how "now your training is finished"

[hoyboy](#)

And then they've left the student as someone who will carry on the tradition of being a violent bullyboy with the excuse for making people stronger, so great job.

*grzecho2222*

Compared to teacher that is nice, but will teach you nothing and freak out when you don't agree with them? Both of them are terrible choices for teacher

[hoyboy](#)

But they are not equally terrible. One needs to go back to teachers college for remedial. The other needs to not be allowed anywhere near children and maybe should be in prison.

*Unorginal*

If you guys go check PGtE's Reddit page there is a whole thread dedicated to WOGs. Reading through it gives the sense that the Gods Above are about a stronger community together under the direction of heave (with additions of long-term GREATER GOOD planning.) Meanwhile, The Gods Below are about individualism mixed with cruelty and disregard for others.

(Mainly just plugging the Reddit page, seriously go there we always need more people.)

*Yotz*

If I dare to invoke the shadow of Babilon 5?  
Think of the conflict between the Vorlons and the Shadows, the former being rigid idealists heavenbent on the Scripture of Greatest Good, and the latter – brutal social darwinists, spreading conflict and suffering to facilitate the survival of the fittest.

Above follows the maxim of “Right makes might”, and would be building a Divine Mechanism, where each small part is significant, but have not freedom of any kind save for the freedom to follow the Scripture. The amount of resources is limited, therefore each member of the community should limit him/herself in the consumption, for only together they will have enough power to gather enough resources for the community to continue to grow, and overall growth of the community is the only thing that will allow individual parts to grow. And any step from the clearly defined Path is treated like a disease – for it is cancerous in nature indeed – and will be cured with mandatory injection of the Greater Good. The only thing that keeps them from implementing that, is that humans are not ideal by the nature, being the mix of the two Primatii, and will always seek ways to improve their situation at the expense of someone whom they can find an excuse to treat this way.

Below follows the maxim of “Might makes right”, and would give everyone absolute freedom to jump-start the Grand Evolution. Let weak feed on weak, that we may divine the nature of strength, and all that jazz. Of course there would be bloodshed and oppression – the amount of resources is limited, to allow yourself to grow you’ll need them, and if you try to be nice and stuff, someone more fit will consume them, leaving you and the ones you shew mercy for on the side of the Path, or being trampled over by the ones who’ll not shy of the actions. You don’t want to cut throats and bully the weak to acquire resources? Boo-hoo, cry me a river! That’s an order, by the way – start crying, or I’ll make you. The only thing that keeps them from implementing that, is that if Atlas shrugs, the World will

crush him, and everything would be better for that, full stop. That, and the little insignificant things like 'compassion' and 'empathy'. Heart is the most awesomest power, you know...

*grzecho2222*

That's why Hierarchs insane democracy and Cats positivism have surfaced, both Above and Bellow visions of how world should work clash horribly with free will and you can't change them.

*Dany*

I think it's interesting that people assume the Gods Above and the Gods Below are not on the same team re: whether the gods should direct humans.

This is a story about a world with cyclical, unbreakable, Good vs. Evil conflict, and Villains are as bound by their names as anyone else. The gods opposed to interference are presumably...not interfering.

[vuthuha912](#)

My question is can you find a solution to the problems that are plaguing Evil nation. 90% of criminals irl are pushed toward that road due to poverty, lack of opportunity, and various other factors outside their control. If I had money, I will be the nicest person in the world. If I were full, I would give my neighbor some food. The ruling class of Praes is hopelessly in love with Evil so there is no helping them. But, many people have been pushed down this path because of where they were born like Cat or Black or Terribilus I&II or Maleficent I&II or Orcs or Goblins. Maleficent I united her country to fight off magical Roman and she got a knife to her back for her troubles. Because of 1 person's actions – Sinister I stabbing his superior, the entire Empire turn into the Dread Empire, officially shutting off trades with the two biggest grain providers on the continent: Procer and Callow. You tell me how to unfuck this entire mess. It takes a lot of work to have peace on a continent as divided as Calernia. They are so divided that Evil and Good don't even see each other as human anymore. Good doesn't think Evil deserves the right to live while Evil lashes out at Good. Japan doesn't just become a US ally for the 2 A-bombs, they become allies because the US provides a way out for Japan: food, trade, and military support against China.

## *Hardric62*

One resurrection by day, uh... The 'Gods' aren't even trying to make this look balanced (and I say 'Gods only, I've got the sneaking suspiscion the 'Good'/'Evil' pissing contest is the only difference between the two sides, if that's not just one running both sides for shit and giggles). And I find this funny they moan about a soul destroyed when the Pilgrim explicitly says that resurrection scars the soul... Or the fact the only difference between him and a necromancer is that the 'Gods' approve when he does it.

The more I see the 'Good' in this story, the more they look like the joyous and murderous followers of Law of Shin Megami Tensei. The angels certainly play the part, and the purging they do in the name of the 'Gods' is getting always bigger and bigger (the Law side is generally the one starting the genocides of the 'unclean' in SMT...)...

Not that 'Evil' is better, as we saw again and again in this series. And the cutthroat mentality for supreme power here mirrors SMT Chaos fine too...

Meaning there is only one thing left... Embrace Neutrality, and mankind first, and begin to punch expired godlings in the mouth until they give up their sick little games. The Bard will be a good start.

Go for it Foundling, break them! Although twisting the game to make all this nice and shiny crusaders the 'Evil' side would be a really good start.

## *Saragh*

Is there any chance that, in the absence of any other fae type Cat absorbed both powers active on the field, the duchy of Moonless Nights and the Duchy of Noon Sun. What's happening could be the two powers warring inside her. Not sure what the implications would be.

## *Raved Thrad*

As I remember it, Sulia of High Noon was freed of her bindings when the Summer Queen called all her fae back to her side for Cat's parlay.

## *Vhostym*

People seem to keep commenting on the Pilgrim stealing Masego's sorcery, and using Summer power to attack the portal. But based on the phrasing in Pirouette where the Pilgrim creates his own star to split the power of the sun, it's much more likely that the Pilgrim has a star related aspect that he used. Especially

since he seems to be modelled almost completely after Gandalf (one of the Istari).

So I'm pretty sure there's no unexpected summer influence on Cat's soul right now, though other influences can't be discounted. However, similarly to what we saw in Book 3 where Cat was displaying much less power than you'd expect from a Duchess of Winter, she's still not acting on the level of what we saw of the Queen of Summer. So there're probably some decent power grabs she could take if she's willing to shoulder the cost.

*narcoduck*

"I do not fear wicked men, who know only cruelty and pain. The fear they inflict leashes them as well. But a decent man? Oh, there is no limit to the devilry a decent man will fall to, if he believes it necessary."

—King Edward Alban III of Callow, best known for annexing the Kingdom of Liesse

What if instead of Summer's Sun like we all thought, he called upon the power of an angel to break Cat's portal. Thousands of crusaders were dying in moments, and thus he believed it necessary to break the agreement. That could be why he appears so weak now (breaking a deal with a Fae and the strain of calling upon the Heavens).

Nominally, King Alban's quote is for the breed of villains like Cat. Are we going to see what a Practical Hero looks like?

[vuthuha912](#)

Cordelia is practical Good. She is the mix of Malicia's political talents and Black patriotism and institutionalism. She is both of them before both falls to evil madness (Black for his arrogance and Malicia for her Flying Castle). Still, Cordelia is quite arrogant herself and if she can get a nuke, she won't hesitate so... maybe there is not much of a difference between Practical Good and Evil. They are fighting for each other and against Stupid Evil.

*Polite Cultist*

Er... I forget, is the Archer doing something? Like, has Cat sent her off to do her malevolent bidding?

Or is she capital A Absent?

Because uh... Demon running amok.

*grzecho2222*

And nobody realized that they are missing, unless they, this two Heroes and whoever else got missing are still fighting Demon.

*Draeysine*

"She killed thousands "

Bruh, so have you. Is it an efficiency issue? Should nobody be able to drop a bomb? I don't understand how blind people can be. What are they putting in that Good-Aid ?

*Raved Thrad*

You shall forevermore live in infamy for the term "Good Aid."



*Author Unknown*

So... What effect does a mile wide portal have on helleggs?

*Forrest*

I would point out that in the game of war they are playing, the crusade is playing as a finite player, while Cat is playing as an infinite player. Just another angle to look at this in.

*letouriste*

good try thief, at least now pilgrim know you have brandy. if that is not the setup of a pivot right there, i don't know what this is:)

[Antony444](#)

So the Procerans are going in for day 2 of battle. They are going to lead the charge with nine heroes (since one is awaiting resurrection and two are in reserve) and have lost one-fifth of their army.

Oh and the best part: they have to charge through a swamp land covered where the corpses of over nine thousand men and women are awaiting.

The enemy is fresh, massively outnumbered in Named and troops, they have proved they can't stand against the two big monsters, and two of the Woe are unaccounted for, their cause is righteous because they defend their lands against a rapacious enemy wanting to grab their kingdom for sheer cupidity and greed. The Saint of Swords and the Grey Pilgrim have proven they're more or less unbeatable with the 'help' provided by the Heavens. Even when a Hero is slain, he's going to be resurrected in the next minutes or days, making all sacrifices useless.

The Priests of Light are here to corral the Callowans, killing them in all but name and making a mockery of their vows.

Story-wise, I would not be anxious if I was in the Crusader army. I would be flat-out terrified.

Whatever happens now, the possibility of retreat on this terrain is very low. Mobility is going to be severely hampered. And if it fails and they retain a big part of their army? Massive starvation because Heaven or Hell, every army needs to eat and a big battle is devouring supplies at a horrifying speed...

This is all or nothing; we are certainly going to watch the Graveyard of Princes and Heroes in the next chapters...

*grzecho2222*

They are going around from two sides, also I'm not sure if you can resurrect away goblinfire, also this seems to be Battle of Camps

[Walter](#)

Jeez, if Cat and Masego don't wake up the Callowans are going to be absolutely massacred. Juniper has no answer to even the minor heroes, and Saint/Pilgrim will paint the land red with no Named to stand against them.

Maybe the speculation about the psychopath prince actually being Assassin here to cost the Crusaders the favor of the Heavens by sacking Hedges is correct? I dunno. It seems like the army is about to be obliterated. With no fair gates to escape they will be slaughtered to the man.

[ayon96](#)

Black knight, Warlock, Captain, Assassin, Scribe  
Cat, Adjutant, Hierophant, Archer, Thief  
Making of five  
So five is the maximum size of a party for Nameds

*Raved Thrad*

That only holds true if Scribe only joined after Ranger left.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Juniper either fights at the barricades or leaves a rear guard and staged a fighting withdrawal.

The staggered withdrawal makes it hard when the starvation hits the attackers.

I'm really curious to see what she does.



I'd have decamped during the night.

Make them chase me and starve.

But then I'd have created a winter court to give me fae to balance against heros.

Anyway it should be interesting.

*beleester*

They have to defend Hedges, though, so they can't retreat very far. And IIRC Catherine didn't want to retreat all the way to Hedges because she wanted to minimize the damage the invaders would do as they traveled.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

I get that they have to defend Hedges to an extent, but the "good" side is down to two days of food and then starvation.

And the parties have agreed to avoid civilian pillaging and destruction.

Again, I don't know what Juniper would will do. But in this situation, in these facts, I would be staging a fighting withdrawal. A shadow rear-guard at the palisades to delay things. But the majority of the troops would have withdrawn in the night.

I would so dearly love the Wild Hunt to harry the back of the crusade (since the heroes will be at the front) – but that would have taken a liason that would work with them even after Cat went comatose. If I were the warlord/field marshal I'd have wanted that.

And, of course, the two missing named ....

So.

First, I don't know what the author will do. I expect surprises.

Second, I don't know what Juniper will do in the context. It doesn't appear that she is focused on using starvation and attrition as her major tools.

But, Third, I thought I'd just state what I would have done if I were commanding. I'll bet that Juniper does better than I would have.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

"Gods go with them, though hopefully not the ones Above. The kind if work I had in mind for these two would be frowned upon, upstairs."

Still looking forward to more. 😊

*Nerfnow*

Jacques Milenan, a younger cousin to the Prince of Iserre. His mother was... from an Alamans royal line, though she could not recall which one at the moment.

Demon strikes again, did it cross borders into porcer by the stairway?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Forgive.  
Resurrect.

Two of his Aspects...

[wyaldriddler](#)

Forgive is his Resurrect aspect.

[Barthumphries](#)

Lot of comments, don't know if anyone else has said it, but it seems confirmed that a person can have more than one Name. Still apparently only three Aspects, but I'm sure there's more than one advantage to having an additional Name.

[wyaldriddler](#)

What do you mean? The stuff with Grey Pilgrim and Saint? Those are epithets or titles, not Names.

*Captain Semantics*

Of course this is where I catch up to the story...

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Yanno,  
I'm starting to feel like Good has entirely too many edges. The ONE material edge that Evil was supposed to have, not aging, ergo retaining their health and physical vigor...and the Saint gives the lie to it parkouring through the sky by cuts in Reality. If old Heroes fight like eighteen year olds, Evil doesn't get any advantage from being unaging, since they never live past their natural spans anyways.

An upcoming resurrection two days after death. Another done despite the damage being done in a no-Light zone. There really, REALLY doesn't feel like there's anything Equal And Opposite in Good and Evil. In fact, I can't even imagine how things like Praes and the Keter ever manage to originate in the first place. In every single potential aspect of conflict, Good is not only superior, but flatly and inarguably so.

I haven't been thrilled with the Crusade-writing so far. They already had double the troops, three times the Heroes versus Villains, AND two Ranger-Class Heroes among them...there's creating a bleak situation for the underdog to triumph over at the 11th hour, and then there's just Too Much. I'd really like to see the throttle eased off on Good some. The Pilgrim managed to break the work of TWO villains, and he's just a bit tired for it (which conveniently didn't include any meaningful disadvantage for him).

Still reading, but this plot arc is palling for me.

*green*

the more I hear of his thoughts, the more I dislike the Grey Pilgrim. I had hope for him at first, but he is *\*deeply\** blinded by his prejudices, and completely incapable of seeing the truth in front of him. what a waste.

*Max Scherer*

Yeah if they win this battle and go through Callow The Quality of this story will drop, because again there is a drawback. Maybe Cat will win at the end, but the cost was again way to high *\*sigh\** I dont know her victorys never feel like victorys and i only read it because it is intersting and not because it is satisfying....

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## **Interlude: Kaleidoscope III**

*"The meaning of the exercise of war is the destruction of your foe's ability to wage it. 'Victory' does not exist as an independent entity; it is merely the manifestation of the enemy's defeat."*

– Extract from 'Considerations on Warfare' by Marshal Grem One-Eye

It would come down to steel and blood. The Thief had failed, not that Juniper held much hope for success. The woman was not as

clever a liar as she believed, and the enemy was cunning. Much as she disliked the former heroine, the orc refrained from spending a quarter hour verbally ripping her to pieces. She had more important duties to see to, now that near forty thousand crusaders and their *heroic* hired killers were on the march. Heroes, huh. Much like knights, Juniper had never thought much of them. All a knight could claim to be was a killer on a horse. The rest was pageantry. And heroes, well, the Hellhound had never cared for the smell of hypocrisy. 'The Heavens told me to do it' did not qualify as a valid excuse under Legion regulations, and those were the closest thing to fair laws Creation had ever seen as far as she was concerned.

"She bought us a few hours, at least," Aisha said.

The two of them were alone in the tent, at least until the rest of the general staff arrived. Juniper cast a look at the Taghreb, eyes lingering on soft skin of her bare wrists. Such delicate appearance, for such a dangerous woman. The urge to sink her teeth into the warm veins warred with the urge to feel the softness with her own rough hands. The orc cleared her throat.

"For all the good it's done," she said. "We're in for a red day."

The olive-skinned Staff Tribune flicked her an amused glance.

"The Fifteenth's eternal motto," she teased.

The orc did not allow the laughter in those bright eyes to distract her.

"We have a choice to make," she growled. "Static or moving."

Princess Malanza was splitting her host in half, roughly fifteen thousand on each side of the marshlands advancing in thick columns. It'd been too much to hope for the crusaders would try going through the water. It didn't take Grem One-Eye to see that'd mean easy targets for Juniper's engines, and Rozala Malanza had already proved she was no fool.

"Legion doctrine dictates retreat to a hardened position, when met with superior force," Aisha said.

Their current position was as hardened as field fortifications could allow, so the traditional call would be remaining behind the palisades and preparing for a hard fight. It meant, though, surrendering the initiative to the enemy. And the Hellhound had been burned playing number games with this foe before. She was wary of a repeat.

"We could have local superiority, if we sent enough men to hit a single column," Juniper said. "And possibly break that side before the other one gets anywhere close."

"Without heroes on the field, it would be risky," the Taghreb said. "With them, it nears wishful thinking."

Her Warlord had picked a fucking bad time to take a nap, that much was undeniable. Were there even half as many heroes, Juniper would not hesitate to strike anyway. Twelve, though, was too many for her tastes. Even if all they did was prop up morale wherever they stood it might be enough to tip the balance. If the Saint of Swords or the Grey Pilgrim happened to be with either army, massacre was the word that came to mind.

"We let them march without contest, and by afternoon we'll be surrounded and up to our neck in Named," Juniper said. "Even if we don't give battle, we have to slow them down."

"We have munitions," Aisha pointed out.

They'd both known that, but the point of this conversation was not her friend pushing for a plan. The back and forth allowed Juniper to sharpen her own thoughts, using Aisha's words as a grindstone.

"There's a thought," the Hellhound mused. "Not as a weapon, but as ground denial. Plaster one flank with goblinfire and hit the other column with our full muster."

"We'd be leaving our camp exposed," the Staff Tribune said. "We risk a wipe if they have a way to cross the marshlands or get around the goblinfire."

"They're leaving their own exposed," Juniper noted. "They've got at most a few thousand soldiers there that're fighting fit. And they're serving as Malanza's strategic reserve. Which means this isn't just testing our defence, she's aiming for a full victory."

"Assuming they know our queen is incapacitated, they might be under the impression they need to hurry before she awakens," Aisha said.

"That has sense," Juniper said. "And if true, it means the enemy is *committed*. They will not withdraw because of losses."

"Malanza's not been shy about trading casualties so far," the Taghreb shrugged. "This is not fresh observation."

Juniper shook her head.

"No," she replied. "It is. If you're right then static defence is not an option. They'll not retreat with sundown no matter how many we kill, just send wave after wave against the palisades through the night. They're in it to the death, and that means the only way we make it through this is by forcing a retreat."

Aisha's eyes narrowed.

"And the only thing that would make Princess Malanza call one is the risk of a defeat so major her army would not recover from it," the Staff Tribune said.

"Which we can't inflict by force of arms," the Hellhound said. "Or by Named superiority."

That meant the effect had to be obtained indirectly, through strategic means. Juniper licked her chops hungrily. It was a puzzle. One where the slightest misstep would doom her army and likely Callow with it.

Gods, she'd missed this.

—

Captain Pierre Dulac squinted into the sun. The Callowans were fucking crazier than he'd thought, because he was looking at a force of at least four thousand. The Brabantine had served in the army of Prince Arnaud for a decade and a half now — loyalty to the principality of one's birth was all well and good, but the Cantalins paid better — and fought in four of the Great War's largest pitched battles. He'd been known to make the boast that he'd killed someone from every principality in Procer, after a few drinks, and for all he knew it might even be true. He had, to put it bluntly, gotten a handle on the waging of war. No fantassin lived long enough to make it to his current rank if they didn't, much less rise to command of a free company as he had. Which was why he was surprised the enemy had abandoned perfectly good palisades and the cover of their war machines to sally out against the column he was the vanguard of. Spitting out the ball of redleaf he'd been sucking on all morning, the captain slowed his march so his second would catch up. Pierre often led from the front when on the march, though he'd gotten old enough he left the sword-waving to younger sorts when battle started.

"Captain," Lieutenant Francesca, better known as Belle, greeted him.

The southerner was a massive beast of a woman, built like an ox and hairy as one. Some Lycaonese fuck had taken off the tip of her nose with a blade at the Battle of Aisne, which only added to the gruesome spectacle that was her. Not a nice woman. She was quick to use the knife and cheated at dice. But the men were fucking terrified of her, and that had uses.

"Tell me my leaves didn't go bad, Belle," he said. "I'm not hallucinating that army, am I?"

"I see them," the lieutenant grunted.

"Fuck," Pierre feelingly said. "I was hoping they'd stay holed up and we could trick another company into leading the first wave."

"Callowans," the woman shrugged. "Hicks one and all. You want to send a messenger to the prince to ask for orders?"

The captain grimaced. He'd rather not if he could avoid it. Their column was following the western bank of that creepy magic swamp, from a bird's eye view, and unlike the other army they had no cavalry backing them. Princess Malanza had gone to command the host with horse, like a good little Arlesite trying to win wars one charge at a time, and that left Prince Arnaud and Princess Adeline sharing command over this column. Pierre didn't know shit about the Princess of Orne, but everyone and their sister knew Prince Arnaud was a proper twat. He was a twat who paid well and on time, so Pierre's company remained in his service, but the fantassin wasn't eager at the notion of following the military wisdom of the Prince of Cantal. Like all princes, he wasn't known to send his retinue into the breach when there were spare fantassins lying around. Better to take a look on their own terms, the captain figured, without any 'inspired' instructions about when they could retreat.

"Rustle up the last ten men who pissed you off, Belle," Pierre Dulac said. "We're going to have a closer look at whatever they're cooking up."

—

Tribune Abigail of Summerholm should have known someone was out to fuck her when she got offered the promotion after Akua's Folly. Sure the pay increase was nice, and word had got around she'd been in the frontlines during both the Arcadian Campaign and Second Liesse – which made it really easy to trick strapping young lads from home into her bed, if they were as dumb as they were pretty. Plenty of those floating around, it was the type that made shit life choices just like her and enrolled in the Army of Callow. On the other hand, she'd been transferred from the command of General Hune to that of General Nauk. The godsdamned Princekiller himself. The orc looked like a torch had eaten half his face, and acted like he was going to eat half Creation to even that out. Of course they'd put her under the command of the one man in the Army of Callow who was guaranteed to be sent over and over again into the worst possible messes. Abigail had bought a sack of leeches in Laure and paid someone to drop them in Tribune Ashan's bedding when no one was looking.

That fucker was the one who'd recommended her for promotion.

Worst of all, her cohort was green as grass. Oh, sure, the Hellhounds had drilled them to collapse and taken everyone through a brutal gauntlet of field manoeuvres and war games. But they'd not looked death in the eye properly until yesterday and this was already beginning to shape into a worst fucking mess than Akua's Folly, which was really saying something. Three thousand dead legionaries within the first hour, because the

priests on the other side had found some loophole in the Book of All Things. *See if I ever give alms to the godsdamned House of Light again*, the tribune grimly thought. Could have been her down there, if the Hellhound had decided on different tactics. The Black Queen had seen their priestly fuckery and raised them mass slaughter, which had been good for morale. Until rumours she'd been wounded by the spell began circulating, anyway. Another rumour had immediately started going around that it was a trick and she was baiting the crusaders, but Abigail could recognize the work of the Jacks when she heard it. The Queen of Callow was having her beauty sleep while the enemy marched. *Rank hath its privileges*.

"Tribune," someone spoke from behind her.

Abigail spat and turned to look at Captain Krolem. The orc was standing stiffly, broad arms visibly itching to salute. It'd taken her a while to wean him off that. Fresh meat from the Steppes, this one, passed through a recruiting camp in the Fields and now a proper loyal subject of the crown of Callow. Now that the Tower had forbidden recruitment in Praes, his sort was rarer addition.

"I'm listening," she said. "But if it's the fucking sappers again--"

"It isn't, ma'am," the orc assured her. "Our outer line reports enemy movement."

"So they have eyes," Abigail noted. "Definitely picked the right people for the watch."

"Aside from the column," the orc clarified. "A single tenth of Procerans. Scouts, we believe."

Ah, *shit*. Her cohort was far ahead of where the sappers were plotting whatever Marshal Juniper had sent them here to do, but she had instructions from the Princekiller to stomp hard on any crusaders coming to have a look. General Nauk had made it clear his forces would not be retreating until the sappers were ready, and someone out to kill Abigail had decided it was a great idea for her cohort to be out on the front lines. At least she wasn't the poor bastard whose cohort was stuck next to the creepy murder swamp full of dead people to anchor the flank. Hells of a silver lining.

"Send out a line," she told the captain. "And since I'm in such a giving mood, they can eat whoever they kill."

"Kind of you, ma'am," Krolem replied, sounding absolutely serious.



Of course he was. Tribune Abigail worried her lip and stared at the column in the distance. An hour, maybe, before the enemy was in engagement range. They'd been waiting out here for two. Maybe the Heavens would smile on her for once, and the sappers would be done soon. She looked up at the sunny sky, grimacing.

"Come on, you assholes," she said. "I got to sermons thrice a year, that's gotta count for something."

—

"Only four thousand, Your Graces," Pierre said, bowing again.

He wasn't sure if etiquette required it, but with royals it was always better to be on the safe side. The Princess of Orne had turned out to be young and easy on the eyes, not that he allowed himself to look. That was a good way to end up blinded. Neither she nor Prince Arnaud had bothered to dismount from their horses to receive his report after he was ushered into the presence of greatness. He was pretty sure each horse was worth at least ten times the war chest he'd accumulated after over a decade of soldiering. They were, he grimly thought, probably better fed too. His company had bought food and kept a hidden stash since, because relying on the largesse of princes was a good way to end up starving, but even their own reserves were beginning to run out. The horses, he could not help but notice, looked perfectly healthy. *Better a prince's mount than a peasant, eh?*

"And you did not approach close enough to ascertain what they were doing there," Prince Arnaud of Cantal said, pawing at his wisps of a beard.

The disapproval was clear, as was the implied question of why he had not. Somehow the fantassin doubted that the answer of 'the orcs they sent out looked a little too eager' would earn him much favour here. He cleared his throat.

"As my men and I had already come close enough to see their formation, I judged it more important to return and make sure that knowledge was brought to you," he lied.

It was one thing to kill for Prince Arnaud's silver, another to die for it. The man didn't pay *that* well.

"Prudent," the Princess of Orne said, tone neutral. "And what can you tell us about their formation?"

"They're digging in, Your Grace," Pierre said, bowing again. "There was no reserve, but there were troops detached on their flank to prevent easy encirclement. It looked like they were preparing to fight."

Princess Adeline frowned.

"With four thousand?" she said. "We've more than thrice that number."

The captain had not been addressed directly, and so decided not risk speaking up.

"Were there many mages, Captain?" Prince Arnaud asked him.

"Not on the front lines, Your Grace," Pierre replied. "I cannot speak for further back."

"It seems a rather obvious trap," the Princess of Orne mused.

"They might be a mere sacrifice to slow us down," Prince Arnaud said.

"Or a feint by the Callowans," the other royal said. "Trying to give us pause without any true threat."

"We can simply smash through," Prince Arnaud said lightly. "Why even bother with battle order, against such feeble opposition?"

Pierre winced. Going in half-cocked against the bastard child of the Legions of Terror would get a lot of people killed before numbers won the day. The captain had never fought legionaries before, but he'd heard stories.

"Let us not blunder at this late hour, Arnaud," the Princess of Orne coldly said. "A careful approach is needed. We give battle only when properly arrayed."

"if you insist," Prince Arnaud indifferently said. "Fuss, if you feel the need. The Principate will prevail regardless."

Pierre Dulac silently wondered when they going to remember they had not dismissed him. And, perhaps, if it was time to politely inquire whether the Princess of Orne was still hiring.

—

Princess Rozala Malanza watched the enemy host through her mother's old Baalite eye, the clever arrangement of lenses within the wooden tube allowing her to study in detail even at a distance. Ashurans demanded a fortune for every single one of these, but the imitations from Nicae were of much shoddier quality. That the Thalassocracy would remain so tight-fisted over a device they had not even invented themselves — it came from across the Tyrian Sea — was typical of that grasping gaggle of merchants and sailors.

"More than twelve thousand," she said.

"They mean to give battle?" Prince Amadis frowned. "Would it not have been a superior notion to do so from atop the palisades?"

"Maybe," the Princess of Aquitan hedged. "The Legions of Terror are known for their skill at sieges, but this is the Black Queen's army. They made their reputation on pitched battles."

"Then why even raise them?" the Prince of Iserre murmured.

"Something's changed," Rozala said. "Their general has a plan."

"One would assume," Amadis drily replied. "I don't suppose you could hazard a guess as to the nature of that plan?"

The dark-haired princess frowned. The enemy should have perhaps nineteen thousand soldiers left. Assuming at least two thousand had been left to guard the baggage train, the soldiers in front of them represented around three quarters of the Army of Callow. That left a rough quarter unaccounted for, a fact that was making her uneasy. The enemy could not hope to hold back the other column with those numbers, they'd be encircled and slaughtered to the last. And, to be frank, if defeat in detail was to be attempted it was Adeline's host that should have been the target. Rozala had stripped it of cavalry specifically to tempt such a blunder since the Saint of Swords was with that army.

"They could be attempting to delay us until sundown," Rozala finally said. "To prevent us from encircling their camp, counting on my being reluctant to conduct war after dark."

"You do not sound convinced," the Prince of Iserre observed.

"It would be the first major mistake by their commander," she said. "I was taught it is a rule of war that when a skilled enemy makes an obvious mistake it is no such thing."

"It may no longer be the same commander," Prince Amadis said. "Their Marshal would hold authority, in the Black Queen's absence."

"Juniper of the Red Shields," Rozala muttered. "Hasenbach's reports did not mark her a fool. She is alleged to be one of the finest graduates of their War College."

"A skilled second does not necessarily mean a skilled first," the man replied. "I will not question you in matters of war, but what seems like foolishness might simply be youth and desperation."

*She might be young but she's fought just as many battles as the rest of us,* the princess thought. Yet the Princess of Aquitan could not remember a single of these where the incipient Black Queen was not holding overall command. It was a plausible explanation that Amadis had offered. Yet she still felt as if she was being invited to make a mistake. It was irksome she could not quite put it into words. It was... an alignment. Rozala knew that dwindling supplies were forcing her to be aggressive. She'd only

risked splitting the host in two because heroes accompanied both halves, and there should be no villains left to fight them. The Wild Hunt might strike unexpectedly, so she'd left soldiers to guard her camp and wounded, but everything else she had to field was on the march. Her armies were moving in strength, but there was a certain fragility to that strength. All of this together was bringing muted dread she could not explain.

"We wait," she finally said. "The other column has orders to signal if they engage the enemy or find their path unobstructed. We will proceed when we receive either."

An hour passed with two armies eyeing each other across the field until sorcery rose into the sky. Three red streams. Princess Adeline was attacking an enemy force.

The choice was out of her hands, then. She could not allow the army before her the possibility of disengaging or reinforcing the other side of the marsh.

—

Watching the streaks of red in the sky from her open tent, Juniper allowed the reports spoke to her to go unanswered. The enemy on the left flank was moving to engage Nauk. The enemy on the right was moving to tie up the army she'd put in front of them. She looked down at the map on the table, the figurines she had set down.

"That," she murmured through her fangs, "was a mistake."

The Hellhound smiled, and in her mind's eye she loosed the arrow.

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### [DroughtBringer](#)

Oooh. Very excited for next chapter, watching Juniper shine shall be fun. Also, everyone go vote! We are only slightly behind Ward and can easily get past it today!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Matthew*

I feel bad. Practical guide seems a much more in spirit sequel to Worm than Ward does. I feel like Ward hasn't found its stride yet.

*werafdsaew*

Really? Having read all 3 I'd say PGTE is very different from Worm.

*Levinus*

I just finished worm. Is ward a continuation or just an after story prolonged like those cash grabs riding on the originals success?

*Fern*

It's a direct continuation, it takes place about a couple years after the finale of Worm. I'm guessing most people aren't too fond of it because the MC is lawful good and not chaotic good/neutral, but I'm pretty fine with it. I think it's finally hit its stride with the newest arc.

*Levinus*

Just finished the first chapter. A new series with Glory Hole's perspective, ok I shouldn't judge so soon but is the story still related with Taylor or just an aftermath and rebuilding?

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Didn't you read Glow-Worm, the inbetween? Taylor is gone.

*Anon*

At the risk of possibly being pedantic (and or spoilery), unless something's changed or I missed something (only sporadically checking in on Ward), Taylor's fate, whatever it may be, is up to the reader.

It's perhaps more accurate (again, unless I missed Wildbow retconning the epilogue for like the 4th time) to say that unless something REALLY changes in Ward's story development, Taylor won't be featuring in Ward in any significant capacity beyond her past actions.

*Levinus*

I guess I'll start with Twig for now and see where Ward is going.

*therealgridlock*

Twig is pretty great, a true epitome of mad science and body horror.

*Dainpdf*

Wait. He retconned the epilogue? Weird.

*therealgridlock*

I don't actually know what the canon ending is, but when I read it she was alive enough to meet Contessa, but not enough to actually communicate or interact.

I was under the impression she was functionally out of the story even if not totally braindead, her dad had to take care of her.

I mean, experimental brain surgery will do that to you.

I guess it's possible wobblebibble intended to imply Contessa Kills her as a mercy but the last we see is a name on a plinth of the dead from brockton bay, without ever actually seeing her dead body.

Perhaps the tri-quel will show her as a side character? She's only mentioned like... Five times offhand and once directly in Ward, so idk. Likely there won't be a sequel after it though, since it's already basically been said it's the end of the written universe for that story.

The sequel to pact is well on its way, and presumably after that is twig 2; electric slime eels.

*sheer\_falacy*

It's not about Taylor. It's a new story taking place after the events of Worm, featuring both new and familiar faces.

And no, you shouldn't judge so soon. Victoria has changed, and everything we saw about her in Worm except her interlude was filtered through Taylor's view.

*Anon*

I mean, I've given it like....7 arcs or so, and IMO, Wildbow is struggling to write a non-'escalation' plot that manages to hook me...for that (and a few other reasons), since it hasn't hooked me, I'm just kinda getting...bored.

However, further discussion of Ward can probably be better achieved in a more appropriate setting than a comment chain in a different author's work – as Ward is (apparently purposefully) going for a different tone than Worm, and/or this work.

[maelos61](#)

Yeah, sadly enough I'm of the same opinion. It just didn't grip me somehow. Maybe Pact will finally be bumped up to 2nd worst Wildbow story?

*Theo Promes*

not quite sure this is the right place to discuss it, but I have to say, I disagree. I enjoy Ward immensely, and while I'd agree that it took a few chapters to hit its stride narrating the rather daunting premise of team Therapy, I feel like things have been shaping up quite nicely over the fallen arc. The main thing I personally am missing right now is villainous banter, but I'm pretty confident that comedic relief itch will get scratched soon, too.

It is true that wildbow is amazing at escalating to grab the reader and pull them along, but I also like this sort of post-apocalyptic connection building, politics style narrative that he is exploring currently. And I'm pretty sure the other shoe will drop at some point...

*Theoretical\_Human*

we should not be discussing ward her, but did he end the fallen arc? i grew bored of them.

*stevenneiman*

I honestly like Ward, but I do agree that PGTE is probably more like Worm than Ward is. I think the point of Ward is to act as a sort of counterpoint to Worm, focusing more on the dangers of being reckless and thriving on chaos. On the other hand, Guide has been moving a bit that direction as well, with the way that Cat had started having to simultaneously take the initiative and worry about the consequences of her actions.

I feel like Cat is moving towards a compromise between caution and unpredictability, while Victoria is trying to leave her old, chaos-loving self behind entirely. Which makes sense because Victoria was personally harmed by her mistakes a lot worse, and never really had any major victories with her old methods. For all that they had unpleasant side-effects, Cat's methods did usually get the intended results.

JD

Oooo, interesting. Because she is Named, Cat has received all of the credit for her previous victories, even though we all know that the majority of the genius tactics were Juniper's. That's a major tactical advantage.

*RoflCat*

I think it's more because in Procer (and Praes too) they're still under beliefs of Name > all else, in that anyone who's good enough to change the world would have a Name attached i.e. they look up at the ceiling.

Whereas Cat (and Black to a certain degree) is trying to raise the floor, and despite their lack of screen time her non-Name companions are the ones keeping Callow in shape (Talbot, Ratface, Juniper, even the Jacks are made up of non-Names)

*Yotz*

That, and she's an ork – which means she can't be that dangerous and/or bright (beyond the obvious rude bestial cunning and brute force) from their point of view. Yes, there are some /in/famous of greenskin kin, but since Procerans never have heard of that particular one in terms of One-Eye or Knightsbane – well, soon they will know better...

*Porkman*

Procer is not a name believing place. I think it's said somewhere that they are unique in that they aren't ruled by names and they kick ass without them. They have Cordelia Hasenbach, a non named, going up against the Calamities for 15 years and she's not dead. Procer uses names but they don't rely on them.

*Antoninjohn*

Without Auger Procer would be smashed by the Dread Empress

*Porkman*

True, but they aren't ruled by the names. Praes has it's ruling structure built into its local names. Dread Emperor/Empress is a name. Chancellor is a name. By definition, it can't be ruled without the ruler becoming that name. Same thing with the Tyrant.

First Prince isn't a name.

*Shequi*



I don't think it's that Procerans think that way about Names,  
I think it's that they think that way about Royalty.

*RanVor*

It's funny how they try to discern what the change of the  
Callowan command means for them, while in reality there was no  
such thing. It was Juniper all along.

*Theo Promes*

yeah apparently they think cat is a tactical genius, which is  
admittedly plausible given her unerring ascension and the  
various battles where her armies managed unlikely victories.  
That this is a team effort between cat as a blunt instrument/  
fulcrum and Juniper's tactical genius is plausibly much less  
apparent from the outside.

*Engineer*

Their mistake was not categorizing the Fifteenth's battles  
into two sections: the Narrative side and the Mundane side.  
Catherine compared to Juniper is the less skilled General  
when it comes to mundane warfare tactics, however in terms  
of Narrative Warfare she has few equals, having beat  
entities several orders of magnitude greater than her  
through exploiting Stories.

With Hasenbach's reports and the wisdom and experience of  
the Grey Pilgrim, they have all the required prior  
information and tools to reach this conclusion. But their  
prejudice and arrogance are blinding them to this.

The Proceran Royalty will pay dearly for this mistake.

*Matthew*

Since conservation of ninjitsu is in effect, can the saint of  
swords be tied up by just having a couple hundred people to hack  
through? Like, even though theoretically she could cut the legs  
off of hundreds of people in one sweep, her powers won't allow it  
unless it's against named.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Me think Abigail getting chewed up is a running gag now, really  
have a blast with the girl's practical view on sermons.

*RanVor*

Wait, it's the gal from the Interlude: Skirmish I? I didn't  
notice it before.

*Letouriste*

She is shaping to be a secondary character with some screen time;) we have seen her in three or four interludes I think (first battle against deads,talking a little to cat just before liesse,here and maybe somewhere else I forgotten)

Yotz

Well, we haven't seen any new Special Tribunes for a pretty some time, so /fingers crossed/...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Long prices... or leaches. Same difference. xD

She should not rub shoulder with goblins too often. They'd be a bad influence on a promising enough mean pranker.

[boballab](#)

Saint isn't as good as she thinks she is. Remember back to one of the interludes or extra chapters (Can't remember which) where Ranger snuck into the Undead Kings lair? Then there was the fight between Ranger and the Summer Queen. It was in one of those stories that Ranger stated she only went after those that might be a challenge? Notice Ranger hasn't gone after Saint? Think about that, Saint has a rep and she is good, but she relies too much on certain tricks over and over and she can be baited as shown by Cat. Then there was the point that the Saint made about Cat, that her story is in the pattern of a hero (Cat was supposed to be a hero, if you read between the lines of one of the epigraphs and why Black sought her out). If Cat is following a hero's pattern and Saint is opposing her that forces her into the villain pattern, and what happens to Named villains that attack a smaller force led by a Named following the hero pattern...They get trumped and killed, something Black pointed out more than once.

*nick012000*

For all we know, Ranger \*has\* gone after the Saint of Swords, and either the Saint of Swords was strong enough to drive her back, or Ranger decided to let her live afterwards.

*Engineer*

I think its the latter.

Ranger hasn't shown to be in the habit of killing her prey (that haven't truly pissed her off); merely to beat the shit out of them. What usually happens to a Hero after they get their ass handed to them by a stronger "rival"? They get stronger, allowing the Ranger to once again hunt them which

perfectly feeds into Ranger's Role. Take note she didn't kill the Queen of Summer.

*Rq*

If Ranger hasn't gone after saint, where do you think Ranger dot her copy of saints signature technique from?

*dalek955*

Ranger has been crashing around for hundreds of years, Saint is sixty at the oldest. Who is more likely to be copying who?

*eso*

And it naturally occurs to nobody in the Proceran leadership that Juniper might have been calling the military shots the whole time.

*Allafterme*

I do feel sorry for the poor Tribute Abigail. Nauk still kicking and twice as mean than before is just the stuff nightmares are made of 😊

*Blinks*

I think she's going for the food supplies.

Destroy her own, destroy theirs. Everybody starves. Unless they allow Cat to take people home through her gates.

*Sniggs44*

This does seem like a good strategy, but IIRC the crusaders have enough food to march all the way to a major Callowans city, with or without the stuff Cat's army has.

If it was just a matter of taking out the crusader's food supplies, why hasn't that been the focus from the get go? Just drop the lake on their supply train and then portal out.

I'm thinking (hoping) the strategy Juniper is executing isn't just a way to burn the enemy supply train.

*HiThere*

I'll try to answer your questions.

It was mentioned earlier that the crusaders have only 1-2 days of supplies left. Part of Rozala's objectives was to seize the legion's supplies, which would allow them to just barely make it to Harrow.

Taking out the supplies was a large part of the earlier strategy; Thief was sent during the negotiation with the princes to steal their supply stores, she succeeded, and later Hune and the wild hunt were sent via gates to make sure additional supplies from Procer did not reach the crusaders.

The "Lakehammer" used by Cat was a trump card, an army-killer. Using it too early would leave the crusaders wary and ready to counter. Better to send Thief and keep that card for when it would be really needed.

As for Juniper's strategy, unknown, I speculate she's going for defeat in detail. Engaging the crusader side with the horses, the less-obvious target, while keeping the other one at bay with munitions and goblin. Local legion superiority could carry the day, though I do not know how exactly she plans to deal with the heroes.

Hope this was helpful 😊

### *Darkening*

Minor point, Thief stole the supplies while Cat and the Wild Hunt were attacking the camp, not during the negotiations.

### *Blinks*

They've got enough food now. If Juniper takes out their food supplies and nukes her own things get far more dicey. Especially if she takes out any kind of siege weaponry that might be available.

At which point Juniper can either set herself in for a fight to the death around Cat and hope the Queen awakens in their darkest hour or begins retreating the army herself.

At which point the crusaders have no food, their supply lines interdicted and no cities within reach they could batter down to get needed supplies.

Oh! Maybe she just punches the whole way. Goes through the marsh, through the Crusaders camp and starts moving north. Simply abandons her Camp entirely. They take each others camps "Battle of the Camps" as it might be known but from Junipers point of view it works out perfectly.

### *Naeddyr*

Motherlover it's the war college battles all over again!

grzecho2222

Or Hakram with Duchess will box them around Cat, like the second Battle of Akka (1189) making this double siege (Akka was triple at one point, but maybe we will see this also)

[sengachi](#)

Oh jeez, there's a thought.

Is Larat still available to Juniper as a resource? Because if he is, a scorched earth retreat might be a valid victory tactic. Torch whatever supplies you can't take with you, detach a substantial force to sweep your opponents few remaining supplies from behind (the assumed 2,000 soldiers guarding the baggage train have not actually been seen I'd like to point out), and then fall back in good order through a gate. Give your opponent a moving battle rather than a static defense, to keep your forces from being pinned down so they can retreat when they have to. Or perhaps just delay the start of combat by as many hours as possible and use harassing tactics which drag the battle on as long as possible.

Procer's so low on food already that a day's delay (less if Juniper hits their supplies any more) might leave them too hungry and tired to successfully assault a Harrow which Juniper is defending. Stalling Procer for time and then bugging out is totally a victory condition for Juniper.

It'd even match up with One-Eye's opening line. Victory isn't about any nebulous definition of 'winning', it's about removing your opponent's ability to wage war. And you can't wage war on empty stomachs. Therefore any outcome which sees Procer still here a day from now and the Legions not here is a win for the Legions.

And as a last detail, this seems like something that would be remarkably hard for Heroes to narrative their way out of, and not a tactic the Saint of Swords or the Gray Pilgrim seem well-suited to counter.

*TeK*

Yeah, the problem is gates. Cat's incapacitated, and even if Larat is here, he may not be as readily subservient to Juniper.

*Blinks*

He's also a, y'know, treacherous lieutenant. Best not to put him into such a situation as it'll not end well.

[Euodiachloris](#)

On the one hand, having fun with the treason game. On the other, having heaps of fun playing very-distinctive-cat-and-rather-surprised-mouse with an entire crusade. On the gripping hand, having fun just sitting back and watching all the tangling, untangling and crashing the various narratives are going through... Decisions, decisions; what is a fun loving fey to do?

All, probably. With a little bit of Bejeweled on the side for when feeling a little bit bored.

*Author Unknown*

IIRC the mnemonic is 5 minutes without air, 5 days without water, 5 weeks without food.

They are not going to fall over dead just from missing a day or two of food. They will, however, become lethargic and unable to really fight. If Juniper fled now, Procer would probably be able to make it to any nearby city, assuming it isn't heavily defended. That might mean Procer would have to make some hard decisions, like abandoning armor and weapons or eating horses, but it is possible.

I don't claim to know what Juniper has planned, but I'm betting it's a better option for ending the Procer army as a threat.

*Morgenstern*

Hmm... I did a first aid course just yester-yesterday and they said four, not five, for the mnemonic.

*CBH*

Its the rule of 3's, not 5's. 3 minutes without air, 3 hours without shelter, 3 days without water, 3 weeks without food.

Might be important just in case you're ever trapped in the wilderness. 😊

*DD*

Kinda right. People forget or are never taught certain things. The numbers are based on rough averages, so the ability to survive is actually variable, depending on the person and the local environment. Also, if you have certain types of food, it may contain all the water you need to get by. Many don't realize that the old "8 glasses a day" is from an 1800s book and had a second part to the sentence "...most of which can be found in food."

People can and have lasted a lot more than three weeks on no food, though they absolutely would be unable to fight at that point.

*RanVor*

Well, the point is to neutralize them as a fighting force, not to starve them to death. A week without a meal and it's more than done.

*Tristan*

For those of you wondering, CBH has the correct estimate. I've heard the 4 & 5 numbers thrown around before but realistically, average individuals may still be alive in that 'extra' time they're likely to be incapacitated. You might survive to day four with out water but you're also likely to be incapable to saving yourself at that point. Would also like to point out that the mnemonic is intended to inform your priorities in an emergency. In extreme weather, shelter is far more critical than food & water.

*RanVor*

Even if they managed to capture a city, they might be forced to pillage to get enough supplies to survive, breaching the agreement and destroying their credibility completely.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah a day without food won't kill anyone in Procer's army. But it will \*annihilate\* their capacity to give battle. Let alone to siege a fortified position.

A traveler forced to go without food for a day is miffed and a little uncomfortable. A soldier forced to go without food for a day is a corpse come battle.

*taovkool*

On the other hand, she'd been transferred from the command of General Hune to that of General Nauk. The godsdamned Princekiller himself. The orc looked like a torch had eaten half his face, and acted like he was going to eat half Creation to even that out. Of course they'd put her under the command of the one man in the Army of Callow who was guaranteed to be sent over and over again into the worst possible messes.

You know, it feels strange that Nauk hasn't made an appearance as of yet after the arc began. He's a pretty big supporting character and they've all made their appearances. What the hell happened to that guy after Warlock fixed him up?

*Letouriste*

I think cat is kinda avoiding him a little because of guilt. So we would not see him much until an important meeting where the

complicated feelings would be plain to see or something like that...or until next interlude^^

*Nani the fuck?*

"The urge to sink her teeth into the warm veins warred with the urge to feel the softness with her own rough hands" ???

*Kylen*

Literally her actual orc hunger is fighting with the fact that Juniper may well have a deep crush on her.

*RanVor*

I think I'm not the only one who found that line very creepy.

[taliesinskye](#)

Anyone want to bet that Juniper just found a way to attack the enemy camp while both enemy armies are tied down? I think that's how she forces a strategic defeat here.

*Morgenstern*

Same thought, but I don't quite see how destroying their camp would necessarily force a retreat. Is she banking on Rozala's honor or what? o0

*Morgenstern*

One way: Robber and Archer would be my first guess. They're still out there. And Juniper just thought in terms of an archery, as tiny tidbit that might or might not be important.

[wyaldriddler](#)

That's one of the things she does, she did it before she met Archer during the battle with the Exiled Prince if I recall correctly.

*Morgenstern*

Hm... One thought just occurred: are the priests back in the camp...?

And as a quick mobile force maybe we could see the Order of Broken Bells on the move again. Might send 'em around.

[wyaldriddler](#)

"`She looked down at the map on the table, the figurines she had set down.

"That," she murmured through her fangs, "was a mistake."



The Hellhound smiled, and in her mind's eye she loosed the arrow.“`

Welp. They're dead.

*Antoninjohn*

Cat is a goddess so she can answer prayers from her believers/followers which is pretty much her whole army, would come in handy if the priests manage to shutdown the Order of Broken Bells magic resistance, I know that should not be possible but with how much the “Good” guys are cheating I can see them doing that

*grzecho2222*

Order of Dark Knights would be fun to watch.

[daegone823](#)

Read all the comments and no one comments on the Juniper and Aisha cruise ship sailing with fair winds

*Fern*

soft hands indeed

*Darkening*

Yeah, that ship's going strong at this point.

*Letouriste*

i can't help to see she want literally eat Aisha:) feel kinda vampire-like love story

*Gunslinger*

>The urge to sink her teeth into the warm veins warred with the urge to feel the softness with her own rough hands.

We've all been there June

*maresther23*

There is the shape of a story there. In the middle of the Moonless Night the Black Queen raises to defend her friends and country, unleashing monstrous forces against her enemies. By dawn, the Grey Pilgrim Forgives the monster, restoring her soul and cutting her mantle. By midway, Catherine Foundling defeats her enemies once more, through superior tactics and with a weaponized box.

*Notimpressed*

\*Weaponized Goat

## [Rey d`Tutto](#)

Undead Goat Bomb Brigade!!!

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Sheer Goat Attack, maybe?

*Antoninjohn*

The story is a Practical Guide to Evil not a Hypocrite Guide to Heroes. Cat is not becoming a Hero and serving the Gods Above, it does not matter how much they try to brainwash her she does not become a hero

*Decius*

Whether she does the will of the Gods Above depends a lot on what the will of the Gods Above is.

It's entirely plausible that she's a Hero AND a Villain, in addition to neither.

*Engineer*

The main thing about practicality is that you don't have any rigid boundaries. If Cat needs to play the role of a Hero to achieve her objectives she will do so, if she needs to play the Role of a Villain to achieve the same she will also do so. So her playing the role of the Hero, come to save her army in their darkest hour is entirely inline with the theme of the Guide because she is not is deluded by the "good" of the Gods Above nor the "power" the Gods Below offer. The Roles they empower are merely means to an end.

*grzecho2222*

Enlightened tyranny, positivism and very TTS "Who said that gods are more than mortals" seem to be running theme of Team Cat and Team Black

*Fern*

So, here's what we know:

Because Princess General is aiming for a complete victory in one go, and a single hero, let alone fourteen of them, buffs morale in attacking armies, the Principalities won't tactically retreat, meaning Juniper is going for a strategic endgame here.

Rozala's camp only has 2000 guarding it, likely with all of their supplies.

The bulk of the Callowan army is looking to plant munitions, then retreat.

Here's what i'm guessing: Juniper draws in the Principality host between the munitions and the palisade, and starts working their asses like a drunk stepfather. She then sends her 2000-odd force of knights under Talbot to hit their supply train and then make a fighting retreat. Since the heroes and Amadis' own ambitions won't allow Rozala to retreat, this is the only winning option for Callow.

The big hole in this plan, of course, is the heroes. But then, a Queen awakening at her kingdom's most dire hour to lead her army and her troupe of named has a nasty shape to it.

This is gonna be interesting.

[daegone823](#)

Hyped to see if Nauk can gain name. I mean Hakram was a large part in Chat's story and Nauk mirrors villainous traits. He was raised from a near dead state by Warlock, killed a large demon in the midst of red rage, but most of all his reputation precedes him which can foster the creation of a name. I mean if rogue sorcerer and thief are names they should have orc names for berserker's which Nauk is becoming his undying allegiance to Chat has only focused his savage rage onto an enemy.

*grzecho2222*

New version of Warlord (highly unlikely) or something completely new like Wojewoda (chosen leader of warriors or one of armies)

*Notsteve*

I hear there's an opening for the name of Captain. Maybe for a character that's big and strong and has a curse that powers them up but makes them go berserk...

*Cap'n Smurfy*

The advanced tactics and set up here is great and all, but holy crap Juniper is repressing a pretty blatant crush on Aisha!

*Anon*

Hmm....Juniper seems to be operating under the assumption that priestly fuckery won't be going on any more – if they could create walls, they could equally feasibly create something else non-lethal but that could still mess with the Callowan Army's plans.

And that's to say nothing of the 12 named, two of them high-tier, who can say 'screw you, not happening' to various elements, if need be.

I know Juniper's been played up as decently tricky, but there's a lot of elements that can still mess things up for her to seemingly be so confident.

*TeK*

Remember how in the battle of marchford she went for sleep in the middle of the battle, placing contingencies not only for demon being like really tricky, but for Aqua suddenly appearing to slaughter the rest of Fifteenth? And she has only upped her game since.

*TeK*

Ok. Let's review teh pieces. Deoraithe are going in force, obviously to reinforce Cat. Adjutant is with them and some detached forces as well. And we know that Larat can make gates, and it's at least hinted he is not with the Army of Callow (having a band of murderous demigods up close, when you've suddenly lost the leash is not something you just ignore), it's possible reinforcements are coming. But somehow I wouldn't bet on this. Procerans have three major detachments, fifteen thousands on each side of the march and approximately five in reserve, protecting camp. Priests are most likely equally spread, so much less boxes, and their mage lines are butchered. Callow has something around nineteen thousands total, putting around twelve on one side, and four on the other. And some people staying in reserve, two thousands by Malanzas estimates. Brave General Two Face and his four thousands are behaving as proper minions, continuing time honored Callowan tradition of burning all your problems in goblinfire. Against them stands Fool-that-cuts-nothing, and no cavalry, as well as some heroes. Lead by not exactly brightest commanders overall, fifteen thousand infantry strong. Not mobile, so that's a plus. On the other side, twelve thousands and change are standing against fifteen thousands total, with full force of cavalry both. Also, despite what everyone on the Proceran side thinks, Callow still has Garcher and Thief. And the Demon of Absence, as well as two heroes are unaccounted for. Cat's and Mazego incapacitated for a time being, and yet, in her memuars, Juniper attributes Battle of the Camps to Cat, which seems rather counter-intuitive to me. Either author forgot he wrote this (like when Juniper is both of Red Moons and Red Shields), or the basic outlay of battle was already preplanned.

The problem is, as epigraph hints and Juniper thinks, the only way to win this battle is to force a retreat by strategic means. Already is clear that this is an eponymous Battle of Camps, so the point of fulcrum would be said camps. The Juniper said so

herself, they need to put Crusaders into position where they have to retreat, or face annihilation. What Procerans need right now more than crushing down opposing army are supplies, supplies which are currently in Callow's Camp. Denying them any supplies, harassing theirs and then retreating in good order, leaving Crusaders for a guerilla tactics of Deoraithe seems optimal to me. What will really happen? Frankly, I don't want to think about, it'll spoil the surprise.

But on the side note, given that Thief can apparently snatch entire army supplies, why Juniper's yet to use her as a mobile supply train? Or maybe she does, and her camp is already empty of anything to plunder?

*Naeddyr*

It might be perfectly possible that Thief's Aspect doesn't allow for storing things that she doesn't technically steal. A fleet of enemy ships and accompanying water? Sure. A grain of rice that her allies want her to take? Well, she could technically put it in her pocket...

*TeK*

She is a Villain and a Thief, and if a former knife problem in Fifteenth is any indication, she is kleptomaniac too. Some people justify stealing as to "relieve person of pressure caused by money", I don't see why she can't steal supplies so that "it will be a little easier to move". She'll return it later, promise.

*Allafterme*

That is not the case, she vanished the contingency soul for Akua after Cat gave the obsidian cylinder to her and told her to hide it.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Cat and she were partners in that caper. And, "hide the loot" is something somebody in anything nefarious will have to do at some point. \*shrugs\*

*Darkening*

Well, for one thing, putting all your supplies in an extradimensional space that could be lost to you if a hero happened to put an arrow between Thief's eyes has a bad shape to it? But yeah, makes a nice backup and helps with moving quickly if she can just grab all your supply wagons and hightail it out of there.

*TeK*

She does not engage in combat that much, and has an Aspect involving stealth. And who's to say that after her death, everything she stole is gone? It just may materialise near her in the moment of death. Btw, it would've been awesome to see her appropriate a shitton of goblin munition, and bring it back later in some kind of grand Last Stand, going kaboom with enemy.

*Raved Thrad*

Damn, you beat me to it. Not that I think Thief is the kind to go kamikaze, but it certainly is an idea, especially if her yoinkhole stores items in stasis so goblin munitions aren't in danger of exploding until she takes them out, or she dies and they suddenly appear.

*grzecho2222*

Yoink explosion itself, it worked on sun

*Yotz*

All my thoughts at this point spin around different kinds of wunderwaffe (like zombies with pressurized necroice core), but that would 1) require Cat to dream about it, and 2) too much ex machina for my tastes. Beyond that, I always was shite at strategizing.

Said that, here's two cents on the matter: Nauk's flank was given order to prevent enemy from discovering whatever the sappers do here, then – I presume – retreat when munitions would be put into place, and lure procerans on the mindfield; other side of engagement was placed to tie up corresponding enemy group – and enemy must engage on their own will to prevent cavalry from slipping out, which they would if you just attack first – procerans must be committed. Now, when sides are locked and can't maneuver freely, Nauk begins to crawl back, 'retreating' under the enemy pressure, and using mines to force the Saint show herself. GP is considered to be absent (not Absent) due to report/analysis of his condition by the Thief As soon as Cutter's position is known, Talbot steamrolls the other flank, while the 'retreat' on the Sainted front becomes 'full-fledged panic' with complimentary running back to the palisade. In the middle of all this, clearly seen greenish fire begin to light up the sky over the place where all the supplies in the Callow camp are held, and – since proceran cavalry currently is tied up/being crushed by Talbot – there's nothing they can do about burning supplies. To add insult to injury – from the general direction of the proceran camp sounds of explosions and plumes of fire can be seen, courtesy of certain Special Tribune and – ahem – the Garcher...

Proceran leadership understands that force attacking their camp can't be that large, but fears it can be large enough to successfully destroy remaining supplies, and callowan supplies

are clearly gone – no way they can crush the Army fast enough to loot the burning camp. So they try to pull soldiers from the lines fast enough to prevent destruction of their camp, and carefully enough to prevent incoming massacre of retreating courtesy of the Army of Callow.

All that kitten calamity goes sideways due to one or another Heroic Interventions, then completely south when Saint goes on rampage. All seems lost for the side of Ebil, which triggers “The Darkest Hour” protocol. The Black Queen has awoken...

*Yotz*

Meh, while I was typing all this, Fern already supplied that much. Oh, well – in any case we will see the resolution soon.

*ALazyMonster*

You mentioned this being the battle of the camps, wouldn't that just have been the raid on the Proceran camp that let Thief steal the supplies? This seems like this would be more like the prince's graveyard to me as this is a series of battles and there really is no camp involved in this fight other than Procer's reserve.

*Metalshop*

Ok, now I'm /very/ eager to see Nauk onscreen. There's been enough teasing and delaying of his appearance that I think something odd is going to be up with him when he does show. Maybe there's some Summer fire left behind in him or something...

*Letouriste*

Same for me:) but I think the reason is some awkwardness between him ( his injury is shameful to orcs) and cat( guilt). EE seems to build something with that or just feel like putting nauk in the background. Normally such action would be a death flag but there is a badly needed talk between them two we didn't see so I guess he is pretty safe right now

*TeK*

Actually, he might just die off exactly because there is so much needed talk between them. What's more, I think him getting in dire straights or outright dying would be a catalyst for Cat to awake.

[sengachi](#)

“The urge to sink her teeth into the warm veins warred with the urge to feel the softness with her own rough hands.”

... is it bad that I interpreted both of these as sexual, not just the latter?

*Yotz*

A person of taste I see...

[sengachi](#)

... is that a pun?

*grzecho2222*

Don't be bitter, even if this might be rather tender topic for many sour reactions may spoil the taste of this sapid discusion

[sengachi](#)

Okay you? You go to your room and think about what you've done.

*grzecho2222*

"Evil Laughter"

*Allafterme*

It takes an orc to get lust and gluttony go hand in hand...

*Seabornia*

Am I the only one who assumes that lack of Archer's mention in last chapters implies she and Robber are "absent" ?

*Letouriste*

Juniper is probably in the known for what they are doing so I guess they are not with the army,yeah. In the first place, Archer is not suited to fight with armies. she is more of an hunter kind of fighter.

*thegreatfeed*

Fuck that is scary. I hope GP deals with that demon, it has been giving me the Herbie jeevies.

*Highwayman*

Nauk kinda sounds like a big great American Bully here; vicious with an ugly mug but cuddly at the same time.

[daegone823](#)



Where is the cuddly part I think it died with his friend who was a double agent. I forget his name.

*Blinks*

Aright, this is how i think it might kind of go.

Munitions for ground denial in both engagements of the battle. The tactical situation is fairly hopeless. The enemy has too many soldiers and too many named. Which makes it a game of keep away until Cat wakes up again.

By hook or crook get across the marsh but Juniper destroys the supplies before she does. They've been noted a lot and made such a part of the story i think they're doomed to die.

Take their camp, pull the forces in. Crusaders take Junipers, maybe in the night just to make sure they don't know all of what's going on. Essentially swapping positions except for Junipers the only one with supplies now and she is literally sitting on the Crusader supply route. Assuming anything was getting past the Watch anyway who can now reinforce easily.

Battle of the Camps indeed.

*aran*

So, uh, random point of interest. Probably nothing.

If those munitions really *are* made out of the essence of devils (and even demons, in the case of goblinfire), then are they covered by the agreement Catherine made with the Pilgrim? Meaning their use would break the truce, and allow the Crusaders to start calling on angels?

(If that is the case, then I'm completely sure the Pilgrim knew exactly what he was doing by insisting on those rules of engagement.)

*Yotz*

This topic was discussed previously, afair. The point of mild contention was as such: Procerans use miracles in warfire; priestly healing, protective blessings – not to mention the Fences – are by nature of the Above, and so fall under the terms of treaty as “angelic intervention”. If Procerans so chose to enforce ban on the goblin munitions, they'll break terms of the treaty retroactively, since between the point of the agreement and the point of the supposed munition ban they were using miracles freely.

The treaty, as I understand it, counts only direct use of Demons and Devils from one side, and direct interventions of Hashmallim from the other. That includes direct summoning, and

accepting the offers from the Other side – but! – not the use of, say, angelic feathers as swords, or devils' teeth as flechettes. Although, bilethrowers filled with demonic vomit are, probably, out of question due to inherently existencidical nature of said materiel.

That, and I still think that demonic trace is a red herring – munitions are made with the essence of dragonfire, not Infernis. Well, if Dragons of this world are not of Infernal origin – in which case they'll fall under situation described above.

### [Dragnor425](#)

Wait Nauk is still alive?

### [daegone823](#)

warlock agreed to help him. He was in a near death state after being burned by summer fire. He is now something less. It was revealed in the first chapter how priest can heal wound easily with miracles simply calling on the heavens, whereas mages must put everything mechanically back in place meaning more room for error.

If a hero such as sword and board is deeply affected by resurrection of the pilgrim who has a natural affinity for healing with miracle abilities, then the warlock which specializes in affliction and pain was less kind to Nauk.

He is now something less than what he was before. based on what the tribune stated he is twice as pissed as he was before. He probably only has the rage as well as his allegiance to Chathrine keeping him sane. That and the near countless number of enemies she puts in front of him.

So to make a long story short yes he is alive but the psychological and physical pain he must experience must be immense not to mention his soul must have been modified, ripped, scarred, or worse something was used as a substitute.

### [Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Well, if the Interludes are true to form, III will be followed by Cat's narrative again.

Curious if that happens or not.

### *Detton*

The comment that Cat's situation does not feel like a villain's story had me thinking. I dont think she will become a hero – I dont think the Gods Above like her enough to give her that willingly.

However, Black and the Calamaties have been changing the game for 40 years; redefining what it was to be evil by defying and recognizing the tropes that cause their downfall.

What if Cat and her situation (not having a Name currently, all the stuff shes been through), have finally broken the board? That we are now seeing this world's narrative-focus reality finally split down the seam?

Just a thought. Excited for the coming chapter(s)!

*Trebar*

The talk about munitions is a red herring. All that talk about ground control and tying up one column while dealing with the other was before the revelation that Procer needs a complete victory and all that talk about strategic defeat. It's also never mentioned what the sappers are doing; just that they need time to do the work.

What are some things sappers can do other than munitions? Well, we know they can dig but that hasn't been utilized often as it is often less effective than munitions outside of siege situations. But this time there's this random lake just begging for an outlet...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Don't be between a large body of fresh, newly uncorked water and the sea, yes. Especially if in a valley. \*winced\*

*Everybody*

Hey just noticed the Summary page still says "Updates Monday and Wednesday" , should probably update with the good news 😊

*Jworks*

When are the updates now?

*Poetically Psychotic*

Not giving a reason for Prince Arnaud's deception was excellent writing. I cannot for the life of me figure out why he's pretending to be an incompetent, arrogant jerk, and honestly it's kind of creeping me out. "That which we don't understand" and all that.

*Lemon*

Hoping Cat wakes up when things are looking grim and summons her first large undead army from the creepy murder marsh. Undead armies would suit her so well because it's seen as the epitome of Evil but can save so many Callowan lives. And she could

transition to Death Knight in the future after she becomes Mortal again.

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## Interlude: Kaleidoscope IV

*"And so Dread Emperor Irritant addressed the heroes thus: Lo and behold, I fear not your burning Light, for I am already on fire."*  
– Extract from Volume IX of the official Imperial Chronicles

Abigail was beginning to reconsider her position on tanning being an acceptable vocation. Sure, the smell was horrible and they made you live outside city walls. Pay wasn't that good, and good luck trying to get anywhere without joining a guild that'd squeeze you on fees. On the other hand, she mused, the average tanner did not usually have to deal with fifteen thousand angry crusaders howling for their blood. *I probably shouldn't have gotten sauced and insulted the entire family before leaving*, she decided. *Now even if I come crawling on my knees they'll make me marry a cousin before taking me back.*

"I just can't do it," Tribune Abigail of Summerholm sighed. "They all look like ferrets."

"Ma'am?" Captain Krolem asked.

"We have to win this one, Captain," she told the orc solemnly. "There's a lot riding on it."

"For the honour of the Black Queen," the orc growled approvingly.

"Yes," Abigail lied. "That is exactly what I meant."

The queen could stab her way to an honourable reputation on her own, as far as the woman was concerned, but telling greenskins shit like that was never good politics. It wasn't quite as bad as someone badmouthing the Carrion Lord – or, as this was known within the Army of Callow, *suicide by stupidity* – but orcs tended to be touchy about Queen Catherine's reputation. She'd had drinks with a Taghreb once who'd explained it to her, and what she'd gotten out of the man was that greenskins had a great big cultural boner for people that were good at killing. And Hells, no one ever said the Black Queen didn't have a talent for that.

"Rotation, Captain Krolem," she said, eyes scanning her frontline. "We're tiring."

The Hellhound had, in her great wisdom, decided that the four thousand men under Nauk Princekiller were enough to kick an entire enemy column in the balls. The tribune wasn't all that fond of the Marshal of Callow, who was rumoured to eat people who got sloppy with kit maintenance, but she had to concede this wasn't going as fucking horribly wrong as she'd expected when the enemy had advanced. For one, compared to Summer fae and wights the levies were godsdamned pushovers. It was *incredibly* refreshing to fight people that didn't keep attacking after you hacked an arm off. Captain Krolem sounded the whistle around his neck and the twenty soldiers at the front of her cohort withdrew, a fresh line taking their place. The crusaders didn't have fancy manoeuvres like that. When they got tired they just died, thank the Gods. Her eyes flicked to the sides and she grimaced.

The crusaders had wasted the better part of an hour getting in battle formations before attacking, but what had struck her as unnecessary wariness was beginning to pay off. Sure, they were failing to breach the shield wall, but the flank to the west was a problem. General Nauk had left a full kabili of one thousand floating out there to prevent easy flanking, but the crusaders had the numbers to keep going around even after engaging those. The only reason the host hadn't been enveloped yet was... A horn sounded, and Abigail kissed her mailed fist in thanks to the Gods Above. Retreat to the next line, at last. It was the third time the general called for one, and they gave more ground every time. Abigail figured at some point the entire army would just fucking leg it, and it couldn't come soon enough.

"In good order, soldiers," she called out. "Anyone falls out of line and I'll drown them in the marsh myself."

It was going well, she thought. Better than she could have reasonably hoped for.

"NAMED," a legionary called out.

It fucking figured.

—

It was like trying to break a stone with a wooden hammer, Captain Pierre Dulac thought as he strode over the corpses of his fellow fantassins. It left a mark, but the hammer tended to break and considering his company was the hammer of this tortured metaphor this was not a pleasant state of affairs. The Brabantine had heard stories about the Legions of Terror, how they'd swept aside the armies of Callow effortlessly, but he'd always believed them to be exaggerated. They'd had twenty years to swell, after all, and he was not unacquainted with how evenings at taverns made yarns grow ever more vivid. After the first time he'd lost thirty of his finest trying to break through the enemy shield wall, however, he'd had to swallow his old opinions. The heathens

fought as hard as the devils they bargained with. Horns sounded in the distance and the Army of Callow moved as a single living creature, retreating at a measured pace as balls of flame bloomed in the sky and began raining down on Proceran lines.

Pierre put his shield over his head and knelt, waiting for the rain to pass. A man to his left was a little too slow to bring up his own shield and sorcerous flame struck his face, searing flesh and muscle in the blink of an eye. The fantassin squinted. New recruit, he was pretty sure, some Segovian second son who'd enrolled to seek his fortune. The poor fucker should have listened, when his mother told him fortune was a fickle bitch.

"On your feet, men of Procer," a voice rang out.

The captain obeyed before he even realized what he was doing. The man who'd spoke was tall, and his accent in Chantant was heavy with the thick syllables of a native Levantine. Armoured in silver, with a shield polished until it shone like a mirror and a sword that was more radiance than steel, the Chosen could be *felt* even from ten feet away. Like a pulse, a whisper of power bestowed by the Godss.

"The enemy retreats," the hero said. "We must pursue. The Heavens will it."

"The Heavens will it," Pierre replied in a fervent whisper.

He would have formed the wings with his fingers, had he not been holding sword and shield. With the end of the wave of fire, advance towards the retreating legionaries was left unbarred. His company formed ranks and advanced, the Chosen at their head, and they shouted defiance. The humans and greenskins on the other side watched them in silence from behind their shield wall, grimly professional. No levies, these. The difference between soldiers trained and soldiers conscripted had been written across the field today.

"Do not be afraid," the Chosen called out. "Their dark queen is wounded and they stand bereft of her protection. This battle will be won by faith and courage."

"Company, charge," the captain screamed. "Honour to the Wreath!"

Shouts gave answer, the oaths of half a dozen principalities sounding where no banners stood.

"Double pay to anyone who stabs the shiny fucker," a woman's voice called out from the other side.

Pierre blinked, but had not time to spare for surprise as a moment later his shield hit the enemy's. A massive orc, who smashed him back with brute force. The fantassin had not survive

the Great War without picking up a few tricks, though. He went low and stabbed up, finding flesh, and the greenskin howled in rage. Squaring up behind his shield the captain let the creature's violent death throes bounce off wood and iron, pushing forward before the legionary behind this one could fill the gap. Along the line his men were like wave hitting a cliff, save for where the Chosen led. Legionaries were smacked down like insolent children, and those that tried to force back the hero found a sliver blur carving through their flesh. The fantassin rocked back as a Callowan went shield to shield with him but dug his feet. Gritting his teeth, he had to retreat when the legionary to that one's right stabbed forward with his sword. Another of his men took his place, and he joined the pressing throng to look for a better opening.

"Scatter," a voice too deep to be human shouted.

Pierre found his gaze moving to the side, attracted by sudden movement where the Chosen was fighting. The legionaries who'd been surrounding the man retreated swiftly, and a moment later lightning struck. The Brabantine's blood quickened and he blinked away the bright light, relieved when he saw the hero stood unmarried with his shield up. Lightning scarred the earth around him. A trail of red went up in the sky above, some sort of munitions, and the captain grimaced. That did not bode well. A spike of flame formed above the Chosen and hammered down at him, but the mirror-like shield shone blindingly and the fire blew back into the sky. The second spike, though, shook the Chosen's stance. The third drove him back. The fourth nailed him into the ground. Pierre hurried towards the grounds, not sure what he could do but knowing he had to try. The fifth spike formed... and went out. Snuffed like a candle. By the Chosen's side a wrinkled old woman stood, glaring up with a sword in hand. The Regicide, Pierre understood with trembling hands. The fantassin hurried and helped the other Chosen back to his feet as the Saint of Swords casually carved through half a dozen legionaries with a single swing.

"What part of *careful advance* did you not understand, kid?" the Regicide said. "This is a battlefield, not your sister's wedding. Going in with your dick out won't get you fucked the fun way."

Pierre would never be so foolish to admit this out loud, but he felt a little cheated that the first sentence he'd heard the Chosen of the Heavens speak involved mention of dicks. It was perhaps less radiantly heroic than he'd expected.

"I apologize for my failure, Honoured Elder," the Chosen still leaning on him gasped.

"Apologize by not forcing me to drag my ass here again," the old woman snorted. "Steady this flank, sorcerers are focusing on the right."

The Saint glanced at Pierre, who blanched, and nodded approvingly at him before moving out in a blur. In the distance, horns sounded again and the legionaries began to retreat. The hole the Chosen had carved into the lines had already reformed seamlessly, and the fantassing let the hero he'd been holding up steady his own footing.

"Again, Captain," the man said. "The Heavens will it."

"The Heavens will it," Captain Pierre Dulac agreed.

—

Well, at least she was still alive. Tribune Abigail rubbed at her left eye again, pretty sure she was going to have to get that looked at by a mage. She'd made the mistake of looking at the fucking hero when he made his pretty little shield shine and she'd had to deal with persistent black spots ever since. General Nauk had finally sounded what should be the last retreat before they got the Hells out of here, so her odds of surviving the day were looking sunny. She'd also gotten through a visit by the Saint of Swords without losing any limbs, which had her in a good mood. Named were like lightning: the odds of them striking at the same place in the battle line twice were pretty low once they left. She'd lost a quarter of her cohort when the shiny fucker had led a charge, and not even calling for heavy mage support had gotten rid of the bastard, but they were approaching the low earth slope the sappers had raised and that was probably a good sign. She hoped. It wasn't like tribunes were high up enough the ladder to be in the loop for whatever secret plans were unfolding. The crusaders were pressing on all sides, but the measured pace of the retreat had continued to prevent encirclement.

Still, thank the Gods the enemy didn't have cavalry.

Abigail squinted at the enemy, to her dismay finding out that the hero from earlier was still leading the pursuit. Fuck. She'd really been hoping that would end up being someone else's problem. Her cohort still had two tracers to send up to request mage intervention, but for the heavy stuff the mage lines could only hit one place at a time. If her signal went into the sky and they were already busy, the enemy Named was going to fuck them up.

"At least they don't fly," Abigail mused out loud. "So there's that."

"Ma'am?" Captain Krolem asked.

He tended to do that a lot. It was a little unsettling for an orc his size to turn into an eager page whenever she spoke.



"Keep us at pace, Captain," she said. "I'm just thinking."

"May I ask about what?" the greenskin said.

"Comparing this to the Arcadian Campaign," she said. "Didn't fight much at Five Armies and One, but this is about as bad as Dormer."

The orc looked at her eagerly.

"Is it true you ripped out a fae's throat with your teeth?" he said.

Oh Gods, the rumours kept getting worse.

"I stabbed it," she denied. "Blood just sprayed into my mouth."

Because she'd been screaming at the top of her lungs in terror at the time, then nearly choked to death as the fae kept trying to knife her.

"Drinking the blood of your enemy is an honourable thing," Krolem assured her.

Burning Hells, she'd never get used to orcs. Sometimes they were almost like people, then they said shit like that.

"Eyes on the enemy, Captain," she said, retreating from the line of conversation.

Speaking of retreats, her cohort was nearing the position they'd been ordered to stop at. The beginning of the earthen slope snaking across the field. Abigail glanced at it and frowned. Wasn't high or angled starkly enough to serve as proper field fortifications. What had the sappers been doing? Looking further back, she saw the packs of goblins standing in companies. No longer digging. Was this the sum of the plan, raising a second-rate hill? It was impressively long, sure, but all it meant was that her soldiers were going to be killed with the high ground. Pressing through the ranks to get to her, one of her lieutenants was making her way with an urgent look on her face. Tribune Abigail went to meet her half-way after leaving Krolem in command.

"Ma'am," the dark-haired Callowan saluted.

"Report," she ordered.

She'd sent the officer to have a look at what the goblins were up to, in case it ended up blowing up in her face.

"Tunnels, ma'am," the lieutenant got out. "They dug tunnels."

Abigail frowned.

"To where?"

The lieutenant gestured forward.

"In that direction," she said. "I couldn't tell how far, but at least beyond our position."

The tribune wiped sweat off her brow, though she was pretty sure she'd smudged dirt more than wiped wetness. Tunnels, huh. What for? Her cohort finished falling back in good order moments later, and she got her answer. The ground shook with muted explosions, snaking across the field until a chunk of the battlefield went up in the air. The Callowan almost fell, but caught herself at the last minute. Dirt began to fall like rain maybe a third into the Proceran host, and her brows rose. That would have killed a few hundred, but it wouldn't stop them. It'd dug some kind of trench in the ground, she saw, pretty deep and wide. Not exactly a knock out-blow, though. Then the water from the marshlands began pouring into the trench and Abigail of Summerholm breathed in sharply. A *river*. The Hellhound had dug a river in the middle of an active battlefield, too broad and deep for easy crossing. And now a third of the Proceran host was stuck on the wrong side of it. Horns sounded, but the call was different this time. It'd been one of the first she learned, when going through officer training.

*All companies advance.*

—

"Left flank, tracer just went up," the human officer said.

General Nauk of the Waxing Moons did not reply, idly chewing on a finger. He'd had one of his aides drag a corpse out of the swamp. Bloated corpse wasn't his favourite, but it beat rations and the water made the flesh easy to tear off the normally tricky finger bones.

"Use the Spikes," Legate Jwahir said. "And keep hammering, the Marshal handed down orders to try a kill on any hero on our side of the river."

Juniper of the Red Shields. The Hellhound. They had been friends once, he thought. He could remember parts of that. Enmity too, but that only to be expected. Nauk was certain he had not been a very good orc, even before Summer burned away most of what he was. Licking the last scrap of flesh and skin off the tip of the finger bone, the general swallowed. Eyes on the battlefield before him, he savoured the taste of meat and blood as he watched Proceran lines waver. The crusader left flank was attempting to salvage the situation by circling around, but he'd put most his heavies in the kabili standing in their way. It had meant more casualties for the regulars under heroic pressure, but that was

necessary. He did not have enough men to be able to afford coddling.

"Jwahir," he growled.

"Sir?" the Taghreb answered, turning to him.

"Burn them," he said. "We're not lingering, not with heroes on the prowl."

His legate looked like she wanted to argue, but he stared at her calmly until she flinched and gave the order. Calm came easily, these days. Balance for all the things that did not. The old killing urge was muted, the Red Rage burned away. Instead now he had this vicious spasm of violence never too far from his hands. That and the hollowness, but he had grown used to that. There was satisfaction to be found in his work, as close to pleasure as it got. General Nauk watched as clusters of green flames exploded in the ranks of the crusaders on the wrong side of the river, picking at the flesh between his fangs with the finger bone. The screams were soothing, almost as good as listening to the spasm. He'd keep his troops in place long enough the Procerans could not escape, then pull back to the camp as instructed. Heroes could still bleed them, and if a commander on the other side managed to restore order long enough to start sending soldiers around the river – which only went on for so long, time had forced limits – defeat could still happen. The world shivered.

"Sir," Jwahir said.

"I see it, Legate," he grunted.

A pair of heroes were hacking at the river with great spurts of Light, trying to collapse a ford. He snorted, dimly amused. Might work, but it'd take too long. Even if they didn't get exhausted before the end, the amount of men they'd be able to spare a burning death would be minimal. Dark eyes, one dead and one living, turned to the crusader camp even though it was too far to see. Soon that would go up in flames as well. Special Tribune Robber would be starting fires there, green and otherwise. Nauk felt like she should dislike the goblin, though he hardly remembered why. Something about a woman? Felt childish. And now he was hungry again. His fangs crushed the finger bones and he sucked at the marrow within, swallowing shards with it before licking his chops clean and tossing away the remains. A great ripping sound sounded in the distance, and the orc jolted in surprise. There was a wound in the sky, a woman running on it. Past the enemy lines, past the goblinfire, past his own men. Nauk's brow creased.

"Scry our mages," he ordered the Callowan officer. "The rest of you, go away."

Legate Jwahir's lips thinned.

"Sir-"she began.

Nauk unsheathed his sword.

"Disobeying a superior officer's order had clear consequences, Legate," he said. "The army now goes in full retreat. You hold command until told otherwise."

The woman paled. The orc did not pay much attention as the mage officer placed the scrying bowl in front of him on a tripod and the rest cleared out. His eyes were on the old woman running across the sky. Heading towards him. She flicked her sword, carving another rippling wound and sliding down until she landed in front of him.

"You'd be the general, then," the Saint of Swords said.

Nauk tapped the flat of his blade against the scrying bowl's edge.

"Spike," he ordered.

Flame hammered down a moment later and the world became a sea of fire as he laughed. Ah, that'd felt good. The impact had knocked him off his feet, but he rose.

"Again," he called out.

The heroine carved apart the flames that bloomed above them both, glaring at him. Another cluster was born and they both went down. Fire licked at his hands and the Princekiller hacked out a cough. She wouldn't die that easily. But neither would he. He'd felt harsher flames than this. Still did, whenever he closed his eyes. Through the smoke a shape burst out, but he was quick enough the cut that would have taken his throat cut through his ruin of a cheek instead. Barely felt it. The old woman eyed him contemptuously, raised her blade once more and then hurriedly backpedalled when a long knife scythed through where her throat had been a heartbeat earlier.

"So," Archer said, blades twirling in her hands in a display of unnecessary dramatics, "Is it me or you've gotten a little crazier?"

Nauk hacked out a laugh.

"Try to get me a slice, will you?" he said. "Never had heroine before."

"That wasn't a no," the woman drawled amusedly.

"You're one of Ranger's," the Saint of Swords interrupted.

"And you're..." Archer began. "Shit, I could have sworn I knew. Sorry, I really wasn't paying attention during that briefing. Catherine was wearing this very flattering tunic and I was hammered like you-"

The heroine struck, but Archer danced around the blow and forced her back with a slash that would have gone across her eyes.

"Go for a walk, Nauk," the brown-skinned woman said, as if she hadn't been interrupted. "I don't think she's happy about your setting her minions on fire. Go figure. Some people just take things too personally."

"Flank meat," General Nauk suggested. "Or cheek. Tender pieces."

"Gross," the Named said, wrinkling her nose. "And I've been stealing goblin bedding for like a month, so I *know* gross."

The orc snorted, and fled to the sound of Archer beginning to expound on the virtue of royal liquor cabinets with breakable locks as the heroine tried to kill her.

—

Princess Rozala clenched her fingers until the knuckles turned white around the reins. They had been so very, very close to utter and complete victory. She'd followed the classics perfectly. A first wave of levies to tire out the enemy infantry, followed by fantassin companies across the line while princely retinues struck at weak points. She'd tied down the enemy cavalry with a portion of her own, then sent the rest to circle around to hit the back of the Army of Callow while she thinned she extended the line of her left flank. The enemy mages had been more than a match for her priests, but the struggle had occupied the both of them and left her foe with no real check for the Chosen. Who'd torn into the shield wall with remarkable alacrity, constantly forcing the opposing commander to reinforce breaches with fresh troops. Within the first half hour of the battle, victory was in the air. Wherever Named struck, the Army of Callow bled men like a leaking barrel. Then her circling cavalry had struck, and found a thin line of scorpions awaiting them. She'd almost laughed at the sight. The wave of bolts tore bloody swaths, but it could not stop thousands of horseman on the charge.

Then they'd fired again, barely a heartbeat having passed.

The tip of her cavalry wedges disintegrated. Men and horses died like flies as the scorpions damnably *kept firing*. The losses promised to be brutal, but as her horsemen spread out and began to close distance she bit down on her fury and made her peace with the trade. A higher cost than she would have wished, but victory was coming nonetheless. Then the goblins had wheeled out some shoddy-looking slings, and packed munitions began to blow

away whole chunks of cavalry. Her people were valiant, many of them hardened veterans from the Great War. It took them sixty heartbeats to break, and what should have been a triumph tipped towards a draw. The Callowan knights, though outnumbered, broke through the cavalry she'd sent against them after an hour of hard fighting. Losses on both sides were... steep. One of the few comforts of the day, that over a third of the enemy's cavalry had died before her own fled the field. Without the Chosen it might very well have been a defeat. The enemy commander turned those vicious scorpions against her fantassins, revealing that in addition to being repeating they could also be swiftly moved by oxen.

Then the Grey Pilgrim had taken the field and radiant light carved through the engines like a heavenly stroke. The enemy commander ordered a retreat soon after and the legionaries withdrew in good orders, bleeding men to heroes and skirmishers they had no answer to. But the knights of Callow threatened to charge them, and Princess Rozala had no choice but to order a temporary withdrawal while she sent some officers to force back steel in the spine of her horse. After another hour she was gathered in good order again, and ready to order another assault. With the scorpions destroyed, her foe would break. The the sky streaked with sorcery across the march, and she learned that the other column was in full retreat. But a half hour later, another signal touched the sky. Her camp had come under attack. Soon after the flames grew tall enough she could see them even from this far out. Princess Rozala had fought a battle, today, against twelve thousand men. She'd slain near a third of that army, at the price of perhaps five thousand dead of her own. Yet if she pressed the assault now, without the other column, she might very well be assaulting a fortified position with numerical inferiority. Gritting her teeth, she ordered a retreat back to camp.

One night. One night of rest in whatever was left of her camp, and then with dawn she would dispose with all strategic subtlety. She would muster her entire host, and hammer at the enemy until they broke.

—

Vivienne woke to the sound of someone pouring wine. She had a knife in hand before her eyes opened, and she was halfway out of her chair when a chuckle gave her pause. Thief stilled her heartbeat, meeting the former Prince of Nightfall's lone good eye. The fae had a cup of wine in hand, sitting at the edge of Catherine's bed. There were four mages in the tent and over thirty of her Jacks outside, yet not a single one of them had raised the alarm. The Callowan eyed the mages, who had neither noticed her waking nor Larat's presence.

"Where have you been?" she croaked out, voice still-half asleep.

The sound broke whatever glamour had kept the mages from noticing what was going on. Their eyes widened in alarm, but Vivienne's hand rose and they shut their mouths.

"Around," the fae drawled.

Instinct warred in the woman. Part of her wanted to dismiss the mages, since this might be a conversation best kept private. Another part of her was very much aware the nonchalant fae could kill her with a flick of the hand and Catherine was not awake to hold his leash. The mages might be her only chance of survival, if the fae felt inclined to violence.

"Every word spoken in this tent is under seal," Thief told the mages, choosing self-preservation with a bitter taste in the mouth.

"Precious," Larat smiled.

"We fought a battle, today," Thief sharply told him.

"And won it, I hear," the fae replied. "Or at least avoided loss, which is victory enough for the likes of you."

"She'll have your hide, for staying out of it," Vivienne said, forcing calm.

"I take no orders from mortals," the fae sneered.

The implication that Catherine was not one of those hung heavy in the air. Thief's lips thinned. It might even be true, to an extent.

"Then why have you reappeared?" she asked.

The one-eyed fae idly set down his cup on the bedside table and rose to his feet.

"Perhaps I've decided to dispose of my shackles," he suggested. "Or merely to hack away at dead wood."

The way he smiled at her when speaking the latter sentence sent a shiver up her spine.

"Doubtful," Thief said. "There's no Hell horrible enough for what would happen to you if you did, and we're both aware of it. That's not the game you're playing."

Larat shrugged languidly, leaning against a dresser.

"Perhaps I am simply waiting," he said.

Vivienne frowned.

"For *what*?" she pressed.

There was a gasp and Thief wheeled about. One of the mages was staring at the bed, where Catherine was... well, her body was no longer shuffling around. The woman flicked a glance at the fae, who was smiling thinly. Amused. After a long moment, the Queen of Callow's eyes opened and she let out a ragged sound. Rising to a sitting position on her bed, she rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Well," Catherine Foundling rasped. "That was a thing."

"Oh thank the Gods," Vivienne whispered.

Then Larat plunged his blade into her throat. Thief froze in utter surprise, but Catherine did not. She slapped the fae across the face, breaking his chin and teeth, and got on her feet. She took out the sword and her throat reformed within a heartbeat. Larat began to get up, but Cat kicked him back down and kept her bare foot on his chest. The fae began to laugh.

"Already?" the Queen of Callow said, and glanced at the mages still in the tent. "Bind him."

She reached for the cup of wine on the bedside table, then after a sigh withdrew the fingers. Thief's fingers clenched.

"*Hold*," she said.

The mages looked at her in surprise.

"And in wickedness doth Evil sow the seeds of its own defeat," Vivienne quoted, meeting Catherine's eyes.

The queen rolled her eyes.

"For barren is the womb, and certain the fall," she replied.

Is was, Thief knew, the correct second half of the verse from the Book of All Things. It was also not the correct answer to this phrase. It should have been the punchline to a truly filthy joke about sailors and holes in the hull she'd learned while a waitress in Laure.

"Hello, Akua," Vivienne said.

The Queen of Callow's face went blank and immediately a long spear of ice formed from her extended hand, the point resting on the sleeping Hierophant's throat.

"None of you," Akua Sahelian said through Catherine's lips, "are to move or make a sound."



The mages went still. Larat was still laughing.

"You won't," Thief said.

"I assure you," Diabolist said, "the survival of this man is of middling import to me."

"You won't," Thief repeated, "for the same reason you didn't drink from that cup. You're still bound by the oaths her body took."

Akua's eyes narrowed and her wrist flexed, but did not otherwise move.

"Clever girl," Catherine's lips said. "She took an oath not to harm any of you."

"Moonlight," Thief said, and the body froze.

Passing a hand through her hair, Vivienne felt her stomach drop. This, she thought, had just gotten a great deal more complicated.

"Bind her," she ordered the mages.

Larat, she noted, was still quietly laughing.

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*Yotz*

Irritant slowly but surely becomes my favourite Dread Emperor. Reminds me of Nathan from 'Misfits' – annoying as all hells, and immortal, so you can't even get rid of him for long – sooner or later he'll return like a migraine he is.

[maelos61](#)

I stopped watching after Nathan left, he was so damned annoying, but so funny too.

*Yotz*

I tried to soldier on, and it was a slog. Like a spark went out, and what left was only vapidty itself. Skipped to the end making checkpoint viewings just to see how it ended.

*nimelennar*

The reveal of Irritant's Law back in Book 4, Chapter 6 wasn't enough for him to win that contest outright, in your mind? It certainly was for me.

*stevenneiman*

For me it was still a contest with Traitorous (or possibly Treacherous, I can never remember which), but I think Irritant is ahead with this one.

*Yotz*

The one with "I'm not saying that I've killed all your friends and relatives long time, and replaced them with shapeshifting devils... Just saying, that's a possibility to consider", or something to those lines, yeah.

*stevenneiman*

The conclusion was "...but I'm certainly implying it very heavily"  
And yeah, that was a large part of the reason why I liked him so much. But let's be honest, all of the quotes from either of them have been amazing.

*grzecho2222*

I wonder what killed him. Being bored with winning?

*Jabes*

I was going to comment how much I loved the chapter, but my love of Emporet irritant sometimes overshadows that 😊

*Lord Chungus*

Well, shit

*Eduardo*

How will they know that Catherine is back?  
If she is back?

[Barthumphries](#)

By giving and receiving the proper passwords and passcodes.

*Draeysine*

Larat is super cool for a treacherous lieutenant. Knew something was up, so he shows up pours wine out as bait so Thief knew what was up, as well as tell thief about removing "dead wood" in a vague double meaning, THEN stabs the annoying girl possessing his queen as soon as she wakes up because it's both expected of him AND he knows that Thief is there to stop her further. Laughs the entire time because it's all a fun play.

*Mine*

Well there's nothing else to say other than Holy shit! Nauk got his feelings and memories burned by the fae 🔥!!!

*grzecho2222*

Larat acts like little rascal most likely because he is happy to finally be under leader that is magnet for trouble.

*Dylan Tullos*

This battle was a defeat for Team Practical Evil. Whenever a legionary dies, Catherine loses a highly trained professional soldier that she will desperately need later. When a fantassin dies, Cordelia Hassenbach loses a dangerous mercenary who has no place in a peaceful Procer. The Tenth Crusade has reserves; Catherine doesn't.

So far, the Crusaders have killed more than seven thousand soldiers of the Army of Callow. That's nearly half. Their own casualties have been substantial, but they have more men, and this host is built out of the First Prince's political enemies and the fantassins she wants to get rid of. The loss of the peasant levies is sad, but the only people in this army that Hassenbach actually needs to survive are the Heroes. Everyone else is either someone she can afford to lose or someone she actively wants to die.

Catherine can't simply replace her legionaries; professional soldiers take years to train properly. Even in the best case scenario, she'll be left with a crippled army, while the Crusade has armies to spare. Juniper is tactically brilliant, but Cordelia understands that strategy beats tactics; the alliance with the bigger army can afford to trade at a loss, since she can afford to replace her losses and Catherine can't.

[donforrester456](#)

The military aspect is fairly fascinating. I've been questioning, 'Could Procer eventually make a professional military like Praes?' Historically, the rise of a professional military, with leaders such as Kaiser Wilhelm and Napoleon, was tied to the modern notion of statehood and 'countries' as opposed to 'kingdoms'. While one didn't cause the other, they were definitely synergistic influences.

Praes, for its flaws, is at a place where having a professional military works. They have centralized political power in a way that Procer cannot, and both the cultures within Praes and the pre-existing Imperial bureaucracy lend themselves to its existence. Though it still took a period of severe internal strife and political upheaval to make it happen, one could say that Praes already had the elements for it before Black catalyzed them.

Procer is not ripe for such a thing AT ALL – their ‘Princehood’ political structure is practically designed to obstruct the creation of one, with only the threats at the northern borders giving a compelling reason for a truly national army. Though Praes is giving a convincing argument for having a national army at that border too, simply by existing as a unified state with Callow for so long.

The closest I can see Procer getting is the Ottoman style of semi-professional, semi-tribal, semi-mercenary (and semi-Janissary i.e. slave, but I don’t see Procer going that far). Actually, a more apt comparison would be the Macedonian states post-Alexander. Meanwhile, the Legions of Doom are analogous to Roman legions almost 1-to-1, discounting mage lines and goblin fire. We all know how that contest went.

Professional militaries historically trounced states whose military was mostly levies and mercenaries, such as Renaissance Italy and the fragments of the Holy Roman empire, even when vastly out-manned and out-financed; besides Rome’s example there’s also Prussia’s takeover of the German states demonstrating this. If it weren’t for that Procer \*enormously\* outpopulates Praes/Callow, has large allies to fight with them, and has Praes/Callow still recovering from ugly internal strife, Procer wouldn’t stand a chance. It might still not.

Though the disparity in naval power is disconcerting – Britain built the biggest empire the world ever knew on naval power. Praes is in France’s position on that one compared to the Ashurans, and that is a bad matchup. Something to watch, that.

Obviously, Procer will take notes and want to copy this whole ‘professional military’ idea. But I suspect it will take deep political reforms before Procer is able to field anything like what Praes has – even if Cordelia Hasenbach made such a thing her priority, conflicting internal interests would tear the military apart like we’ve seen in historical Europe and more recently Africa, the military juntas, tribal divides (‘Principality’ divides – we say tribes, but they could be considered on the same level of cooperation/competition for internal power) and precursor states to much of central Africa coming to mind.

### [Barthumphries](#)

“Praes is in France’s position on that one compared to the Ashurans, and that is a bad matchup. Something to watch, that.”

What with the games that city lords like to play, I presume all Praes’s cities are heavily fortified. And since they don’t really have a navy, they probably don’t really care what happens on the ocean. If merchants want to make money,

merchants will take the risk and run a potential blockade, etc.

Praes is in Spain's position with the Rock of Gibraltar. No navy wants to try to take that.

*Dylan Tullos*

donforrester456:

I agree with what you're saying about the qualitative superiority of Black's Legions. From what we've seen, they are the best human army on the face of Calernia.

However, the Dread Empire's political situation is drastically different from that of Rome. Rome had the advantage of being able to fight their enemies in sequence, digesting each conquest before they embarked on their next war. There was never a Grand Alliance dedicated to destroying Rome, and there was no unifying ideology that could bring all of their foes together.

The Good nations of Calernia aren't going to sit back and watch while Praes conquers the continent one bite at a time, and they have Named to even the odds. With Heroes to back them, fantassins can fight a Legion shield wall and win. Catherine just lost more than four thousand expensive, highly trained professional soldiers in exchange for five thousand mercenary fantassins. That kind of exchange rate leads to inevitable defeat.

Having the best military on the continent doesn't count for as much when you're at war with the rest of the continent. At some point, quantity outweighs quality, especially when one side can simply replace their losses in a matter of months and the other side requires years of training and preparation to produce new soldiers.

*grzecho2222*

Unless you count the fact that only the core of Army of Callow is made from veterans, And with it you can raise new legion in 2-6 months (if we compare them to roman legions). Training soldiers is faster than training warriors. Problem for Cat wasn't time but cash, she had to rebuild the country. If can defeat this attack and has a year of peace she can easily make even bigger army next time.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

It's like Larat said – "[You] won [the battle], I hear. Or at least, avoided loss, which is much the same for the likes of you."

True, it may not have been a true victory in the sense of soldiers exchanged, but Callow achieved its operational objectives – burn the camps, hold Procer back – while Procer achieved no such objectives. Additionally, 5000 men were trapped between a river, set on green fire, and then executed by Nauk's legionnaires. Rozala lost an additional 5000 on her side of the river. Add that to the couple thousand that the Lake maneuver killed, and Team Practical Evil is actually coming out about even in terms of casualties, going by percentages.

*Dylan Tullos*

oldschoolvillain:

Cordelia Hassenbach sent this entire army to bleed Catherine and die. The leaders are her political enemies, most of the soldiers are surplus mercenaries she needs dead, and she doesn't care if they come back.

So far, about half of Catherine's army is dead or wounded. None of the Heroes that Cordelia actually needs to survive are permanently dead. At this rate, Cordelia will achieve her operational objective of destroying the Army of Callow and her operational objective of getting rid of her troublesome fantassins.

Catherine's "victory" involves killing a lot of people Cordelia wanted her to kill. In the process, she lost most of her skirmishers, a third of her cavalry, and about half of her highly trained professional infantry. Cordelia has more armies, while the vast majority of Catherine's forces are involved in this battle.

Tactical victories are only important if they lead to strategic victory. And when we look at the big picture, the score so far is Cordelia: 2, Catherine: 0.

[Warriormonk](#)

Ah, but what about Juniper's observation about the skirmishers/levies being comprised of more young farmhands than she would have expected?

Could the loss of this army be putting Cordelia on more of her back foot in terms of negotiating with Cat later down the line, which has been foreshadowed since the end of the last book?

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Yes, it puts them in a hole for the next harvest.

Still, this was interesting, down to the staged withdrawals.

Looking at the next one, with the way team good's supplies are going even faster than expected.

[oldschoolvillain](#)

That's true. I admit I was focusing more on the scale of Rozala vs Catherine, seeing as how in the big picture, Catherine is not the only army that Cordelia has to contend with. There is also Black and Juniper+ up in the Red Flower Vales, there are still several legions in Praes headed by – if I remember correctly – a dragon, a vampire, and an Ogre marshall. Not to mention the troves of untapped artifacts that Malicia has to draw on if things get truly ugly. So far, the objectives of the Crusade – those being, unseat Catherine, unseat Malicia, dismantle Praes – have been entirely unmet.

So, when we look at the big picture, the score so far is actually Cordelia: 0, Praes: 0.

*grzecho2222*

I would say Cordelia: -1, Cat: 0, Black: 1, Malicia: 0  
You are missing the bigger bigger picture. Pilgrim said it. The worst possible outcome for Good is Callow turning Evil. And when you look at Abigail and married couple from Prologe you can see that they start hating Heroes and Good more and more. The two points of this attack were flanking Black and getting rid of Cat, because when Crusade will go through Callow to Praes they will need food and water and you can bet that they won't accept food from Evil ruler and everytime they take something from people of Callow by force they will remember it and it forces Cat to lead them to fight them which make them more Evil and so on. Even if Crusade wins this war this way they lose in long run which is opposite of what Cordelia wants and what Black wants.

*d\_o\_l*

Cordelia wants the crusaders to take loses, but she still wants them to \*win\*. Without a flanking force, the crusaders are unlikely to be able to defeat Black at the Vales. If they can't break through there, the whole Crusade collapses.

[vuthuha912](#)

Not really. Cordelia is losing men for her farms, craftsmen, tradesmen, and so many others. A country is not built on heroes and princes alone. Fantassins are potential farmers to me. Give out lands, reduce the taxes on farmers, rebuild roads, repair water infrastructures, etc. These are the most

important duties of a ruler, not killing or waging a war far away to kill off excess landless peasants. Girl, your duties are to your people, even if there are too many, you still have to take care of them. Can you just wait a few years to improve the economy before you go to war?

That is why I've been skeptical about Cordelia – she wants the best for her country but the girl totally forgets about the peasants. I don't know if there is a problem with the political systems but the first thing you do before waging war is to have a booming economy. Yet, I doubt the girl who thinks about killing excess peasants in a religious war instead of land reforms like a normal person is the type to care about recovering her country's agricultural production. I have read enough Chinese history to see that Cordelia is very close to having a peasant rebellion. Constant civil wars, corrupt warlords, little land for farmers, etc. Have a drought or a flood ruin this year's harvest and you have the situation of the Han Dynasty at the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period. Yellow rebellions – Procer edition will be really fun.

*Someguy*

Actually, I thought Juniper has already won. The invaders have 2 days worth of supplies at most. Team Evil doesn't have to win any battles, they just have to stall until Procer starts starving and discipline falls apart with mass desertion. Unless the Grey Pilgrim can do the 'breadcrumbs to whole fish' thing, they will all starve to death.

[Nairne .01](#)

Do they now. Their camp just burned down.

*dusting*

excellent deduction my friend.

But I've been thinking. This is all slowly going down hill. For Team practical evil. Even though they have been doing the utmost best with all resources available, excellence on all fronts.

Now why is this important? Hero does everything in his power and more that can be expected from him and yet still falls short. \*wiggles eyes\*

Also lets not forget this is essentially the most "Evil" part of the crusade. Traitorous elements, violent mercenaries etc. Also, what do we call the one invading a country where the general populace prays to good? Yep.

*TeK*



Procer doesn't have reserves, you fool. Only second waves.

Truly marvelous to see Rozalia loving up to fame of her ancestor, the only one to ever defeat Theodosius the Unconquered in the field.

*Trebar*

YES! Called it on the river!

"What are some things sappers can do other than munitions? Well, we know they can dig but that hasn't been utilized often as it is often less effective than munitions outside of siege situations. But this time there's this random lake just begging for an outlet..."

[superkeaton](#)

I was wondering if Akua could do that. Well, this makes things much more troublesome for poor Catherine.

I am really starting to like our dear Tribunal, though.

*nipi*

Cant say I wasnt expecting this since the moment Cat went to lala land.

*grzecho2222*

She is roleplaying Sleeping Violence

*Lordy*

Abigail + Cat FTW. Who is with me?

*grzecho2222*

Cat+Hakram. For the sheer amount of horror from everybody.

*Agent J*

Ew. That's damn near incestuous at this point.

CatxArcher. Like mentors like wards.

[wyaldriddler](#)

That's quite possibly even worse. Imagine the horror everyone would have when they think of what those two could get up to. :V

'Sides, we all know Masego and Archer is the real deal.

*RoflCat*

Would not surprise me if Archer just suggest a threesome.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Throw in Thief too, the more the merrier.

[wyaldriddler](#)

One thing that I haven't seen commented. The "The Heavens Will It" thing Mr Shiny is pulling out of his fancy ass.

I'll just say that looks like some really fancily hidden mind control. Because \*damn son\* I'm impressed with how far you have your shiny fingers up in people's ass brains.

[daegone823](#)

I enjoyed the perspective of the good side. There heroes simply tell them to do something and they do it. The jedi trick used over a large area is really cool. Reminded me of the scenes in kingdom of heaven whenever crusaders where about to go to battle to kill people in the name of "god", they always said "god wills it", to justify there actions. Which were clearly in contradiction of turning the other cheek.

Whereas the evil side are dominated by there named villains and run from them fearing there wanton destruction. The good side calls on human armies to surround themselves while evil villains are singular powerful yet ultimately tragically flawed individuals.

Which gives credence to how the calamities were such a force to be reckoned with, they were able to benefit in the same way that heroic bands benefited by rallying around others. They covered each others weaknesses thus in there flaws they grew even more powerful. The fact that Chathrine's band posses heroes, neutral, and villainous name working in conjunction with one another is a symbol of there ability to not just benefit from the villainous power, but heroic bands proficiency with groups, and neutral parties lack of influence by either of the below or above powers.

*Richard Warriner*

I am conflicted.

I wait with baited breath for each next chapter, railing against patience and silently pleading that time magically shift.

Never mind it has to be written first before it is put up.

Hi my name is Folly, and I am an addict.

[daegone823](#)

I too suffer from an addiction it seems the more of this wonderful fiction I am given the higher my tolerance for it. The more I read the higher my tolerance and the more I need.

I tell others at my work and home about how ground breaking this book is and how it checks off each of my needs and they just don't get it.

I recommend adding to the wiki it will give you an excuse to reread previous chapters with fresh eyes.

[amargosamountain](#)

"I tell others at my work and home about how ground breaking this book is and how it checks off each of my needs and they just don't get it"

Maybe this is on you for not explaining in a way they understand, or not creating the proper expectations?

Maybe this is on EE because the typos and irritating still-uncorrected errors from chapter 1 on turn people off?

[daegone823](#)

Yeah well maybe your right thank you never new therapy could come this cheap. Now off you go to fix another person's problems. Thank you kind sir or mam

TeK

Same here. While my addiction admittedly lessened in period between books, it steadily picks up again.

Varelse

Cat will wake up with an new name – Peacekeeper. And her aspects will be Stop, Listen, and coreablorate.

[shieldredblog](#)

So no one thinks Nauk is getting a Name?  
He dodged one of Sword Saints strikes and laughed in her face, much like Adjutant did. He is a legend in his army.  
All the pieces are there.

[sengachi](#)

He's too shallow as a person. Names are more than reputation and feats, they're an attitude. As Cat has said so many times, to be Named is to be dead certain that you have the right of how Creation ought to be. Nauk -especially this new Nauk- doesn't have that. He's just floating along atop the currents of war.

grzecho2222

I agree, but I think that we will see Callow spawning its new villainous Name before long and I think that Talbot will be the one, something like Grandmaster

[shieldredblog](#)

What I really want to see is a Name spawn in Callow in response to the Crusade that has nothing to do with the Legions. A villainous take on Callow's many rebellion and resistance stories.

Someguy

Unless he recovers his full mental faculties and becomes the [Reborn].

[Barthumphries](#)

Ever heard of Pet Cemetery? That's Nauk. He's going to tie in with the... what's his name, the Dead King coming back.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Oh, moonlight, cause shes the duchess of moonless night.

JJR

I'm not sure if I'm reading this right, but does Thief have a some sort of power to freeze cat's body? Maybe an oath that Cat gave to be still if Thief ever says 'moonlight' to her or something.

[Barthumphries](#)

Yes, that's exactly what happened.

TeK

I think whoever says that Nauk ain't gonna get a Name should reconsider. Nihilstic view is still a view. And he's a Princekiller and we got Princes of Procer as well as Prince's Graveyard ahead 😊

[ahd](#)

Archer could have engaged at range, but is instead going toe-to-toe with the Saint of Swords...with blades.

Yep, she's one of Ranger's, alright.

[lqueenofblades1](#)

Not really. The Saint would have just used her sword-fu to cut through the arrows...and the bow...and the hand. At least with blades you can actually keep her occupied long enough to be a distraction or whatever.

*lqueenofblades1*

I really want prequels to this story with protagonists of Dread Emperors Irritant and Treacherous and their shenanigans.

*Pilgrim the White*

You know i kinda fancy Amadeus' story. Starting from when he was a farmboy.

I hope she considers that one whenever guide is concluded 😊

*fbt*

I love Abigail sooo much! great chapter, ty!  
Not sure what's up w/ Akua, but hoping she ends up as catbox liner in one of the hells, ofc.Gray Pilgrim has noted all Cat wants is peace..and he's not in the forming 5-some. Maybe he realizes she's (kinda sorta) in the right in this? At least compared the the hypocritical warmongering hero set.

*Goodpie2*

PROTIP: Never follow a cliffhanger with a series of flashbacks and interludes. Readers frequently just say "Nope, fuck it. Not worth it," and either skip the flashbacks or drop the story entirely. This is the second time I've done both. Last time, with the battle of Liesse, I stopped reading entirely for over a month.

*zout*

Bringing back the same old enemies over and over and over and over does not make for an interesting book.  
Nor does every battle ending in surmountable "insurmountable" losses and Cat being beaten but somehow still winning in the end. It's become formulaic and tedious as it's 10 to 20 chapters for The same pay off...  
The premise is of the story is brilliant but at this rate it can't carry the drag

*morroian*

Yes I was tired of it in book 3 and sad to see it happening in the very first battle here.

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## Interlude: Kaleidoscope V

*"The final disappointment of heroism is to find that a just war was, in the end, just a war."*

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

Ink and parchment would see the day recorded as a victory, but Juniper of the Red Shields knew better. Despite her best efforts, the Army of Callow had reached the threshold where even the slightest losses began to affect combat efficiency. The loss of the crossbowmen on the first day had already crippled the host's ability to wage open battle, but the second day's losses had been a mere hour away from catastrophe. Twenty-two thousand soldiers had come to these plains, and now less than fifteen thousand remained fighting fit. The mage lines had nearly burned themselves out fixing minor injuries, an ugly choice to make. The Hellhound had broken Legion triage doctrine, which emphasised keeping as many legionaries alive as possible, in favour of getting as many men able to fight as possible. The deeply wounded had been allowed to die, or put out of their misery when requested. It burned her, the knowledge that the other side would have no such decision to make. Priests were a larger logistical advantage than she'd believed they would be.

The Marshal of Callow set aside the thought temporarily, though it never strayed far. There were decisions to make tonight in the dark and they would be no more pleasant than those of the day. She entered the tent without a word, the pair of legionaries guarding it saluting as she passed.

"If you're here to cheer me up, you should have left the armour behind," Archer drawled.

The orc did not bother to humour the Named's coarseness with an answer, instead looking her up calmly. Lady Ranger's pupil had done away with the woven scarf that usually covered the lower half of her face, along with the cloak and coat she insisted on wearing even now that spring had come. It bared skin, but despite the other woman's finest attempts at a suggestive pose there was nothing seductive to be found. She was a mass of bruises and cuts, a red scar going up her cheek and across her left eye, through the eyebrow.

"She beat you like a drum," Juniper stated.

Archer's nose wrinkled.

"Got a few shots in myself," she denied. "Pretty sure I broke her shoulder, near the end."

"It will have been fixed within the hour," the Hellhound said. "They have a healer among their Named."

"You asked me to cover Nauk's retreat," the ochre-skinned woman shrugged. "Mission accomplished. Now where's my seraglio of doe-eyed Taghreb beauties and oiled-up Soninke manservants?"

"Lodge a request with my supply tribune," Juniper blandly replied. "I'll have it fast-tracked."

"We are the least decadent Evil side I've ever heard of," Archer whined. "Who does a girl have to stab, to get fresh dates and a fan-waving pretty boy?"

"The Empress, one assumes," the Hellhound grunted. "Will you be able to fight tomorrow?"

"If you're going to use me for my body, you could at least make it enjoyable," the Named snorted.

Engaging with this one, Juniper knew from experience, was akin to giving a stone that initial push down a hill. She let silence do the talking.

"Not confident about taking on the greybeards," Archer admitted. "I could handle a few round with the side-pieces, but the Saint's gotten used to my forms and the best I can manage with the Pilgrim is a shooting war."

The orc's lips pressed tightly, revealing dismay. That limited their options sharply. Already the loss of most of Pickler's repeating scorpions and all of the Spitters had taken a tool out of her available arsenal, but if Archer couldn't even be counted on to check either of the prime threats? It might still be possible to win, if she defended cleverly enough. But even if she did, the ruin inflicted on the other side would be matched by the devastation of her own host. Should the Army of Callow take even another four thousand casualties – a very conservative estimate of minimal losses considering enemy numbers and Named – then it was done for the year as anything but a second-rate defensive force. The recruiting camps in central Callow would continue providing a trickle of freshly-trained companies, but that covered only mainline infantry. Sappers, mages, knights. Neither of these could be so easily replaced, and without them it would be exceedingly difficult for the Army of Callow to handle the numerically superior forces the Tenth Crusade would inevitably send their way.

"Rest up," Juniper finally said. "We'll need you tomorrow."

Archer leaned back in her seat, eyes for a single heartbeat bereft of the usual mocking indolence.

"Hellhound," she said. "The Saint? I might have gotten a handle on her weakness."

The orc paused, meeting the gaze of the Named.

"She never used an aspect," Archer said. "And her cuts, it *looks* like she's tossing them around carelessly but there's always a purpose to it. Either as a deterrent, to allow her to move quickly or to put down an opponent hard before they can fight back."

Juniper chewed over that.

"I've had very few reports of her using the cuts against soldiers," the Hellhound finally said.

"She'd been fighting for over an hour when we scrapped," Archer murmured. "And she never used any of the fancier tricks Catherine mentioned she has up her sleeve. I think she physically *couldn't*."

"She has limited amount of power, then," Juniper deduced.

The other woman shook her head.

"I think she'd old," Archer replied. "And that using tricks and aspects takes a toll on her body. She doesn't fight your boys because, even if she kills a thousand, after that she's emptied her tankard. It's why she's not the tip of the spear, she only comes out to remove problems."

The Marshal of Callow inclined her head in silent thanks. It would not tip the balance of the battle, but it was great contribution nonetheless. So far, the Saint and the Pilgrim had acted as invincible forces of nature wherever they arrived, only ever checked by other Named. Juniper already suspected that the Grey Pilgrim could only intervene when others were threatened – else why only take the field when the repeating scorpions had already struck? – but now there might be a vulnerability to exploit in the other monster as well. The Hellhound offered a simple nod before leaving the tent, mind already returning to the decisions ahead. Which, to her irritation, she would have to consult another before making. The Thief was easy enough to find. It had been hours since she'd first settled in front of the camp fire she now stared into. Juniper claimed a log by her side, displeased she had to share a fire with the likes of this one.

"We need to retreat," the Hellhound bluntly said, eschewing greetings.

"You know we cannot," Thief replied just as bluntly. "If the Principate keeps a foothold on this side of the Whitecaps, there will be no truce to be had."



"There'll be no truce if the Army of Callow is wrecked either," Juniper growled. "Which is the best outcome to be counted on if we fight tomorrow."

"Duchess Kegan-" the other woman began.

"Is half a month away, at the earliest," the orc interrupted. "And not to be relied on if the tide looks like it's turning against us. The Watch contingent in our ranks is a blade that cuts both ways."

"The duchess will not lightly go back on her word," Thief said.

Juniper frowned. The Named spoke as if she knew something the orc did not.

"What are the odds of Malanza following us, if we retreat to Hedges?" the Callowan asked.

"Slim to none," the Hellhound replied. "We just torched their last supplies. They can last a little longer by butchering their horses, but by my count they'll be starving for at least a week before they get to the fortress. They'll know they can't win a battle in that state. If we withdraw, I am certain they'll fall back to Harrow and disband part of the host while sending for supplies."

"Which leaves half of northern Callow occupied," Thief said. "I am no student of strategy, but I can assure you that is a diplomatic and political defeat that will cripple us."

"The moment we get Catherine back, we can link up with the Deoraithe by gate and drive them entirely out of Callow," Juniper replied. "They'd have a few months in the region at most."

"It is still too long," the woman tiredly said. "Depending on the outcome at the Red Flower Vales, the Empress might backstab us during that period. And if public perception is that Catherine cannot defend Callowan borders, much of the crown's support vanishes. Riots, at the very least. Possibly small-scale rebellion. That divides our manpower, and I assure you we will not be allowed to put back the army together after it has been split. No major player save perhaps the Carrion Lord would see our strength preserved as being in their interest."

"If Lord Black wins-" Juniper began.

The Thief spat into the flames.

"Then it is a *certainty* that the Empire will sabotage us," she said. "From Malicia's perspective, a Proceran foothold in the north is a leash on both the Carrion Lord and Callow. Neither can turn against the Wasteland while the kingdom is in danger of

falling to the next offensive. She'll want us strong enough we can bleed the crusade, but weak enough we have no negotiating leverage."

"If we fight tomorrow, the army's done for the war," Juniper honestly said. "At most, if we force them to retreat all the way back to Procer, with the Deoraithe backing us we can hold our end of the passage. Any offensive operations became a fantasy until our next three training cycles are done, and that's at least a year. Longer, for sappers, and we drained the pool dry for both mages and knights."

The Thief hesitated.

"Perhaps a partial retreat?" she ventured. "Followed by a counteroffensive when they are unaware."

"Without the gates we don't move nearly as swiftly as before," the orc refused, shaking her head. "I've already considered it. Might soften them up a bit to let them starve, but it won't make enough of a difference with heroes in the ranks. We still bleed too much."

The Callowan brushed back her hair, then grimaced.

"You are telling me that either path has a decent chance of taking us out of the war," she said. "That there are no good choices to make."

"Only bad ones," Juniper agreed. "And among those, there's one we haven't discussed."

The Named stiffened, the fire's flickering light revealing cold fury.

"You can't be serious," she hissed.

"You have a way to shut her down," the Hellhound said, and it wasn't a question.

Thief's eyes grew cold.

"A heavy assumption," she replied.

"I've known Catherine longer than you," Juniper said, baring her fangs. "She didn't even trust her Name, and her mantle is a great deal more dangerous. She would have contingencies in place, and within the Woe you're the only she considers to have a moral compass."

"I will not allow *Akua Sahelian* to walk free," the Thief hissed. "Much less to wage war."

"Then this conversation is over," the Marshal of Callow said unflinchingly. "I refuse to fight a battle tomorrow in the current circumstances. We'll take our chances with a retreat."

"How could you possibly trust her with any kind of power?" the Callowan said.

"She's a Praesi of the old breed," the Hellhound said. "In front of her is the Tenth Crusade. Blood will tell. Trust has nothing to do with it."

"If she gets loose, she'll turn on us," Thief said. "Without a second thought."

"You have your leash, and we still have Archer," Juniper calmly said. "Sahelian is a coward at heart, and she plays the game according to the old rules. That makes her predictable. She will not make a move unless she is *certain* she can slip the noose."

"The Callowan half of the army would defect, if they ever knew," the woman said.

"If they ever knew," Juniper repeated softly.

She had won the argument and they both knew it.

—

Akua Sahelian wore Catherine's body seemingly without the slightest awkwardness. Sitting with her legs crossed, stripped of anything but a loose tunic, the Diabolist opened her eyes when Vivienne entered the tent. The glow of the wards keeping her contained was the only light there was to be had, weaving strange and moving shadows over the panes of cloth.

"Vivienne," Sahelian smiled with lips not her own. "I'd expected another bell before you came to terms with the necessity. Your perspective has broadened since I last had you studied."

Thief dragged a seat and dropped it in front of the butcher, dropping down into it without even the pretence of elegance. Idly flipping a knife her aspect had dropped into her palm, she watched the Diabolist silently. Were she not uncertain of the effect it would have on Catherine, she would have already ordered Sahelian's soul to be ripped apart piece by piece.

"Think you have it all figured out, do you?" Thief said.

Catherine's body inclined its head with an understated grace its true owner had never quite managed.

"Though your hostility is understandable, it is unnecessary," Diabolist said. "We serve the same mistress, after all."

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye."

Over a month of late evenings had been spent wording the contingency oaths. Possession by the Diabolist had not been the issue they'd expected – Catherine's fears had been centred around Winter making her lose perspective – but the conditions were cleared by this state of affairs regardless. Thief had reason to genuinely believe Catherine's judgement was impaired by an external factor, which allowed her to call on the first three oaths. Sahelian smiled even as her fingers dug behind her eyeball, ripping it out. Vivienne noted with satisfaction the smile had grown a little stiff during. She could still feel pain, then.

"Try to play me again and I'll have to get inventive," Thief said even as the eye reformed.

"Noted," the Diabolist replied, inclining her head. "You have a use for me, or at least the power this body holds."

"I do," she said. "You're going to kill crusaders."

"A most enjoyable task," Sahelian smiled.

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye."

She waited until the eye had reformed before speaking again.

"That one," she said, "was just because you pissed me off."

The fucking smile never went away.

"I expect there will be heroic opposition," the Diabolist said.

"There should be at least ten left, maybe more," Thief replied. "Most dangerous are the Saint of Swords and the Grey Pilgrim."

The Queen of Callow's body hummed and cocked its head to the side. The gesture was so *Catherine* that Vivienne almost ordered Sahelian to rip out her eye again.

"Not unworthy opponents," Diabolist said. "I will prevail regardless."

"You are not to cause a massacre," Thief said. "After inflicting no more than six thousand casualties, you are to retreat."

Sahelian's smile turned sharp.

"Restraint," she drawled. "How quaint. You miss an opportunity."

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye."

The Diabolist's breath grew ragged, in the aftermath. She continued speaking anyway.

"You need the crusaders dead," Sahelian said. "Yet you also require Catherine's reputation to be unsullied when negotiating a truce. Allow me, then, to bloody my hands. I will make it clear to the heroes that this her body is not currently her own."

"You don't know shit about the current political situation," Thief said.

"I know you cannot fight a war against Procer while unseating the Empress," the Diabolist said. "What follows is a mere exercise of logic."

*We can't negotiate with the heroes if they think Catherine is a sharper than can go off at any time,* Vivienne thought. Sahelian had not grown beyond the causes of her failure. She still looked at all the nations of Calernia with the belief that sooner or later she would war against them all. Peace stretching further than a temporary truce never entered her calculations.

"You will pretend to be Catherine," Thief said. "And stick to the limits I have already outlined. In addition, you may not slay the Grey Pilgrim."

"Even if this body is at risk of permanent destruction?" the Diabolist probed.

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye."

This time she flinched, to the Callowan's satisfaction.

"Don't attempt to make a loophole again," Thief said. "Not even then. Flee instead."

Sahelian softly laughed.

"And what," Thief asked, "has you so happy?"

Catherine's dark eyes met her own.

"Do you believe in redemption, Vivienne Dartwick?"

The Callowan shivered.

"There's nothing in you to redeem," Thief said. "You are a thing pretending to be human."

"My people," Akua Sahelian murmured, "do not put much stock in it either. But I have pondered this matter deeply, of late. Perhaps there is some worth to be found in it."

*The moment I have a speck of leverage, I will convince Catherine to break any semblance of thought in you,* Vivienne thought. *You are too dangerous a loose end to allow, and you should have forever disappeared after Liesse. There is no place left in this world for you.*

"How hard could it be possibly be," the Diabolist mused. "Acting heroically, that is."

Vivienne rose to her feet.

"You will 'awaken' slightly before dawn," she said. "Prepare yourself."

"I look forward to our fruitful alliance, then, my trusted comrade," Sahelian grinned.

The aristocrat clenched her fingers. That wasn't her grin. She had no right to wear it.

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye, seven times in a row."

She left the tent to the sound of muffled screaming.

—

Prince Amadis Milenan had only managed to sleep after drinking half a thimble of poppy brew, and even then he'd woken long before dawn. The trembling in his hands tempted him to indulge a second time during the darkened hours, but his father had always warned him off reliance on medicine. Many a great ruler had been unmade by growing too fond of a particular vice, when age or exhaustion weakened their resolve. He would not follow in that mistake. Instead he sent for inks and parchment, splaying them over his scribing desk and lighting a pair of oil lamps. The lines of the first illustration were botched by the shaking of his fingers, but the longer he forced himself to concentrate on the matter the steadier his hands became. It was a thorny issue to work these failures seamlessly into the greater design, but he'd had a taste for this sort of diversion since he'd been a boy and when the quill scratched the last of the blue on the parchment he found himself satisfied with the illustration. Not his finest work, but neither would he be ashamed of having it displayed before peers.

He'd sketched a view of Lake Pavin in the traditional Alamans manuscript style, that sprawling expanse of deep blue touching stony shores. He'd done so from memory, drawing on the beautiful summer he'd spent in Cleves as a young man. Having met his wife there had left him with a lingering fondness for the beautiful principality that had occasionally been politically inconvenient. Jonquille still occasionally teased him for being softer on the

land of her birth than she was herself, to the amusement of their children. He rather missed her, at the moment. Her discerning judgement and sharp temper, the way she could soothe him without ever saying a word. His father had been furious he'd betrothed himself to a girl from a largely insignificant branch family, but never once had Amadis regretted it. He'd paid for the sentimentality in the years that followed, even risked disinheritance in favour of his younger brother, but those were all passing things. The partnership had endured far longer than the grievances. The thought that he might never see her again was a sobering one.

He penned a missive for his wife beneath the illustration, strangely uneasy, and blew on the elegant cursive quoting the couplet by Drunken Berilion he'd botched declaiming at her on their first meeting. She'd recited it back at him properly with laughing eyes, and neither had looked back since. The prince sent for a footman to have it set with the diplomatic correspondence, a mild abuse of prerogative near every royal in the host had indulged in at least once. Even Arnaud, that old sot, liked to write to his bastard son. His worries having ebbed, the Prince of Iserre watched the sun begin to dawn as he ate his frugal breakfast. The most extravagant of his personal foodstuffs he'd had distributed to his men in a gesture of good will, though he'd kept enough there was no risk of either he or his personal household starving. He remained silent as his manservant removed the empty plate, contemplating the coming day. Twice now, his host had waged battle against the Army of Callow. Twice they had been driven back, at great cost. Prince Papenheim's army would be facing that infamous old monster the Black Knight in the Vales, and the costs of that victory would not be slight. That thread woven with his own losses inked a picture he disliked.

The armies of the Dominion would enter the Principate soon enough, a Principate weakened by war. Prince Cordelia might put her faith in the alliances she had bargained for, but an alliance of victors was like a hearth in summer. The diminished and defeated found no friends, only hungry dogs. All of this, unfolding because a handful of children with an army refused to be defeated. No matter. Princess Rozala believed that this day's fighting would end it all, though the price would be heavy. All could be remedied, once victory was attained. Trumpets sounded in the camp, and Amadis raised an eyebrow. It was not yet dawn, after all. Malanza was displaying unseemly haste. Then they sounded again, urgently, and his blood ran cold. This was not the call to rise.

It was the call to *battle*.

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[erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, extra chapter as usual. A continuation of the last, titled "Court II".

JD

I guess Akua really believes that Death Equals Redemption.

*Allafterme*

C'mon, its Akua we're talking about...

*Rook*

Knowing Akua she means it from the bottom of her heart. The catch being, her idea of 'redemption' is probably something so twisted it makes the Woe seem like ordinary average folks.

*Dainpdf*

She wants redemption from the sin of defeat.

*WuseMajor*

She reminds me a bit of Lucrecia from Girl Genius. She was also a "reformed" villain who decided to be a hero because they always win and went about it in very scary ways.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Never thought of it that way, but yeah. Could draw some good parallels to Black and Wulfenbach as well, though ultimately Wulfenbach actually wants to be good person, though knows it won't happen.

For those that don't read GG, the beginning of Lucrecia going "good."

[http://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20041206#.WxFiotLD\\_bg](http://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20041206#.WxFiotLD_bg)  
[http://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20041210#.WxFif9LD\\_bh](http://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20041210#.WxFif9LD_bh)

[Euodiachloris](#)

Ah, dearest Lu. Every last bit of (probably) her. ;P

[Euodiachloris](#)

She could be trying to throw Cat under the Angel bus: by getting Cat brainwashed into becoming Good... I mean,



being redeemed. Which would be a weird form of win for Akua.

There are major downsides to that, though. Especially if you're currently an undead artefact possessing the redeemed.

*Dainpdf*

I don't think that's what she's doing at all. She's definitely still on Team Evil.

*aran*

And right now she's living inside the protagonist's head.

*Shequi*

I think she's trying to unsettle Vivienne by commenting on how far she has fallen that she's willing to use torture.

*nipi*

Bottom of the hearth she no longer has. Someone ripped it out after all.

Im thinking she is talking about the Thiefs redemption. Her newfound brutality being a redeeming feature in her eyes.

*Metrux*

I guess you mean heart? Hearth is a place of fire inside a home.

*stevenneiman*

I find it hilarious how the closest we've seen to Defeat Equals Friendship is from a such a monster.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

You have a rival, who you have a long relation with, that you eventually beat in a climatic battle, and now you take them everywhere.

Why wouldn't she be part of Cat's entourage now?

*Metrux*

Because Cat hates her, like the whole rest of the entourage, and will never trust her?

*Stormblessed*

Vivienne is absolutely ruthless here. Very very unheroic. Unless torturing a villain counts as heroic these days. Which unfortunately it might.

I think it's also interesting that Akua said "we serve the same mistress." Either she being manipulative or she sincerely believes she's on Kat's side now and out for her 'best interests'. But because it's Akua it's probably both meanings.

*Anon*

Do remember that the entire reason Thief joined up with Cat in the first place is because she's a patriot.

And Akua murdered like 60,000 of her kinsmen for no other reason than to further her own ambition.

I'm still somewhat surprised she let Cat keep Akua around at all, to be honest – but I suppose that just goes back to the nature of being a protagonist versus a party member.

*Novice*

Are you actually defending Akua motherfucking Sahelian? The Diabolist? The manipulative bitch? The butcher of Liesse? Murderer of a hundred thousand? Really?

She deserves far far worse than what Thief has inflicted.

*Anon*

Nah, I was giving context to Vivienne being so 'cruel' and/or unheroic.

Idly, Akua has made mention before to Cat that she at least 'somewhat' considers herself to be Cat's servant, due to Praesi tradition of being defeated meaning that she is now Cat's 'possession'.

Whether she actually means any of it, and by association, the redemption angle she's trying to play, is up for debate.

*Novice*

I will admit that Akua's talk of redemption has got me a little bit interested in her. But I still genuinely believe that her story is already done and she should not have this much impact in the story. I was actually looking forward to her being an exposition fairy to Cat, but alas.

*Dainpdf*

Torture is unheroic. It is hurting another, generally for the pleasure of seeing them suffer. There is no context

(excluding *\*very\** convoluted ones) I can think of where torture is not an evil act.

*Author Unknown*

I honestly don't see it as torture. I see it as training a beast. Do you consider bopping a dog on the head with a rolled up newspaper, or spritzing water in a cat's face torture?

She may be a bit ruthless when jerking Akua's chain, and that chain may lead to a choke collar. But, it's a collar around one hell of a monster; one that needs trained quickly.

*crescentsickle*

There are some schools of thought where that is indeed considered torture.

Some research regarding humans shows that nations that outlaw corporal punishment (spanking, etc.) have much lower rates of violent crime. Correlation and causation adage aside, there is a pretty strong movement in general for positive-only reinforcement or no negative reinforcement that could possibly be construed as "traumatizing".

Per those schools of thought, even if this is training Akua, it is torture.

If you factor in "Good is an actual force in-universe", I can see it going both ways, because we've seen a wide array of heroes. I could see William going for some variety of torture, for example.

*RedoneAgain*

William did torture people. It was when Cat just arrived in Summerholm with her new legion. He was carving stuff onto people's faces while they were alive.

*Lucas*

Negative reinforcement is different than beating someone when they do X. That is punishment, and was proven not to work the same as reinforcement because whoever received it would not continue the behavior when the punisher is not along. At least that's how I think Skinner thought about it.

*Cicero*

However it is not what most people have historically considered torture.

I mean, what is the difference between assault/battery and torture then?

Historically, torture has been considered one of three things:

1: The inflicting of pain on a helpless person for the personal enjoyment of the person inflicting the pain.

2: The inflicting of pain in order to compel the target to reveal information they do not wish to reveal

3: The inflicting of pain on a helpless person in order to compel a betrayal of their current loyalties. Either in the reveal of information that harms their current side, taking affirmative action that benefits the side of the torturer, or in confession of a crime thereby justifying their punishment and/or execution.

In modern times we tend to focus on the first one, and assume that is the motive. This form of torture is always immoral, even under moral systems that accept the justification of torture in other circumstances. Generally it's the kind of motivation associated with demons and devils.

The second is the most commonly argued about as a possible justification of torture even in modern morality. Specifically, the "ticking time bomb" scenario. In this specific circumstance the argument is that torture without malice is essentially assault. Assault is legally and morally justified when done to protect the lives and well being of others, therefore in a ticking time bomb scenario, torture to obtain information that saves others lives is a moral choice.

However, historically, the third scenario was actually the most common usage of torture. This is sometimes blurred with the second, because obtaining information is a common shared objective. However, in actuality the difference is quite big. The whole point of this kind of torture is to change a person's allegiance, not just to obtain information. As such it's a direct violation of freedom of conscience. One of the most common purposes was to force someone to change their religion. In modern times it's been used primarily by totalitarian tyrannies to compel someone to accept an ideology they don't agree with. (Usually Communism, Socialism, or Fascism – think Mao's Cultural Revolution). The widespread idea that individuals have an inalienable right to their own

beliefs is actually quite new, being perhaps 300 years old, and born out of the religious wars of the Reformation. (Yes, some philosophers had articulated it previously, but it didn't have much hold in the actually world.)

The case here doesn't really fit into any of those categories. If anything it's closer to domestic abuse in which one person inflicts pain on another to maintain an already existing position of authority by making the weaker party afraid to betray the stronger party.

Except of course that Viv and Auka aren't married and Viv never promised to cherish and protect her, and Auka is currently and actively possessing the body of Viv's friend and Queen.

(As a side note on corporal punishment, causation probably runs the other way. Nations that already have lower crime rates are more likely to ban corporal punishment. There may even be two Nash equilibrium here, in which there is a tipping point in cultural traits at which corporal punishment does more harm than benefits, but in other nations they are at a point where corporal punishment does discourage crime more than it promotes it. Possible examples of these two extremes? Sweden and Singapore.)

*Dylan Tullos*

Author Unknown:

People are not animals. The idea that Vivienne can "tame" Akua Sahelian by inflicting pain is stupid to the point of suicide.

Every story where someone tries to torture a monster into submission ends the same way. Sooner or later, the monster breaks free from their control and takes horrible revenge. In this case, I'm betting on "sooner" rather than "later".

*Author Unknown*

Wise, no defiantly not wise. Certainly not with a hellegg nearby. Never said that. I said I don't consider it torture, and you have hit on the reason why: I don't consider what is left of Akua a person. I consider it a monstrous thing twisted by it's Name and desire; something that left humanity behind a long time ago. It can't be reasoned with. It can't be controlled. At best, it can be fenced it for a time. It should be destroyed. Perhaps that is overly Good of me, or maybe it is just practical.

*Dylan Tullos*

Author Unknown:

I consider it evil to enjoy inflicting harm on someone or something, whether they are a person or a monster. If Thief needs to kill Akua, she should do it, but torturing her for revenge is actively harmful to Thief, even if Akua doesn't count as a person. Torture leaves marks on the torturer as well as the victim, and it creates a mindset that enjoys harming others for personal satisfaction.

You're right to say that Akua should be destroyed. Catherine should have done it at the start. That's not Good or good; it's just common sense. If you keep a monster on a leash, it's only a matter of time before it escapes, and trying to use Akua as a weapon makes summoning demons seem almost sensible.

*Author Unknown*

A couple of interesting points. Is it lasting harm to Akua? I wouldn't say so. Physically, certainly not. Psychologically, I don't think Akua is still capable of changing her behavior that much. She has shown she left reason behind and expects reality to conform to her will. How long until she sees her current condition as a part of her master plan?

Also, how much of what Thief did was for Thief's own pleasure and how much was simply because Akua defied her. You don't take pleasure from bopping the dog with the newspaper (or you shouldn't, if you do seek psychological help immediately) It isn't like she can use positive reinforcement when training this particular monster.

The harm to Thief if she did it for her own emotional gratification is indisputable.

*Shift*

Are you just arguing for the sake of arguing???? because you seem to have forgotten that Akua is possessing Catherine. Thief is not doing it because she enjoys it, it's a necessity. Do you think she could just ask nicely and Akua would do it? I think the rules of what construes torture go completely out the window when someone is possessing someone else.

*Agent J*

"I said I don't consider it torture, and you have hit on the reason why: I don't consider what is left of Akua a person."

... what? That's objectively wrong. Akua's personhood is not something that's up for consideration. All thinking, sapient beings are persons. From the kindest soul to the cruelest, from the wisest person to the dimmest, from the mentally stable to the most deranged psychopath. Personhood has nothing to do with morality or mental health or, in this world, species.

Akua Sahelian is a person. A vile, twisted, and monstrous person, but a person all the same. Should she have been erased from Creation? Absolutely. Should she be tortured? That would depend on your opinions about torture. Is she a person? Obviously...

*MetruX*

I don't think this view applies on this world, actually. Devils can become sentient, but until they become thousands of years old they usually will not be considered people, and it is a whole nother argument if fae are people or not in this scenario. As such, Akua has, yes, stopped being a person. She can think by herself, but she isn't a person in any sense, since she has no control of herself, even if let loose from her restraints.

Also, on the major discussion: Good is not good, I always say in those comments, it may very well be Good here, as much as it isn't good. I dislike that Akua still exists, so any opinion I have on if Thief should be torturing her or not is biased, thus I leave this part of the discussion to others.

*WuseMajor*

...Wait. If Akua is now the Chained Monster and Thief is the one holding her leash, doesn't being mean to the monster carry a very dangerous precedent?

*Dainpdf*

If you take satisfaction in the feeling or do it just because you're irked (like she did when Akua just smiled)? Yes.

[amargosamountain](#)

Oh, so you're fit to say what somebody deserves? Maybe she deserves love and nurturing.

*burdi*

thief definitely in the process to become villain just like the pilgrim said

*RanVor*

There's no "in the process". She's already a villain, has been for some time by now. She was explicitly referred to as such in today's extra chapter.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

tfw you forget good ol' Will

[Euodiachloris](#)

And another meaning on top. I wonder how the Soninke anthropomorphise death and/or destruction, for a start. Because, if as a woman in both or either case...

*Notsteve*

I agree that this is torture, and that it's definitely unheroic by our standards. But I think one of the big themes in the story here is that heroic Named aren't necessarily what we would call heroes. A Named torturing someone, especially torturing a villain, doesn't mean they don't have a heroic name.

In this world, Good doesn't necessarily mean nice. Heck, it doesn't even mean anything we would think of as good. I think we've seen that just because a country is Good doesn't mean it's a better place to live.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Akua and Redemption? I think you misspelled re-damnation there  
Akua

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Goddamn that's a pretty fucking nasty play by Juniper.

*Daemion*

Akua is lots of things but I doubt she'd ever make a Catherine convincing enough to fool the Saint or the Pilgrim.

*Allafterme*

That may be for the best, since winter influence plus f\*cking Sehalian is a ticking nuclear bomb



*Agent J*

I might actually have to disagree. Akua is, if nothing else, a master class actress. She's also had ample time to study Cat's mannerisms, especially now that her soul's been bound to her.

*Dainpdf*

And Vivienne is a good liar, yet she lasted seconds against the Pilgrim. Akua might fare better, but that's still minutes at best.

*Novice*

I very much agree. This is a mistake laid on top of more mistakes.

*Dainpdf*

Not sure whether it's a mistake. They had two bad choices and a gamble. And Akua is certain to cause a lot of damage to the Crusade before she's done.

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

All their choices were bad. They chose the bad choice that didn't have an immediate, obvious cost. The problem with that is that Akua Sahelian is likely to be far more expensive in the long run.

I wouldn't unleash Akua at all, but especially not in a world where the Narrative shapes reality. I've read plenty of stories where desperate people unleash a great evil to stop their enemies, and I can't think of one where they didn't end up regretting it.

*Dainpdf*

How can Akua be worse than "we lose the Kingdom" in the long run? I mean, if you're Juniper and don't particularly care about whether a few people get fates worse than death along the way.

Unleashing great evil might have its narrative cost, but the fact it was done without Cat's explicit approval and with tight reins it might work. And that's all they need. If any mistake was made, it was keeping Akua in the first place. Doing that virtually guaranteed their hands would be twisted into releasing her (as they were right now).

*Morgenstern*

Thing is, this (unleashing Akua \*now\*) might actually cost them Cat's awakening in the direst moment. Because they get rid of that direst moment. I don't like where this seems to be going... unless the author gets in another direst moment, a personal one, for Cat... I don't want Akua instead of Cat, man. \*sigh

*MetruX*

I think you're being a little narrow, in this. She is directly limited to killing no more than 6000, it is probably just a demonstration, not a full on death toll. Their plan is to make the enemy hesitate, which is a very good thing, especially if you are bidding for time. Also, they won't kill the Pilgrim, though she can soften up the other Named, so in the end, when the man clash and things get ugly, it won't be ugly enough to completely destroy Callow, thus leaving Cat with an edge to work.

Yes, this WILL backfire, but will probably still be a better outcome than any of the other two choices.

*Decius*

If we're very lucky, the Heroes will destroy what's left of Akua so that they can deal with Catherine again.

*Dainpdf*

I don't think that would work out well for Cat. Whatever heroic sort burns the Akua out of her is likely to do it quite literally.

*MetruX*

When have we ever been this lucky?

*RoflCat*

Based on her words, she won't.

She'll make it clear, that she's Akua Sahelian, taken over the body BECAUSE the Pilgrim did what he did.

And she'll show them, what Catherine Foundling could've done, if she wasn't such a NICE person.

Basically she's going to Bad Cop the shit out of them, and I'm going to enjoy it.

Still hoping she'll get to join the Woe somehow, because I think it'll be entertaining to watch, even if the chance is practically 0 because of Thief.

*Daemion*

Vivienne threw that out of the window. If Akua reveals herself to the world, then people would consider Catherine unstable, a ticking bomb. This would undermine everything and she'd never get Procer to negotiate peace.

Akua might believe that simply killing all of the invaders would solve that issue... but it doesn't.

I also doubt Akua will do any better against the Saint and Pilgrim duo than Cat did.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Ah, you seem to forget the large number of corpses just hanging around.

*MetruX*

In the end this doesn't matter, she is very limited, she will act as Cat and kill no more than 6000, while not killing the Pilgrim. This is what they'll make her do, so unless the author plans on a drama instead of an adventure, this is what we should expect from Akua.

*Jane*

I'm not certain that matters, actually... If Akua "behaves", it demonstrates that Cat still has control of her, even when she's not herself. And there's a chance that neither Pilgrim nor the Saint tells the commanders what they know; if they retreat, this portion of the Crusade is over, and they have no particular loyalty to Procer.

Besides, they already know that Cat acts irrationally when in the depths of Winter – they might well mistake the changes in her behavior for Winter influence, or some aftereffect of the backlash of the gates.

*nipi*

Fooling the Callowan host is the more important parth here, I think.

*Dylan Tullos*

Well, there's no way this could possibly backfire.

Asking whether Akua Sahelian can make things worse is like asking whether Robber thinks fire is pretty.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

And that's why Robber named his spider Akua Sahedon't.

*Dainpdf*

Juniper is banking on her “FOAR TEH EVULZ” nature making her target mainly the Crusade, and that she’ll make things worse enough for them that the balance will actually end up preventing damage to the Army of Callow.  
Quite a gamble, really.

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

This is AKUA we’re talking about. She could follow orders to the letter, defeat the Crusade, save the Army of Callow, and still wind up making things worse.

Classic Evil is the unquestioned champion of short-term victories that end in disaster. Breaking them out because you need an immediate win...well, I understand the situation is desperate, but they’re not thinking ahead.

I’m fairly sure Catherine wouldn’t want to unleash Akua for any reason, and if any other Callowans find out about it, they’ll murder every Praesi in the army and defect to the Tenth Crusade. Unleashing the Butcher of Liesse is not the kind of decision you can justify to Callowans.

*Dainpdf*

Yes, but even 70% chance of disaster is better than a certain one.

There’s no other real option, and Akua herself knows it. She’d probably not have tipped her hand like this if she didn’t.

Again, the hope is the damage she prevents the enemy from dealing to Callow outweighs the damage done to her own side. I wouldn’t give it good odds, but there is a chance.

*MetruX*

Have you people heard about the Godzilla Treshold?

I rest my case.

*Dainpdf*

Do you mean Juniper used Akua because the Crusade passes the threshold (I agree it does – there is apparently no other option than “lose everything” without using her) or that the Crusaders might amp up their efforts because Akua might pass the threshold (something akin to what Thief cautioned about)?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Or if other people's stuff has his name on it... 😊

*Pilgrim the White*

Sudo Rip out your left eye

*Dainpdf*

Sudo rm -rf ./Diabolist/

*memes*

Catherine should have put Akua in chroot jail

*Dainpdf*

I think she did. The problem with that? Gotta give them root access first.

*Cicero*

Maybe the Thief can make up some sort of semi-plausible lie as a backup lie. Since Auka will inevitably fail.

Something like: "I Stole Cathrine's body and was puppeting her – but had great difficulty controlling Winter. I was only able to do it because of the unique state the Grey Pilgrim's attack left Catherine in."

*Byzantine*

She could also just say "Winter did it, as it finally had the opening to take complete control. We've taken precautions against it, but to end the war we were willing to unleash it, for a time." It's got the benefit of not even being untrue – Akua can only do this because Catherine's body is made of Winter.

*Decius*

Better not to lie at all.

"Akua's soul survived the death of her body and is now controlling the Queen's body and a good portion of her power. If you can sever Akua's soul and restore our Queen, she will assist the Crusade in marching against the Tower."

*MetruX*

Except she won't? At the most she would let them pass unmolested, and after all of this even this much is not guaranteed.

Think about all we have seen, Cat will not become Hero  
neither fight for the Crusade, as much as some would want her  
to.

*Antoninjohn*

Akua could be a willing comrade of Cat seeking redemption after  
all she tried her old villainy vs Cats practical and lost so she  
might switch to the Cat's/winning side or instead she tries to  
backstab the Woe and suffers greatly. I wonder which she picks.

*Anon*

Hmm...I legitimately think this line with Akua is a narrative  
misstep, in terms of the current book.

Others may disagree, but Akua (or the shade of her) is never  
going to fly past the Grey Pilgrim – whom, if he is left alive,  
will be able to read Cat's emotions/tells, and know that  
Catherine isn't in the driver's seat. And from a 'redemption'  
standpoint, Akua has also shown zero semblance of even coming  
close to wanting to redeem herself for the murder of all of the  
inhabitants of Liesse, in any of the conversations she has had  
with Cat.

From a meta-contextual standpoint, we're now at 5 chapters in a  
row with Cat being KO'd, and now to have her to-date most hated  
enemy take up in her place, after we just had an entire book  
devoted to her – and all the meanwhile, there are MUCH bigger  
fish to worry about.

I think I'm going to bow out until Cat wakes up, Akua is utterly  
uninteresting (and IMO makes this part of the story more boring/  
worse because of it), because nothing in the conversations she's  
had with Cat (that the audience has seen) will indicate she has  
any assumption of not trying to pull off another backstab the  
second she feels she can get away with it.

The only small (almost miniscule) hope is that this is Cat is  
either pretending to be Akua/controlling Akua's shade to puppet  
her for....some narrative reason that I can't even hope to fathom,  
in order for her to 'justify' going against Malicia's edicts (in  
that Akua did it, not Cat)

*Laken*

They don't know that Pilgrim can see the truth of a person. Not  
letting her take to the fields due to that would be a narrative  
misstep since they lack that info.

Oh nvm, you mean Akua is boring. Why the hate against Stacies,  
Anon. Tell you what, ill give you 10 good boy points for each  
chapter of Akua you read.

*Anon*

Thief already that Pilgrim was able to 'read' her to the extent of knowing her saying 'okay' to healing meant Catherine was out – whether that's emotion sense or not, it means he has good enough stock in a person to bluff a dedicated non-combatant Named.

Cat making a 'miraculous' recovery may play into the fears he discussed with Saint regarding the story supporting her, but that only lasts until he comes into contact with the monster wearing Cat's face. And Juniper's quote gives him the perfect leverage to break Callow's armies.

As for Akua, I'm not saying she's boring (well, I am, but not solely in that context) – moreso that her being able to take control of Cat's body like this is unearned.

Yes, EE has pulled this kind of 'pull back the curtain after the fact' secrecy before, but IMO the setup for it isn't right here at all – Akua's 'story' in this book hasn't felt anywhere near the gravitas of taking control of Cat's body, and absolutely nothing in the interactions she's had since her defeat lends any sort of credence to the type of 'negotiating' Cat did with Black and jabbing a dagger in his side,

I'm also full-up on 'good boy points', but thanks for the condescension.

*Laken*

They think he has an ability that lets him discern the truth at the moment. What he has is so much more.

A common theme in the story is people paying the price of their own folly such as Cat not killing the Lone swordsman and by proxy damning his countryman. Cat not killing Akua's soul and binding it to her mantle was just too stupid to not backfire disastrously, the setup has been here all along.

And i gotta say i really want to see what the author makes of Akua. She is obviously a psychopath but will she truly try to redeem herself? Will she backstab them the first chance she gets? Can she be redeemed despite everything?

What kind of Anon doesn't want GBP?

*MetruX*

I very much dislike Akua's continued existence, but my take is that Akua don't see redeeming as we, or even as the other characters.

*Novice*

Is your last sentence really necessary? You're being a child here.

*Laken*

@Novice ill let you know that GBP is a premium currency to Anons for acquiring valuable resources such as tendies. 10 GBP per chapter was me being very generous. (its a running gag don't take it seriously mate 😊)

*Novice*

Considering @Anon's reply to you, I think they're offended. But if you're sure, you do you.

*Laken*

Yea him getting offended confused me as well but w/e.

[amargosamountain](#)

Who made you the boss of the good boy points?

*memes*

I want Cat back too

*memes*

Seeing Akua using the power Cat's worked so hard for is painful

*Andy*

I think Akua works great as someone to drive character development for the Woe, especially Thief as we're seeing some very evil behavior from her this chapter. Also the story is called A practical guide to evil, not Cat butcheres people every chapter, I think its necesarry to show off all types of evil and killing Akua off only to bring in another follower of the old type could backfire spectacularly since people could just see the new villain as "Discount Sahelian".

*Metrux*

You do know there ARE better villains of the old type than her, right? As in, the Dead King, the Tyrant of Helike, some people from out of the continent... We already HAVE villains with the odl mentality and diferent ways than Akua, and she has been completely exhausted in the last book. There is neither the need to keep her own brand of villainy, neither to introduce another villain to give those different



perceptions, so we can only assume EE has something different in store for her.

Otherwise, she is my only critique to the whole series, so far. Not her in general, her in this book.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

"I have a very different understanding regarding the phrase 'Let it rip'"

– Thief Vivienne Dartwick after the Battle of the Camps

*Anon*

Actually....wait a second – how does Akua know Thief's true name? I don't recall Cat ever speaking it in front of her, and thief seemed to guard it really closely.

Also, Jupiter saying 'if they ever find out' is like a reverse chekhov's gun for the grey pilgrim doing just that – in which case, Callow basically collapses.

*Dainpdf*

She did have her investigated.

*MetruX*

Akua was always better than Cat in these kinds of things, she probably knew Thiefs name way before Cat did.

*Alivaril*

I swear, if Akua breaks the rules of engagement laid out with Pilgrim or otherwise screws The Woe, I'm going to be... let's go with "disappointed." I still believe she's a character dragging herself into conflicts long past her prime.

*Dainpdf*

I do agree Akua as an antagonist is done. Bringing her back as that would feel like regression. But I have faith erraticetera will make this Catakua thing interesting.

[sengachi](#)

Catherine sworn an oath on that one and Akua is bound by Catherine's notes.

*nipi*

I dont think she can break the orders Thief just gave her. Fae and oaths you know. So demons and devils are off the table for

the used-to-be-Diabolist too. But she will be able to do stuff that wasn't talked about here or before. Undead?

*Someguy*

Undead makes sense. There's plenty raw materials in the new marsh.

*Decius*

Against a Crusade? Against a Crusade well-supplied with priestly magic? Undead would be worse than useless.

*Dainpdf*

The call to get slaughtered by the Diabolist. She's precisely the type of villain that does horrific amounts of damage before being taken down – we can only hope the collateral damage is not excessive and that Cat doesn't end up paying too heavy a price. Because we all know the Saint and Pilgrim would eventually take Akua down \*hard\*.

*Harry*

I get that this is supposed to be a big mystery, but why would Thief either not make mention of having asked Akua about knowing where Catherine is, or use the oaths to force Akua to give an explanation, and/or a timeline of what happened to Cat, and how they could get her back?

Like, if we're meant to be in the dark fine, just have Akua say she doesn't know, but Thief making zero mention of trying to figure out what the fuck happened feels like it's placing an idiot ball on her in order to keep the readers in the dark.

(Juniper saying 'the moment we get her back' doesn't really do enough justice on that front, as it's utterly devoid of any actual intelligence)

And on that note, I'm still a little uncertain of just how much 'power' Akua would actually have – from what I understand, the mantle of Winter belongs to Cat – and as such, her body is reshaped accordingly.

Yes, the body has access to Winter's power but the strength of that connection comes from Catherine being the Duchess of Winter first and foremost, not the other way around (especially because the body is essentially just a construct) – Akua being able to access anywhere near its full power doesn't make sense to me, as the connection should be minimal, if present at all.

*MetruX*

She IS still the Diabolist, so she probably has access to her own powers, besides the physical qualities of this body. Also, who says she didn't ask or do something to know? We got a little time skip, but more than enough for her to have tried questioning Akua, especially since Akua is in a different situation from where we left her, and the fae is nowhere to be seen.

Also also, it would be pretty idiotic to ask Akua about that. Akua is the biggest pain in the ass to deal with, and will usually manipulate and backstab anyone in close proximity.

*Rook*

The only silver lining is that the Crusade will be the first ones to experience the unbelievable pain-in-the-ass that is Akua Sahelian this time around. We'll get that satisfaction at least, before shit hits the fan again.

*Novice*

Also, Amadis writing to his family and reminiscing about his wife and his youth before a decisive battle? That's a death flag.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Not a flag, no. Not even a flare. He put up a large metropolitan New Year's fireworks display, the prize idiot. 😐

*Burnsy*

You know, the twisted thing about this is that I genuinely think that Akua thinks of herself as Cats ally now. Any ally that will stab in her in the back the very first chance she gets, but so long as Cat keeps foreseeing and dodging those knives, Akua will keep going.

*letouriste*

well, an ally for akua is only until the next backstab so that still fit the description

[ahd](#)

Iron sharpens iron.

It's not \*impossible\* that the Diabolist has finally eaten enough pain from poor life choices to start making less bad ones, such as "be a faithful servant of the Black Queen and you get to stand in the ashes of Ater, after helping to burn it."

Still not the most likely possibility, but I'd like to see it happen.

## *Highwayman*

While I hated Akua during her arc, I cannot deny that she is a delightfully evil bitch that certainly lives up to expectations regularly. Kinda like Joffery, no? (Might be mistaken here as I never watched pass S2 of GOT)

And Thief torturing Akua was a delightful thing to read, both because I dislike Akua personally and because it is a tell that Thief is firmly in the grey zone. She now has the same vibe as when Batman decided that nah, leaving villains alive ain't worth it.

Great stuff as usual, EE.

*letouriste*

joffrey\* and the guy kept getting worse each episode^^.  
Thief is already a villain in this universe. a fallen heroine.  
nothing grey about her anymore,

[benthelynx](#)

Thief is technically a hero.

[benthelynx](#)

Based on where she gets her powers from (heavens above)

*RanVor*

Not anymore, if she ever was. She started doubting it after joining Cat.

*MetruX*

The doubt doesn't make her a Villain, and not all Names are purely Good or Evil, as evicenced by Cat being able to change allegiances before, and no one knowing if Ranger is a Hero or Villain.

*RanVor*

I meant to say she started doubting she ever was a Hero.

Names themselves are not purely Good and Evil, but the individuals bearing them are. That we don't know if Ranger is a Hero or a Villain doesn't mean no one knows it in-universe. And Cat never changed allegiances, she just manipulated the story into a pattern where she takes place of a Hero.

*burdi*

just wondering

where is catherine actually, there is no way akua can control cat with CLAIM and BIND since battle in the liesse prove that winter was to big for her power to hold

and this "Sitting with her legs crossed, stripped of anything but a loose tunic, the Diabolist opened her eyes when Vivienne entered the tent" show us that the fucking Diabolist not in the Cloak of the Woe anymore.

the is only one power that can take Diabolist out of her prison to cat body, the Winter itself backed by Creation.

confrontation between cat and saint prove that winter can repair itself, the backlash from absolute positioning maybe very well broke cat's soul and mind. but Winter needed a mind to exist (my own theory) and Creation needed story to continue, so It took Diabolist soul to mend cat's broken soul (i dont know whether to excited or terrified)

the saint already said that cat's story in this moment is not like villain and the pilgrim already said too that there is a big possibility cat will return to give help in the darkest hour. so since its already in darkest hour for The Army of Callow, with defeat looming in their face..help is needed and The Black Queen has to wake up

just dont know, is it possible to meld two soul became one as we can see through many chapter that cat's soul and mind not strong enough to hold Winter mighty influence. if it continue there is no other end in her journey except to became creature of winter wearing her own face

of course that just my theory, maybe cat in the journey in arcadia, meeting former king of winter to get her queen of winter title official

*MetruX*

Well, I see it VERY differently from you. To start with, the souls were already connected, and she probably can't completely control Cat, only her body, so Diabolist powers can be the culprit, no need for winter and reality to mess around.

Then we get to the point this is NOT the darkest hour, the darkkest hour is, by definition, the point where things can't get worse, and by people desperation things can very much become worse, so not hte time yet.

Lastly, I don't think she will keep Winter as her main power. Simply makes no sense, she very much fits a Named in reality yet. So maybe her new Name will help tame Winter, or she will get rid of it for her new Name. That's by two bits, anyway.

## [blitzxs](#)

No way in hell can the crusaders get even remotely ready for an assault via Gate. They were so sure that Catherine's out of the picture or at until her army is at the edge of defeat, that they, Named or otherwise, never assumed that the Callowan army would be the one on the offensive. This has got to be the Battle of the Camps. The one where Catherine and the Wild Hunt attacked was only a diversion to steal the Crusader's supplies. This has got to be it.

## [Warriormonk](#)

Cat sent Larat to attack supply lines, letting the Crusaders know that they have two people including herself capable of making gates.

They may have defenses prepared for gates, just in case.

## *lqueenofblades1*

>>Catherine's dark eyes met her own.

"Do you believe in redemption, Vivienne Dartwick?"

"My people," Akua Sahelian murmured, "do not put much stock in it either. But I have pondered this matter deeply, of late. Perhaps there is some worth to be found in it."<>"When historians try to pin down Foundling's methods they point to the Battle of the Camps or the Princes' Graveyard, but those came later. After she'd learned her trade. If you want to understand how she operated, look to the Battle of Four Armies and One – from the beginning to the end, she was playing an entirely different game from every other commander on the field."

– Extract from "A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars", by Juniper of the Red Shields.<<

I suspect Cat's playing a trick on the narrative or the heroes. I can't think of a reason, but I strongly suspect she's up to something. Like everyone said, there's no reason for Akua to be plot relevant...unless Cat is twisting the narrative about her being the heroic side in the war further by using a villain to anti-hero redemption arc via Akua. I suspect the Proceran army is about to be crushed.

## *lqueenofblades1*

For some reason WordPress cut out half my post.

I think it's Catherine that asked Thief if she believes in redemption. She's playing a con, on either the narrative, or the heroes. Which is why even the Woe can't be in on it. And

plus, for all we know, she just improvised it while unconscious and dreaming.

*burdi*

holy shit, i think your theory has possibility in it  
this will be epic  
i still thinking that somehow part of akua soul got absorb in  
catherine soul in order to repair it

*grzecho2222*

I think that Akua is doing "Former Enemy attacks hostile army to buy some time, so the Protagonist can appear with new forces and drive them back only to discover that the Former Enemy is dead/dieing and admits that they will miss them" kinda gambit with intention of gaining something from it. Hard to tell if Cat is on it or not, but it seem that she will come back in critical moment to do some Oddfathers-style neutral necromancy – "Hear me People of Callow, hear me People of Praes, I ask You to rise in defence of your land, your families once more. Come and drive away the prideful invaders and their greedy masters. Come and fight again!" – and dead legion will rise.

[Antony444](#)

Well this battle promises to be interesting at the very least...we are about to see what Winter can really do when most of the moral constraints are out of the way.  
Juniper was great as always. I think new strategies are going to be thrown since this time Akua must obey the pre-battle plans.

But it was Prince Amadis of Iserre who was perhaps the most interesting. First, because it presented him as a human for the first time, far from the opportunist jackass of the first appearances.

Second, because he thought about many good points.

Cordelia Hasenbach manipulated the 'Good' nations of Calernia to join her great Tenth Crusade. But has the First Prince truly considered what can happen if they fail?

Her opponents being crippled may be a very bad thing in the weeks to come.

If Amadis and Malanza lose the next battle (and there are good odds they will at least finish the battle with half their forces dead), then it's 50 000 men gone.

Then our good friend The Tyrant attacks by surprise the 20 000 men stationed in the south and proceeds to set the Principalties aflame.

Black manages to defend the Vale and inflict losses which makes Papenheim stop his offensive.

The Levant troops are diverted from their original course to protect Procer, hardly the heroic and redemption show they had

been promised.

The Ashuran Navy is unable to do more than a few skirmishes and annoying the Tower.

Then the Dead king strikes.

In her haste to get rid of the villains, Cordelia could lose as many as 120 000 men (which has to be a very significant number even for them) and have her home country fought as the battleground...making the Tenth Crusade a monumental failure from the start.

### *lqueenofblades1*

I've noticed comments along with this story (on the surface at least) to be falling to same preconceptions that medieval nations couldn't field large armies. Even in Roman times, whether you were Athens or Rome itself, only a tiny fraction of your men were in an army at any time. Rome was different in that the Senate could conscript you at will and many spent their youth training in preparation for being conscripted, so even though during the Punic wars when Rome was much smaller and several consular armies were destroyed consisting of tens of thousands of men, replacing them was pretty easy meaning Rome was punching well above its weight for its size. Even the Seleucids at their height, their all-out mobilization was a 110,000 men with a total population of several million. Even if the entire army was annihilated, it's hardly that big a drag on the demographics. Yes there may be several thousand less farmers, but it's honestly not that big a loss especially considering they're from all across the empire and spread out across various towns and cities, and armies tended to also make use of mercenaries. The state will have a few years of economic pain, then will recover. Procer has a population of millions simply because anything less couldn't support an army of 100,000 with such technology, as well as the already massive losses taken during the Civil War. 100,000 people hell 200,000 people dying will be a drop in the bucket in the long run to Procer. Cordelia will probably be thrown out of power but Cordelia is the government, not the state. Even if the government changes 10 times, Procer is Procer and it wouldn't be such a big loss to it.

The peasants will breed themselves back – Every aristocrat ever.

### [frolamiz](#)

On the medium term, perhaps.

But on the short term, it would be disastrous. Procer has been described many times as weakened by the long war between princes, and is barely starting to recover thanks to Hasenbach. The principalities keeping in check the Dead King and the ratlings cannot afford weakening anymore, and their



society is already militarized in all its aspects to resist their invasions.

If the crusade fail and Procer lose its armies, it may recover militarily if given some time (and economically after a decade or two), but the Dead King is already on the move, and even if he wasn't, it would be the perfect time to strike. The newly raised armies would be comparable to untrained levies even if they could muster their new army fast enough. Even if they were individuals that had trained (which is unlikely, a farmer's life is harsh enough already without adding training to it), it would be an army of warrior instead of soldiers, and we saw with the battles between Summer and Winter how these go.

And you have to take into account that merely assembling them would take months at the earliest. It's not for nothing that the Arcadia gates are such a logistical advantage in this medieval setting.

### *SMHF*

Akua talking about redemption gives me a bad feeling... For her, this is like a once in an afterlife time opportunity... so that whole redemption talk, is probably her attempt at a story to set herself free!

Which I really really really hope doesn't happen!

Back in the lamp with you, Akua!

### *Darkadaption*

Akua leading the army while pretending to be Cat reaps the benefits of a strong story.

– Villains who have been out of the picture always create a big impact when they return (and this applies both for Akua making her possession play and, "Cat," awakening to lead the army on the third day).

– The deception will then be inevitably discovered leading to a reversal. Where the story backlash for the ploy goes is interesting, my bet is Thief as a Callowan patriot making deals with the Butcher of Liesse. However Akua herself may suffer as both the possessor and Casus Belli for the crusade.

– Nevertheless the reversal will create a desperate enough situation to bring Cat back to save her friends/army.

The overall story when she wakes is going to be:

Cat returns by throwing off possession by her oldest enemy/awakening in her friends' hour of need/in order to turn the tide of a losing battle/that she needs to win in order to defend her homeland against invaders.

That's about 4 separate Named power boosts in the context of the story.

I'm pretty sure that Cat engineered this situation (possession and all) to give herself a near unbeatable amount of narrative weight.

*Albatross*

On Wednesday I was pretty down about this whole 'lets bring back Akua thing'. But if the redemption thing holds true I actually kinda like it? Idk the fact she went straight for 'hold Hierophant hostage' on waking up doesn't seem like a good sign

*Gunslinger*

While I despise Akua and hate how her presence means Cat's not going to wake up till Wednesday at the least, I'm quite curious to see how she handles the winter mantle.

Also RIP Saint

*Someguy*

Thief is going to upgrade into [Thief of Time] to steal away Saint's lifespan? Too bad Archer could not use Unli.ited Blade Works.

Jokes aside. Cathrine should have aimed for the decimation of the Invaders like how Black put down the rebellion. Granted, she has less tools and resources to work with but forcing a "truce" with crowd brainwashers and an enemy pulling a Genghis Gambit due to realpolitik is a bad idea.

*grzecho2222*

Or maybe her blade.

[\*benthelynx\*](#)

Typo: neither should be none.

"Sappers, mages, knights. Neither of these "

[\*Barthumphries\*](#)

Further typo:

The prince sent for a footman to have it set with the diplomatic correspondence  
Change set to sent

*Naeddyr*

My prediction:

Akua is going to act as a soul-shield. Not just a meat-shield, a soul-shield. The Saint is going to cut the fuck out of her, possibly even kill her, and that's when Cat returns.

*Someguy*

This is the best idea i've read all day.

[BarthHumphries](#)

That is a great suggestion. I'd buy that for a dollar.

*nipi*

Wonder if Akua will introduce the Crusaders to Cats "white walkers"? Cat hasnt made any it this war if Im not mistaken.

*fonti*

Am I the only one seeing this love story forming between Cat and Vivienne?

*breadknife*

I'm onboard this ship as well

*tbarim*

I think that particular ship is really risky right now.  
Catherine is needing a climactic story event to wake up...

*Vhostym*

I love how all of the Akua hate here has left it so that there are no comments questioning how... fortuitous... it is that she appears now, at the brink of Callow's defeat. Almost as if a hand from below is tipping the scales.

I mean, I get the hate, Akua was always that after the last moment villain that jerks reader's expectations, and we loathe that. In book 1 she was a pretty standard villain who only really started antagonizing Cat after William showed up and took the spotlight. In Book 2 she was a problem on the side after Marchford and until Liesse, and unlike William we missed seeing her get her comeuppance. In Book 3 she was almost forgotten, or at least once again the lesser problem, until after Summer's defeat, and at that point many of us readers were hoping the book would end. That said, this is a pretty cool time for her to show up, even if we all know she's going to betray The Woe and fight them again.

For now though I'm more interested in the parallels between what has happened here and Angelic intervention on the crusader's side. I'm sure that if the Crusade had been pushed to this point,

without the Grey Pilgrim's oath, Angels would have intervened to turn the tides. Instead Heaven seems to have been playing its hand more conservatively but consistently throughout the entire battle, with relatively little overt countering from Below. So it's quite interesting to see Akua show up now, considering all of the potential power that Below could levy, it implies a lot about her potential impact here. The one thing that we know is that with Akua, we can expect the heroes to start taking actual casualties (it's been two days now, so both dead heroes have probably been rezzed) like they were supposed to all along.

*Metrux*

Excuse me? Are you trying to imply the third book was about fae? The book was wholly about Akua, even the fae coming was because of her, and she was more than overexposed there, honestly, I feel like there is nothing more to know about Akua, and this is not good for a character, especially a Villain, since this is the time when you defeat her/him and say goodbye.

*grzecho2222*

I wonder what Gallowborn and drow that were conscripted are doing.

Also, have we ever got any info how drow compare to elves of Golden Bloom?

*Sen*

A mistake, Thief. I suspect that 'Flee' was an inappropriately vague instruction. If Akua seeks out our pilgrim friend, she has permission and imperative to leave the battlefield and seek out her own ends.

*Anon*

Technically no – I believe flee only applies insofar as escaping from the grey pilgrim.

Unless He follows Akua forever, her next order would eventually be to return to the camp/Thief.

*RanVor*

A Terribilic victory indeed.

Like almost everyone here, I'm tired of Ubua, but her comment on redemption got me thinking, and I came to the conclusion that she still has the potential to be entertaining for a few chapters. Until she inevitably backstabs everyone again, that is.

Also, between this and Court II, I can't believe people still claim the Thief is a Hero.

[sengachi](#)

I mean, Akua is basically Hitler. If you decide to inflict serious pain on a leashed Hitler to try to dissuade him from breaking his leash that's not, like, pure in the way that would pass muster for a paladin. But it's also not capital E evil. Heck it's barely a pragmatic lesser evil. Maybe it rates as a sensible but mildly disconcerting measure. Even if you take a vindictive pleasure in it that barely tips the scales at all. Especially if you're part of the group that genocide was committed against.

Thief was barely a Hero in the first place. She never had any kind of selfless motives, just an urge to make the Empire pay for the insult and injury piled on top of her mother's death. She only got to be a Hero by dint of being on a rebellious Callow's side of the narrative. Where she is now? Being a bit casual with the "torture Hitler" button? There's not much moral distance you have to travel from where she was to where she is, if any. Fuck knows William would have done way \*waaaaaaay\* worse than Thief did to Akua, and he still classified as a Hero. So yeah, I get how people are still calling Thief a Hero. This really doesn't represent any great moral shift in her character, let alone something beyond the limits of what the Heavens are okay with.

*RanVor*

I'm inclined to disagree. Torturing any person for any reason is a capital E Evil, no matter how horrible their deeds. Them being the tormentors is not an excuse for us becoming the tormentors too.

Although I must admit the scene in question was immensely satisfying.

[sengachi](#)

I mean I do generally agree that torture is always a bad thing (as it doesn't actually produce any kind of reliable information or actually change behavior).

But for someone like Thief who believes that torture might actually influence Akua's behavior? Who thinks it has even the slightest chance of reducing her likelihood of slipping the leash? Even if Thief's wrong, I'm not inclined to penalize her too heavily for making the decision.

*MetruX*

Besides what the other discussion already spoke of all that, in this same chapter, I'd just like to point out Hitler is not nearly close to being the one behind the

biggest genocide. Just when Spain came to the Americas they killed more Indians, pacific ones who were trading with them. So, you know, Hitler is horrible and no one will disagree, but people just put him into a reversed pedestal, there are actually much worse than him.

[sengachi](#)

Oh yeah, the point in using Hitler as an example isn't "this is actually the worst person in history", but rather "this is the worst person in history that both you and I are likely to know the most about, have a mutual understanding on their awfulness, and be familiar with the consequences of their actions". There's not much point bringing someone up as a "person X is like person Y" example when the person you're talking to might not know much about person Y.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Aqua Sahelian's wonderful ideology of "Winner takes all"

[Warriormonk](#)

Ah, Akua seems to be so tightly bound by Cat's contingency plans that this may actually work if Thief is careful enough. I wouldn't mind having Akua around as another treacherous lieutenant other than Larat. It'll keep Cat on her toes, but also a lot of firepower. I don't know how she would explain the butcher of Liesse to the rest of the government or Callow though.

Also, I am really, really happy that we'll get to see the powers of Winter fully unleashed, at least until Akua kills 6000 soldiers. 6000! I mean like, holy shit! Can't wait to see how that goes on Monday 😊

[Walter](#)

Akua can't kill Grey Pilgrim, but if Thief is out of command range then I bet anything that among those six thousand are the Princes and Princesses of the Crusader host.

*Kallikrates*

A tiny detail I don't think we've seen for a while. They are referring to Akua, by her Name. Does that mean she still has the Name? Is the Mantle of Woe also the container/prison of a Named Villain???

*MetruX*

Yes, she still has her Name. It isn't much clear, but I think Villains don't lose their Name on death. Maybe Heroes neither, since they can be resurrected?

*Lucas*

So, as the saint said, waking up at the last moment to save your people is not a villain story. Having your pet monster do it is.

*Edrey*

akua using undeads to attack sumoning devils using the crusaders, breaking the deal with the pilgrim and having angelic intervention is the kind of thing i expect here only with cat awakening and tricking the angel to his death

*Tohron*

I'm getting a nasty feeling that Akua has a play involving the Absence demon up her sleeve. That thing was brought up too many times to be completely dealt with offscreen.

*JJR*

I'm thinking, with demons of absence, their very nature means they will only ever be dealt with offscreen.

*JJR*

You know, if there were one piece of advise I would have given in regards to Akua, well other than get rid of her, it would be DO NOT MISTREAT HER. Thief is risking turning the Narrative in Akua's favor faster than she can say, "What about the city she murdered?" Well, hopefully Cat can pick up the pieces when she get's back in her bodies helm.

*Max Scherer*

Did anybody mentioned to Akua to NOT use the Demon that is still somewhere. I cant be the only one that sees Akua on the loose with a still unaccounted demon to be a bad idea.

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## **Interlude: Kaleidoscope VI**

*"You can have the throne when I'm done with it, which will be never."*

– Dread Emperor Revenant, initiating the First War of the Dead

Rozala had only felt it once before, throughout the whole of her life. That limpid clarity that was perfect understanding, the crystallization of thought and moment into a single flawless

shard. She'd been a child, last time, and her mother had kissed her brow before sending her out of the hall. She'd remained alone on the ancient throne of Aequitain, a cup of poison in hand. In that moment, as the oak doors closed behind her, Rozala Malanza had known that she would take Cordelia Hasenbach's head or die trying. Known it in a way deeper than she knew her breath or the flow of her blood, felt that certainty become part of her soul. Now, standing at the centre of a storm of shouting men and bared steel, she learned something else.

She had overestimated her own cleverness.

It was a bitter lesson. She'd learned the ways of war since she'd been a young girl, been taught them so deeply her grasp on the Ebb and the Flow had paid for it. There were perhaps a handful of generals in all of Procer that were finer commanders than her, and all had decades of experience that in time she would come to match. The Iron Prince, she'd fancied, had been the only one who could match her own discernment in matters of battle. And Klaus Papenheim was old, stepping closing to death's threshold every year. As the blue-eyed dead advanced in utter silence, Rozala Malanza realized that the waters of the world were deep and her understanding of them shallow. What had seemed like cleverness days ago might very well cost her this day, this battle, this campaign and perhaps even this crusade.

That the dead would rise was no great surprise. There were reports of the Black Queen having raised them for purpose of war in the past, and though the Army of Callow lacked Wasteland mages it would have been naïve of her to expect complete ignorance of necromancy. And so, even after the Queen of Callow was laid low, Princess Rozala had laid a trap. She'd crafted it carefully, drawing on the knowledge of the Rogue Sorcerer and the Grey Pilgrim. Even if the Black Queen woke, as the Pilgrim had hinted she might should defeat loom tall over the Callowans, Catherine Foundling had limits to the power she could draw. Great workings such as raising a mile of marshlands' worth of dead would exhaust and weaken her. And so, patiently, she had ordered preparations. Rozala had no lack of priests and Chosen, and if there was one truth to be had about water it was that it could be *blessed*.

It would have been a beautiful counterstroke. The moment the Black Queen invested her power into the dead, heroes and priests would have gathered together to bless it and the touch of holy would have broken both the host of undead and the villain raising them. Two birds taken with the same stone, turning the Enemy's arrogance into just demise. And so when the alarms had rung and the call to battle trumpeted, when she first received report that blue-eyed undead were rising from the marsh to attack the camp she had smiled. She might, after all, have just won the battle. Then the priests and the Chosen sallied out, carving an island of Light by the shore until they could finish their holy blessing,



and when the ripple of pale shivered across the surface of the water triumph coursed through her veins.

Until the moment she saw the dead were still advancing, and Rozala Malanza was struck by terrible clarity.

The dead were coming. Thousands of them, leashed to the Black Queen's will. It was possible for her host to successfully defend, even if caught by surprise and still half-asleep. With the Chosen holding the shore until enough soldiers could be assembled, it was possible to weather the storm. Unless the crusaders were forced to defend on two fronts. The Princess of Aquitan swallowed her fear and despair, soothing her mind. It was not yet done. If the Chosen managed to slay the Black Queen, the tide could be turned.

"Gather the men from Orne and Cantal," Princess Rozala barked, her raised voice stilling the chaos. "We are, I believe, about to be attacked by the Army of Callow."

She did not look to the shores, where the Named were gathering. The Pilgrim and the Saint would understand the situation without need for her to send a messenger.

It was as all on their shoulders now.

—

Christophe raised his shield and the undead's blow glanced off the polished silver. The creatures were slow, for all that the Rogue Sorcerer had been astonished by them. The man's insistence that they'd been raised through the pure power of Winter instead of a Damned's fell abilities or even necromancy seemed to make little difference when it came to meeting them on the field. Flicking his wrist, he separated the abomination's head from its body and the corpse dropped to the ground. The blue eyes winked out a moment later and he settled his stance. The wave was at an end, though already more were rising from the tepid waters. The Mirror Knight feared no Evil, yet he disliked the lay of this battle. His fellow Chosen were too few to hold the whole shore, and there were dangers in standing alone against the horde. Kallia had lost an arm to a dead crusader but a half-hour past, the thing clutching at her body until the munitions within detonated. Goblin devilry, the mark of a degenerate breed. The scuttling greenskins were without honour. The Forsworn Healer had reattached the arm and healed the wound, but the Painted Knife had been shaken. He could not blame her. Unlike him, she'd fought the monster up close. Christophe would never forget the sight of the Black Queen laughingly tearing apart an entire band of heroes almost by herself. She'd ripped out their lives like errant weeds, making a game of their struggle. Antoine, his young Alamans brother-in-arms, was still plagued by nightmares from

having his arm torn out and tossed in Mansurin's face as a *distraction*.

Yesterday had been almost worse. Christophe had come within a hair's breadth of death leading the fantassins in their advance, saved only by the intervention of the Regicide. A second time he had felt the Cold Lady's breath on his neck, when the Callowans had plied wicked sorcery and made river where there was once solid ground. He'd been on the wrong side of it, surrounded by the enemy, and prepared for his last stand when death suddenly bloomed in green flames. The impotence of it had been what stung the worst. Men and monsters he could meet sword in hand, but how did one fight *fire*? Soldiers he'd spilled blood with, comrades under the Heavens, had died screaming while the power he'd been bestowed by Above proved useless to save anyone. He was the Mirror Knight, granted his armaments by the spirits of the Old Lake after he passed their harsh trials. His power was the reflection of Evil against Evil, the conception of the snake biting its own tail. Yet he'd crawled away shamefully from the blazing green, fished out of the waters by a soldier after almost drowning in his flight. The Enemy had failed to scar his body, but the remembrance of that shame would leave mark on his soul until he drew his last breath.

Not all had been so lucky that dishonour was the price exacted. Mansurin's second death had taken him beyond even the Grey Pilgrim's reach.

Christophe chased away the thought and let the light of day wash over him. He drew strength from it, from the **Dawn** that was one of his aspects. He rose with the morning sun, tiredness and uncertainty leaking out of his body. The Elfin Dames had shaped him in this, granted him the boon that with every dawn his soul would rise – and never retreat. The Mirror Knight had once been a thin and sickly child, but the passing of the years had made him a warrior beyond mortal capacity. It was a slight thing, but every morning saw him a little stronger. A little faster. A little more enduring. Another decade of this, the Regicide had told him, and he would be beyond even her ability to match. Perfect within and without, as the Heavens meant him to be. His strength reaching its peak and a sliver beyond, he waded into the shallow waters and scattered the marching dead. He scythed limbs and shattered skulls, his silver blade breaking steel and the dead flesh beneath. He retreated only when none were left to stand against him, soiled water dripping from his greaves. The whistle caught him by surprise, and he turned so his helm would allow him sight.

"Mirror," the Vagrant Spear said in broken Tolesian. "We gather. Take head of queen."

The Arlesite tongue was not his most fluent, but he had made some study of it during his years defending the convent. Sidonia, as the other Chosen insisted they all call her in private, seemed unruffled by the darkness besieging them. Christophe admired this greatly, as she had been returned from the side of the Gods Above for nary an hour. The Pilgrim's power had breathed life back into her still body so recently, yet she returned to their holy struggle without hesitation. The strength of her resolve was worthy of praise. No all the Grey Pilgrim had returned had been so unflinching in their devotion. There was no trace of daze and confusion in her eyes, only certainty, and the Mirror Knight wrestled with the strange thing that was attraction towards a Levantine. Had his vows not forbidden it... He cleared his throat, cheeks flashing with embarrassment.

"Are we to leave our fellow crusaders to stem the tide alone?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Great Elder say, battle won only when queen dead," she replied. "Strike strong. Avenge dead."

Reluctantly, the Chosen withdrew. Already crusaders were forming in proper ranks behind him, priests mingling amongst them. Holy flames would not burn as bright as they should against these queer undead, but burn they would regardless. It would have to be enough, until the Black Queen was slain. Christophe saluted the brave soldiers with deep respect, and there was a flicker of guilt within when they responded in kind. He knew this was retreat with purpose, but it still felt wrong to leave them to stand alone. He followed Sidonia, who led him surefooted to the gathering of Chosen further down the shore. The Knight was the last summoned, he saw. The others greeted him, grim but resolute. The Saint of Blades stood apart from the rest, lazily carving through undead without even relying on her Name, while the rest of the Chosen clustered around the Grey Pilgrim.

Some he knew by name, others only by Name. Kallia, face painted in a fresh coat of red as she held her twin knives, stood besides young Antoine. The Blade of Mercy had his greatsword propped up on his shoulder, eyes gleaming white as he drew on the Light to slay his fears. The Forsworn Healer had his eyes closed as he mastered the pain of feeling so many deaths bloom around him. The Silent Guardian, tongue forever stilled by her oaths, kept her shield close even with her sword sheathed. Christophe had shared a shameful escape with her, yesterday, and their eyes met with unspoken understanding. *Never again.* The Myrmidon, garbed in bronze and faith, was sharing quiet words with the Rogue Sorcerer. Often these two kept to themselves, as the Sorcerer was one of the few Chosen that could speak her obscure Free Cities dialect. This was the sum whole of the Chosen of the Heavens in

this blighted place. Mansurin and François had been taken by the green fire, never to grace Creation again. Christophe sheathed his blade and formed the wings against his breastplate, commending the souls of the lost to the Gods. They had served unflinchingly to the end, and deserved endless felicity for it on the Other Side.

"Hear me," the Grey Pilgrim said, and a ripple went through all of them.

None dared disobey, when the Peregrine spoke. The Mirror Knight felt a thrum of excitement. When had such a gathering of the Good last taken place? Blessed souls were a rarity in the lands of his birth, and like him often served their purpose in isolation. The Tenth Crusade had gathered them all for greater design, and they would see it through. *The Heavens will it.*

"We go now to make war on the Black Queen," the old man said. "We were twelve, once, but no longer. Do not forget this. As the Heavens protect us, the Gods Below look well upon her – for she serves their purpose, however unwilling. Victory is not assured, for we now venture in her realm of death and ice."

The elder Levantine smiled sadly at them.

"There is no glory in this," he warned them. "Bards may write songs, one day, and chronicles sing your praises, but this is earthly luster. We march in the spirit of sacrifice, to bring light into the dark. Do not look ahead or behind, only to each other. There is no salvation to be found save at the hands your comrades."

Christophe kept himself from frowning. This was far from the exaltation that he had expected, and suspected they all needed.

"Stand with pride, nonetheless," the Pilgrim softly said. "You came here of your own will, proving yourself worthy of all that was bestowed upon you. Much has been demanded, yet nothing is promised but duty fulfilled. Stand proud, children. We are the torch taken into the night, and though our flame is passing today we burn *bright*."

The Mirror Knight shivered. He felt it, just like the others. The eyes of the Heavens on them. That sacred thing that made them who they were. The trance was broken by a cleared throat, to his vexation.

"All right, kids," the Saint of Swords said, idly decapitating another undead. "We're going after the tiger in her own lair, so expect this fight to be a notch above anything you've been in before. This is the third dawn, and she's fresh returned: she will be at her *peak* and out for blood. Guardian, you're to cover Forsworn against anything she tosses out."

The silent woman nodded, edging closer to the healer.

"Myrmidon, you're sticking by Rogue," the Saint added. "If she hits you, buy him time to retreat and hold her in place until we can flank."

The old woman looked upon the rest of them with a hard smile.

"Knife, Vagrant and Blade," she said. "You're our knife. Stay out of it until Tariq gives the signal. As for you, Mirror..."

The old woman's grin had Christophe uneasy, though the light of dawn pushed the failing away soon enough.

"You're with me," she said. "We're claiming the first dance."

The Chosen nodded gravely. If he could save the lives of others by enduring pain, there was no real choice to be made. His power had granted him the ability to withstand much.

"Steel yourselves," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It begins."

The old man struck the ground with his staff, and the marsh *parted*.

Standing tall, the Chosen advanced.

—

Kallia's heart grew steadier the longer they walked. The Painted Knife adjusted her stride so would not leave the shorter Vagrant Spear behind, silently hinting the Blade of Mercy should follow suit. The boy was taller than either of them, regardless of his youth. He'd have to be, to lug around that chunk of steel he called a weapon.

"There will be honour to be found today, strife-sister," Sidonia murmured in Lunara when she caught up. "Worthy strife to offer the Blood."

Kallia almost rolled her eyes. *Alavans*. The hill people were a ferocious lot, but they did clutch the old traditions a little too tightly for her tastes. She was from Levante, herself, which was a true great city instead of a remote valley of orchards and cattle fences. No one could deny the people of Alava were great warriors – their city was the home of the Champion's Blood, after all – but Sidonia wasn't someone she'd ever be able to discuss the latest songs from faraway Smyrna with, or even the latest couplets from the Hidden Poets of the old city. Still, she found her mood lifted by her fellow Levantine's eagerness. In times of strife, it was heartening to remember the old ways.

"I'm not of any of the lines, Sidonia," she reminded her comrade. "Either greater or lesser."

The records of the Holy Seljun had shown that there had once been a Knife of Night a century past, who shared purpose with her, yet the man had never had children and so had spawned no lesser line to be added to the families of the Blood. Should Kallia ever have children of her own her line would be added to the rolls, but she had never been hungry for that honour. Only the greater lines won more than empty titles and emptier privileges from being recognized, as was only fitting for the descendants – in Blood or Bestowal – of the five heroes that had founded the Dominion.

“We Spears have timid boasts,” the other woman shrugged. “It will be good, to add this strife to our histories. We stand too deep in the shadow of the Champion lines.”

Not so deep, Kallia thought, now that Mansurin had been felled. He’d been born to the thinnest of the lesser Champion lines, but he had been descendent in Blood. His death was worthy of grief, but not unexpected. The descendants of the most fruitful of the founders of Levant were many and often Bestowed, but were known to die as often as they were empowered. None of those lines had ever learned fear, or the virtues of retreat in the face of the Enemy. The Painted Knife still felt awe at the remembrance of her meeting with the Valiant Champion, months ago. The woman was no descendant in Blood, but she had inherited the full Bestowal of her line’s founder. This was a rare thing, considered omen of great strife. Not, Kallia thought, that there was not even greater rarity ahead. Her eyes lingered on the crooked shoulders of the Grey Pilgrim as her hand unconsciously reached for the pouch of red paint at her side. She’d almost drawn the Mark of Mercy out of habit. And, she would admit to herself, wonder. The Great Elder was full inheritor in Blood and Bestowal of the ancient Grey Pilgrim that had been the first Seljun of Levant. Royalty beyond royalty, no matter what lesser kin now held the earthly title in Levante. More than that, he’d saved her life. Years ago, when that Spirit of Vengeance –

“Eyes ahead,” the Blade of Mercy spoke in Chantant. “We are nearing.”

Kallia’s mastery of the Proceran tongue was better than Sidonia’s, but both understood him perfectly. Her instinct was to move closer to the boy, stand shoulder-to-shoulder against the threat, but she could not – he needed room, to swing around that greatsword of his. The Painted Knife flicked a careful glance at the walls of water flanking them on both sides. After the Saint of Swords dispatched the first few undead to wander out effortlessly, the probing assaults had ceased. Their march had been unhindered; the path of mud they strode across leading to a tall glacier ahead. The Levantine stared at the mass of ice, still unused to the sight. These lands were strange ones. She had never seen snow nor ice before crossing the Stairway and glimpsing the tall peaks of the Parish, but now she had seen too

much of it for her tastes. All the Bestowed grew tense when the enemy came within sight, save for the Great Elder and the Saint. It settled Kallia's nerves some to see them so calm. They were a mighty pair, no lesser than the foe ahead. The Black Queen, she saw, was patiently awaiting them.

The Painted Knife's fingers clenched around the hilt of her blades when she took in the full sight. The glacier had been turned into a blasphemous challenge to the Heavens, sculpted by eldritch power to nestle a great throne upon which the Enemy was seated. No, not seated. She was lounging, almost mockingly, with a long dragonbone pipe in hand. The Black Queen blew out a stream of smoke, eyeing them nonchalantly. The Bestowed slowed, spreading out as the Saint had ordered. Kallia felt Sidonia let out a delighted breath.

"Now that," the Vagrant Spear murmured, making the Mark of Valor with shaking fingers, "is a worthy foe. Honoured Gods, a thousand singing praises for offering a great struggle to this humble one. Blood spilled on these holy grounds I dedicate to your name, my unworthy life placed on the scales of your judgement."

Naturally, the Alavans was *excited* by the sight of this. She should have known better than to expect wariness from a Heavens-maddened lover of war. The Blade of Mercy glanced at them.

"Prayer," Kallia explained in Chantant.

The boy looked approving. It was probably for the best he did not know about Levantine battle prayers. Whatever chatter had bloomed was whisked out then the Great Elder strode to the forefront, passing even the Saint of the Blades and the Mirror Knight.

"Child," he said, tone appalled. "What have you done to yourself?"

Sidonia shuffled impatiently. She did not know Lower Miezan, and so had no understanding of the conversation taking place.

"What needed to be done," the Black Queen calmly replied. "My side doesn't get to walk away clean, Pilgrim. I see you've been tossing around resurrections like they're godsdamned solstice treats, too. Charming. Not going to have any long-term ramifications at all."

The monster paused, then leaned forward.

"Did that register as a lie?" she grinned. "It didn't, did it? Have a good think about that one next time you try to sleep, Pilgrim."

"Surrender," the Great Elder said. "Abdicate. It is not too late."

"You missing the part where I'm currently winning the battle?" the Black Queen drawled. "Hells, it's not too late for you either. Terms were offered and they hold. Take your army and go home. This doesn't need to turn into a Named pissing contest."

"You would argue this, after slaying thousands?" the Pilgrim asked.

"I feel like we might need to revisit the concept of foreign invasion," the villain noted. "Specifically the part where it has fucking *consequences*. Like, you know, people dying. You'd think that one would be a given, but apparently you're slow learners. Wahwah, my attempt to conquer a – sort of – sovereign nation wasn't met with flowers and a godsdamned parade. It's almost like we're not happy about the whole thing. Go figure."

"And you think your reign a better alternative?" the Grey Pilgrim asked calmly.

"Hells, Pilgrim, I was *born* to rule," the Black Queen replied with a toothy grin. "But I'll settle for getting you fucks out of my backyard, this once. Any takers?"

The monster's gaze swept across the crowd of Bestowed as she idly emptied her pipe and put it away within her cloak. The only answer was Light blooming and weapons raised.

"Ah, well," the Black Queen mused. "Pissing contest it is, then."

—

If Akua had always known heroism was this entertaining, she would have begun dabbling *years* ago. A hook of Light lashed out at her as the healer Named shaped the heavenly power and tore through her throne, but she'd already been moving when the working had just begun. Landing in a crouch atop her glacier, she unsheathed her sword and tapped it pensively against her armoured leg. It was unfortunate that the deception required her to remain in dearest Catherine's garments, as they were admittedly horrid, but needs must. The body was wonderfully responsive, and though without the Gift the mantle allowed her powers not fundamentally different. Tainted with Winter, perhaps, but that was no great trouble for her. Her angry little overlord had, as usual, allowed herself to fear her own power to such extent it crippled her when instead she should have been learning to master the influence. One never quite escaped one's origins, it seemed. A shame Catherine was disinclined to take lessons from her in such matters.

Akua Sahelian was no stranger to otherworldly influences, and so she embraced Winter eagerly.



The mantle howled through her veins, and eyeing the healer and his grim little sentinel she flicked her wrist. Her glacial throne, a useful mass of ice she had chosen as her seat for purposes both practical and theatrical, twisted sharply and speared forward. The Saint of Swords shattered it within a heartbeat, sword clearing the scabbard, but Akua was unmoved. Ice remained ice, even when broken to pieces. An exertion of will transmuted the shards into cold mist and it fell over the pair of heroes like a blanket. Beneath her a man with a mirror-like shield was climbing the glacier with unseemly haste. And was that sorcery she felt? What familiar taste. A pilum of concentrated yellow flame tore towards her, and she raised a contemptuous eyebrow. The Half-Hornet, truly? How provincial. No one she knew would be caught dead using that in a serious battle.

She leapt down, feet landing on the climbing hero's head, and measured the angle so the only corrective action the spell formula allowed for would fall well short of her. The sorcery hit the glacier with a thunderous crash, splitting it in two. Ugh, he'd even overcharged it. It was like watching a grown woman improperly dose last season's poison. Movement flicked at the edge of her vision and Akua's boot came down to smash the helmet beneath her, forcing the hero down and allowing her to avoid the Saint's blow by less than an inch. The tips of Catherine's pathetically unadorned crown were shaved cleanly off. The sorceress threw herself to the side, sliding down the falling glacier as streaks of light further shattered what had been a very tasteful throne, in her opinion. A piece of the crown fell at her side, and once more Akua mourned Catherine had not even been willing to add some sapphires to it. They were only moderately costly to import through Mercantis, and they would have fit a Queen of Winter perfectly. A triad of heroes, two of them Levantines by the skin tone, charged towards her as she caught her footing at the edge of the slope. The pair still shrouded in mist, she noted, were beginning to disperse it.

That just wouldn't do.

Akua flicked her wrist and turned the mist they'd inhaled to ice again, clogging up their throats and lungs. Transmutation, she noted approvingly, came particularly easy to the mantle. Likely a consequence of the ever-fluid nature of the fae, or that these waters had come from Arcadia in the first place. The triad closed in, an inexplicably barefoot woman serving as the tip of the wedge.

"Glory in strife," the beggar screamed out in Lunara.

Did Catherine know any Levantine tongues? Most likely not. Still, a responding battle cry was in order. It was the heroic thing to do. Something about Callow? Akua pondered her understanding of Catherine's temper. *I am angry*, the sorceress decided, *because I*

*am disappointed as I have mystifyingly failed to grasp that the Heavens prefer their pawns powerful yet rather dim. I must now protect the venerable sanctity of farms and countless peasants everywhere, as I am very concerned with their fate even though they are ignorant and full of lice.*

"Fuck off and die," Akua called back, tinting her voice with wrath.

There. Crass more than witty, but Catherine did tend to walk that line. Entirely disinclined to engage three Heavens-empowered hardened killers with only a sword and dubious moral grounds in hand, she retreated into the waters and let them envelop her fully. Breathing was not necessary to this body, after all, and she could feel her foes where eyesight failed. She took a moment to touch the marching dead with her mind, noting with approval that though after the heroes claimed her attention she'd only succeeded in making them mindlessly advance and attack, they were bleeding the crusaders. Slowly but surely. She'd been rather displeased at the haste the enemy approached her with, as she'd been amusing herself by redeploying Catherine's old goblin tricks against fresh opposition. A heartbeat later, the water surrounding her blew away as the Saint's blow forced the marsh to recede.

"There you are," the unseemly old woman grinned.

"Dodge," Akua replied with a friendly smile, greatly enjoying herself.

Two massive blocks of ice formed into the waters on each side, their mass smashing forward and sending the tide hurtling back towards both of them. The wicked enemy of all things Callowan blinked in surprise, but alas it was not to be. Starlight stolen and made a streak cut towards the sorceress, evaporating the water and prompting a frown. This was not mere heavenly lightshow: it was the principle of untainted radiance directly from firmament, made into a weapon. Such a thing could be interrupted by workings, but it would take nothing less than a miracle to usurp or reshape it. Fortunately, she was not without answer. The gate opened before her, a perfect circle pressing back the fabric of Creation, and Akua carefully threaded the needle. Difficult, on such short notice, yet not impossible to a practitioner of her skill. Orienting the gate properly, she wove will into forming the corresponding exit behind the trifling Proceran who'd tried to hit her with childish sorcery. The radiance hit him in the back before he could react, though to Akua's displeasure it did no harm. The Pilgrim could control his working to a truly despicable extent. Tying off the two gates so she could not be made to suffer the backlash of their breaking, the sorceress condensed a platform of ice to leap off of before the Saint could bisect her.

She landed smoothly atop the water on a foothold of ice, moving towards the flank of the assembled heroes before the old cutter could catch up with her. The enemy seemed puzzled, she saw, by her refusal to engage them on their own terms. Had Catherine truly traded blows with them up close? The sorcerers almost wrinkled her nose. Waving about swords was the business of people who *failed* to murder demigods for power. Perhaps it was time to make that exceedingly clear to the opposition. Winter burning gloriously through her frame, Akua Sahelian shaped the full power of the mantle. Half a mile of marshlands turned to ice as she remained standing on an elegant pillar, the surrounding waters disappearing as they froze and gathered into a monumental ball of frost hovering over the heroes. The Saint was running on now solid ground, sword flashing to carve a groove through both Creation and the pillar, but the sorceress merely cocked an eyebrow. Even severed, the upper part of the pillar remained unmoving in the air. Fire and starlight shattered the mass of ice, but the heroes were gravely mistaken if they thought this was a mere foot to stomp on them with. A flick of the wrist had the ice transmuting back into water and falling into a shower over the Named.

Another flick had it freezing again, and they were buried in falling ice.

"Come now," Akua said. "This is as obvious an opening as you'll get."

The Saint of Swords was a wizened old killer, with an impressive reputation. She was not, however, invincible. Even as she turned around in an instinctive parry, the old woman took the arrow in the shoulder as the Archer finally made her presence known. The sorceress felt the trembling heat of the wounded heroine, and Winter demanded her screaming death. She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mind, will lashing out to take the mantle by the throat and choke it. The urges receded ever so slightly. More dangerous than she'd believed, this influence. The principle alienation was similar in nature to the bleed from binding an ancient devil, but unlike the latter it did not recede after the moment of binding. Akua leapt down from the pillar, power lashing out to smash both broken halves on the Saint. The heroine flickered with Light and it pulsed in a perfect ring around her. Aspect, the sorceress decided. Weak enough it could likely be used more than once, which would be difficult to deal with. No matter, there were more tempting prey. Akua felt mild revulsion at the term her thought had ended by, to her surprise.

She did not have the time to linger on the matter, as the heroes had escaped her little greeting gift. Light broke through the ice, once, twice, and then in an eruption of steam the entire structure vanished. The second-rate wizard's doing, she suspected. For a heartbeat she mused leaving the battle entirely,

going to lead the dead personally, but found she could not. It would mean leaving Archer on her own, something she could not accept. The notion displeased her, even. The sorceress' brow creased. This was not coincidence. She could feel her mind even struggling to consider the subject, which was telling. Feeling the Saint pivot to cut through a second arrow, Akua moved towards the other heroes as she fought the influence.

"Oh," she murmured to herself after a moment. "My dear, that is *exquisitely* done."

The sorceress had slipped her bindings by snatching an errant piece of Winter and making it her own. Through it she'd opened a path to the greater mantle that she'd eventually managed to crawl through, entirely so when she found no opposition awaiting. In her current state, it would be impossible for her to claim this body if Catherine disallowed it. The discrepancy in will and power was overwhelming. Yet using the sliver of Winter, Akua had succeeded in stabilizing the construct she now inhabited and claiming use of the full mantle – which she'd drawn on, this entire fight. The path going both ways, the mantle itself was now influencing her. Which had seemed a minor concern, until she realized that Catherine Foundling had bound her very soul into its fabric. The more Akua drew on the mantle, the more she called back the body's true owner. *I had wondered, as to why you never had Hierophant lay deeper bindings on me*, the sorceress thought. *It never truly mattered, did it? You left yourself a backdoor.* She could not help but approve. Perhaps some mundane sorts would have been horrified, but Akua had first ripped out her own soul to use as a tool as the tender age of thirteen. Ruthlessness turned against yourself could be a very useful tool, if properly employed. In matters of self-mutilation for the sake of advancement, she must admit Catherine Foundling had few rivals. Eyeing the spreading steam, Akua made a decision. Struggling against this was pointless, and might be taken as treachery she did not intend.

"Let it not be said, my Empress, that I did not offer service leal and true," Akua Sahelian mused.

She called on Winter again, the fullness of the mantle, and kept digging deeper until her vision blurred. Her reward did not take long to be delivered.

**Back into the box, Diabolist.**

Darkness came, yet Akua smiled.

A useful tool, after all, was never allowed to rest for long.

---

*Sir\_Immith*

Akua is my favorite character.

There, I said it.

*burguulkodar*

I'm quite puzzled why Adjutant was never around in this fight...

Also Archer could have killed off some heroes at distance with her shooting-a-mile-away-headshot, but never even try.

Archer+Catherine against 10 heroes seems stupid, but maybe Thief will help somehow. Hierophant not being there to counter magic will really be dire, though. I don't quite see how they will win this.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I thought Adjutant was still at the other end of Callow.

*Jeffery Wells*

He's on his way back, but will be a while – months possibly – before he arrives. There is an interlude between him and the leader of the Regals that was a little confusing, because said leader is the head of Callow's knights and fighting in this battle. It never explicitly stated it but the meeting clearly happened before Adjutant went South.

*General Chaos*

That wasn't an interlude, it was an extra chapter. It happened between books 3 and 4.

*rook37*

The contrast between the heroes' and Akua's perceptions of the "tasteful" throne is one of the funniest jokes yet haha

*Onos*

Yes, someone on the Villians team going for the instant-kill headshot against a dozen heroes is sure to be a great plan. Definitely not the kind of thing Providence would mess with at all.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Akua's caricature of Catherine was quite entertaining, but her inner monologue was even better. A true villain in the throes of quasiheroic bliss? Now there's a treat!

[aran](#)

Akua pondered her understanding of Catherine's temper. I am angry, the sorceress decided, because I am disappointed as I have mystifyingly failed to grasp that the Heavens prefer their pawns powerful yet rather dim. I must now protect the venerable sanctity of farms and countless peasants everywhere, as I am very concerned with their fate even though they are ignorant and full of lice.

This is still one of my favorite parts.

Aaradur

Dread Emperor Treacherous is mine

[Giraffee](#)

I'm sorry if this sounds like I hate the story, but 5 interlude chapters in a row AND a bonus chapter was too much for me. Ended up skimming through V and VI

Onos

Nobody's forcing you to read the story chief, if you want to miss some of the best foreshadowing in the Guide that's your call. I don't think passive-aggressive criticism of the story structure will really stick either since we're like three books further on at this point.

Bart\_KF

"Glory in strife," the beggar screamed out in Lunara.

Did Catherine know any Levantine tongues? Most likely not. Still, a responding Battle Cry was in order. It was the heroic thing to do. Something about Callow? Akua pondered her understanding of Catherine's temper. *I am angry, the sorceress decided, because I am disappointed as I have mystifyingly failed to grasp that the Heavens prefer their pawns powerful yet rather dim. I must now protect the venerable sanctity of farms and countless peasants everywhere, as I am very concerned with their fate even though they are ignorant and full of lice.*

I had to stop reading, laugh uproariously, and immediately post this comment. Holy shit. What a swerve.

skairunner

Damn, Akua has a very very twisted mindset. I think she might actually care a little about Catherine right now

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## Chapter 17: Contingent

*"Peace is little more than the recognition that the reasons for which war was undertaken are no longer relevant."*

– Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

I came back to myself with a roiling sea of Winter at my fingertips.

*Fucking Hells, Akua.* The trap I'd set that ultimately brought me back had required that the Diabolist or another entity to essentially go mad with power for it to work in the first place, but this was still beyond my predictions. Even with oaths binding her and Vivienne holding a leash, what I saw beneath me was a dark reminder of the quantity of power that could be thrown around without breaking the letter of the limitations I'd imposed. Half of the lake I'd dumped over the head of the crusaders with Masego's help had apparently been used to smash the heroes, though I saw no corpses to show for the effort. Not that one of those would necessarily mean the end of it, with the Pilgrim around. Five contingencies, and this had been the one to work. I could not help but be pissed that even after all that planning in the end it'd come down to Akua making a mistake, however baited that mistake had been. Hierophant was nowhere in sight, so he was probably incapacitated. That was one down. Thief's secret set of oaths must not have been sufficient to call me back from that... unpleasant journey, which made two. I'd not woken up to a sword through my back, so Larat hadn't worked out either – but then that had always been the chanciest of the five. The oath forced on the fae had been comprehensive, but with that sort of creature it was hard to make one completely water-tight. He'd failed, either on purpose or not. I'd have to get the details out of him, but regardless that made three.

As for the last trick, well, it had very specific requirements. I wasn't surprised it hadn't gotten me out, though I'd need to have Hierophant take a look at the overlay as soon as possible. We were pretty sure it wouldn't *kill* me if it triggered by accident, but there were always risks in turning yourself into living munitions.

I held the power in check, barely, as my gaze swept the battlefield. Ten heroes, looking ragged but unbowed. The Saint

had taken an arrow, which meant Indrani was up and about. A relief, that. The rest were clustered together, protecting the Pilgrim and the wizard I'd scrapped with that one time. The thousand little bundles in the back of my mind made it clear Akua had indulged in a spot of necromancy, which brought mixed feelings. For all that Masego insisted there was nothing inherently bad about that kind of sorcery, after Second Liesse I had my doubts. Maybe there were applications that weren't inherently horrid, but no one seemed to be actually using those. On the other hand, if the undead were getting chopped up that meant fewer of my soldiers were dying. I could appreciate the results, even if the means had me more than a little uncomfortable. I'd take a closer look at those later. For now, I was juggling the difficulty of maintaining the ice beneath my feet that kept me on the surface of this eerie marsh while simultaneously trying not to blow up either myself or my surroundings with the power Diabolist had drawn. My grip was beginning to slip, so action was in order. Senses no mortal could have were in full extension, telling me of the humidity in the air and the spread of both water and ice in my surroundings.

I dumped the power into the water beneath me, flash-freezing it with a loud snap as I continued spreading and shaping the working. The glacier formed at a mind-boggling pace, water rippling around it, and I closed my eyes to focus. Getting the paddles of the waterwheel all the same size was difficult, though it grew easier the more power I shed. I could have made it larger, not that it wasn't already massive, but just a structure of ice wasn't what I had in mind. Fingers clenching, I severed the platform I stood on from the wheel and lashed out with my will. Slowly, the wheel began to turn. The waters churned. I continued dumping power into the movement, accelerating it, and the tide of soiled water raged towards the heroes with a roar. *Fuck it*, I thought, and tossed the wheel at them too. We were past subtlety at this point. Eyes flicking towards the Saint, I sighed as she carved herself a path above the current and stood atop the arc. That'd been too much to hope for, I supposed. An arrow whistled at her and I took advantage of the opening Archer had just gifted me to move further away as I riffled through the bundles in the back of my mind until I could find Zombie. Good girl that she was, she'd been waiting on the edge of the marshlands. She seemed pleased by my summons, taking flight with haste.

I wasn't sure what Akua's plan had been but it hardly mattered. While it looked like she might have been getting the better of the fight with the heroes, fighting them at all was a mistake as far as I was concerned. Even if I killed a few they'd still get me in the end. In the distance I heard a gargantuan crack as the ice wheel fractured into pieces merrily carried by the currents, heroes having climbed atop them. That, as it happened, was an opening I'd left on purpose. I drew on Winter, feeling it whisper



lovingly in my ears, and shattered the wheel shards. That dumped the heroes back into the water, though the fucking wizard made some kind of ring of fire that evaporated a safe place for them to gather and regroup. Saint was back on the offensive, making her way to me, but I wasn't having any of that. Zombie made a low pass and I leapt atop her saddle, fingers slipping into her mane to anchor me while I got my feet in the stirrups. We went high after that, the undead horse's wings beating hard as we ascended. My cloak was wet, I only then noticed. Like I'd been swimming. What the fuck had Akua been up to? No, not the time. By the height of the sun it was morning still, and promising to be a warm day. Not a cloud in sight. My mount gliding slowly, I took a look at the broader situation unfolding across the field.

The undead were shambling forward into a defensive Proceran line near what must have been a shore, before most the water in the marsh was used as ammunition in the Named brawl below me. The dead were not making an impressive showing. They seemed to have some semblance of intelligence, but there was no real coordination. They went in waves and shattered on the formations of fantassins and the priests accompanying them. Still, casualties were slowly mounting. I suspected the first few waves must have been wiped almost without losses, but now the crusaders were tiring and beginning to make mistakes. There was, to my surprise, another front to the battle. The Army of Callow was out in force, though there were a lot fewer of them than I'd expected. Had Juniper left men to guard the camp? Regardless, if she was leading this engagement she was being rather conservative in her command. Mages on both sides were trading spells at a pace, but aside from a long shield wall of regulars pressing against crusader lines there was no other real fighting going on. *She's not fighting to win*, I thought, frowning as I watched the Order of the Broken Bell manoeuvre on the flank to draw away enemy cavalry without ever engaging. *She's delaying and tying down men while incurring as few casualties as possible.*

That was unlike the Hellhound, who tended to go for the throat whenever she could. Which meant she was relying on the dead to do the heavy lifting – and by extension had relied on Akua. That was a desperate measure if I'd ever seen one. The situation must be worse than it looked on the surface. The moment the front holding back the dead collapsed the battle was good as won, barring heroic intervention, but at the current pace that might take hours. My brow tightened as I scanned the battlefield for any hint of the Wild Hunt's presence, but they were nowhere in sight. Had the fae sat on their asses the entire time I'd been gone? Fuck. It was a solid assumption there'd been a battle while I was gone, and without the fae the Army of Callow would have been fighting Named with only Legion mages to back them up, while the enemy had wizards and priests both. *It must have been a fucking slaughter.* Were the men I saw below all that was left of our host? There were what, maybe thirteen or fourteen thousand there?

The Procerans looked like they'd taken a beating too, lost at least another few thousand since I'd dropped the lake on them, but Malanza could afford those losses a lot more than we could. She was throwing away levies and fantassins, not professional soldiers.

While I'd been taking my look around, the heroes had gotten their shit together. A beam of radiant light – fucking Pilgrim – tore up towards me, followed by a swarm of little balls of flame that looked liquid. I led Zombie into a deep dive to shake the projectiles. Archer could take care of herself, I decided. She was probably half a mile away and picking her targets carefully, in no danger of being swarmed by the enemy. Just in case I wove a glamour into large streaks of yellow and red indicating she should disengage even as I spurred Zombie to head towards the shore battle line. I whistled loudly as my mount's hooves swept just above the water. It was not long before I had my answer. Loyal dogs that they were, the Wild Hunt came as summoned. There was an eldritch glimmer on the surface of the water at my side before Larat came riding out in full armour, sword in hand and grinning broadly. Even as his horse kept pace with mine, the rest of the Hunt emerged in our wake.

"Your Majesty," the one-eyed fae greeted me. "Was your journey a fruitful one?"

"We're going to have a talk about that, you little weasel," I darkly said. "But it'll have to wait. I have work for the lot of you."

"We await your will eagerly," the raven-haired man replied.

"Ignore the heroes unless they attack you," I ordered. "See those Proceran formations ahead?"

My sword helpfully pointed out the Proceran defensive line.

"Their fear and desperation wafts most pleasantly to my nostrils," Larat informed me.

They did to mine as well, and Winter grew hungry for the banquet, but I forced myself to focus.

"Break them," I said. "Killing's not the objective, the Hunt is to concentrate on shattering their lines."

"Tasteless meat," the one-eye fae complained.

"That sounds like the talk of a man hungry for fingers," I noted very mildly.

The bastard laughed.

"Your will be done, Sovereign of Moonless Nights," he smiled.

"It better, for your sake," I smiled back cheerfully. "Because you seem to have fucked around in my absence, and we're going to have a nice chat about that."

I didn't even allow him to respond, pulling Zombie up and willing one of her wing beats to splash water in his face. Let him try to look all elegant and sinister with muck everywhere. I absently tugged on the reins to lead my mount towards the crusaders, but my mind was elsewhere. I needed to keep the heroes busy for a while, there was no telling what they'd get up to unattended. I reached for the dead, grimacing after a moment. Ordering them one by one would take too long. I thinned my will and cast it broadly, grabbing a rough thousand still roving around. Pain spiked through my forehead. *Too much feedback*. I grit my teeth and ordered them to assault the heroes before withdrawing my will. They weren't going to win that fight – a band of tired and encircled heroes fighting back to back against a relentless tide of undead? It had victory written all over it – but it should keep them out of my hair for a while. I tasted the warmth of the enemy Named, trying to get a sense of their readiness, and my fingers clenched. There should be ten. There were only eight. Where had they – no, it wasn't even worth asking. They would be at the very worst possible place for me.

Guarding Rozala Malanza.

I allowed myself a moment to contemplate the unpleasantness that was fighting people both stronger than me and certain to be where I least wanted them to be before pressing down against Zombie's back. She neighed and angled for descent as we flew towards the back of the Proceran lines. A handful of archers loosed arrows upwards, but I was too far and too swift for them to have any real chance of hitting me. Unfortunately, mages were bullshit and evidently I was both recognizable and a favoured target. Panes of opaque yellow force formed around me in an airtight box, but they were in above their heads this time. When it came to power, pound for pound, there were only a few people in Calernia who could beat me if I put my back into it. A lance of ice and shade formed around my hand and Zombie dove down. There was a heartbeat of resistance when the tip of the lance met the sorcery, then they both shattered and we flew through as my cloak trailed behind me. With a target painted on us so blatantly, it was no surprise I had to lead Zombie into a desperate roll to avoid being incinerated by a beam of light. It caught the edge of my cloak, leaving it singed and smoking. Fucking Pilgrim. It was supposed to be resistant to magic, wasn't it?

He was down there, as I'd suspected. Leaning on his staff, the Saint of Swords by his side and waiting patiently for me to gain enough momentum I wouldn't be able to pull out of the dive when she struck. Malanza was behind them, and as the air whistled around me I got a glimpse of her face. Fear, yes, but much more

anger. I had to respect that she remained on her horse and unmoving even as my descent quickened. Her officers were not so brave, scattering to the winds. I'd have to play this one precisely, if I wanted to avoid getting skewered in the process of landing. Fortunately, I was spending increasingly large amounts of my life either falling from things or being thrown off of them. I'd become a fair hand at it. I drew on Winter and shaped it, tossing ahead of me a spear of mist that detonated into a cloud. Throwing myself off Zombie, I ordered her to peel off even as my relationship with gravity took a sharp turn downwards. This, I mused, had seemed a better idea *before* I'd gone through with it. The timing held. A cut dispersed the mist, missing Zombie by a mere inch. Then the Saint struck again and I cursed.

I threw ice at the cut, saving my hide just long enough for my feet to land on wet earth. Mud sucked at my boots and both my knees snapped, but they were reforming before I even stood. The Saint of Swords was lazily advancing, the Pilgrim pointed his staff and Malanza looked like she *really* wanted to be pretty much anywhere else.

"Truce," I called out. "I'm here to talk."

"I'm not seeing a banner," the Saint noted.

*Really?* She was such a godsdamned asshole. I flicked my fingers and wove one out of glamour, but she pointedly did not look at it.

"I don't want to fight you," I insisted.

"So don't," she suggested. "Angle your neck a little to the side, it'll be a cleaner cut."

She was closing distance, which I knew from experience would result in my getting chopped up painfully and repeatedly.

"Pilgrim," I tried, looking behind her. "This can end *right now*."

"Gods forgive me," the old man said. "But you are right. It will."

"The battle is lost," I said. "Your lines by the shore are collapsing as we speak. Even if you force me to flee, none of that changes."

"Armies are armies," the Saint shrugged. "Named are Named. More than one way to win a war."

One step away from striking range, now. And the moment she got there we entered the wheel of pain, where every spoke was me losing a limb and trying very hard not to scream. The bundle of

instincts that were not my own was licking its chops, hungry for the fight. To crush my enemies and savour their screams. The rest insisted I make some distance, because this was about to get ugly. I unsheathed my sword. *This isn't going to work*, I thought, but I had to try anyway. My fingers came loose and I dropped the blade.

"Unarmed," I said. "Under truce banner."

"You're a weapon unto yourself," the Saint of Swords snorted, and stepped forward.

From the corner of my eye I saw implacable light bloom at the tip of the Grey Pilgrim's staff. If I got hit by that, I suspected the consequences would be much more unpleasant than a sword wound. Nothing friendly felt the way that power did.

"Stop."

I'd been reaching for Winter, but stayed my hand. That was not the Pilgrim's voice, and certainly not the Saint's. Rozala Malanza took off her helmet, sweat-soaked curls falling across her face.

"You want to talk, Black Queen," she said. "So talk."

"You fucking yellow-bellied-" the Saint began.

"I am the ranking general of this army, Regicide," the Princess of Aquitan coldly replied. "I take no orders from you. Slay me or stay your tongue."

By the looks of her, the heroine was feeling inclined towards the second. The light winked out on the Pilgrim's staff.

"Laurence," he said. "She cannot easily retreat. If talks fail, we will strike."

That wasn't how fucking truce talks were supposed to work, but then I'd not exactly respected the usual etiquette either. Disinclined as I was to give them a full pass, I would at least recognize they had some wiggling room when it came interpretation. The heroes were a distraction here, I decided. The one who mattered was the princess watching me with hard eyes.

"Battle's over, Malanza," I said. "Let's end it before any more people die pointlessly."

"I was assured you could not open your deathly gate again without the Hierophant," the Proceran said flatly. "He is not here. The battle is not yet lost."

"So maybe you wreck my army," I said. "Even if you manage that, yours gets wrecked in the process as well. And you can be sure

enough of my people survive to run that we can defend Hedges against what you have left. Logistically, you're *done*. You don't have the supplies or the men for a successful offensive into Callow."

"If we take your supplies-"she began.

"Not happening. I gave standing orders to burn what we can't carry, if we lose," I interrupted brusquely.

Her eyes flicked to the Pilgrim, and reluctantly the old man nodded. The Saint's already grim expression darkened further.

"I will not *surrender* to the likes of you," the princess snarled.

My fingers clenched.

"Gods Below, what will it *take*?" I hissed. "Do I have to murder ever last Proceran on this field before negotiations can be had? Are you really so unwilling to consider not invading you'll let dozens of thousands *starve*?"

"Your doing," Malanza hissed back. "You steal our supplies, harass us and then claim affront at our desperation? You are the architect of this madness, Catherine Foundling."

Winter whispered in my ear, urging me to rip apart the righteous little shit who had the gall to pretend she was the victim here while leading a fucking invasion army. My fingers dug into my palm until steel gave and flesh beneath it, blood dripping on the ground. The Saint's stance shifted ever so slightly. Breathe in, breathe out. Pride was a liability. Anger an unhelpful bias. *Be cold*, I told myself. *Be clear. Be a creature of logic, because logic is what gets you through this. Everything else is distracting noise*. I thought of pale green eyes, and lessons I had not yet outgrown.

"Then do not surrender," I said calmly. "Sound a withdrawal. My side will do the same. We can discuss terms for your retreat from Callow when our people aren't dying."

"And allow hunger to do your work for you?" the princess retorted.

"I'd be putting down an army of the dead as a gesture of good will, Malanza," I said. "My concession is greater than yours."

Her face remained unmoved by the statement, but she was silent for a moment.

"Supplies for the night," she said. "Food, water and tents. Delivered after we tend to the wounded."

I forced myself to consider the counter-offer calmly. Would those make enough of a difference I should bargain down? Vivienne still had their old foodstuffs in her metaphorical pocket, so it shouldn't lead to logistical issues for the Army of Callow if I shelled these out. It would still mean that the enemy, while not fresh, would at least have full bellies. They'd be closer to fighting fit. If negotiations broke down afterwards – no, wrong way to think about it. If we had a night to spare, odds were I'd be able to get Hierophant back up. My comparative advantage was greater, even with the undead tossed aside.

"They'll be added to your bill," I said.

The princess opened her mouth.

"Flat cost," I added. "No surcharge."

Her mouth closed. Grudgingly, she nodded. We both knew that if negotiations failed any talk of coin would become academic anyway.

"Truce until negotiations come at an end," I said. "First session held at noon tomorrow."

"Granted," Malanza replied.

My eyes flicked to the Named at her sides.

"That includes heroes," I said.

"I take no orders from mortal rulers," the Saint flatly said.

I ignored her. She was irrelevant in this, unless she was willing to fight the entire Army of Callow on her own. Even if she got the rest of the heroes to back her, it wouldn't be enough.

"You can't seriously expect me to feed and shelter your army while we're under attack by your allies," I told Malanza.

The Proceran looked like she'd swallowed a lemon.

"I will formally renounce alliance with any hero resuming hostilities while we are under truce," she said. "I can do no more."

It'd be enough, I decided. Might even be better if the Saint attacked after that, we'd get a clean shot at her without making a diplomatic mess.

"I strike bargain under these terms," I said.

I got my gauntlet off and offered my hand. Revulsion flickering across her face, the princess spat on the ground.

"I strike bargain under these terms," she replied. "Get out of my sight, Black Queen."

I supposed we were past courtesy, at this point. It'd never been my strong suit anyway. I crouched to pick up my sword and sheathed it, keeping an eye on the furious Saint as I did. She turned and walked away. The Pilgrim sought to meet my eyes, studying me a pensive frown, but I was done with him. Zombie landed moments later, a handful of arrows having sprouted in her flank since I'd last seen her. The enemy archers had been busy. It still took half an hour before the battle came entirely at an end, the last of the dead dropping into the mud like a stringless puppet, but it ended.

None of this felt like a victory, but at least it wasn't a defeat.

---

*SMHF*

I know they say the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing... But trust me, voting for Evil is much more helpful!

Help guide get back on top!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Soifon*

Dread Emperor >Benevolent<? Is that name for fun or there really was one like that? o.o

*Darkening*

He's been mentioned before. Don't recall anything specific about him, but I remember the name.

*Jane*

I think we've heard of him before, but... As I recall, Praesi definitions of "benevolence" differed rather greatly from the common usage.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Even with our understanding, it's still scarier than the openly sinister names.

*TeK*



He's the author of the one of my favorite quotes: "Morality is a force, not a law. Deviating from it has costs and benefits both – a ruler should weigh those when making a decision, and ignore the delusion of any position being inherently superior."

*stevenneiman*

He was real. I think his thing was about understanding how to manipulate the interaction of Good and Evil in his favor. The only other quotes of his I remember were one about letting his enemies arrange their own doom, and one (which someone else already mentioned) about understanding the advantages and drawbacks of choosing Good or Evil rather than believing them to be ends in themselves.

*Jeremy*

Well, makes sense.

But what was the fifth workaround for Winter?!

[wyaldriddler](#)

The one that actually worked.

First is Masego.

Second is Theif's oaths.

Third is Larat.

Fourth has something to do with turning her body into munitions.

Fifth is the Winter Trap.

[DroughtBringer](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Go vote!

Hmm... Larat mentioned a Journey; I wonder what Cat experienced and if we'll get a flashback.

*Naeddyr*

Yeah! Whoo! Diplom the shit out of them, Cat!

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Diplom? Seriously? Are you TRYING to prevent communication from taking place? Well at least you didn't call her Kat or Chat

*Jane*

Doesn't everyone know the proper nickname for Catherine is Dog?

*Naeddyr*

Oh fuck off, no one likes you.

*nerferf*

Ack so the battle of camps continues

What are the odds and implications if the heroes off the nobles and take the army for themselves?

After this i dont think any cool heads among the heroes can keep the peace in regards to the more hotheaded ones

Would be interesting to see the heroes reaction to how aku was waving so much power about, getting humuitated like this when promised and epic battle is not going to go over well

*Cicero*

Pilgrim would never stand for that. As powerful as the Regicide is, the Pilgrim is clearly the boss of the heroes.

At most... maybe the Mirror Knight and the Spear would side with the Saint over the Pilgrim. The rest will side with the Pilgrim.

Just not happening.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Unless the Pilgrim snaps. Everybody is so sure Saint will do it it has a narrative weight of twist to it if Pilgrim is the one who just can't abide it. Because of the Sunken costs.

Things have already gone so bad but if he lets the "punishment" of past sins win, surely that punishment will grow all the worse, and Procer will feel it most of all. So he invokes the story of damning himself to get the job done, going against orders to finish the job. Of course, since Cat is playing the role of hero, he's the treacherous one violating truce and suddenly far more vulnerable.

*nerferf*

Aye i can see that,

Pilgrim is the only one willing to talk peace when the others already thought cat was full of it and was just lying

Him noticing the changes when aku was in control seems to make him more willing to just kill cat given how he barely even tried to stop saint here

Pilgrim seems to be in confused and lost when he tried to reach cats eyes as he doesn't have a clue what is going on anymore and when the mentor got no clue then the other hero just to decide usually

*daniel young*

Also it's never wise to break oaths with fae

*eh*

Has Cat really been all that villainous? Her overarching story is a rise from tragically orphaned orphan, to pit fighter, to misguided protege of a monster, to vaguely benevolent ice queen. She had a tragic and violent past, she had bad influences, she hasn't had a kick the dog moment worse than crucifying some naughty mercenaries and turning a war criminal into a fashion statement, most of the heroes are cowardly idiots, Squire/Thief/Hunter (and maybe Hierophant/Adjutant) aren't strictly evil Names, she's thrice offered terms to enemies that are out for her blood in order to save lives, everyone from Akua to the Grey Pilgrim believes her story has core heroic components, and she's literally an ice queen ready to have her heart thawed.

She's ideally placed for a redemption arc, and with the break from the tower and from Black she's arguably already a budding antihero. Pilgrim will presumably notice this before he tries to murder her, and avoid a story where his side are arrogant betrayers acting from a sense of misbegotten superiority.

*Lucas*

She started a war so she could ride in ranks.

*Oshi*

For which she suffered deeply and mutilated her soul/  
led to the death of 100k people she was trying to save,

[cheeseyme1999](#)

yes and no. On one hand she is indeed being heroic by our standards, but in this universe good and hero both apply to followers of the gods above, not actually being good/heroic. Cat opposes the gods above, she is automatically a villain and it's the villain's set of tropes that apply to her.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

If the Grey Pilgrim is to be believed, then yes, simply by being a Below-oriented head of state, Cat is actively spreading Evil, corrupting her people by drawing out their Evil tendencies (sort of like how the US gets Trump and suddenly America is evil and racist. Cat's supernatural

Evil influence will probably be slower and more subtle, you know, so it's believable).

Personally, I suspect Grey is right, but not quite in the way he thinks. I predict the spreading "corruption" will turn out to be neutral or more likely beneficial for the common people. Maybe mastering this "leader effect" was originally Black and/or Malicia's intended endgame (pure speculation)

*RanVor*

Except in US's case, it's the reverse. Trump was elected \*because\* America is "evil and racist", as you put it.

*David K. Storrs*

The large majority of us are not; he lost the popular vote by more than any President in history. Unfortunately, what Americans \*actually\* want doesn't matter in an election, because we have the electoral college, this historical artifact that was literally created to disenfranchise the majority. If 39,000 votes in 3 swing states had gone the other way, Trump wouldn't be our Baboon in Chief.

Even beyond that, it seems like the majority of people who voted for him did so either because (a) they wanted a conservative Supreme Court justice and were willing to trade all the damage that Trump would do to our nation and our reputation in order to get it or (b) they bought into the smear campaign that the Republicans have been running against Clinton for 20 years.

Yes, the racists all voted for him, but please believe that they are far from a majority here.

*Abrakadabra*

You also delude yourself. Clingon is actually evil, turncoat, and incompetent.

*Abrakadabra*

Dont delude yourself. Murica was always evil and racist.  
P

[sengachi](#)

She crucified hundreds of people to send a message.

*Decius*

If the heroes take over, the diplomatic part of the war is over and a Red Skies style gambit is on the table.

*Dainpdf*

Still a bad sort of gambit to throw huge sorcery at heroes on the nett of days.

*HiggsUnbound*

Im interested too.

I'm concerned actually, heroes tend to get more powerful every time they get beaten up and survive to walk away, that means every time Cat allows this the danger grows.

It really has to stop.

*Brilliant idea*

Ah, but if we look at her history, so does Cat

*HiggsUnbound*

True. But Cat is... She's the protagonist. The rules simply don't work the same for her. She upsets the normal rules.

[Aaron Wagner](#)

Wow, just wow.

*Big Brother*

Pilgrim and Saint can sod off. I cannot wait for them to pass into dust.

*1queenofblades1*

If that happens, then truly Thanos will have done nothing wrong...

*SnacShac*

r/unexpectedthanos, perfectly balanced... as all things should be

*Jimbo*

Man, this is not enough to satisfy my fix.

*LM*

Well this was definitely not the climax the story was trending towards.

I understand the perspective of the generals calling truce, but I would think that thematically the Gods wouldn't let this stand. This is the third confrontation, and the third draw.

[wyaldriddler](#)

I also think it is the third time Cat has offered peace, though I'm not sure.

*Jonnnney*

The gods above can satiate their boodlust elsewhere

[wyaldriddler](#)

Also I just want to comment on how Cat is NOT a morning person apparently. Cause damn, she woke up angry.

*Misterspokes*

She woke up in the middle of a battle with winter raging through her, she's ready to kill and actively suppressing it...

*tbarim*

It's like waking up to find squirrels in your kitchen. It doesn't matter how good you slept, it's going to be a bad day.

*thegreatfeed*

Loved this. She just went over the heroes heads to what really matters, logistics and mortal men. Of course all is gonna be fucked up by the pilgrim calling on Malaza's oath, but good try nevertheless.

[wyaldriddler](#)

If he does use that oath, things are going to get fucked so fast everyone will be laid up with broken spines.

And he probably knows it too, since it pisses all over the character he has established for himself in this story so far by slamming full speed into his flaws.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Especially since Cat is a Fae and they just made a bargain about negotiations and truce.

*Lucas*

What path is this? Can you tell me in what chapter it appears?

*thegreatfeed*

You mean the oath? It's on the first kaleidoscope, or maybe the second. Right after the lake drop.

*Jane*

If he does that... That's going to break the story *hard*. Not "The Practical Guide to Evil", to be clear, but the whole story of the Crusade – a Hero cruelly calling on a debt owed to march the Crusader army to their certain deaths, after peace had been reached? That's a total Villain move, and the kind that ends *harshly* for the Villain in question.

It doesn't really seem in keeping with Pilgrim's character, but it's not out of the question. If he does it, though? That would backlash *severely*.

*Dainpdf*

It can be a Hero move, but only for William's sort. Not the Pilgrim. He's a savior, not the one who sends people to glorious death in battle.

[shieldredblog](#)

Ya, William's whole calling down and Angel of Contrition to make a suicide army trick, was in fact copied from a Crusade. One that failed to do more than annoy the Dead King.

*Dainpdf*

His move was actually an attempt to call down a Crusade. But hey, Praes is a softer target than the Kingdom of the Dead... We thought, until we found out about the classified protocols.

*Veryconfused*

I think cat underestimated the value she was giving up in feeding the enemy.

These negotiations, if they work, would mean either A) an end to the crusade, or B) black is dead. Procer cant lead a crusade if its hosts either surrendered or were defeated. No one else would join the cause.

The enemy army had pretty much no food last night, and likely didnt have any food this morning. Her army is well fed. Both armies have been standing in full armor for most of the morning, but a hungry man tires faster than a full man, by the time the dead had died again, Procers army would be practically useless, even the portions that had nearly been standing opposed to cats

army. And while cat might not be able to go toe-toe with 10ish heros, cats army can.

It seems likely Juniper was pulling something similar to hannibal at Trebia, let the enemy army exhaust themselves/freeze/starve, while yours is still ready and capable, and on your own terms, crush them.

The taking hours for the front to collapse is highly unlikely, especially with the fae back in the picture and their ability to jump around, get a few key positions undone, engage the maximum number of troops, and let the starvation exhaust them.

Cat could have just jumped around with her gates and the fay + whatever little calvery she had left, hitting where the heros arent, and collapse Procer's army.

Heiropant is not equal to feeding the entire army.

I am kind of unimpressed with Cat's plan, her disregard for the incredible staff she's built, and refusal to investigate what was presently going on.

*Soifon*

Remember that Juniper didnt want to retreat because they didnt have gates without Cat. Now that they have they can leave very fast, burn everything behind them and come back with help from the Duchess

*Veryconfused*

True, but like, do they even need to? their army may be decimated, but so long as they are on site, the enemy army is going to be weaker by the hour. Hungry men do fight well, and unless gray pilgrim is even more overpowered than implied, hero cant be everywhere at once, most of the enemy army will be likely falling over from exhaustion before Juniper even initiates contact.

*Faiir*

Didn't Akua use 'feeding of the enemy' as a source of power, twice?

[daegone823](#)

You guys are forgetting rule number one when facing heroes. If things look like they will go in your favor then you should retreat. Remember Black and Hano when victory was in his grasp it was the worst moment war in Calernia is not just 2D, 3D, its 4D (names tip the scale every time).



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Oh, yeah, if Malanza decides not to pay, then Catherine can just retrieve the supplies eaten and have a few thousand crusaders dead/weakened instantly.

[sengachi](#)

Also Cat's a fae now. They've got a whole thing about taking food without paying for it, to say nothing of breaking bargains.

I get the feeling that bargaining with a fae Queen for food and then stiffing her is a quick trip to a very bad place.

*Morgenstern*

You're forgetting that Juniper already mentions that the Army of Callow is at the point where every single death makes it noticeably a lot less efficient and the losses are ones that will be felt for YEARS. So, if Cat wants the long-term plan, she's doing exactly the thing she has to, just like with all the negotiations and not killing off too many of the enemy host (if based on the wrong assumption that peace CAN be had and on more or less her terms, somehow).

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Remember that Cat's ideal victory condition is not destroying this army, but forcing it's withdrawal. Your plan seems plausible. But it's not what she wants.

*Jane*

While I do agree, it was a necessary concession; Malanza knows how precarious a position her lack of supplies puts her in, and wouldn't risk Cat just drawing things out until the army is dead of starvation.

That said, the Crusaders have lacked food for several days – they're still going to be pretty weakened if they only get a single meal out of this. And if Cat wants to play hardball, she can give them a half-rations worth of food each, to fulfill the terms of their bargain while still keeping the army on the brink. If she was especially unscrupulous (and she won't be, because it would blow up the negotiations, drugs don't actually work this way, and they don't have the right supplies regardless), she'd dose the food with a light sedative so that they'd still be groggy and weakened if it can't blow.

What I *would* do, if I was her, though? Be sure to give them a generous amount of wine as part of the supplies. The Crusaders

are going to need some heavy drinking after the last two days, and truce talks encourage soldiers to rash celebration. It'd look like kindness, but it'd be a good edge if talks broke down.

I am kind of unimpressed with Cat's plan, her disregard for the incredible staff she's built, and refusal to investigate what was presently going on.

Yeah, it was the right call, but... Mostly because Cat has good instincts. It was pretty weak evidence to base her decision on, and I don't know that it would have taken much to have had a quick talk with Juniper before doing anything – her Pegasus is pretty fast, and nigh-unstoppable.

Still, forcing her way to Malanza's tent may well have been a then-or-never moment; who knows how long the other heroes would have stayed put, after Cat quit the fight.

[poignardazur](#)

Uh. That *\*is\** deviously clever. (Malanza could just not distribute the wine, though)

*Dainpdf*

That would be terrible for morale if word got out. Unless some pretty great PR work was done (say, convincing people it is poisoned).

*Dainpdf*

She needed to seize the momentum, and finish this battle while her army is still in salvageable condition. Yes, she could win this battle, but the gains for her are negligible or actually negative when compared to them retreating, and the costs might be prohibitive – they can't afford any more losses, and every second this war goes on is a chance some Hero will get lucky and take her down.

*HiggsUnbound*

That's a devious and effective plot, "giving the wine".

However, pretty sure clerics and especially Pilgrim with his waves of light can mass-detox people.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah but then they've burnt healing power on a mass detox right before you hit them with all you've got (and we've seen very well how ugly that can get, with the Ashen Priestess).

*Author Unknown*

What I would do is give them a lot of rich food. The hope being that they would eat too much too fast, get sick, and vomit it back up. Then Cat will have fulfilled her part of the deal, but most of the Procer army wouldn't actually receive much nutrition. Plus Cat gets points for being generous.

[donforrester456](#)

As a diabetic, I can appreciate this strategy. Give the Crusade enough cake and ice cream to *\*destroy them\**.

*Jane*

Hm... Things might have been much better for Cat if Akua had waited five more minutes to call her back... No doubt Akua could have dealt with a few of the younger heroes, who are certainly going to be obnoxious even if this truce holds. Killing them in clean battle would no doubt be demoralizing for the Crusade, without causing the sort of diplomatic issues that Cat fears – while they are potent war assets, they are not, in the end, *Proceran*, for the most part. And those that are, aren't nobility.

But, eh, that's how Juniper would look at the field, not Cat. Peace is the goal, not breaking the Crusade's war potential.

Also a pity that she has no idea as to what happened while she was "gone", not that she had any reason to. I doubt she's going to trust Akua's description of what happened in the fight, and there was no one else close enough to corroborate her story – Archer might have great vision, but too much of the fight took place in ways that obscured her vision.

I wonder, though... If Akua had held control for the entire day, how would the battle have gone? The plan seemed fairly sound, from what we saw. Could the Army of Callow have forced a military victory without losing too many soldiers? A single unstoppable villain against a party of heroes also *sounds* like a recipe for a loss, but could Akua playing the "hero" have given her the narrative weight to pull it off? She didn't have to win after all, just keep the heroes occupied until the dead army did their job – a single champion holding against impossible odds is a powerful story in its own right, especially in the hands of Callow.

Of course, from a diplomatic perspective, staying her hand in her moment of victory *probably* gives her more credibility than annihilating the enemy army, but... Well, breaking the army past repair *here* probably offers her more security. A neighbor as devastated as Callow is is a neighbor that can't find a pretext

to wage war on her for a decade, assuming the rest of the Crusader army is still strong enough to weaken Black and Malicia.

Though... Hm... While it wasn't a bad call, I wonder if it was really a good idea to make a decision this important without having talked to anyone who knows the current condition of the relative armies? I mean, she didn't *really* have much idea as to whether they were on the brink of complete victory or utter defeat. Though she does have good instincts, and correctly read the implications of the field.

As a final observation... I get the feeling that Cat forcing the Saint to put down her sword by order of Malanza probably earned them both her eternal hatred in a way that even having party wiped the Heroes (sans Pilgrim) wouldn't have. Being forced to compromise with Evil seems like the one thing she absolutely won't forgive.

/end first impressions.

*Dainpdf*

I agree on the "not talking" point, though things were somewhat rushed at that point, and she read the situation fairly well. As for killing more heroes... The "lone champion holding the line" story tends to end badly for the champion themselves, plus there's the inverse ninja principle. Not to mention the Saint barely tolerated negotiations as is, and who knows how far the Pilgrim can be pushed before he stops being the voice of reason.

*MetruX*

Actually we already got glimpses that the Pilgrim is NOT as he seems in personality, this is kind of a facade, making him more credible to others, and Saint is in the knows. So, he stopping being the voice of reason could be pretty easy, after all.

About the lone champion you're right, the story, for heroes, is usually that they defeat everyone, but end up dead together, as a last sacrifice.

*Dainpdf*

What? Where did we get that?

We got the Saint actually displaying a form of hero worship for him, and threatening people if they disappointed him because she knows he'd do nothing of the sort.

*Cicero*

Hmmm... well since it's clear that Cat has no memory or knowledge of what has been happening while she was out (not even recognizing that Auka was loyal and did not fall into her trap) this does make perfect sense for her. Get a truce so she can determine what is happening, reconsolidate her power, and prepare for the next conflict. Either a negotiated peace (unlikely) or a renewal of battle on more favorable terms.

Although... the existing tide of battle probably favored the Army of Callow. If Cat had kept the heroes busy – but obviously Cat doesn't have the right fighting style to handle the Saint and Pilgrim. So maybe this was the best choice after all.

And here I was taking odds on which heroes would survive the battle with Cat.

Not what I expected.

*Dainpdf*

I was so sure at least the Mirror Knight would fall... His "grow stronger" gimmick is a huge death flag.

*MetruX*

Maybe not necessarily? Imagine that he ends up leaving and respecting Cat, despite she being a Villain. Then, years later, at the end of the last book, they meet again, and he asks if she is ready. She just sighs or smiles and says it's been enough. He kills her after she completed what was needed, and the story ends.

It's not a bad ending, and he could even be the one to keep around to make sure Callow stays free.

*Dainpdf*

A non Callowan hero? Surely not. Also, he was introduced way too late for us to have that sort of ending, without a whole lot of development time spent on him.  
It's possible, but I doubt it.

*Ein*

Akua was doing the whole epic battle thing and looking a proper badass. All she managed to do was to tire out some heroes.

Cath wakes up, and within a few minutes has the enemy in surrender talks, with Pilgrim and Crazy Sword Lady completely shut down and the other heroes made irrelevant. All without raising her blade.

*RoflCat*

To be fair, Akua could've gone further and probably might even win (her story here is of the ruler waking up in time of crisis and facing off the invaders, a heroic one), but then she realized the path to bringing Cat back and chose that instead.

Which make me a little sad that Cat wakes up without any knowledge of that, I'd love to hear her reaction once she learned that Akua didn't go nuts and trigger the Winter Trap, she knew the trap was there and chose to trigger it as a sign of her loyalty.

*RanVor*

She probably wouldn't believe.

*Jane*

I think she can compel honesty from Akua, though? Akua can give a weasel answer, but if she forthrightly says she realized how to bring Cat back, and chose to do so, Cat will know it's the truth.

That doesn't mean she'll *accept* that truth, choosing instead to believe it's in furtherance of some scheme, or that she just doesn't see how the truth is being twisted, and it's entirely possible she'll never ask a relevant question to begin with, but if she *does* ask, she'll most likely at least trust the broad outline of what actually happened.

*RanVor*

Well, it *\*was\** in furtherance of a scheme. That doesn't mean Akua doesn't intend to serve Cat loyally, at least until she gets put in a position of power again, which might as well be never.

*MetruX*

You forget about another part of the Praes way. If you can't have the power, you set things up so your descendants can. She has none now, but who says she can't have some later? Lack of a body, what's that? Is it tasty?

*Decius*

Not surrender. Withdraw.

*HiggsUnbound*

At the same time, it's difficult to dispute that Akua clearly is the more skilled bearer of Winters Mantle. She made those heroes, even saint, look like chumps.

Cat is far below her potential, if she could master winter as Akua did... Damn, I'd place her equal to the Calamities. A few of them anyway.

*MetruX*

The problem is not her prowess or power. Remember that since the beginning we've been told that the Calamities are actually weak for Villains. Villains tend to have the upper hand in raw power against Heroes. But they still loose. Every. Single. Time. And Akua is just like those losing Villains, using full incredible power, that still leads to their end...

*Antoninjohn*

Heroes don't compromise and they have brainwashing powers, Cat needs to rebuild Callow and break it's story of been invaded, she's immortal so she can grow stronger and take over Calerina in a century or two instead of with a rebuilding nation, through she might have to end up casting a mighty spell to place Callow in the lands of Arcadia more a century then come into creation 10 minutes later

*Dainpdf*

All villains are sort of immortal. Thing is, eventually a hero gets all of them. I don't think planning on the premise of living forever is sound.

*Dylan Tullos*

Antoninjohn:

"Taking over Calernia" is a terrible plan. You end up fighting the entire continent and losing.

*RanVor*

Well, there was one who fought the entire continent and won.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Triumphant did fight the entire continent and win.

Then she ended up fighting two foreign empires while Calernia rose in rebellion. That didn't go so well.

The problem with grand plans of conquest is that you just end up stretching your forces thinner and thinner while making more powerful enemies. Triumphant conquered Calernia, but she fell within twenty years, and she destroyed Praes

for a generation. There's a reason the Praesi say "may she never return".

*Antoninjohn*

Callow was taken over, and kept and the idea was she tricks the Heroes into breaking a ritual to prevent beings in the Hells into calling back Dread Empress Triumphant turning the story from Good and Evil to Cat being the lesser evil, sacrifice all the people who will die from Triumphant in order to keep Calriena under control

*Forrest*

Now, see, I would love to see the heroes reactions after all this. They just got toyed with in battle, and they then get humiliated by truce. I would love to see their take on things after that. But- We just had six interlude chapters. Six of them. Honestly, that probably had more than a little bit to do with how many of us were frustrated about Akua showing back up as a major piece again.

Either which way, glad to see Cat is back and being rational about her approach. Too bad she can't seem to remember what she did in combat when Akua was running things. Alas.

*Rook*

It's the right decision, she's fighting the right battle.

If she finishes the fight against Procer then she wins the battle and loses the war. As far as Callow is concerned, minimizing casualties is what's important right now, not bleeding yourself for the satisfaction of cleaving into the crusade's forces. As far as the Gods Above and Below are concerned? you're already playing into their hand if the conflict is ongoing, and they're half the problem in the first place.

If they wanted to just kill the leadership, they could've used absolute positioning to open a faerie gate two inches above Malanza's head and poured a cup of goblinfire through it. Or hell, pop up a bigger one above the gathering of non-named commanders and just have Archer shoot them all before anyone can even figure out what's happening. Named interference could be neutralized as easily as waiting for them to take the field in the frontlines and striking while the Pilgrim is temporarily anchored after showing himself to save a baby Hero.

The point was never to kill them in the first place, the point was to avoid killing each other. It's a very intentional choice, and it's honestly the better one at the moment.

*Dainpdf*



Gotta scry the general for that, and that's not happening with all the priests running around. Plus the Pilgrim would probably pull something out of his... sleeves and save her.

*Oshi*

In that case probably not as much of an issue as you think. Equate the gates and dropping fire to modern satellite imaging and carpet bombing.

*Dainpdf*

But they actually mentioned it was a problem a couple chapters ago. It's why Cat had to rely on the maneuver with the Watch scrying home to invade the enemy camp. Because she couldn't scry into their camp and therefore couldn't open gates in there normally.

*Cicero*

Remember that Cat is under orders not to kill the two leaders

*MetruX*

You really think she worries about those orders right now? She's more predisposed to rip Malicia apart than hear her out. She will only keep to it as much as it favours her own plans.

*WuseMajor*

Ok, I get that there are times when you need to make a stand against the darkness, but when the Evil Queen has offered peace talks a bunch of times and worked really, really hard on getting the first version of the local equivalent of the Geneva Convention installed before your fight, it seems like it might be worth considering that you might not be on the correct side here.

Ok, sure it might be a trick to, ya know, ambush the opposing military commanders or poison everyone, but it's still worth considering that you might be a self-righteous ass instead of a decent human being.

[\*ahd\*](#)

The Heavens will it.

Once you start wondering whether the Heavens should be obeyed, you stop being the Grey Pilgrim and start being, well.

*Rook*

Correct. A soldier's duty is to follow orders, not question if they make sense. If your commanding officer tells you to mop up the rain, you stand in the rain and mop it up

In this sense the Heroes are doing an outstanding job of what the Gods above recruited them for. Same goes for Villains and the Gods Below. It's not a coincidence that the overwhelming majority of Names and Aspects on both sides of the fence are innately combat-oriented.

The fundamental misconception that Catherine has – one which Akua understands perfectly, ironically enough – is that she thinks the Heroes are 'Saints' when they're actually 'Swords'. She's got the emphasis on the wrong part.

*Dainpdf*

From what I got from the Pilgrim, a villain like Cat is somewhat akin to a Demon, though on a lesser scale. Even if she just sits there, doing absolutely nothing, her mere presence (especially in a position of power) is enough to spread the influence of the Gods Below. And honestly? While I can't really recommend the Good nations we've seen (Procer and Ashur chief amongst them), Praes and Helike, let alone the Kingdom of the Dead, are not places you want anywhere to turn into.

*Dainpdf*

Essentially, from their point of view, they're waging a war to get to a lot of radioactive waste that is all over the place. Yes, war is terrible, but the waste will cause more damage long term. At least that's what they believe.

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

From that perspective, Cat's peace deal is basically saying "Go home so I can turn Callow into a radioactive wasteland as bad as Praes."

Even if they didn't care about Callow at all, that deal wouldn't work, because Procer would be right next to a radioactive wasteland of Evil. Either they win this here and now, or they'll end up with Praes and Callow as one big Dread Empire on their borders. If they don't want devils and demons swarming into the Principate every time a Dread Emperor/ess decides to have some fun, the Crusaders need to break the Empire and restore Callow to the side of Good.

Catherine refuses to understand this because she rejects any worldview that conflicts with her own.

*Dainpdf*

Being Evil doesn't mean Callow and Praes have to stay allies... But battles between Evil sides tend to involve devils, demons, and whatnot.

What Cat is asking here is really quite a lot. She's asking them to condemn Callow and everyone in it to Evil, on the vain hope that they'll somehow be able to take it back some time in the future.

*Rook*

They 'condemned Callow to evil' for decades on end under Praes in the first place. They're here now because of political convenience, not because they're so horrified at the idea of callow being ruled by a Villain.

What happened in the last few months that made it so much worse than Malicia and Black being the rulers for years and years? The fledgling Villain who's so shit at being a bad guy that Akua considers her to be more of a Hero is unacceptable, but two of the most notorious Villains in recent memory – the literal boogeymen under Calernia's bed – are no big deal?

She really isn't asking them for much, really. The message is 'go back to failing to do your job like you have been for an entire generation worth of time, because I'm making it politically inconvenient for you again'

[hoyboy](#)

Ummm... Procer has been dealing with a civil war for the past thirty years, this is like blaming someone for not running into the burning house next door to save people because they're busy trying to prevent a home invader from stabbing them.

*Rook*

Um, the named who are claiming a villainous ruler to be the just cause for the crusade aren't proceran military officers or even proceran at all. For the non-named it's been explicitly spelled out through Cordelia & Co POV chapters that this is just a political war to give Procer a common enemy and shore up their own strength, not one of morals.

It was The Pilgrim himself who admitted in no uncertain terms during the initial talks, that it was their failure to only march on Callow when it was too late, and only then out of fear.

So blaming them for not saving Callow earlier is like blaming a criminal for their crimes when said criminal explicitly admits to it, and hard proof exists in the form of omniscient narrative exposition.

*Dylan Tullos*

Rook:

What you're saying is true, but that's all the more reason why they should act now. They failed to protect Callow from conquest due to their own selfishness, and it's time for them to earn some measure of redemption by crushing the Black Queen and restoring Callow to the side of Good.

The Good nations of Calernia are definitely guilty; the Tenth Crusade is about them admitting their guilt and trying to do better. They're finally uniting under the banner of a holy war to fight Evil, like they should have done from the start.

*Rook*

Except for the part where they're insisting on breaking themselves against the Black Queen who is both planning to abdicate as well as offering safe passage through to Praes, using a shortcut that can ferry the entire army across.

The point of contention has been that she plans to abdicate to a Callowan Ruler and keep the nation intact, instead of having the nation carved up like a pie to be ruled by the Principiate which kills their own people more than anyone else.

They're uniting under the banner to get her off the throne a few years earlier and kill tens of thousands in the process, after doing nothing for decades. Meanwhile the greatest villains of the century seated on a throne of a historically evil nation, who were directly responsible for creating both the Black Queen and the Hellgate are, uh, secondary concerns. I guess.

*Dylan Tullos*

Rook:

Grey Pilgrim isn't Proceran, and the Saint is famous for killing a Prince. These are not people

who care about the secular ambitions of the Principate.

They're turning the deal down because leaving Catherine on the throne risks Callow becoming an Evil nation. If they go Evil, then there's nothing to stop Praes when it inevitably rebuilds, just like it did after the First Crusade.

Calernia needs Callow to be the guardian of Good, to stand against the darkness. If Practical Evil reshapes Callow, then there's no guarantee that they won't ally with Praes next time the Dread Empire comes looking for conquests.

Whatever the princes think, this isn't about carving Callow up. It's about ensuring that Callow returns to the cause of Good, rather than becoming an Evil nation and possible ally of Praes. In the long term, an Evil Callow is more dangerous than any demon or Hellgate, because they're the people that the rest of Calernia relies on to stop the Villains.

Malicia doesn't have an active Hellgate, and Praes is already lost to Evil. The long-term goal here is to throw Praes back to their previous borders and restore Callow, and that means removing a Villainous ruler who is turning her nation Evil. Grey Pilgrim explicitly says this to Cat, but she ignores him because she wants to magically make Good and Evil go away.

Reality doesn't work like that. Good and Evil are real, and Callow has to pick a side. Catherine chose...poorly.

*grzecho2222*

Exept for the fact that Callow is turning Evil because all their allies abandoned them, they had three wars in last years and now when finally they are free and under competent ruler and want to be left alone to rebuild their country, this exact moment their Good allies attact them, want to kill their queen and take appart their lands, while acting like arrogant jerks and blabbering how Good and proper they are

[shieldredblog](#)

The people of Praes live under Evil sorcerer kings that fertilize thoe fields woth blood and love

summoning Demons. The high lords kill each other constantly and routinely raise the dead.

Procer is worse than that.

Being sacrificed to feed your family is probably a lot more fun than watching your family starve to death because your rulers are renowned elitist aristocrats. Procer has had more civil wars than Praes as well.

You seem to be distracted by the flamboyant nature of Evil. Mundane evil is always worse than the flashy stuff and Procer is as guilty of that as anyone. Heroes don't prevent starvation or deliver firewood during cold winters. They just kill what their told.

*Dylan Tullos*

shieldredblog:

You make excellent points. We've seen how often the Princes fight their Good neighbors or each other, and while Ashur might be less violent, their society is even more static and oppressive. These Good societies aren't actually good, and Heroes should be opposed to tyrannical Princes as well as cackling Tyrants or scheming High Ladies.

I guess the only real answer is that the High Lords and Ladies do all the mundane evil stuff in addition to the demon-summoning and necromancy. There is plenty of starvation, oppression, and general awfulness in Procer as well as Praes. It's just that only Praes has the mass sacrifices and evil rituals.

So if everyone is ruled by selfish, uncaring aristocrats, I think Heroes are right to prioritize the murderous elitists who warp the very fabric of reality with their unholy powers. They're all baddies, but some baddies have access to really nasty powers.

Entirely in agreement that Heroes need to spend some time helping Good societies actually be good. If Heroes did more work to build a better world when they weren't punching demons in the face, Calernia would be a much nicer place to live.

[hoyboy](#)

That's not how societies work. The cornerstone of any state is being able to make sure that the populace using it's labor to produce food and

goods are themselves at the bare minimum fed enough to do labor in the first place. Even under it's most brutal conditions feudalism still operated under this basic social contract. Starvation didn't tend to happen just because the overlords were meanies, it happened due to environmental factors such as blights and disruptions such as wars.

If a society does let lots of people starve, like for instance if the labor of large swathes of the population aren't needed, they tend to start getting their torches and pitchforks out. Quite simply, if Procer was as dire as you say it must be, then Procer wouldn't exist. It wouldn't have the strength to hold itself together as a federation, would be torn apart by constant rebellion, and absolutely would not have the available manpower to send tens of thousands of people into a war.

Meanwhile there's nothing stopping Praes from having poverty and starvation as well, it explicitly used invading Callow as an excuse to send surplus populations to die in pointless imperialist war so they'd have less mouths to feed. That's pretty fucking mundane evil if I do say so.

[shieldredblog](#)

hoyboy:

Except we know at least half a dozen Dread Emperors tried to avoid that exact scenario and were killed by the Narrative. (One tried to kick start a industrial revolution.)

The Black Knight didn't invade Callow because he wanted his own Kingdom, he knew the Gods would replace him if he didn't.

As long as Praes and Callow exist as independent countries, they have to fight. At least until the Narrative changes.

*Dainpdf*

You may recall the Calamities have been hard at work precisely delaying the forces of Good from being able to assemble to do precisely what they're doing. It's not like they've been sitting on their thumbs for decades.

And the Saint or the Pilgrim moving alone wouldn't do that much – they're not the only powerful ones around,

and they're somewhat kept in check by the powerful evil Named.

*RanVor*

Catherine refuses to understand this because she doesn't give a shit about Procer. She does, however, give a major shit about Callow, which has been a victim of the Good Vs. Evil pissing contest since forever. And she's hell-bent on changing that. And the first step to changing that is not allowing Procer to conquer it.

[shieldredblog](#)

Also the quality of life under Praes has increased. Meanwhile Procer is one of the most repressive and elitist governments on the entire planet. Their peasants are kept poor and uneducated and used as fodder in their endless civil wars.

*RanVor*

Hellgates aside, Procer isn't that much different from Praes – a giant empire constantly terrorizing its neighbors, filled to brim with scheming, backstabbing nobles who treat their people like shit.

*Novice*

You just described Praes. High Lords, remember?

*RanVor*

Yes, I meant to do that. My point is that under all the facades, Procer and Praes are actually very similar.

*RanVor*

Sorry, I read it wrong.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Where the whole "clean-up" argument falls down, though is... they all sat back and let Chernobyl happen 20 years ago, and only *now* do they think about carting in cement.

If Evil is like radiation, then fine: going in when everything is super-hot is a Bad Idea. But, they don't view it that way; they think of it as the contamination getting stronger over time, rather than "boom then gradually fade"..



Yet, 20 years. And, only now a Crusade. And treating everybody in Callow as Evil, even though most still look to the Houses of Light.

I know the Calamities are scary, but *damn*, The Heavens are as much responsible for what Callow is turning into as Black is... because they piddled about raising narrative drive, while not caring about the people on the ground In any way but the most tenuous abstracts. Oh, and decided that Evil leadership meant All Callow Evil Because Standard Haphazard Insurrection Procedures Failed: Cleanse From Without.

[vuthuha912](#)

But does a country really turn that toxic with Evil influence? We are seeing Cordelia throwing peasants at the Crusade to have fewer mouths to feed. The prince of Procer is as treacherous as a Praesi noble. They aren't even seeing the other side as human. It is in human nature to be evil. Praying in the house of Light doesn't stop you from being cruel or racist or sexist or elitist. Human can be awful regardless of race, gender, and religion.

Cordelia and Black are quite close in terms of philosophy and motives. She just choose politics instead of military means. Everyone in this conflict is fighting with underhand tactics but for really good reasons. Black doesn't want his country to wipe out, Cat wants independence, and Cordelia wants to unite her nations. They can't negotiate so they keep on fighting. Make no mistake, Cordelia will kill as many as she needs to defeat the others. She is not that much greater of a person than Cat or Black. Cat, Black, and Cordelia are working in the moral framework of a typical medieval ruler. They are even better people than medieval rulers since they actually do their job for patriotism and are not motivated by personal like several assholes I can think of. No one is building a lake of alcohol or filling their tomb with gold or forcing people to be buried alive to keep them company in the afterlife or violating widows or burying servants of defeated enemies. They also don't think of killing every civilian in a city as a necessary warning/ deterrent for the other sides or as some sort of revenge for the governors. They don't even try to kill their siblings for power and all of their descendants to avoid a rebellion.

And you may remember the reason Tyrant becomes Tyrant is because he doesn't mind dying – he is destined to die and no amount of praying was going to change that. Then he said fuck it and make a huge mess everywhere. Praes is what happens when an entire nation falls to the same type

of hopelessness – they said fuck it and drag everybody down. It is a vicious cycle that keep Praes down: Desperation -> crazy shit -> a pattern -> shittier situation -> crazier shit -> deeper pattern... It is cocaine at this point. Getting rid of cocaine is just the first step, rehab is the step that people keep on skipping. Cordelia's dream while tempting is still not addressing the root cause of the problem – Stupid Evil. Even if Black failed in his attempts to stop Evil from being as destructive, he is not wrong in his assessment of Evil and its effect on both the society it rules and the one next to it. Society can only move as fast as the slowest person. Evil, more specifically Praes need to change so that everyone on the continent can be safe. Well, keep killing Evil Names aren't the way – it is proven by the current state of the continent. The Crusade that occupied Praes aren't able to contain it for long. I also don't see the cleansing effect that Good had on Praes. Reforms and diplomatic solutions are probably the solutions, maybe. Praes is not an easy mold to break and more importantly, Praes need to want to change and not force by outsiders

*WuseMajor*

Incidentally, my perception of the end game this story is leading to is "Cat climbs the tower, throws Malicia off of it, and becomes the Dread Queen, Crowned in Woe, Anointed by Winter, Ruler of Praes and Callow and possibly Procer. And maybe she gets a few things done before becoming the End Boss to the Five Man Band of heroes, forged in this crucible of War."

My expectation of the actual end game this story will head to is either "Cat manages to beat enough people over the head with a stick, brings them to the negotiating table and forces through her Accords, then takes Archer off to go see the world," or "Cat gets so DONE with everything she abdicates to the Pilgrim and fucks off to a beach."

[wyaldriddler](#)

A beach, in Arcadia. :V

*grzecho2222*

Cat brings beach with herself

[shieldredblog](#)

She Wins unconditionally and unlock a new Aspect.  
Lounge: Summons a Beach where Named cant bother you

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I feel like the final fight is with the Gnomes, whether she's become the Empress or not, but probably.

Cat is all about changing the status quo and progress. Narratively they are her ultimate enemy.

### *MetruX*

They are ONE OF the super powers in the world. Not the only one, neither the most important one. Really, for her story the Gnomes are simply a mention far away, it's kinda too hopeful thinking they are the end game enemies, since there are so much going on and this is still small scale for any of the big powers.

### *Silverking*

Dang it, Cat, you're supposed to wake up from your Winter nap with a Name or an Aspect, not just lost time! Although, perhaps Larat's mention of a "journey" might mean that there's something else going on.

As for the truce, I think it was probably the better of limited options. To paraphrase Quark from DS9, "Peace is cheapest when nobody's got a clear advantage." The crusaders were close to starvation, but there's always been so many more of them. The undead helped close the gap, but Cat seemed to think that actually pulling ahead would take time that the heroes wouldn't give them. Akua was having a ball toying with Winter's power, but as Black knows, Villains either need to get a decisive victory fast or pull out; delaying tactics wouldn't be narratively sustainable.

As for what to come next:

- Militarily, she needs Hierophant up and running to act as the "secret weapon" that would make Malanza think twice about further combat.

- Diplomatically, she needs the crusaders to consider her someone they can negotiate with. If oaths of righteous revenge come out, Cat loses even if she wins. In the short term, Callow can't withstand the full might of a crusading Praes. In the long term, a peace that only lasts until she's incapacitated or dead is not acceptable to her.

- Narratively, she needs a Hero to do something stupid and break some term of the truce. Divorcing the Heroes from the support of the army would be helpful, losing their (shaky) moral high ground would hurt, and...I'm not up on my mythology, breaking a promise with the Fae seems to be a thing that has "consequences."

### *Dainpdf*

I think Cat just wants to preserve as much strength as she can, though taking out one of the more clearly brash heroes gunning for her head wouldn't hurt.

*RanVor*

The Heroes must have been mighty confused when after wrecking them effortlessly the Black Queen suddenly turned her tail and run away.

I think Cat is giving up a certain advantage for an uncertain one. After all, she doesn't even know the state Masego is currently in. What is she going to do if she doesn't succeed in waking him up, go to negotiate with well-fed, well-rested and still overwhelmingly massive crusader army, and then negotiations fail? Malanza might not be so eager to treat when her soldiers aren't starving. Cat would lose every advantage she had and gain nothing in return. Well, I guess now that she has the fairy gates back, she can always run away. Not that it'd be helpful in the long run.

I'm kinda disappointed Cat doesn't remember how big a favor Akua has done her in the previous chapter, although maybe it's for the better. The Diabolist has become an incredibly useful tool, and that's exactly why relying on her now is more dangerous than ever before.

Overall, I can't help but feel this chapter is a bit of a letdown, but that's mainly because of incredibly high expectations the previous chapter has left me with. It also might have something to do with distinct lack of Akua in this one... Ok, I'm joking, but after Kaleidoscope VI I can't wait for her to make an appearance again.

Also, we lost the first place to Ward again. This is simply unacceptable.

*Dainpdf*

Small problem with the "certain advantage": it is narratively and logistically unfeasible.

Cat needs her army as intact as possible, and has very little to gain from running the score on a battle from which she just wants an enemy retreat. So it's in her interest to stop everything as soon as she can.

As for the actual fight with the heroes, a prolonged fight against multiple heroes is a complete crapshoot. Black would scoff at the very notion.

*RanVor*

What I'm asking about is what she's going to do if her plan fails (which is likely, considering it hinges on negotiating

with fanatics). As it stands, the Crusaders are going to crush her completely unless she succeeds in rebooting Masego \*and\* talking some sense into the Heroes, and both of these objectives are rather hard to achieve within the limits she has. And she just got rid of everything that might have helped her in case of failure.

*Dainpdf*

The people she'd be negotiating with (the nobles) aren't that fanatic about the cause. The Princess, in particular, has shown much concern about her troops.

As for what to do should negotiations break down, she seems pretty sure she could wake Masego up, and keeping up this fight would not actually help too much. Either she keeps distracting the heroes (at mounting risk of death) or they go turn the tides of the battle. And even should she somehow succeed on the former without the Saint turning her into sashimi, every soldier who dies now is a great loss for the Army of Callow. One it may not be able to afford.

*RanVor*

How can she be sure she'll be able to wake Masego? She only knows he's incapacitated because she figured it out from the battle. She hasn't seen him since the Pilgrim broke her gate. She doesn't even know for sure he's still alive.

I'm not saying she made a mistake. I'm not smart enough to predict every eventuality. I just think she's risking too much too lightly.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

You're right.

Catherine is taking big risks because she can't survive a Terriblic victory. Even if she wipes out the entire Crusading host at the cost of no more than three or four thousand of her own men, she can't afford that.

If Catherine is going to survive, she has to have enough of her army left to defeat the next wave of invaders. Unfortunately for her, that means she has to risk her entire force to avoid unacceptable losses, chancing a defeat to gain a less destructive victory.

*Dainpdf*

Masego probably walked her through the possible consequences of the working. It's part of why she was reluctant to use it.

So they probably planned for what to do in case it happened, and outlined the procedures for that situation.

I don't bet Cat would know how to wake Masego, but I bet he would have known and would have told her. That's the one explanation I have for her confidence.

*grzecho2222*

It was implied that Cat can appear in dreams

*Dainpdf*

Where?

*grzecho2222*

When she talks with Kegan she mentions something about haunting Kegan's nightmares if she wants

*Dainpdf*

Right. That sounded more like a thing she could do to Kegan right then, though, no? Place some sort of working on her that would give her terrible nightmares.

[superkeaton](#)

Cat is definitely over Pilgrim. She's genuinely attempting to make peace and end the war in good faith and he's still gunning for her, making him no better nor more useful than Saint.

*Dainpdf*

Might have something to do with her showing she's a pretty big threat, plus the repeated murder of his charges. But hey, he helped hold the Saint back.

*RanVor*

Which in turn might have something to do with his repeated attempts to kill Cat and ruin everything she stands for.

*Dainpdf*

Well, yes. It is a given that two sides at war will attempt to harm one another, and thus create ever more reasons to prolong the conflict. The cycle of hatred is a powerful thing.

*Dylan Tullos*

superkeaton:

She's trying to end the war in a way that leaves Evil in power in Callow. Her "peace" gives her more time to rebuild Callow, raise a larger army, and prepare to fight Good on more even terms.

Given the constant conflict between Good and Evil, why would it make any sense to make a peace now only to fight a stronger enemy later? An Evil Callow is a threat to all of its neighbors, and needs to be put down hard.

*RanVor*

Except we know that's not what she wants. She plans to rebuild Callow and abdicate, leaving the crown to someone who has enough sense not to get into another stupid war.

And if you stop thinking in Good/Evil terms, you'll see Procer is a much greater threat to its neighbors than Callow.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Anyone Catherine abdicated to would be either Evil themselves, or willing to work with the Evil people who command Callow's army. Ending their current war so that they can fight a bigger, harder war twenty years later...that's not a good plan.

Procer's Princes are terrible people. Evil creates Hellgates that summon armies of devils, and they're not scared of calling demons that maim the fabric of reality. Letting people like that live on your border is an invitation to having entire cities wiped out, like Liesse, whenever they decide to unleash their unholy sorceries.

Procer is a mundane threat that can be handled through mundane armies. Praes and Callow can access Calernia's equivalent of nuclear and biological weapons, while Procer has a bunch of people with pointy metal sticks. No matter how bad a neighbor Procer is, there won't ever be any Proceran Hellgates, while Akua Sahelian just showed everyone what Evil is capable of if they're left unchecked.

*RanVor*

Then why are you still reading? It's obvious the story isn't going to end the way you'd like it to.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Until Liesse, I would have agreed with you. But Practical Evil just lost hard, and the rest of the Continent is finally getting their act together.

I don't think the story's ending will be exactly what I want, but I'm still rooting for Cordelia, rather than the people who think that making deals with the Dread Empire is the way to go. That kind of plan cost Callow its second-largest city and more than two hundred thousand people.

Also, Akua is so much fun. I loved her attempt to think like Catherine.

*RanVor*

Well, for me it looks like you just declared that you hate all the main characters and want them to die. You know it's not going to happen, so there's no point in going on, in my opinion.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Are you so sure that the author won't kill off any main characters? I'm fairly sure at least some of them will die before they end.

Anyway, I don't dislike Hierophant, Adjutant, or Archer. I dislike Cat and (to a lesser extent) Thief for the absurd idea that the best way to do good is to join a foreign empire of ruthless militarists with a proud cultural heritage of demon-summoning and evil cackling. This is a bad plan, as they learned at Liesse.

Collaboration is a dumb choice. It's quite possible to free Callow and defeat Praes, and Callow was a lot better off fighting the Dread Empire than surrendering to their Evil overlords. Catherine's attempts to rationalize her actions as protecting Callow have failed, and she's turned the southern third of her country into a refugee camp while she's at war with most of the continent.

Wasn't being a collaborator supposed to spare Callow from being invaded? That plan was a disaster, like most of Cat's plans, because she's really not a great strategist. Black's "Rage against the Heavens" strategy makes sense, but Catherine's whole idea of



shielding Callow was obviously flawed from the outset. They're going to be a battlefield; the only question is which side they were on.

She picked the wrong team, and now Callow is paying for it.

*RanVor*

In your mind, you have already condemned Callow for an eternity of suffering at the hands of cruel tyrants and no less cruel liberators. I didn't. I believe in Cat and her quest to tell all the gods to fuck off and leave her people (and possibly all people) alone.

She picked the wrong team because:

- a) it was the only team available,
- b) not being a part of the team wasn't an option, and
- c) the other team is actively acting against her goal of removing Callow from the conflict forever. So she didn't really have that much choice in that matter. It's far too late to change sides now, and even if it wasn't, she'd have to forgo her goal for a vague promise of not getting fucked over too much. She's doing what she can with what she has, and she isn't actually that bad at it.

Also, she quite possibly prevented Akua from becoming a Dread Empress. That's gotta count for something.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Callow did pretty well when it was a Good nation. Yes, the Praesi invaded every generation, but Callow usually threw them back without too many losses, and most of the country wasn't touched by war.

That's not "an eternity of suffering", that's an unfortunate consequence of having a terrible neighbor. Catherine's alternative is to surrender to that terrible neighbor and then to inevitably be caught up in their frequent and ugly civil wars. The people of Liesse would have something to say about that decision if any of them were still alive.

I don't blame Catherine for picking the wrong team; as you say, she had limited options. I blame her for remaining on Team Practical Evil after Liesse, when she had clearly seen that they couldn't protect Callow.

It's not too late to change sides even now. I would have done it much earlier; at the start of the campaign, Cat should have opened a gate to Arcadia, bring Malanza's army into Callow, and smash Black. He'd be surrounded, cut off from supplies, and vastly outnumbered in both regular soldiers and Named. Cat would renounce her evil mentor, and rise with a Heroic or Neutral name to strike down the Black Knight and restore a free Callow.

If Cat was Good or Neutral, there would be no excuse for deposing her. Callow could resume its ancient role as a bulwark against Evil, Praes would be broken for at least a generation, and the Good Queen could create a Legion-trained army that would stand up to the worst Praes could throw at them.

Cat's problem is the sunk cost fallacy. She keeps trying to find a way to fix her mistakes when she should just defect to Team Practical Good, join up with Cordelia, and wipe out Team Practical Evil.

Stopping Akua does count for something. It would count for more if Akua's rise hadn't been aided by Malicia, who was deliberately trying to get her to make a superweapon. What's the point of Practical Evil if they can't stop Diabolist before she kills an entire city?

*RanVor*

There's no Team Practical Good. All the business Procerans have in Callow is to force people of Callow to martyr themselves so they don't have to. There's nothing noble about it. The closest thing we've had to the Practical Good so far is the Bard, who made it clear that the Heavens prefer mass murderer Akua to rational, not-attacking-unless-provoked Catherine.

It is far too late to change sides. If you didn't notice, the first demand of the crusaders after entering Callow was for Catherine to die, and it remains their main condition to this moment.

As for stopping Akua, I meant that scene towards the end of the third book in which Catherine experienced alternate timelines as the Hero, the Tolltaker and the officer in the Legions. In all of them, Akua has successfully overthrown Malicia and became Dread Empress Magnificent. As we know, it didn't happen in the real timeline.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Callowans can be martyred fighting evil, or they can die because their Collaborator-in-Chief decided that making Akua Sahelian governor of Liesse would have any disastrous consequences. Maybe it would be better to go out fighting rather than dying in an Evil Civil War.

Cordelia is Practical Good. She wants all the Good nations to make peace with each other and work together to stop Evil. If Catherine was willing to abandon her Praesi buddies and stop making Callow evil, they could make a deal. Instead, Catherine has gotten half of her army killed, and she's at war with most of Calernia.

Catherine could renounce Evil and take up a Good or Neutral Name. Once she did that, she wouldn't be a Villain anymore, and the Heroes would be glad to team up with her. The "redeemed Villain" story is old and well-established, and there would be no problem with a repentant Villain on the throne of Callow.

We don't know how much of that vision was "real", and I sincerely doubt that things would have gone that smoothly for Akua even if Cat wasn't around. Black is still there, after all, and he and the Calamities are probably more than a match for Diabolist.

Despite Catherine's belief to the contrary, there's nothing that awful about serving as a bulwark against Evil. Callow has only been conquered twice in centuries of resisting invasion, and the only thing stopping them from returning to their proud traditions is Catherine Foundling, who insists that the only "practical" approach is to team up with the most hated nation in Calernia.

As a result, the southern third of her country is in ruins, and the northern third is being invaded. If Catherine had joined the Crusade, they would probably be casting down the Tower by now, and Callow could enjoy a few decades of peace and quiet. Instead, they've committed to ongoing war against Procer, Ashur, the Dominion, and every Heroic Named in Calernia. How's that working out for them?

*RanVor*

Or they can break free of the cycle and make others take their pissing match somewhere else.

As you probably well remember (and consciously choose to ignore this fact), Catherine was oath-bound to recommend Akua to the post of the governor of Liesse, still did everything in her power to make sure the Diabolist didn't actually get the post, was rightly horrified when it happened, and it only happened because Malicia already knew what Akua was up to and Catherine's input didn't matter in the end.

Another fact you keep ignoring is that Malicia's main goal is ruling Praes forever. Therefore she's not going to jeopardize it by invading people she doesn't have to invade, for the reasons you masterfully summarized in the different comment chain. She's Practical Evil after all. She's more intent to preserve what she already has achieved than getting in over her head knowing she's going to get fucked over at some point. Invading Callow was necessary, because without it, Praes would starve. Invading Procer is pointless from Malicia's point of view.

Eliminating Praes as a threat forever is not feasible. Destroying the Tower won't be enough; it's been done twice and it didn't work. Only complete extermination of the entire Praes population would put an end to the Dread Empire. Without it, people of Callow would be forever forced to bleed in pointless wars that could be averted, but didn't because Heavens want it that way, and it's more convenient for Procer.

By Catherine's "Praesi buddies" you mean Juniper, Aisha, Hakram, Ratface, Masego and others, right? Juniper and Hakram would surely die first, because they're monsters and cannot be allowed to live. Masego would be killed on account of being a

villain and son of a Calamity. Catherine would probably be forced to slaughter them herself, to "prove her redemption". Aisha, Ratface, Kilian and others might at best be cast out, then re-inducted into the Legions and killed by Callowan soldiers. All in the name of the GREATER GOOD, of course.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Catherine had reasons for agreeing to appoint Akua to be governor of Liesse, but it was still her decision and her responsibility. She acknowledges this. Catherine underestimated how much harm Akua could cause, and she was distracted by other problems, but her entire job is to stop this from happening, and she didn't.

I agree that Malicia isn't going to cackle and decide to invade Procer. But no matter what she thinks, Malicia won't be in charge forever. As Malicia rightly pointed out, Praes is a nation full of people who want things, and one of the things they want is to conquer and loot their neighbors. Now that Callow is part of the Dread Empire, their closest neighbor is Procer. Oh, and they have a poison that lets them kill an entire city and raise the corpses as zombies.

You are also right to say that Praes can't be eliminated forever. The most that the Crusade will do is break their power for a generation or two. In that time, though, Callow can build Legions of its own, form stronger alliances with other Good nations, and prepare to fight the Dread Empire. Or they can surrender to the culture that produced Akua and fight the rest of Calernia right now. One of these sounds like a better plan than the other.

Bleeding in wars against Praes is better than being sacrificed for ritual fodder or used as cannon fodder against other Good nations. If Callow has to fight someone, better Praes than the rest of Calernia.

All of Catherine's friends are combatants, and their lives are less important than the lives of innocent civilians. All of them have plenty of blood on their own hands, and morality isn't about sparing the people whose names you know. If they have to die so that Callow is spared, Catherine should do it.

"Breaking the cycle" sounds like a great idea until you realize that Bard has been slaughtering Black's plans like they were a rookie hero facing the Calamities. The only change in the Story is that, instead of Praes fighting Callow, Callow and Praes are fighting everyone else.

As the bulwark against Evil, Callow usually crushed Praes's armies in the south, leaving most of the country intact. As an ally of Evil, their country has been wrecked, and they're fighting one Proceran army to a very bloody stalemate. A traditional story that has them winning decisively could be better than a new story that has them getting stomped by the Tenth Crusade.

*RanVor*

So you're basically saying Cat should just forget about her dream, acknowledge the futility of her efforts and die? Preferably after murdering people who trusted her with their lives? Is that what you're saying?

Because that's what I see when I read your comments.

Ok, as for actual response:

Catherine didn't actually have a say when it came to appointing Akua the governor of Liesse. This entire farce was mainly for public eyes.

Of course Malicia isn't going to rule forever, despite her best efforts. But one would think that having a stable, relatively sane ruler in charge of a dangerous neighboring country is a good thing and it should be kept that way for as long as possible. Apparently it works differently in Calernia.

I'm sure people of Callow would prefer one bloody war with Procer to a thousand bloody wars with Praes. You speak of the invasions as if they were nothing. They weren't. Callow people of Callow suffered and bled, and lost their homes and families – every few years. The sad part is that the invasions weren't the product of just megalomania, but also necessity – without Callow's food, Praes just wouldn't survive. Of course i'm not saying sending hordes of devils and greenskins against Callowans was justified – but I totally understand why this pattern has gone on for so

long. It was disastrous for both sides, but it was necessary. But it doesn't have to. If Callow and Praes form a relationship where, say, Callow exports wheat to Praes in exchange for safety of the borders, the entire pattern collapses like a house of cards. I think that is the true goal of the crusade – to ensure this doesn't happen and Callow and Praes stay in the state of permanent conflict forever. War between Good and Evil is, after all, the gods' main source of entertainment.

The Bard is an incredibly dangerous enemy. I personally see her as an "anti-Black", someone who's willing to sacrifice everything and anything to ensure the state of perpetual strife is prolonged forever. But that's all the more reason to defy her.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Cat's dream is to keep Callow prosperous and safe. Her goals hasn't changed, but her methods haven't produced good results. Instead of committing to doing the same things that haven't worked, but harder, maybe it's time to adopt a different approach.

If sacrificing some of her closest Praesi friends will save thousands or tens of thousands of Callowans, then it's her duty as a ruler to choose her people over her friends. You insist that there's something sacred about Catherine's friends and her current methods, but her main priority is the welfare of Callowans; if she can safeguard the country, her alliance with the Dread Empire and her Praesi companions are expendable.

I agree that Catherine was forced to appoint Akua. Having done so, she had to duty of stopping her by any means necessary. Catherine was in command, and command takes responsibility. She chose to side with the Dread Empire, and she chose to make a deal with Akua, and those choices made Liesse possible. Catherine admitted as much in her conversation with the First Prince.

Malicia funded Procer's civil war, sent Black to help the Tyrant of Helike, and allowed Diabolist to make a Hellgate. That's not my idea of how a good neighbor behaves.

Sometimes stable, reasonable people can be far more dangerous than raving madmen. Malicia is intelligent and capable, but she uses her abilities to invade and destabilize neighboring countries and help an old school Villain construct a Hellgate. Praesi stability simply means that they can export death and destruction to the surrounding area. Thankfully, their neighbors are done putting up with them.

The invasions were bloody, horrible affairs, even though Callow won practically all of them. Besides invading Callow, though, the Dread Empire's favorite pasttime is civil war. By joining them, Callow has just guaranteed that they'll serve as a battlefield in future succession fights, as well as any future conflicts between Procer and the Dread Empire. I'm sure that, now that they have Callow, future Emperors and Empresses will happily abandon their long history of invading their neighbors and make peace with everyone.

No, wait, that's the opposite of what's likely to happen. Malicia's successor will look at her success as a conqueror and decide to go invade Procer or the Free Cities, and Callow will be dragged along for the ride. Or they'll be a huge civil war after she dies, like there so often is, and Callow will get dragged in. Joining a giant, dysfunctional evil empire to avoid war doesn't seem like the most rational choice.

The Bard is terrifying, and she needs to be defeated. Unfortunately, Catherine doesn't have the knowledge or the cunning to do so. Even Black, for all his undeniable brilliance, has been completely outplayed by the Bard.

*RanVor*

You're missing the most important point – the alliance with Praes isn't meant to last forever. Once Callow is strong enough to survive on its own, Catherine is going to proclaim sovereignty. After that, if Praes wants something from Callow, it'll have to agree for Catherine's (or her successor's) terms.

You're also missing all the reasons Malicia did all the horrible things she did.

Actually, I see the Heavens' knee-jerk reaction to Catherine's rule as a proof that her dream is much



more achievable than it seems, and than you try to make it look.

Even if Catherine somehow came to the conclusion that she has to do the unthinkable and betray all the people who trusted her up until now to join up with the bunch of jackasses who want to throw her country back into Forever War, I doubt it would improve her standing with Procer. An ally who changes sides whenever the wind starts blowing in different direction is unreliable, and an unreliable ally is worse than a reliable enemy.

You admit it yourself – the Bard is terrifying and she needs to be defeated. And yet you're urging Catherine to give up and join forces with her. Who's going to stand up to her then?

*RanVor*

Another fact you seem to be constantly forgetting about is that Callowans hate Procer almost as much as Praes, and for a good reason.

Let me outline what would likely happen if Catherine, in a sudden fit of stupidity, decided to abandon her cause and join up with Procer right now (as opposed to what you apparently think would happen).

### 1. THE SITUATION

The Army of Callow is severely weakened from fighting much more numerous crusader host during the Battle of the Camps. Malanza's army is also on the brink due to lack of supplies. Klaus Papenheim's army is stuck fighting Black and Warlock, and isn't going to move for some time. The rest of the Legions are stationed beyond the borders of Callow, waiting.

### 2. THE ASSUMPTION

Let's say Catherine decides joining the crusade is a wise move that will indeed help Callow (spoiler: it won't). During negotiations with Malanza, she offers full cooperation of the Army of Callow during the invasion and somehow manages to avoid being beheaded on the spot. The truce is made.

### 3. THE PREDICTION

The large part of the Army of Callow, including almost entire command staff, is immediately executed on account of being Praesi. The Army of Callow is finished as a fighting force. The

Callowans declare Catherine a traitor for selling them out to the Procerans after promising them freedom. The remains of the Army of Callow are inducted into the crusader host, and promptly begin sabotaging it, stalling its advance and giving Callowans time to rise into rebellion. Already decimated from fighting Catherine and ill-prepared to fight the guerrillas, the crusader host retreats to regroup. Malicia seizes the opportunity and the Legions enter Callow as liberators, offering the guerrilla forces assistance in casting the invaders out of their land, while simultaneously reinstating Praesi rule in Callow. Hasenbach concludes that Callow is now forever lost to Evil and the next wave of the crusaders annex what they can and raze the rest of the country to the ground on their way to the Tower, to deny Praes the resources.

#### 4. THE CONCLUSION

Callow is in ruins with no hope of ever being rebuilt. Catherine, seeing how utterly she failed her people, commits suicide. In Praes, the power vacuum created after Malicia's fall is quickly filled by another madman who immediately begins plotting the downfall of Procer. The idea of Practical Evil is lost forever, as is the only chance to break the cycle of perpetual strife. The Bard grins devilishly and disappears, her mission accomplished.

THE END.

*Dylan Tullios*

RanVor:

The proper term for a province of an empire "proclaiming sovereignty" is actually "rebellion". If Catherine, or any future Callowan ruler, decides to go against the Tower's commands, then Callow will be in rebellion, and we'll be right back in the Forever War, with Praes grasping and Callow resisting. The idea that future Emperor or Empresses will be cool with Callow just doing its own thing is hilarious.

Malicia had lots of reasons for doing horrible things. None of her neighbors care about those reasons. They're not sympathetic to her sad backstory or her desperate desire for control; they see that she's a dangerous tyrant who likes

invading her neighbors and destabilizing rival countries, and they've decided to put her down.

Redemption stories are a big deal in the Narrative. Villainous Cat is a dangerous, unreliable traitor; Heroic or Neutral Cat would be welcomed as a comrade. Grey Pilgrim is in charge of the Heroic Named in Callow, and he'd be overjoyed to see Catherine come to the side of the Heavens.

Catherine isn't standing up to the Bard. She's not a player, because she doesn't even know what the game is. All she's doing is running around trying to put out fires while the Bard neatly moves her pieces into position and prepares for the endgame.

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Grandmaster Talbot and his fellow knights would be overjoyed to turn their swords against vile Praesi. The bulk of the army's infantry are Callowan, and their loyalty is to their own queen, not the Tower or foreign officers. Your entire projection is based on the idea that Callowans would rather support the Dread Empire than Catherine, and that idea is wrong.

Here's what actually happens:

Catherine defects. The Grey Pilgrim uses his truth sense, and tells them she means it. Saint is unhappy, but she goes along.

Catherine executes her own command staff and a large part of her army. She's still got her knights, though, and most of her infantry. They join up with the Crusading host and march south.

Black can't move because Pappenheim will invade the moment he moves away from the Vales. Legions from the Wasteland start to move north into Callow, but Catherine uses her gates to move the united army to the Blessed Isle, halting the invasion attempt.

Catherine then takes the Grey Pilgrim to the armies of the Dominion and gates them into Callow. With a vast army and a force of Heroic Named, they

attack Black from behind while Pappenheim attacks from the front. For all of his strategic genius, Black has no chance.

The Crusading Host gates to Ater and casts down the Tower. The Dread Empire descends into civil war.

Catherine abdicates in favor of Anne Kendall, but hangs around to remind ambitious Princes that Callow is not their playtoy. The armies of the Levant back her up, since they don't want Procer to gain any more territory.

Everyone celebrates! Well, except the Praesi, but they're awful people, and they really had it coming.

*RanVor*

That is total bullshit and I'm not interested in replying anymore.

*RanVor*

Ok, I changed my mind.

You obviously never met a man who holds grudges. Like, *\*really\** holds grudges. Callowans still remember Proceran occupation, and it really wasn't any better than Praesi one. Not to mention the recent offenses of Procer, like funding the rebellion that ended in a disaster. Or, I dunno, funding a certain Diabolist's little experiment in Liesse, although I'm not sure they know about that. Furthermore, the Praesi have been very cooperative since that incident (being thrown out of the country probably helped), while Procerans just invaded with a big army and began killing. This wouldn't sit well with anyone, but especially Callowans. Meanwhile, Catherine managed to wrest from the Empress a ridiculous amount of autonomy for Callow. It's not a province anymore – it's a vassal state, with its own ruler, its own currency and its own army. And the crusade comes to take it all away. So I'd risk saying people of Callow do, in fact, hate Procer a little more than Praes at the moment.

When the demon was unleashed on Marchford, who saved them? The Legions. When they burned in the fires of Summer, who saved them? The Legions. When the Diabolist turned Liesse into a flying, greater

breach-shitting fortress, who saved them? The Legions. When did Procer save them? Never. The Procerans have no right to demand anything from them, and they know it.

The assumption that the Callowans would be happy to serve under (not side by side with, because they wouldn't have officers anymore and therefore wouldn't be able to wage war on their own) people who tried to kill them just a couple of hours ago is preposterous. I have no idea how you managed to come to this conclusion.

As for the vile Praesi, I'd like to remind you the scene in which young Hanno's mother was lynched before his eyes just for being born in Praes. Nevermind that she fled from there, didn't do anything bad and only prayed to the Gods Below because she was afraid of what would happen if she stopped. She was Praesi, therefore Evil and unworthy to live. This is the kind of people the crusaders are going to slaughter in large quantities. Not the villains. Not the nobles. Regular people, whose only crimes are being born and raised in Praes. They might not be the paragons of virtue, but let's face it – the Procerans aren't either. Not all Praesi are monsters. But that's not going to stop the crusaders from treating them as if they were. The Book of All Things speaks of the choice, but it's a lie. Not many people actually have it. For most, their allegiance is determined from the moment they are born, for better or for worse. This is ridiculously unfair and I refuse to stand by it. And to add insult to injury, the actual monsters will most likely survive, holed up in their strongholds no sane man would venture into willingly.

Of course Catherine is a player. If she wasn't, there wouldn't be a crusade. The real reason for this farce is that the gods look at Catherine and feel threatened. That's why the crusade is concentrating on Callow. As you probably well remember (and once again choose to ignore it) Catherine offered the Pilgrim free passage to Praes through Arcadia, and even helping in the assault on the Tower, during their first conversation. He refused. Why? Because the crusades's actual objective is to destroy the Black Queen. That's why every Hero on the continent suddenly took interest in the reborn

Kingdom. Praes is only a pretext. Malicia and Black together aren't as dangerous to the Heavens as Catherine. She's just thinking on a too small scale. This isn't about Callow anymore. Scratch that, I just re-read her conversation with Pilgrim – she's well aware of the actual stakes.

As for your preferred ending, everyone indeed celebrates, and the Bard most of all, because she just won.

Ok, it's the end of the line. I'm not going to comment on this one anymore, for real this time. One more thing I wanted to say is that your arguments are so ruthlessly pragmatic, it's admirable and scary at the same time. Are you sure you're not a sociopath?

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

That's your call.

The real nonsense here is the idea that Practical Evil is somehow the best approach for Callow when it has "Evil" in its name!

Protagonist bias aside, Catherine is a collaborator who has miserably failed to protect Callow, and she's currently getting her army killed fighting the Crusaders while Malicia plans to backstab her and reduce Callow to a conquered province again.

However bad her alternatives are, they're better than teaming up with a cold-blooded monster like Black and a treacherous tyrant who secretly helped Akua make a Hellgate.

*grzecho2222*

Cat is representant of something called positivim and I would say that Cordelia is very similar to Bismarck. And when you know what his not very evil ideas spawned in the end you could say that Praes at it worst is better choice

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

I seem to have missed the part where the Procerans killed an entire city and raised its population as undead.

Oh, wait, that was the Praesi.

Who unleashed the demon at Marchford? A Praesi. Who caused Summer to attack Callow? A Praesi. At their best, all the Praesi have been doing is cleaning up their own mess, a mess that wouldn't have even existed if they hadn't invaded Callow.

The Praesi basically had an entire civil war right in the middle of Callow, and it was mostly Callowans dying in it. So much for the peace and good government of Practical Evil!

Right now, Catherine is running a largely independent Callow, but Malicia is already planning on backstabbing her and turning Callow into a weak, dependent puppet state. She's also stuck as an ally, fighting with Praes against the rest of Calernia. So Callow gets to fight all of the enemies the Praesi make, and they get to suffer whenever a Praesi succession dispute turns into a civil war, which is depressingly common. This deal is sounding worse and worse all the time.

You seem to have forgotten about what the conquest of Callow actually involved. First the Praesi invaded and killed anyone who resisted. Then they killed anyone who rebelled. Then they killed the families of rebels. They murdered a huge number of Callowans to conquer Callow and keep it.

Every Callowan soldier in the army has been serving under people who murdered Callowans. The only difference is that the Procerans have only been killing Callowan soldiers, while the Legions were quite happy to hang entire families for the rebellion of one member.

Plenty of soldiers find themselves fighting alongside, or even under, people they used to be fighting against. War makes for strange bedfellows. If Callowans can stand to fight alongside people of the nation they call "the Enemy", they can stand Procerans.

You are right to say that the Crusade is going to kill a huge number of innocent people for the crime of being born in the wrong country. What is

the alternative? Wait for Praes to construct another Hellgate? Allow Malicia to foment civil war in Procer? Innocent peasants suffer in war, and Crusades are no exception. The only defense is that more people are going to die if Evil gets to entrench itself in Callow.

A Villain on the throne of Callow will turn Callow Evil. This isn't even about keeping Callow out of the Dread Empire; it's about keeping the country on the side of Good. We've seen what Evil looks like; Good, however flawed, is much better than the Dread Empire. If Catherine turns Callow into Praes, all of Calernia will pay the price. Better a war now than a much bigger, uglier war later.

If Catherine is playing chess against Bard, Bard is the world champion of all time, and Catherine is still trying to figure out how the horsy pieces move. Betting Callow's future on her ability to outscheme an ancient monster that defeated Black does not strike me as a great decision.

I am not a sociopath, but I try to think outside the box and consider the general welfare. Cat tends to get invested in the individuals whose names she knows, but Black just showed her that he views her as a tool, and the rest of her Praesi friends simply aren't as important as the huge numbers of innocent Callowans who will die if she stays on Team Practical Evil. Defecting would be ruthless and treacherous, but Black's lessons weren't wrong; she has to keep her on the prize, which is protecting Callow, not helping Black or saving her friends.

*RanVor*

Why didn't you tell me that from the start? We wouldn't have this conversation at all. I have no interest in arguing with people who believe in genocide for the greater good.

*Metrux*

Just to remind you, at the end of it all, that Procer conquered Callow more times than Praes did. For her, and most Callowans, it doesn't matter that Procer is good, they are the enemy. And honestly, they have more civil wars AND outside wars than Praes, so unless you think Demons are inherently worse than brainwashing angels, there is no reason to see Procer as better than Praes. Sure, Callow



seemed to be better, but they were starving and bankrupt, always fending off both Praes and Procer. It's not about being on the right side, it's about breaking the sides altogether and making something better, except no one wants to even let her try.

*Dylan Tullios*

RanVor:

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[vuthuha912](#)

Honestly, you aren't wrong about Praes – they are awful people, and if I were not as invested in Praes as I am now, I would totally advise people to ditch them. Yet, I sympathize with their conditions because you know they are dealt a bad hand – the worst hand that I have seen. Still, they really have to get their act together soon by being better people.

And despite having everything handed on a silver plate for them (foods, silver, power), Proceran prince is still as awful as Praesi noble. They are marginally better in the fact that they don't use magic and can't summon devils or demons. And not every Praesi can whip out a demon at any moment.

Other people's greatest virtue is not being born in Praes. They are as good as the condition allows them to be. Proceran Prince who prays in the House isn't more virtuous than a common Praesi. They squandered their good fortune on civil wars and attacking other Good nations. Praes does fan the flame but they need to have the thoughts of treason to actually commit it. My gosh, Cordelia – the best person to be Procer's leader, organizes the war to get rid of landless peasants. I mean wtf, girl. You are supposed to help them, with land reforms, trade deals, etc not throwing them like unwanted trash. She is good at diplomacy and making political alliances but shows no interest in internal improvements or welfare policies. Killing peasants in a foreign war is not a suitable solution – this is the exact solution that Praes uses on its population. I swear, killing/exiling several nobles and confiscating their property or just buying land and giving it to the peasant can deal with the problems quite well.

Forget about the 'common enemy that united us all', a common enemy will do shit if no one in that alliance shares the same priority. You think that having Qin as the common enemy will unite the rest of China into opposing them or the Coalition vs Dong Zhou or Wu and Shu vs Wei. A common enemy is not enough unless that common enemy can actually threaten the rest's survival, people will unite for 10 seconds and then break up. Unless Black or Malicia or Cat suddenly becomes as powerful as Dead King or Triumphant, people will keep on fighting.

Religion can be powerful but it will mean nothing in the face of death and hunger. The peasant class in Procer is shouldering a heavy burden of both fighting the war and maintaining the economy. They haven't got time to recover from the last decade of the civil war because their leader cares more about her grand plan than caring about the welfare of her population. She does care but not enough to lend them a hand or postpone the invasion for a little longer. One disaster more and Procer will be on fire for peasant rebellion.

As for Praes, the one reason why I don't want Black to die is that he is the close thing to a solution for that country. He understands their problems or the root of them, he actually wants to fix them, he has great eyes for talent, he has his priority straight, and he fucking survives his attempt at

fixing Praes. He is closer than anyone in that awful country to fix it. He has no relationship outside of work, no family left, and needs no personal power or money. He is the closest character to Zhuge Liang and Xun Yu in terms of dedication and patriotism. Thus, I want him to succeed. Zhuge Liang failed despite all his brilliance and determination. Xun Yu trusted the wrong master and got himself killed. I want both of them to succeed so bad and it broke my heart because I knew they won't end up well. So just this time, please Gods both Above and Bellow, help my favorite character gets his dream and survive.

For Calow, I mean they can totally turn their back on Praes, I get it. The situation really sucks for them and they really should just turn sides. I think Cat was not wrong in trying to work through Praes and then try for a deal like India did with the British to gain independence. Obviously, Black was planning to do that from the beginning, trying to give Calow more independence. His main objective was just the grain preferably through tribute but trade is fine too. He wasn't fucking it up like Britain did with its maps and Pakistan. The power was planned to get to Cat eventually but Akua... happened. Thus, if we do betray Praes, we need to do it tactfully. Keeping negotiation and trading on the table because at least there is still a chance that the situation can get better than the old one. Also, a pardon and honorary citizenship for all Praesi military personnel fighting for Calow. We are not the type to push the people who bleed for us under the bus. They can contribute to society and pay taxes while we give them away out of their horrible situation.

Though I am proud of my country's resistance to foreign invaders, I can admit that the war to get our independence is way too bloody. Maybe if we wait a little longer, we might make a better deal with France into letting us go peacefully. But, honestly, my people are too tired of being under France or any foreign powers at that point. We asked again and again for a way out but racism really blundered our chances. Your method of dealing with Praes is too crass and absolute. If you killed both Black and Malicia then any chance of Praes getting out of the cycle goes with them in the near future. How long does Praes need to wait for another none crazy person to take the throne? How many Maligant and Regalia and Nefarious does it

take to get Maleficent or Terribilus? This generation is the one where a sort of Terribilus (Black) and Maleficent (Malicia) appear. The chance was so slim that it might be a rare miracle. ... And Malicia fucked it up. But, it can still be salvaged ... somehow... someway. I want it to get better, not worse. Even if we are swimming against the river it is still better than letting all go like Tyrant.

And I call bullshit on Evil corrupt nonsense. Look at the Procer princes. Are they just the most virtuous of men and the kindest of women? They are just as awful as Praesi without the demon summoning. Gods have nothing to do with their choice to commit treason – by accepting foreign aid to prolong a civil war in their own country. It is on them. No demon is mind-controlling them except the Greed Demon. In war, bribery, assassinations, etc are fair games. People wage war even before the fighting begins.

*Jonnnnz*

A few points:

Is this a second beat of a pattern of three between the Saint and Cat? First time Cat soundly lost, this was a draw... Third time coming up later?

Akua brought the heart of the matter up: this is an invading force. They can complain all they want, but a general that moves an army to where they cannot retreat is the one that sentenced them to die. What exactly can they offer but surrender?

Last point: Cat is keeping with Malicia's directives. It is probably the smart thing. But at the very least she needs to make the lesson of "invading Callow is bad" stick... Which might require one of the two people that Malicia's orders were to leave untouched to be harmed.

*Jonnnney*

She lost twice to the Saint. First with headsman and second before dropping the lake.

*Dainpdf*

Multiple dead heroes plus a decimated, hungry army bringing stories of sudden frost lakes and legions of undead against whom the Light doesn't work like it should will probably do the work.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Let's face it, stories increase in the telling. And, the story of "Don't Play War Games With the Black Queen After She Has Offered to Let You Go With Terms You Don't Like – Because She'll Freeze Your Undercarriage Off and Then Make You Go Away With Worse Terms" has plenty of actual gory detail without any of the inflation.

Imagine what it'll look like with the helpful input of tavern singers?

*Cicero*

Actually Cat had two previous conflicts with the Saint.

First was the raid to kill enemy officer. Cat definitely lost. Had Winter cut, etc.

Second was the fight just before Cat opened the gate. Cat didn't even try to fight but immediately fled. Was this a loss? Or was it a draw since Cat never intended to fight and fleeing was her plan in the first place? She did manage to escape losing nothing more than bits of her armor.

Does the fight between Saint and Akua count was the third conflict? Akua was winning.

Or does this really mean that there is a third conflict yet to come between Cat and Saint, but Saint thinks it will be their fourth conflict, thus she won't be wary of the rule of three?

Or perhaps the rule of three doesn't hold as much power in large scale crusades?

[ahd](#)

Do the edges of Cat's gateways cut? I wonder what the result of Cat's absolutely positioned gateway would have been if opened at about chest level, rather than up in the sky.

Either the crusaders would have been bisected by the opening, or they would have been standing with their feet in Creation and their head in Arcadia.

...and then Cat could close the gate.

If Hierophant ever comes online again, we might get to find out.

*Dainpdf*

Either it doesn't work, or Cat deemed the chance of backfire (either political or due to easy access by heroes) made it too risky.

*Dainpdf*

This was... Okay? Anticlimactic, after the last chapter, although I do understand why Cat took the decisions she did.

### James, Mostly Harmless

This may not feel like a victory, but it is one anyway. Even though they were outnumbered two to one in troops and three to one in Named, the Army of Callow fought the invaders to a standstill and forced them to withdraw. More importantly, Malanza KNOWS this is a defeat, knows that she had no way to win so the best that she could do at this point was survive.

*RanVor*

Actually, it's probably the only option that (presumably) doesn't lead to mutual annihilation. In every other scenario, the winning army would be terminally crippled and unable to continue the campaign. But with so much damage already done, there's not much difference between victory and defeat anyway.

### NZPIEFACE

Wait a minute, if drawing Winter for Akua makes her more Cat, why doesn't the same apply here?

### wyaldriddler

Because Winter *is* Cat now. Not Akua, or a pinball flipper between them, it is Cat. This is because Cat has fused her Soul with Winter.

*stevenneiman*

I think that the mantle is filled with enough of Cat's personality that she would always be there, but it's mostly still Winter. When Akua drew heavily on Winter, it heavily influenced her personality towards Winter and left Cat to inherit that influence, but it also brought back just enough of Cat's own personality that she was able to claw her way back on top.

*pagesbe*

To be blunt, I was kind of hoping that the invaders would be finished with here, diplomatically if not militarily, but I think it's very likely they'll be able to regroup themselves later on.

I also cannot get over how they heroes keep whining about her murdering thousands as if she was supposed to roll over and let them invade, or try to stop them without killing them, which is stupid and ineffective. Like, this one attitude makes me way less sympathetic to them.

*RanVor*

I agree. It's their "how dare you to resist when we try to kill you and destroy your homeland" attitude that makes me loathe them much more than the (objectively worse) villains.

*Letouriste*

That's because they are sure they are in the right, because the Gods they believe in are right. Religion is often a poison: /

*RanVor*

Fanaticism certainly is.

[benthelynx](#)

I feel it falls flat in that. It seems like a lazy way to define an enemy.

*thegreatfeed*

The fun thing is. They are not the enemies, they are just tools and pawns. The true enemy this time around is Hachenbach.

*Trupo*

Cat is moving narrative from heroes and villains duking it out while throwing mortals into grinder, towards diplomacy and leaders discussing the realities. Pushing the Creation away from being gladiator arena for gods amusement, and towards being a place to live in.

I think the Pilgrim is moving towards realisation he can do more good by becoming Cat's peacetime advisor / mentor / good influence on Callow than by warfare, too, and will end up "better world" side of things

*Letouriste*

Wrong, Pilgrim was totally on the mood to end her here and now and now can guess Akua still exist and can control cat in the future...any talk with Callow are gone if he find out that

*Captain Semantics*

I like the idea of Pilgrim becoming a mentor figure for Catherine, it would be a great subversion of tropes

*Letouriste*

I don't get it...why would cat think akua made a mistake? She should know better.  
And that whole day of battle is ending without any benefits for



cat,she is losing...I don't understand at all what is in her mind,I expected her to go talking with juniper for information. The only benefit she could get from that day is psychological ( Saint of sword got rekt and tired and the two mortal leaders got reality smashed in their face) but i'm sure the Pilgrim know something about her now and could guess he was facing akua...only bad outcomes are coming to my mind because a potential Akua coming back is enough for reinforcing the danger cat pose to these foreigners and to break all her long term plans.

### *HiggsUnbound*

I mean, I loved it. It was amazing, the few moments we saw, managed to grind everything and everyone to a halt, instantly.

It was pretty damned cool.

However, don't heroes kinda level up every time they take. Thrashing and walk away alive? This is the third conflict, she needs to be careful, they're going to keep getting tougher the longer this draws out.

Also, clearly Cat is far below her potential in using Winters Mantle, Akua made Cats uses look novice.

And finally, a benevolent dread emperor?

Cat still doesn't have a name, and we have no idea if she ever will, but that, that sounds like something that could happen.

### [Antony444](#)

Well, at least the Heavens cheated once more and in a ridiculous manner. Seriously, what does it take to defeat heroes? Akua literally dropped tons of ice on them and exploded their lungs, and yet she didn't manage to kill a single one. And the moment Catherine takes her winged horse across the battlefield, they are somehow teleported to Malanza's side.

At this point considering none of them have ever murdered particularly strong opponents, stolen mantles or any legendary feat, the point of view espoused by Black is utterly understandable. like the Mirror Shield, heroes are granted power way over their head in exchange of a lobotomy.

And to make it better, they're so full of hypocrisy it's painful to read.

Cat sadly was right to act as she did. She could have broken the Procer army, but she can't kill all the heroes before one manage to permanently end her.

The Woe are good, but they can't be good enough to fight this kind of threat who alter reality when and where they want.

I really hope now the Dead King is on its way to ravage the heartlands of Procer. It would definitely be the ultimate irony

to see the visages of the Crusade leadership as they're forced to force-march to the other side of the mountains in catastrophe as a legion of undead is on its way to Salia. Claim of fighting for the Heavens are well and good, but if you can't defend your frontiers against the Great Enemy...

[shieldredblog](#)

Don't forget the Tyrant of Helike.  
Ambushing the Crusaders as they march home is just the kind of Dick move he loves.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I absolutely love the idea of the Tyrant of Helike.

Because they get the name, they get full control over a country. Isn't that fucking awesome?

*Dylan Tullos*

Antony444:

Catherine can open magical gates and used that power to drop a lake on her enemies. She doesn't get to complain about other people being overpowered.

Also, there is no cheating in war.

*RanVor*

Catherine worked her ass off and sacrificed everything she had, up to and including her humanity, to get those powers. The Heroes didn't sacrifice anything and likely didn't even lift a finger to get theirs.

[hoyboy](#)

First, not really. Just as much Catherine has has basically been handed to her as she actually earned.

Second, that doesn't matter. This is war, you use what you have. Just because you didn't "work" for your advantages doesn't make you bad for using them. That's childish reasoning.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Catherine has no idea what the Heroes have done or sacrificed for their powers.

hoyboy said it best. A child might think that it's not "fair" to use powers the other side doesn't have, but there is no "fair" in war. Her resentment is pointless and foolish, and amounts to nothing more than "They have powers I don't, they cheated, those big meanies."

*Byzantine*

It seems like it's the gods she resents.

...and she has something of a point there, given they are the assholes that set this entire system up.

*Dylan Tullos*

Byzantine:

Agreed. Resenting the gods is always valid, since they could have set things up so that Praes wasn't starving. Also, they created ratlings, which was not a nice decision.

*stevenneiman*

War isn't fair, especially proxy wars like every conflict between Good and Evil mortals and Named is. Besides, I don't think anyone who's been part of an asymmetrical war has ever not grumbled about it being unfair, whether they were on the side which is ultimately more powerful or not. I occasionally feel the temptation to get angry about the design of X-Wing miniatures, and not only is that a lot better balanced than the real world, I have no stakes beyond wounded pride.

*Dylan Tullos*

stevenneiman:

You are entirely correct. People will gripe regardless of whether it is rational to do so.

I don't object to Cat complaining from time to time, but I find it annoying that she always insists that her opponents are OP while never considering her own advantages. Would it hurt to take a second to be thankful for the best artillery, mages, knights, and infantry in Calernia?

*thespaceinvader*

SUPERHERO LANDING.

Those are REALLY hard on the knees.

*stevenneiman*

We have reserves.

[donforrester456](#)

Superhero landings always make me think the hero tried for a tuck-and-roll, messed up halfway, then tried to make it look intentional.

*Draeysine*

Ok to the people who think the Pilgrim will figure it all out:

How much does he really know about Akua? I mean sure he's heard the stories but if his first reaction to meeting Cat is anything to stand by it's that he doesn't know everything. Man has flaws, and Akua did a damn good job of playing Cat.

Let's say he does think something is up and pieces it together (even though he barely had enough pieces from his perspective), Akua didn't do anything drastic with the opportunity she had. Raising a few undead ain't nothing special, and it wasn't long before Cat came back. Obviously contingencies were made and several of them.

So arguably even if Pilgrim pointed this out to the Procerans, Cat simply needs to point out how it didn't make much a difference, not would it ever.

*Dylan Tullos*

Draeysine:

Pilgrim would point it out to the Callowans, who would respond by lynching their own Queen, joining the Crusade, and slaughtering Black's army.

If Callow finds out that Catherine kept the Butcher of Liesse around, they're not going to listen to her explanations. They're just going to kill her.

*Draeysine*

He would have to know The Callowans perspective on this, and he doesn't.

He would also be trying to win a PR campaign as a foreign invader trying to slander the name of the only Callowan ruler the nation has had in a couple generations who is also the person that fought tooth and nail against all many of creatures for Callow.

Point being Pilgrim doesn't have that sway with Callow , nor the insight of the citizens perspective, or all the information to make any of it happen.

*Dylan Tullos*

Draeysine:

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that Akua isn't going to be popular with Callowans after murdering a city and raising the people as undead.

I agree that Pilgrim couldn't just instantly convince Callowans. The main risk is that the rumor will get out, and that Callowans close to Cat will be able to notice little details that suggest Akua is still around.

As Akua said, useful tools aren't allowed to sit idle. Catherine is going to need Akua in the battles to come, and the more she draws on her skills and powers, the more clues she will leave for people who know what to look for.

*Byzantine*

I think "I bound that bitch's soul to my cloak for eternity as punishment for all the horrors she unleashed" would go over pretty well with the Callowans.

*Dylan Tullos*

Byzantine:

Callowans would love to hear that Akua's screaming soul was trapped in Cat's cloak for eternity. Unless they found out that Akua escaped and took over Catherine's body. That would be less happy news.

*RoflCat*

That's the story going around though? Remember the coronation chapter from Talbot's POV? About how some can still hear the scream of Akua from the mantle from time to time.

*burdi*

well

if cat bestowed winter to masego and named him The Prince of Midnight, shit will start to get real

*Anna*

I really look forward to that conversation with Larat. Both to chew him out for not helping while Cat was asleep, and to

hopefully find out more about the "journey". Also I like Larat, so :3

That finger eating reference tho 😊

*1queenofblades1*

I assume next chapter is the failed peace conference and after that the conclusion of the Battle of the Camps, or this was the conclusion and that chapter will be the start of the Princes' Graveyard.

*Author Unknown*

If Cat can wake up Masego in time, she should bring Archer to the negotiations. For the sole purpose of provoking the Saint of Swords into attacking. (If anyone can do it Archer can.) If the Saint breaks the truce and attacks alone, Cat will have a excellent chance to end Saint with all the narrative weight in Cat's favor.

*Draconius Sinister*

Ugh. I'm sick of the Saint and the Pilgrim. Both of them are tropes at this point, and worse, twisted tropes that show only the worst parts of that 'character' while also ignoring that trope when needed to show them as having the moral low ground vs. Cat. Saint was always annoying, but Pilgrim is rapidly reaching her levels, being an abomination of kindly mentor character and Stupid Good.

Won't stop me from reading because the villains are so damn compelling, especially since I know if the story were from the heroes' POV we'd have a much larger appreciation for their side of the war.

Anyways, good chapter, aside from my character gripes. Malanza is getting cooler all the time, and always cool to see Cat wield Phenomenal Cosmic Power.

*Oshi*

Except not so much. If you read the the prior Interlude with Pilgrim perspective you'll see he is playing a part. He is thinking clearly and is very much someone who has a clear vision of all the players. His assessment of all Proceran leaders as well as his obvious maneuvering to gain their trust was telling. He's just fulfilling his role by acting within it while likely planning ahead for something more. The Pilgrim is NOT a fool.

*stevenneiman*

I just thought of something interesting about the Grey Pilgrim. Power, especially the kind of power that comes from being the

person Fate has decided is going to win, is invigorating. The Grey Pilgrim's power is at its height when lesser forces of Good are in danger. He might claim that he regrets the suffering and danger of everything he has been involved in, and he might even believe it, but what if on some level he's just addicted to his own power and he knows that the only way to really tap into it? It would cast his encouragement of his teammates in a much darker light, especially considering that he kept pressing on even after he found out that there was a meaningful risk of defeat.

*Cicero*

Reread, and was thinking about what the outstanding plot threads are outside of the current focus on the battle and repulsion of the northern invasion.

1: The Hells Egg. Did the heroes clear it out? What happened with that?

2: The Goblin Matrons. An important plot line, but probably part of the future conflict with Praes not relevant to what is currently happening.

3: How are things going with Black and the Warlock? Apparently this Witch of the Wilds is a big stick, big enough to take on the Warlock.

4: Where is the Adjunct, and what is he doing?

Anything else that people can remember as open plot threads?

*Oshi*

What is the Augur/First Prince up to?

What is the Hierarch/Crazy Mc-Backstabby up to?

What is the Bard planning next?

The Kingdom of Dead is doing what now?

Malicia has plans....

Where is the Red Vales contingent of the Crusade (Hanno/First Princes Uncle)?

Endgame for Akua now that we know some of what she is capable of and that she is still a player.

What is Winters Plan for it's new Queen?

What the hell happened to the rest of the Fae with their new one court?

Triumphant? (Speculation there)

NZPIEFACE

Well, only 12 heroes came back.

Tohron

The heroes presumably engaged the Hell Egg, since they were previously talking about there being 14 heroes with the crusaders, then shortly after Cat passed info on the egg to the Grey Pilgrim, everyone thought there had only ever been 12. What exactly happened in the engagement is unknown.

As for Hakram, he was on the border of Deorathe territory trying to make their "deal" with Amadis look convincing by raising a fuss. Now he's heading south with a Deorathe army.

*Cicero*

Ah!! That makes so much sense now.

At first I was thinking there was just a mistake made, but the Hell's Egg killing the extra heroes, and everyone forgetting they ever existed because it was a Demon of Absence just makes perfect sense.

Interesting.

*Cicero*

Yes, but why was the Adjunct available to do that in the first place?

I refuse to believe that Cat sent him off to just be prepared in case she needed a little evidence. Evidence that most likely will never even be known by the heroes.

It sounds more like Cat has him doing something else, and that something else just happened to mean he was also available to handle the Deorathe business.

*Jane*

Say... It occurs to me... If these truce talks are successful, the Crusaders have to go back through the pass, right? ...The pass near where they woke up a Demon of Absence, and forgot about it?

It would really suck for Cat if, after having beaten the Crusaders on the field, and then come to a carefully negotiated peace to prove that she's not a monster... All of it just ends up forgotten because the Crusaders wandered into something they shouldn't on the way back. It's probably not *in* the pass itself,



since they still remember there's a new way to get to Procer from Callow, but it's probably close enough to be a hazard.

*Clay*

Is it just me or do these keep feeling shorter and shorter. You need to stop making them so pageturn-y man.

*Meme man*

They are, but we're getting more total words a week than we were getting with two big updates a week.

[erraticerrata](#)

Several of the interludes were a few pages longer than the average chapter. I'm guessing in comparison this one – while actually slightly longer than usual – felt short.

*Yotz*

>Be cold... Be clear. Be a creature of logic, because logic is what gets you through this. Everything else is distracting noise.

All hail Catherine Foundling, daughter\* of Sarek!

\*may or may not be adopted

*Yotz*

Also, I seem to be unable to post the usual way.  
Strange, that is.

*CrysJaL*

So I'm going to call it now seeing as I don't think anyone remembers this detail. The Grey Pilgrim and The Saint of Swords' conversation in Interlude III regarding the greater evil approaching really set the stage for how this is going to end. The Saint is arrogant and thinks that she is going to win the war by killing Catherine. After all she can't die here as she has a part to play in this fight against the coming darkness. She can only win against Cat as this battle is merely a precursor to things to come.

Cat still has her whistle which contains the aspect of Take. Capable of taking away another Named's aspect and remember what saint's third aspect is? Her sword which is said to be a domain in it's own right. Cat is going to Take the sword with the single use overpowered whistle and thereby own two separate domains. The Sword touched by the heavens and the domain created by the mantle of winter. She will be the fifth Named who takes part in the fight against the coming darkness. With the sword Cat will be deemed "sufficiently of the light" to be able to fight alongside

the heroes and the Pilgrim, who will have his own redemption to atone to Cat regarding whatever happens next.

I'm also going to throw it out there now that I think The Black Knight will collectively make mincemeat of all the White Knight's group save for The White Knight himself, leaving at least one place left open for the future battle which will be The Hierophant, who is actually competent and powerful enough to be of serious use as opposed to the other Named woman. The woman who wasn't a match for The Warlock and who didn't even bring out the big guns to handle her in their first engagement.

[cheeseyme1999](#)

interesting possibility, but there are a few problems with your conclusions.

1) that procer is not simply serving the will of the heavens and the commanders here fucking hates Catherine's guts. Catherine will not support the heroes unless she gets security for callow, and while the grey pilgrim/heavens might be willing to accept Catherine, Procer can, has, and likely will tell the heroes to go fuck themselves so that they can annex callow and destroy Cat

2) Black won't make mincemeat of all but the white knight, at minimum the bard will survive until the final showdown.

3) the warlock is restricted from using his big guns under the red skies policy, he wasn't allowed to do so on what was just the first fight.

[crysjal](#)

1. You're assuming Cat isn't capable of compromises. She'd be able to work with anyone if it stopped for example, an army of the dead smothering the entire continent. Her motivation is protecting Callow. A universal threat will no doubt garner some attention.

2 and 3. I honestly forgot about the bard but I don't count her as really "part" of a band considering whatever she is. I actually forgot to edit it properly before posting. I believe black and co will kill all but the white knight over their next confrontation but he will also die in the attempt. This will create tension between Cat and him later when they encounter each other.

My first point about the whistle is the thing I feel most confident about though. The whistle is the super mcguffin that the hero pulls out at the darkest point which will be saint being the supposedly unbeatable villain in the story that the crusade has become. I imagine Cat will be thrilled to be on the other side of things for once.

## *oldschoolvillain*

Just one problem: the whistle contains Akua's aspect of Call, not Cat's former aspect of Take.

## *Cicero*

Thinking about it... I feel that narrative wise there just is not room for a peace agreement without at least one more battle.

So what are the survival chances of the various heroes/crusaders?

Prince Amadis – 1 in 5 chance of survival.

Princess Rozala – 3 in 5 chance of survival.

The most likely way for the truce to fail to resolve into a peace agreement is that Prince Amadis refuses to accept terms that Cat will agree to. Princess Rozala seems much more aware of the limitation and the vulnerability of the Proceran position. So once Prince Amadis dies, peace terms are then accepted. Also, an arrogant ambitious jerk writing a letter to his beloved wife because he has a bad feeling about the upcoming battle... yeah that's a death flag right there.

Grey Pilgrim – 99% survival chance

Saint of Swords – 2 out of 5 chance of survival

Grey Pilgrim is not going to die. He's got a wise old man mentor thing going on with Cat now and that is just too big a narrative to end now. Saint though... while there are things arguing for her survival, I think there actually is a chance of her death. It would be a major blow to the heroes, an unexpected loss for those Above, and would fit with the theme of three and the strong hostility developing between Cat and Saint.

Forsworn Healer – 2 out of 5 chance of survival

Silent Guardian – 1 out of 2 chance of survival

Healer has a target on her back. Especially since Masego will likely be awake for this again and she is the priority target. Silent Guardian is her usual guard so she is in danger too.

Rogue Sorcerer – 3 out of 10 chance of survival

Myrmidon – 1 out of 2 chance of survival

The Sorcerer is the other priority target. Plus, with Witch of the Woods being out there as the stronger caster, there isn't a need for him in the future. Makes sense of him to die here.

Myrmidon is his usual guard because they share a language.

Mirror Knight – 1 out of 5 chance of survival

Blade of Mercy – 3 out of 10 chance of survival

Vagrant Spear – 1 out of 5 chance of survival

Painted Knife – 4 out of 5 chance of survival

Mirror Knight has Dawn, marking him as someone to die early. Additionally, his extra characterization seems pitched towards his death. In contrast the extra characterization given the Painted Knife suggests that she will survive. Meanwhile the Vagrant Spear is far too reckless and aggressive – plus Cat killed her once before. Blade of MErcy also leans slight towards death I think.

Thoughts by others?

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## Chapter 18: Cradle

*“Seven battles I won on my feet, and lost the war sitting at a table.”*

– Periander Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike, after the founding of the League of Free Cities

“Six hundred and thirty-two dead,” Juniper said. “Our edge has been scraped *raw*, Catherine.”

I was really beginning to regret that oath to Hakram, because a bottle of aragh right now would do wonders for my peace of mind. I’d guessed it was bad, when I’d taken a look from the sky, but I hadn’t understood quite how bad it had really gotten. I leaned back into my seat and passed a hand through my mess of a hair.

“You did better than I could have hoped,” I admitted. “Considering what the other side was fielding, it’s a miracle it went this well.”

Miracle was the wrong word, I decided a moment later. It was short-changing Juniper. While I’d been traipsing about the magical wonderland of Winter, the Hellhound had been dancing on the edge against an army about twice the size led by heroes. That she’d not just lasted the day but actually inflicted a defeat was a reminder that Juniper of the Red Shields did not need a Name to be one of the sharpest knives in my arsenal.

“The casualties are trouble, but there’s worse,” the Hellhound grunted. “We’re near out of munitions, and without accord with the Tower the moment our stores run dry we lose one of our heaviest advantages.”

“Goblinfire?” I asked.

"Enough for one last blaze, but not a large one," my Marshal replied. "We're entirely out of demolition charges. Sappers still have a decent stock of combat munitions, but you know how fast we go through those when they're properly used."

Even if I hadn't been taught the logistics of that at the College, Ratface's constant reminders that a protracted campaign would see us run dry halfway through would have served that purpose. Once again, Malicia managed to fuck us without ever needing to do anything but say no. The Snake Eater Tribe that had settled near Marchford had made it clear it could not produce munitions, which meant the vicious old crones in the Grey Eyries had a monopoly. It was illegal under Imperial law for anyone but the Tower to possess munitions, not that it would have stopped me if I had a solid way to get them into Callow. I didn't, and there were watchful eyes at the border just in case I felt like trying anyway.

"I heard we took a hit on siege engines," I ventured.

Which was a polite way to say that Pickler had spent exactly three heartbeats welcoming me back before beginning to rant about the Grey Pilgrim apparently wrecking her lovelies. I'd taken that to mean the repeating scorpions, and while I did not share the slightly unsettling affection my Senior Sapper had for her creations the loss of them was still a heavy blow. They were one of our major force equalizers.

"Two repeating scorpions left, no Spitters," Juniper said. "We've still got our full count of ballistas and trebuchets, but they've already proven they can make those irrelevant with their fences."

As our skirmishing contingent consisted of pretty much only the Watch, that left the mages lines as our only effective long-range option. Which wasn't saying much, considering they'd have to deal with both wizards and priests on the other side. They'd be spending most their time on defence and damage control, not going on the offensive.

"Don't count on the mages," the Hellhound warned. "We've been running them ragged for two days, fighting and healing. A lot of them are on the edge of burning out."

I sighed, fingers drumming against the arms of the chair.

"You're telling me we can't have another battle," I said.

"Not if you want to have a force capable of fighting afterwards," Juniper bluntly said. "Four to six months of recruiting and refit, and we'll be able to campaign again. Anything else is scrapping the host."

"Well," I said. "That adds a certain spice to the negotiations, doesn't it?"

The orc grunted in amusement, and I allowed myself a moment of envy as she drank a mouthful of wine. My own cup was, sadly, water. Which I didn't need anymore, or particularly enjoy.

"Had a good look when we engaged this morning," Juniper said. "They're on their last rope too. Without their officers they've had to rely on fantassins for frontline command, and we bloodied those repeatedly. Levies got bled bad, and the principality troops were always few. Most of their soldiers are fantassins, now, and mercenaries won't be eager for another go."

"They've got heroes, Juniper," I reminded her. "Morale's not ever going to be an issue for them."

"You say that, but we know for a fact they had runners after the first gate trick," the Hellhound said. "Kegan's already caught a few up north, trying to flee back to the passage."

"The meat of them will stay," I said. "Still, worth keeping in mind at least half their host is gone. Gods, fifty thousand. I still have a hard time believe we held against that."

"Wouldn't have, without the gate," the orc said. "Though that wasn't without costs."

I couldn't call it luck, not with the amount of contingencies I'd had waiting, but I couldn't deny it'd turned into a gamble in the end. I'd been so sure that if we kept the positioning aligned for only a short while... No point in whining. They had used their abilities, as I had mine. A mistake had been made, all I could do was learn from it. That particular tool wasn't going to be put away entirely, but the restrictions on where and how it could be used had to be adjusted.

"It all rests on diplomacy, then," I said.

"Your speciality, infamously," Juniper said, rather drily.

I hadn't even been back for a full day and already my underlings were ragging on me. I flipped her off, feeling the weight on my shoulders lighten the slightest bit. It just wouldn't feel like home without the sarcasm. I groaned and rose to my feet.

"Best I get started on Masego," I sighed. "It could take the entire night, if it gets tricky."

"Don't linger," the Hellhound said. "This all falls apart if you're not at the table. He's not going anywhere."

I nodded. Much as I disliked the thought of leaving my friend under any longer than I had to, as long as he was in no danger of

death there were higher priorities. Having him at the table with me, even if he was blatantly bored with the proceedings, would get a point across. But uncertainty would have to do, if it took too long. I clasped Juniper's shoulder in farewell, but paused when I felt her hand take mine. She tightened her grip, face half-hidden by her fur-like dark hair.

"Good to have you back," Juniper got out, looking away. "It's not the same without you."

I embrace her, awkwardly given our respective sizes, but after that I couldn't not.

"We're still in it, Juniper," I murmured. "Bloodied but on our feet."

She shook me off, but only after a moment.

"Go away, Foundling," she growled, sounding embarrassed. "And don't let me catch you sleeping through a battle again. It's horrible for our reputation."

"Yes ma'am," I replied amusedly.

She looked highly insulted by how sloppy my farewell salute was, and the good mood clung to me all the way back to Masego's tent. I'd know she was there without ever taking a look. People had a warmth to them that I had learned to discern. Orcs were warmer than humans, as a rule, and goblins almost feverish to my senses. Archer burned warmer than any of them. My mantle stirred, tasting the sheer vitality in the air with relish. Indrani looked, at first glance, perfectly relaxed. She'd moved the folding chair she was was on so she could rest her bare feet on Masego's guts and was casually chipping away at a chunk of wood with a knife. The carving looked like the beginning of a fox to me, but given her dubious artistic skills that meant very little. Her body was perfectly loose and at a rest, but the eyes gave it away. It wasn't the restlessness of a woman who couldn't wait to move I saw there. It was the silent frustration of someone who had a problem in front of them but no way to do anything about it. Shaving off another sliver of wood, Archer flicked it at Masego's face to join a growing pile and offered me a wan smile.

"Cat," she said. "Wondered when you'd come."

Part of me wanted to simply get what I'd come here to do done as soon as possible, but instead I claimed a chair and dropped it by her side. Boots resting on the edge of the bed instead of Hierophant himself, since I was a good and loyal friend, I made myself comfortable.

"Had to talk with Juniper," I told her. "Get the lay of the land."

She hummed, knife deftly twisting in her grip so she could change the angle she was carving at. How someone so good with knives could be so terrible at sculpting, I had no idea.

"We're fucked, but so is the other side, so we're all showing teeth and pretending it's a smile," Indrani said. "That about it?"

I snorted.

"More or less," I conceded.

A sliver fell to the ground. The tent was silent, save for Masego's spell-induced breathing and the quiet whisper of steel on wood.

"He's going to be all right," I said quietly.

"Is he?" Archer said quietly. "Not so sure about that."

I turned to glance at her and found her face aloof.

"You're angry," I said.

"Angry's not the right word," the other woman replied. "I get angry, I cut a throat. This is something else."

I folded my arms around my chest, feeling defensive but not quite sure why.

"Vexed?" I said.

Her smile was thin.

"A cousin of that, I reckon," Archer said. "I understand the Lady a little better, now. Wish I didn't."

"Thought you had a pretty good handle on her already," I said.

"As much as anyone can," Indrani shrugged. "But I did always wonder, why Refuge? Not like she enjoys running it. If it was just about the fights, she could have found those as a Calamity. They have a regular hero body count. And she still talks about your teacher like she's in love with him, or as close to that as she can be."

"But now you know," I said.

"I do," Archer agreed. "Put an arrow in that hard old biddy the Saint, this morning. Walking back to camp, after you gave the signal, I had a thought."

I remained silent, watching her.



"Catherine, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't really care about any of this," Indrani sighed, waving the knife around. "It was a good laugh when you put on that crown, and the scraps keep coming. Got no complaints about that. But they're just enemies not... *my* enemies, you get me?"

"It doesn't feel like your fight," I quietly said.

"You're my friend," she said. "So're the others, even Vivienne though she's usually a twat about it. It's not that I mind giving a hand, and I'm pretty sure we've still got legendary fights ahead of us. But it doesn't quite scratch the itch."

"Because it's not your story," I murmured.

"It's yours," Indrani agreed. "And there's something to being part of this. The Woe, or whatever you want to call it. I found something here I didn't know I wanted, back in Refuge. But I get the Lady, now, and why she left. Because this isn't something I was meant to do, just something I'm doing."

My throat clenched.

"You were always upfront about it," I said. "That you'd leave eventually."

"Stop looking like I kicked your unicorn," she sighed. "No one's abandoning you. I'm not Ranger, Cat. I want to see it through to the end, to see *what's* at the end. I don't have that... it's hard to put into words. She's old, you know, in a way I don't think we can really understand."

"I never got a hard number on her age," I admitted. "At least two hundred, but that's only rumours."

Archer's knife stilled, tapping against the side of the possible fox.

"It's the half-elf thing," she said. "You go in knowing the people you meet will be dust before you even hit your prime, and there's a part of you that doesn't grow roots. Because you know it's going to pass."

I thought of the man whose name we'd avoided saying, of a quiet conversation the two of us had had long before I loved or hated him. *They never understand*, he'd told me, so very tiredly. *Even if they love you, they never quite understand*. In this, as in so many things, I was still the bearer of his legacy.

"You look sad," Indrani said suddenly, and I found her eyes on me. "It's been a long time, since I've seen you so human."

The gentleness she'd said it with made it so much worse.

"I only ever seem to be," I murmured, "when I'm at my worst."

If It'd been Hakram at my side, he would have offered comfort. Masego would have given an explanation, brought reason into it. Vivienne... I still hesitated to be that open with her. The nature of our relationship had set boundaries. You could not bare your soul to the person you'd entrusted the means to kill you with, should it prove necessary. Indrani didn't say anything, though, because unlike the others she understood that some truths simply stayed with you. Like a scar, or a limp you barely even noticed.

"You ever miss her?" I asked.

"It's different, for us," Archer replied hesitatingly. "She's not my..."

*Mother*, I did not say. I knew a thing or two about words it cost to speak out loud.

"Isn't she?" I gently said.

Indrani laughed, but the mockery in it was not meant for me.

"It's deeper than that," she said. "She didn't tuck me in at night, Cat, she taught me a way to live. I didn't want someone holding my hand. Or maybe I did, fuck – I was a kid and I was scared. But she gave me what I needed instead. Being able to stand on my own feet."

"It's not a weakness, you know," I said. "Loving her for that."

Archer scoffed, looking away. I left it at that.

"You ever miss him?" she asked.

My smile was a bitter one.

"I shouldn't," I said.

It was admission enough. My friend suddenly snorted, jolting in remembrance.

"I had a talk with him once, after Marchford," Indrani admitted. "I was curious after hearing so many stories so I sought him out."

"You never told me about that," I said.

"Didn't think it mattered," she shrugged. "I was going to challenge him to a spar, but he had this look..."

I chuckled.

"Like before you even entered the room he'd figured out three ways to kill you," I said.

She grinned, and it had her hazelnut eyes alight. She was most beautiful, I thought, in fleeting moments. Indrani was easy on the eyes yet not so striking it took the breath away, without the scarf, but now and then there would be a moment and it was the only thing you could think about.

"Yeah, that," she agreed. "Couldn't find the nerve. We had tea, we talked about Refuge a bit and then about the battle against the demon."

She paused.

"And then after that, mild as you please, he smiled all nice and said that if I ever attacked you again he'd have me drowned," she added.

I blinked in confusion for a moment, before I remembered the first time I'd ever met Indrani. She'd burst out of a window without warning at the manor in Marchford, then slapped me around along with Hakram and Masego. While I was still freshly wounded from a fight with devils, no less. Gods, I'd completely forgotten about that. Archer cleared her throat.

"What I mean is, I think he does," she said. "Or did."

Love me, she meant. In his own way.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "He can put it in a box when he acts. It's not that I don't think it's genuine, it's just..."

"How can it be enough, if it can fit in a box?" she said.

I nodded.

"I think I can handle caring," I admitted. "As long as it also fits in a box."

Because it was one thing, to have this tangle of gratitude and affection within me that refused to go away, but it was another to let it dictate my actions. There was a chance, however slight, that I could get to the end without killing him. But there was a greater chance I couldn't, and when the time came I could not allow myself to hesitate. Not going against a man who wouldn't.

"You ever wonder if getting older just makes us more like them?" Archer asked, looking upwards at the ceiling of the tent. "Different roads, maybe, but going to the same place."

My boot scraped against the edge of the bed uneasily.

"I think we can learn from them without becoming them," I replied. "Or maybe I just want to, because the alternative scares me. Not sure it can really be called faith, when I'm more afraid of being wrong than believing I'm right."

"They wouldn't have called a truce," Indrani decided after a moment. "They would have found a way to kill every last one of them."

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched.

"I'm not so sure they would have been wrong to do that," I confessed.

I could feel her surprise without turning.

"Thought you are all about victory in peace, these days," Archer noted. "Peace after a lot of killing, sure, but making nice still being the end of the road."

"If I'd listened to Juniper and gone with Bonfire," I said. "A third of my army wouldn't be dead right now."

"You just got done sleeping off your last big move," she shrugged. "Not sure if it was the right call to pass on the Hellhound's plan, but I can't say for sure it was the wrong one either. Neither can you, unless you know things you're not telling me."

"So I keep telling myself," I said. "But so far, all my plan's gotten done is a lot of bleeding by people my duty is to *not* have bleeding. And it might fail, Indrani. That's the thorn on the stem. I need the other side to be willing to make a deal, and I'm less certain of that being a real possibility by the day. I thought Pilgrim was someone I could work with, but after this morning... They're not interested in both sides getting what they want, because if we get our way even a little bit they see it as a defeat."

"So beat them," Archer said. "Crush them so brutally they're not thinking about winning, just surviving. They'll take terms then."

I laughed harshly.

"Gods, I want to," I admitted. "It might not be easier, but it'd be *simpler*. If all I had to care about was coming out on top and what it takes to get there. And that's the hypocrisy of it. Because as much as I rail against them, what I'm after is utter victory as well. It just involves make treaties instead of invading another country."

"I'm still not hearing a reason not to step on them," Indrani said, frowning.

"Because Triumphant took ten years to conquer all of Calernia and five years to lose it," I said. "Just being strong isn't enough, because if strength is all that keeps the peace then the moment you falter it's *gone*. And we all falter, eventually. You can't dance for decades without ever missing a step. I used to think Malicia lost sight of that, when she tried to get her hands on the doomsday weapon, but now I'm not so sure. After Second Liesse I told myself she'd put herself in the corner on her own. That by fanning the flames when Procer had its civil war she ensured sooner or later there'd be a reckoning, and then made it so much worse by trying to get the weapon. Now, though, I think I get where she was coming from. She thinks the only way they'll ever negotiate with her is if the alternative is annihilation. No uncertainty, no room for a turnaround. Just..."

I snapped my fingers.

"Gone."

"We rebuilding the fortress o'doom, then?" Archer asked. "I was under the impression we didn't care for it."

"Before I told Juniper to raise the army," I said. "Before I let everyone off the leash to rebuild Callow and get it on war footing, I drew a line for myself. That'd I'd only keep fighting so long as what I led to wasn't worse than surrendering to the crusade. Because if I can't even believe that much, I'm the problem more than them."

"No to the fortress o'doom, then," Indrani snorted. "I think? It can be hard to tell with you."

"If it takes Hellgates to make what I'm doing work, then it isn't worth doing," I replied. "The thing that gets me is, what I hate most about the heroes? I do it too. I'm furious that they think they should win just because they won't compromise, but when have I ever done the same when I had the power not to?"

And I couldn't just dismiss that. Because getting angry about them being stubborn didn't hold, when I was just as stubborn. I could believe they were wrong, but I couldn't just dismiss their right to disagree with me. The fury that burned whenever they cast their righteousness in my face was childish. I'd spent years telling my enemies that blame was pointless, that it didn't *change* anything. That it was whining to demand the world be as you thought it should instead of how it truly was. It'd been my answer, when facing Vivienne in Laure, and I would not renounce it now. The servants of the Gods Above had powers my decisions had barred from me, but that was my own doing. I did not surrender the right to restrain and work around these powers whenever I could, but I could not honestly call it *unfair*. When had fair ever mattered? That I had to refrain from using powers I had gained because they were harmful or dangerous in no way meant

my enemies had limit themselves the same way. If I could not win with this state of affairs, that was on my head. There could be no such thing as cheating when none of this was a game. And Gods forgive me, but I'd known it would be like this when I took up the knife.

"Winner takes all," Archer said. "The law older than laws."

"I could probably end the war in about a year," I admitted. "If I hit Black's army in the back while it's defending against the crusaders, then help them move against Praes. There'd be a lot of death before it was over, taking Praesi cities, and probably just as much in purges afterwards. I'm not sure, though, that it won't result in fewer corpses than my way. *I genuinely can't tell*. If I threw it all away, if I rolled over for Hasenbach... Fuck, Callow wouldn't be independent but I broke William's neck because I believe the sign on the banner is less important than the people under it. I'm not after the same things I was when I started, not anymore. The amount of corpses on the ground at the end isn't all that matters."

"Never did get why you worry so much about people," Indrani said. "Vivienne's all about the good ol' motherland and getting even, but she was upper crust before she learned wandering hands. She's got a stake in that game. You? You're an orphan, Cat. Never left Laure before Black took you in, if Hakram is to be believed. Why do you give two shits if this country burns? Not like it ever did anything for you. A chunk of it still hates your guts, and considering you sure as Hells don't enjoy ruling it you're going through a lot of trouble to keep doing just that."

More than once I'd reflected that Archer had a lot in common with orcs, when it came to the way she looked at the world. I'd been wrong, though. Oh, they both liked blood on the floor and they measured most things through strength. But orcs had... loyalties. Not in the way I'd been taught to have them, but they were there. Follow the warlord, protect the clan, uphold what an orc should be. Indrani had none of that. If she was loyal to anything, it was herself. A betrayal, to her, would be forcing herself to do something she didn't want to do. Pretending to be something else than she was. Black and I were creatures fettered to outcomes, if not means. Archer, and Ranger as well I suspected, could not conceive a world where fetters could be anything but a sin. The only thing Indrani had it in her to truly hate was being restrained.

"I thought I could fix it," I quietly said. "I looked around me and thought that, if I had the power all those other people had, I wouldn't make their mistakes. I'd use it the way it should be used. That it would be *better*."

Archer studied me silently.

"And do you still?"

*I made and broke the Liesse Rebellion, I thought. I bargained with fae as my people died around me, failed the responsibilities I had claimed so grandly a city was blotted out from Creation along with a hundred thousand souls. I am leading this land to make war on half the continent while the rest plots my demise.*

"I'm not good enough a liar," I said, "to make myself believe that."

"So leave," Indrani said. "Take your cloak and your sword, wake Masego and convince Vivienne. You have a way with her. We can be out of the kingdom before dawn."

"Do you think we're good people, Indrani?" I asked.

"Good people is what we pretend to be, when we're more afraid of consequences than we are hungry or jealous," Archer replied without hesitation. "When the living is soft and someone else takes the pain for you. It always, always falls away when you walk through fire – and we've been in too many blazes to still be wearing that face."

"Right and wrong are less important than works or not," I mused. "That's what I was taught. And it fit, you know? Because mercy's the privilege of the powerful. The House of Light can speak the pretty sentiments because by following them it wins. Black never followed his philosophy to its logical conclusion, though, because it's not about logic for him. Not really. If the Heavens always win, why should anyone ever pick another side?"

"Gold, pretty boys, the power to fry anyone getting on your nerves," Indrani suggested. "Angels tend to be pricks, too. You're being all philosophical about this, but that's just you. Most people don't think that deep about it."

"The Empire of the last twenty years was probably the most reasonable Evil has ever been on this continent," I said. "It still involved exploiting an occupied country and habitual assassination. I don't think it was worse than other current nations, not objectively. But if the best Evil can do is acceptably awful, then some things have to be reconsidered. The Pilgrim said I'm leading everyone down the cliff just by being in charge, and just because he's trying to kill me doesn't mean he's wrong."

"So stab the Empress," Archer nonchalantly said, like it was just an afternoon's work. "Climb the Tower and, you know, don't do any of that."

"That's exactly what Diabolist is trying to get me to do," I murmured. "But I think it's a trap, Indrani. Because I'll have to

get worse to stay on top in Praes. Below wins, and just because I'd hang the Heavens if I could doesn't meant I trust the opposition any. And whoever puts a knife in me, a few decades down the line, takes up the old banner with the scales having tilted their way. Pilgrim's right about that too. There's going to be consequences to all of this that won't come out for decades, and if I ignore that I'm fucking over a lot more people than I'm trying to save."

"You made part of this mess, can't deny that," Indrani said. "Promises too, to people you like. I won't pretend breaking would be pleasant. But this is larger and older than us, Cat. It's the Game of the Gods. Not playing is as close to victory as you'll ever get."

"If was a heroine," I said, "I'd tell you to have a war you need two sides."

"That ship sailed when you fucked over the Hashmallim, I'm pretty sure," Archer said.

I laughed ruefully, shaking my head.

"The last time I felt like I had a grasp on any of this was when I killed the Lone Swordsman," I admitted. "Ever since it's been like swimming in the dark. I know I saw a shore on the other side, but the night is young and I'm getting tired. The longer I'm at it, the more I doubt I'll ever get to land."

"And what's our shore?" Indrani asked.

"I call them," I softly said, "the Liesse Accords."

"They worth the swim?" Archer said, eyebrow quirking.

"They're why I still have a crown on," I replied. "Because for them to work, someone needs to enforce them from this side."

"So we fight," she said.

"So we fight," I echoed.

Silence lingered between us, almost restful.

"I'm not sure I do," I murmured. "Care. If I did, why would I need so many rules?"

"Same reason anyone has rules," Indrani replied, with kindness like a knife. "Fear."

I knew better, these days, than to argue with the truth. I rose to my feet and leaned over Masego, forcing away her feet and brushing the wooden slivers off his face.



"Wake me with dawn," I told her.

She nodded silently, blade beginning to chip at wood again. I laid my hand on Hierophant's head and breathed in, seizing his dream.

I never felt myself breathe out.

---

*ruduen*

The more she learns, the more she realizes she doesn't know. Funny how that can work out.

Still, that much self-awareness is a lot better than what some people manage.

*JunkerZone*

I think that Cat's also underselling herself here. She might be clueless, but the alternatives are for exploiting Callow, not helping it.

[bookhero123](#)

I am going to be frank here, this novel is spiraling out of control.

Cat's adventures is basically her refusing the gods above and below, end result is obvious.

How do you end a war between 2 superpowers that won't make peace with each other?

Become a 3rd superpower or Annihilate both sides (can't have a war with no sides).

My guess is that cat will lead the woe to be a neutral superpower; one that the ones above nor the ones below can even touch, something like the dead king's territory but so much better that no arrogant heroes rise to fight or delusional villains trying to conquer it.

These are my two cents. Also i would love to get a move on with cat's name, i get that trying to come up with something so she is not reliant on Names is the best way to go but going with queen of winter is the most fun i believe considering the origin of the name is from arcadia so the gods can't fuck with that.

Sorry for the rant I just had to say this because i really like this novel and i would hate if it just goes to hell for one

reason or another because i just lost a novel a day ago from the indecisiveness of the author, IT HAD SO MUCH POTENTIAL! T^T

*RanVor*

EE allegedly has all the events planned out until the end, so I don't think it's going to happen.

*Rook*

Any good serial author has the skeleton of the plot hashed out far in advance. The actual chapter writing is just fleshing it out, not actually deciding where to go with the story week by week, it's a very common thing to do.

In this case IMO it's exceedingly clear EE already knows what he wants to write and the only likely improvisations we'll see are subplots/minor details, not critical plot points.

*Dainpdf*

Calm down. The plot is going places, characters are developing, and much awesome is being had. Cat doesn't need a new Name right now; in fact, giving her one would have been a disservice since this was where we actually got to see Fae Cat in action.

Erraticetera has not let me down yet, and I am willing to trust them to live up to expectations. Heck, these last few chapters have been really great in terms of exposing the opposition in the side of Good and having Cat struggle with it.

She chose Evil, but at what cost? Do the ends really justify the means? At what point is she just running on Sunken Cost fallacy? These questions are central to the thesis of this novel. Just giving Cat enough power to kick everyone around wouldn't just be a cop out. It would actively work against everything that has been put forward this far.

[bookhero123](#)

You do make sense, sorry if my comment came out as if I don't appreciate the novel and angry or wtv but i actually REALLY like this novel it is like top 5 for me.

I was of the same opinion about Cat name, as if she gets a name she is playing the same game the gods want meanwhile while she is drawing on fae power it counts as a nice f\*ck you to any plot the gods wanna go for.

I would like to thank the author and everyone who contributed to bringing forth this amazing novel, i

apologize again if i came off as aggressive or unappreciative of the novel.

*Dainpdf*

It came off like you got way too caught up in what you wanted to happen in the novel and were demanding it happen, and quickly. I'm glad it wasn't that.

*Miles*

If the gods above grant Good Names, and the gods below grant Evil Names, who grants the Neutral Names? The gods on Creation? It seems Masego's goal is to meet or be one. His Name isn't explicitly Evil either, iirc.

But I doubt Cat has to overpower both Good and Evil with her new side. Creation is guided by stories, and neutral sides have a tendency to be forgotten by both sides as soon as they can make themselves irrelevant to their story.

*RanVor*

With every other country, it would indeed be the case, but Callow is too vital to both Praes and Procer to be left alone just like that.

As for Neutral Names, they don't exist. The alignment of the so-called "Neutral Names" is dependent on which side is granting them. Once bestowed upon an individual, they stop being neutral. Us not knowing their alignment doesn't make them unaligned.

[Arthur Hansen](#)

And yet for a while Cat the Squire existed with both Evil and Good powers. If you look at her names under her banner, none of them really qualify as evil. Archer, Thief are given, but Adjutant and Hierophant do not evoke Evil. And even the last dregs of Cat's name, Squire, was explained to be able to become the Black or the White Knight.

So even though Cat came from Evil (and really functions like it), she does terrible, terrible heroics.

*RanVor*

No one ever said they *\*have to\** play their part. None of the Woe decides (or is allowed by Cat) to *\*act\** conventionally Evil, but that doesn't mean they wouldn't if the situation was calling for it.

This chapter, in particular, convinced me that Indrani is indeed a villain. What's more, she's the closest to D&D Chaotic Evil alignment of all the Woe, being interested only in her own gratification. While not particularly malevolent, she's still incredibly dangerous and difficult to contain.

The Names themselves are not binding – the Roles are. And those can be Good or Evil, and nothing in between. The Name of the Squire can be given to an individual with a Heroic or Villainous Role, but that only means the Heroic Squire will develop into the White Knight, while the Villainous Squire will develop into the Black Knight. They don't get to choose – it's determined by their Role.

Seems like I'd use a reminder on the topic of Good powers being used by Cat. I don't remember anything of the sort.

[Arthur Hansen](#)

The regeneration "Rise" that she got from The Lone Swordsman when the Angelic Choir tried to convince her to be the 'Good' Queen Catherine when she tricked/forced them to resurrect her because she was the hero, saving the normal people from both Evil and Good.

*RanVor*

But being a Hero in this world isn't about saving anyone. It's about serving the Heavens, and she was doing precisely the opposite in the scene you mentioned. And Rise was the power she stole using her Evil powers. It doesn't count.

[Arthur Hansen](#)

Yet the Roles they have are (somewhat) based on normal heroics, in other words saving people (from Evil) and 'defeating' said Evil. That was why the Lone Swordsman's actions were not heroic and why Cat was able to take up the Role of hero (and got her Resurrection and Rise power).

Good wanted her to fully take up the Role, but because they were the cause of the not-heroic actions, she refused.

Good is actually forgetting what good actions are at times as long as they get their pawns to fight Evil.

I wonder if that is the true test of creation?

*Tsura*

Not really true. Thief was originally a Heroine and became a Villain

*taovkool*

Philosophy with Archer. Some talk about Liesse Accord, whatever the hells it was. And it seems like Cat went off to some Winter Wonderland Adventure when she's asleep? Eh, whatever. Anyway, good to see more character development on Cat's part. All in all, it's a nice filler chapter to lead up for the next.

I'm still wondering how all of this leads to the so called Prince's Graves.

*esryok*

My guess it that will happen whenever the Kingdom of the Dead makes a move. Either a location in the Kingdom where previous crusades have died (along with commanding Princes) or the undead will kill a bunch of Proceran royals during the battle itself.

*Fern*

God, that'd be fucking horrible. Could you imagine? All this blood and sacrifice to get to a point where Cat can sign the Liesse accord; All of that is presupposed on the idea that people like Hasenbach will be in power in Procer, not people like Amadis. If the Dead King rolls in he'll kill all the royals and pacify Procer, sure, but it also means there's no counterweight to Praes. The Liesse accords might work because people who know better are in power, and if Hasenbach gets Dead King'd that hope is smothered in the motherfucking cradle. That's awful.

*Dainpdf*

One would hope the Kingdom would provide the impulse necessary for everyone else to become friends. Or at least stop trying to stab each other and maybe make some concessions.

[hoyboy](#)

Catherine accidentally helping destroy the entire continent through her actions to perverse one little piece of it would certainly be narratively on point.

*RanVor*

And what message would it send? That war is better than peace? That genocide is the right way?

*Miles*

Does it need to send a message?

*RanVor*

I kind of does.

*RanVor*

Or more like, it happens anyway, no matter the intention.

*burdi*

Maybe its the result  
fifty thousand army, lead by experience general, 2 old heroes,  
dozen other heroes yet they failed  
proceran reputation must be dead, like graveyard

*naturalnuke*

Nah, I think it'll be with the army led by Hasenbach.

[sengachi](#)

Filler?! This is the most interesting character moment we've had so far in this book!

*Dainpdf*

Yeah. This is a very powerful moment for Cat. A culmination of her growth in the "versus good guys" arc. I mean, it's still ongoing, but this is a major point.

*Richard Ngo*

Such character development! Much bonding! Very shipping!

Also, now that she mentioned it, I'm starting to think bonfire would have been a good idea. The crusaders massively outnumbered them in soldiers and named; I hadn't realised until now how cocky it was for Cat to think she could not only win, but win without significant losses. But the rules of the game she's playing are so constraining, perhaps there simply isn't any winning move.

*Matthew*

Bonfire wouldn't have worked.

The advantage they had would be temporary. Remember, Hero aspects adapt to the challenge evil presents.

So Bonfire would work for two months and then the Obscure Enchanter would get an aspect called "Follow" which would allow him to pop out armies wherever Cat's went. They'd get a "Divert" which would allow them to drop the portals into the ocean.

Bonfire only works because it relies on Fae/name powers working dependably and predictably. Which they won't do if it allows Evil to win.

*Yotz*

If I may:

"Forget being a hero. Heroes don't get to have fun. A supervillain gets to punch cars whenever they want, and make them explode and then walk through the flames and glare at people. ... At first, I was thinking about it just to make my dad mad, but supervillains get to enjoy our powers. We can knock down buildings, escape jails, claw our way back up after getting burned in half by red hot rivets..." She trailed off into faint giggles."

Arguably, the Evil wins by not winning. Or, rather, by continuing fighting. The only way Evil will ever truly lose, is if they allow Good to end this all. The core principle behind 'iron sharpens iron' primate, that is. Sure, individual villains will be brought down by the Good – but that's the point. Only through hacking out the old wood the new, stronger, better generation of villains will come to be. After all, if you got bested by someone, that means they are better than you, even if all they better at is being one hell of a luck sunuvas.

Of course, that means that Good will always prevail in battle, but I argue that the Evil already has won the war, for the Game of Gods was rigged from the beginning. After all, it's a very Evil thing to do...

*RanVor*

If so, it would mean Black is looking at all of this the wrong way.

*Yotz*

Not necessarily. He wants to end struggle and establish the new status quo, which ultimately deprives Good from the possibility of winning, and makes – from the Below viewpoint – the difference between the Good's ultimate victory and his brave new polychromatic world insignificant.

In essentiality, he wants to break the game board.

*Dainpdf*

I thought what he wanted was a permanent win for Evil, just to show that it can be done. An incontrovertible, demonstrable win.

*RanVor*

That has already been done. The Dead King, remember?

*Dainpdf*

It has. Still it's what Black wanted. Perhaps he specifically wanted a victory for Praes? Or maybe he felt the KotD was a flawed victory in some way.

*Yotz*

In his mind – yes. it wouldn't be a win for Evil, though, and this is a thing he is unable to understand due to his upbringing. He wants to break the pattern where Good always wins in the end, but he remembers what happens when you just conquer the continent.

A win for Evil would be preserving/returning of to the Old Praes, with style over substance, playing the game just for the sake of playing the game. And Old Praes is a thing he, dare I say, hates on par with the inability of his side to have a lasting victory even once. A permanent win for Evil would be Akua (before her ""redemption"" ark), or the Tyrant (who will do it just because he enjoys playing it – remember "I love war" speech from a certain piece of fiction?), or someone alike claiming the throne. It will all crumble to dust after their deaths, but – in Akua's case – she wasn't planning to die, and – in Tyrant's case – he doesn't care. Although, in the latter case, he is insightful enough to leave the building of foundations for the others – and even this is tinted with his usual flavour.

Black is *too* pragmatic in his Pragmatic Evil ways, he is of 'whatever works' mindset – at least as I understand his character. He will willingly and without hesitation will use the ways of the Good side, if the ways of the Good side will produce the needed result. He uses Evil just because it far, far more efficient way to do things – if you discard petty notion of morality. Which is completely what he refuses to understand – for it's very illogical, you see – is that his perfect machine of the new world, where literal cutthroat politics of the Old Praes, constant prideful blood sacrifices, and use of things that *permanently*



damage your only home; his wonderful new world, there is no place for all such things would be a victory his side, but not for the side of Evil.

There is only choice in this world – between the way of the Above (“Evil? Not even once!”), and the way of Below (“Why choose the lesser Evil?”). Black sees this as a false dichotomy. If the rules of the game preclude one side from having a lasting, incontrovertible victory, then he will break the game by whatever means necessary. But if game was rigged by both sides from the beginning – ‘we always win at the end’ for the Above, and ‘if the game continues, we have won’ for the Below; if the game was rigged, then breaking the rules will be an anathema for both sides – and while the Good will be actively trying to discard the offending wild card (just as we was shewn), the Evil... Well, the only thing necessary for the triumph of Good is for Evil to do nothing. They will not oppose Black directly, for it would be against their philosophical basis (GP’s delusional worldview notwithstanding), but they’ll certainly limit the amount of support they provide. And if I remember correctly, Black is the weakest Black Knight of them all specifically because he willfully acts against the constraints of his role as the enforcer of Evil.

He is a traitor to the Below because he will not kill someone just to ensure loyalty of others, if giving someone a somewhat unnecessary commendation, or monetary aid to someone’s family would be more efficient/useful in long run than just *removing* the source of the problem.

He is certainly not of Good, because he completely willing to commit mass murder, torture on industrial scale, and institutionalize inhumane practices if *that* will provide a better result. If anything, he is the first Champion of Order in the world, where previously only the Good-Evil axis existed. At least, he is a first moderately successful one of whom we know.

Or I can be compleately wrong. In which case – disregard that, I [DATA EXPUNGED].

*Yotz*

My apologies for unsightly amount of typos and missing words. I need some sleep, it seems.

*Dainpdf*

Eh. I think the Pilgrim is on to something. He’s old enough to have an idea what he’s talking about. The

idea that Evil has to be like Akua is a Praesi thing. Look at all the different evil city states. You do have a point, in that Black is breaking with a lot that is classical evil, but that *\*is\** evil. Seeing things you don't like, and BREAKING them. No matter the cost, or the consequences. Like a description we got of Akua, that she'd blast her own side apart if it meant mangling the enemy worse.

Yotz

>GP is onto something

That I can agree. Even in our world narratives hold power, and lesser people seek to imitate the Powers That Be, completely shifting societal paradigms in the span of the generation. And The Loom of Cat's world works with the Fisher King dogma weaved in its foundation, it seems. Therefore, the Villain ruler *will* drag the land in question into the Dark Side. What Peregrin presupposes, is that the Evil inside inevitably will show itself, in one form or another, and they will have another Old Praes in the middle of continent in a the near future. Which is unacceptable, of course. I seem to remember, he was at least accepting to the offer of Cat's abdication in favor of the Heroic ruler. But he has no sway in the ways of the Proceran ruling elite, nor he desires to get ahold of that "privilege" – and so this line of negotiations meets impasse.

>Black is evil

Well, yes, of course. The difference between him and, say, Akua lies in the willingness – or, rather, eagerness – to use 'hit yourself to scare the enemy tactics'. And you are right about the Praesi perception of things – but if there are only evil to work with, then we will make good from evil. Black seems to be of 'Kinslayer' mindset – then his perfect world is ensured to be, he will sacrifice himself as a last remnant of the Things That Should Not Be. It's the part that makes him so giddy after the Second Liesse – besides certainly-not-fatherly-pride – that Cat broke the mold of his calculations, thus making the possibility that he can yet see the dawn of the new world with his own eye quite real.

[hoyboy](#)

This is over-philosophizing Black's entire character. His entire rationale for doing what he does is explicitly motivated by nothing more than a desire to

win and a fundamental feeling of existential angst over being predestined to lose. He doesn't care about breaking the dichotomy of good vs evil, only in helping the latter win in service to his own self-actualization.

His philosophy of Practical Evil only diverges from normal Evil in that it's pragmatic, but it's still virtually identical in it's goals, which is the dominance of a ruthless, Named led society over a sprawling disposable underclass for the sake of Will to Power, so I doubt the Hellgods are all that miffed about it.

*Novice*

I'm not sure I agree with your last paragraph since Black has, time and again, emphasized the whole 'Institutions over Named' thing.

[hoyboy](#)

I don't remember him ever endorsing institutions in of themselves, just institutions of tools for himself and people taking after him to use. Which manifests itself in the personality cult surrounding him in the legion.

Which completely misses the point of institutions as a concept.

*Yotz*

@hoyboy

If you are right, when his plan to be killed by Cat is complete hogwash. In fact, whole storyline of Cat is a hogwash in that case, and may be discarded as such.

*RanVor*

To hoyboy, since I can't reply to them normally for some reason:

Institutions don't exist for their own sake. Their entire purpose is being a tool to aid governments in controlling the populace. Black intends to use them to do exactly what they are meant for – decentralizing power and creating a stable system that doesn't fall apart when the autocrat dies.

*mordered*

I agree, evil has already won. Even if good ended evil forever, evil would still win. For good has to have an opposite otherwise it isn't good anymore, it just is. With evil there is a struggle, in which evil acts can be committed. Without evil good is nothing, so evil wins by default.

*Dainpdf*

That argument sort of works in reverse, too. And it makes no sense, because here Evil and Good are tangible metaphysical entities. You can exterminate Evil and still have Good. As for IRL, you can't really exterminate evil because it is a gradation, but you can always exterminate the worst evils in order until your new normal is much better than it is right now.

*Dainpdf*

That sort of assumes transitivity. If Bob beats Alice, and Catherine beats Bob, that does not mean Catherine is stronger than Alice. That means she has a better match-up vs Bob.

As for how Evil wins, two ways, really. The first is for Good to do nothing. If Good will always beat you if it tries, the best way is for it not to try.

The second is General Tarquin's (from Order of the Stick): Just count the blast you got to have for decades before those pesky five minutes of loss as a victory.

*Yotz*

>That means she has a better match-up vs Bob.  
So, a higher LUCK stat. Which make her better, arguably.

Also, Tarquin for the win!

*Dainpdf*

What? Stats?

...I'm very confused.

*Yotz*

Have you ever read the the "Ringworld" by one Larry Niven? If not, I highly recommend it. Also, spoilers below the line, my dear. For "Ringworld" and Pierce Anthony's "A Spell for Chameleon" (which was not so bad for a first book of the series, I suppose; can't recommend anything else from the *Xanth* in good faith, though).

All that, strictly speaking, is more than excessive, so I will treat it as an offering to the Prince of Excess, praised be Her Dark Name.

In short, though, someone always having a better match-up is sign of better qualities of the said someone. The key word is 'always'.

=====SPOILER LINE=====

>>Ringworld.

Humans in the Known Space are revealed to be selectively bred to increase their luck. Which leads to final result of the program being near invincible due to series of unfortunate – and fatal – events that befall any of the people who wish ill upon the person in question – often even before the intent itself was formulated verbally or mentally. A literal plot armour, and a special talent that – potentially – can manipulate probabilities on the level of abrahamic God without the person in question even knowing about the talent. Which leads to some disturbing thoughts on the nature of the free will.

>>A Spell for Chameleon

Come to think of it, there was also Anthony's "A Spell for Chameleon" with a similar element, where it speculated inside the story, that the Talent in question directly influenced the Weave of the world, puppeteering designated villain of the story into the trap, exile, and then into the organizing the invasion only to ensure the survival of the protagonist, who was never even aware of possessing any kind of magical power, much less on that scale – the obscure results of aptitude tests notwithstanding.

Basically, in series of altercations between two persons with similar skill levels, perks, and abilities (STR, AGI, INT, and so on), the person with higher LUCK stat consistently wins. Therefore, if new generation is better only in being inherently more lucky, they are still better than previous one. Said luck can manifest itself in having better match-ups, for example. Which train of thought led me to a comment which inflicted *confusion* debuff upon you {winking-with-a-tongue-sticking-out emoticon}.

Thought of the day: weaponized memetics is a heluva scary thing.

*Dainpdf*

No one said "always".  
The problem of "iron sharpens iron" is precisely that Bob's only ability might be beating Alice, and Catherine's only ability might be beating Bob. Catherine might be weaker than Alice in every single respect save "vs Bob". And yet Alice might get killed by Bob and replaced by Catherine.

*Bjarkan*

where's this quote from?

*Yotz*

*"Please Don't Tell My Parents I've Got Henchmen"* by one Richard Roberts, a YA novel. That's the third book in the series, start with *"Please Don't Tell My Parents I'm a Supervillain"* if you so want to join in.

*Dainpdf*

We didn't really get to see what Bonfire is, did we? But yeah, there seems to always be a response from Above.

*Nairne .01*

Bonfire was supposed to be a tactic focused on attacking Proceran cities with hit and run tactics through Arcadia. I.e. Go behind enemy lines through Arcadia, lay waste to a city, when the enemy is just a little time away run go to another City through Arcadia. Rinse and Repeat until the enemy can't afford to wage war against you.

*Dainpdf*

You sure? I thought that was a separate thing.

[vuthuha912](#)

Bonfire should focus more on wrecking the supply that the enemy has. I mean there is no point in killing the whole city, just the food is enough – the classic Sun Tzu move. Let's see how long Procer can afford to send its men abroad while its food production is hampered. They can totally avoid a famine if they send their people home immediately but I am not sure Cordelia has enough consideration for the lower class to care if they starve or not.

*Antoninjohn*

Callow bleeds because the heavens are throwing everything and a kitchen sink at her because Cat's winning, she's evil and she's winning

*Brad*

That's just what the heavens want her to think. She'll be just about to decapitate the Saint of Swords and sign an advantageous peace treaty, then BAM! The Angels take away the concept of writing and it's all-out war again

[sengachi](#)

Yeah but as Cat just said, winning doesn't mean your people aren't dying. And if you don't want people to die, well, are you really winning then?

*RanVor*

"There's no such thing as winning or losing. There is won and there is lost, there is victory and defeat. There are absolutes. Everything in between is still left to fight for. [...] Until then, there is only the struggle, because tides do what tides do – they turn."

– Derek Landy, Skulduggery Pleasant

*Dainpdf*

That is sort of true until you remember that William was in part her doing, that the Heavens had nothing to do with Akua and the Empress (who Cat \*chose\* to ally with), and that under her reign we have indeed observed her people become more vicious.

*RanVor*

Technically true, but the only thing Catherine actually did to William was not killing him. It would have been the same if she didn't meet him in Summerholm.

As for Akua, I suspect she was at least partially the Hellgods' solution to the Foundling problem. They too would be affected by her victory, after all.

*Dainpdf*

She knowingly started a pattern of three with him. Also, I don't think Akua was so much a response from the Gods Below to Catherine as much as the last attempt of the old paradigm of Praes to unseat Malicia and her people; one last gasp of the Empire's narrative, its deformation quickly surpassing its elastic limit.

The timing doesn't fit for Catherine – Akua was raised way before she made her pivotal choice – and Cat was always just a stepping stone for our favorite Diabolist.

Plus, we have reason to believe the Gods Below still look favorably on what Catherine has wrought.

*RanVor*

But the pattern of three mattered only to Cat and William. It had didn't affect the progress of the rebellion in any significant way.

Akua was raised way before she ever met Cat, but it doesn't mean the Gods Below couldn't use her ambition to their own ends. And they might look favorably of what Catherine has wrought \*now\*, but what she intends is going to be as disastrous to them as to the Heavens, and I don't believe they don't know that.

*Dainpdf*

The pattern of three is where the whole rebellion thing got kickstarted. The rebellion would have been much lesser without the hero band driving it. Cat herself stated it.

As for what he intends... I don't know. What she intends and what she gets can be pretty disparate things.

*RanVor*

The rebellion was in the making since before she even knew he existed. Her only fault was allowing it to develop when she could stop it before it got out of control. Which is, admittedly, pretty damning, especially considering she did it on purpose.

*Dainpdf*

And she did it by sparing William, thereby allowing a band of five with a pattern with her to be formed.

*RanVor*

Yes, she did. But my point was the rebellion would have happened anyway if she didn't \*meet\* him.

*Dainpdf*

That was not the point I was arguing. It is irrelevant to the topic of whether Catherine sparing William was her causing Callow to bleed, by her own choices, not anything the Heavens pulled.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

The winner takes it all  
The loser standing small  
Beside the victory  
That's her destiny



---

A leftover thought from the latest interlude: what if all the redemption talk from Akua is the set-up for her plan to escape her bindings?

Diabolist seemed to genuinely consider her actions heroic, so the obvious thought is that she's trying to make herself look like a champion for the Callowan side of the conflict, either as Catherine's "follower" or as a narrative leverage to be unleashed at some point. What if she's aware of the greater scope of the coming conflict, and now aims for a redemption story and a common enemy to bring her into the resulting band of five Named? Akua has no way to know about the Witch of the Forest, since she had no previous connection to White Knight's band (or the outside world in general), and the other major practitioner Named all have their respective bands. Even if she suspects the Heavens might have propped up a mage to match Warlock at Red Flower Vales, she might have banked on them dying anyway.

That way, if Catherine ends up making a truce with Procer (and tries to unseat the Empress, as Akua suspects), she can either return to Praes with a conquering army, putting herself back into prominence (maybe even as a new Chancellor, given her political connections), or fight whatever new opponents emerge, making herself indisposible.

I'm not saying that's a good plan, but it might look feasible from Akua's perspective. Why do you think would she make an attempt at a redemption story?

*Daemion*

I think at this point of the story Akua doesn't play a role beyond being a tool or prop anymore. She's out of the game. Maybe at a later point, in a different story, she might get a different ending. There are lots of stories about an adventurer finding some cursed artifact which then wreaks havoc and/or possesses them.

*Yotz*

So.

Someone finds a Mantle of Woe, takes it, and ends being possessed by the Diabolist for their troubles. The climactic grand finale is ensured, and when the Good Lads/Lasses are on the verge of winning, Akua proclaims "You fools! This isn't even my final form!", and draws on full power of the Winter...

[wyaldriddler](#)

And then boom! Out pops Cat and she is Pissed.

Heh, this image amuses me.

*RanVor*

I wonder, does that mean Cat can resurrect herself as long as the Mantle of Woe exists?

*Yotz*

Well, as long as she is of Winter, Mantle of Woe exists and contains the soul of Diabolist, and Akua holds a shard of the ~~Troll's Mirror~~ Winter's Mantle, I suppose.

[sengachi](#)

Maybe, but in that case I'm pretty sure she'd come back as a pure fae queen, no human bits left.

*Dainpdf*

Depends how much of herself she manages to hold onto by then. If she can learn Akua's techniques to suppressing influences with her will, it might work.

*Yotz*

I strongly suspect the in that hypothetical case the Diabolist will end not a Chancellor, but rather as a glorified doorknob, i.e. she will replace the Demon of the Tower as a doorkeeper.

Although, the image of Akua becoming, essentially, the Tower's AI makes me hear "Still Alive" for some reason...

*Dainpdf*

For the appreciation of the audience:

This was a Triumph  
I'm making a note here: "HUGE SUCCESS"  
It's hard to overstate my satisfaction  
Praesi Villains  
We do what we must because we can  
For the good of all of us, except the ones who are dead

But there's no sense crying over every mistake  
You just keep on trying 'til you run out of lakes  
Sacrifice an immortal  
And you make a hell portal  
For the people who are still alive

I'm not even angry  
I'm being so sincere right now  
Even though you broke my heart  
And killed me and tore out my soul

And sewed bound it into your cape  
As I was sealed it hurt because I was so happy for you

Now these soldiers' bodies make beautiful undead  
And they're not too shoddy, we're creating some dread  
So I'm glad I got burned  
Think of all the heights we've climbed  
On the people who are still alive

Go ahead and leave me  
I think I prefer to stay inside  
Maybe you'll find someone else to help you  
Maybe Grey Pilgrim  
That was a joke, haha, fat chance  
Anyway, Winter is great, it's so malicious and cold

Look at me still talking when there's Evil to do  
When I look out there, it makes me glad I'm not you  
I've experiments to run  
There is research to be done  
On the people who are still alive

And believe me I am still alive  
I'm doing evil and I'm still alive  
I feel fantastic and I'm still alive  
While you're dying I'll be still alive  
And when you're dead I will be still alive  
Still alive, still alive

*Yotz*

Thank you for the treat, my dear.

But, one thing to mention... There probably must be **MAY IT NEVER RETURNS** after >This was a Triumph...

*Dainpdf*

You're welcome! Yeah, I capitalized it on purpose – it was too perfect.

*Yotz*

Also, I want an orchestral rendition of it, with choir of  
Dread Emperors/Empresses singing  
>Praesi Villains  
>We do what we must because we can

*Dainpdf*

I don't think that would work. Akua is too tinged with Evil to actually become part of a band of five. She's just taking a page out of Cat's book and playing good parts in specific conflicts, while attempting to find a place under Cat in order

to “live” again.

Also? Show of loyalty to Cat at the end, as fickle as hers is, is unlikely to endear her to the Gods Above.

*Daemion*

I really enjoyed this chapter. All these relationships, thoughts, philosophies and inner thoughts give the characters more depth.

I think it's a good sign that Cat still has an active libido and that she can see the beauty in Indrani without Winter's hunger and lust influencing her. So maybe her body is a construct, her soul has been mangled and her mind is a tiny bit insane... but she's still human to some degree.

I wonder if Indrani sees Masego as friend or as potentially more. She seems to be possessive of him anyway. Somehow I want to see that courtship. It probably involves a lot of clear orders and maybe a manual written by Hakram. Possibly the equivalent to a PowerPoint presentation, just so Masego understands what is expected of him. 😊

*Letouriste*

Would be great!:) )

Masego is so awkward socially that any relationship he start is bound to be entertaining

*Dainpdf*

Pity EE had to sort of sink the Vivienne ship right now...

*Highwayman*

Winner takes all, the law above all laws...

Non-morality seems to be more and more reasonable the more one bleeds, doesn't it? And the thing is that its a very slippery slope too.

My heart aches somewhat after reading the discussion between Cat and Archer.

*Jonnnney*

Wait, why doesn't Cat just link up with Keegan? She could at least move the duchess closer to the battlefield

*agumentic*

Because it'll take several days to several weeks? Arcadia travel is not instantaneous.

*Jonnnney*

Keegan's army is only two weeks away via normal travel that's a day at most via Acadia

*TheCount*

Thanks for the chapter!

Well, damn. I hope Cat dont get lost on her way, i dont want to know how that would play out.

....If masego isnt waking up because he found something interesting.... well, archer should have a new training partner:D

*Panic*

Good as this chapter was I feel like the last two chapters where excedingly anti climactic in terms of resolution and events considering Cats coma and inner struggle. The Akua chapter was great and removed any ill feeling about the possibility of Akua becoming a focus again as a villain. Then Cat came back from her long time in Winter Wonderland and the expectation was that she would finally get her new Name. But instead we return to the adventures of Cat the Lesser and it really takes your breath away in complete Disappointment.

*burdi*

me too, disappoint that cat like never get a new Name maybe that because she confused, doesnt know where to stand like when she let william go in summerhold

[wyaldriddler](#)

At this point I think the idea is that she won't get one this book. And I am completely fine with that one and happy since its making the point she doesn't need a Name at all. Just her Mantle and the wit to kick ass.

Aside from that, I think part of the disappointment might be coming from the sharp difference between murder happy bouncy Akua and the surly sour Cat. Bound to lower the mood a bit.

*Yotz*

She may yet get one – a strange new one, never to be seen before – in the end, as a prelude to Grand Finale of the fifth book.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I think it's one of the things giving the Grey Pligrim a bit of a headache. *He can't see any solid evidence of her Name*, and this is a guy who is very good at looking. And, he doesn't know what to make of it.

As... if she doesn't have a Name bestowed on her by the Gods Below... how capital E Evil is she? What is her actual status? And, if she is only flinging fae powers around, yet keeping up with Named of all kinds without one, what does that tell you about Names and Roles?

Cat is a battered existential crisis, sprinkled with salt and vinegar, all served wrapped in a vulgar newspaper. Free chips with the shoulders; offering mushy peace. 😊

*Decius*

So what changes when The Black Prince makes Callow part of Praes, but still sell food to the wasteland?

*Novice*

Black Prince?

*Panic*

Edward of Woodstock, The Black Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall and Aquitaine, Heir to the throne of England, Winner of the Battles of Crécy, Poitiers and Najera. Capturer of King John the second of France. Father to King Richard the Second of England.

*Decius*

Just like all the other Princes of Procer.

*Anna*

"She tightened her grip, face half-hidden by her fur-like dark hair."

Wait, what? I thought orcs didn't have hair??

*Seabornia*

No facial hair , author clarified it on reddit some time ago.

*Seabornia*

Do you think it will be Saint of the sword killing all the princes and creating Princes Graveyard? It seems fitting for Regicide. It will make Larat go traitorous, as well as fuck up peace treaty.

[ahd](#)

Subthread for guessing Cat's new Name after she comes back from this dreamwalk.

I'll start: the Redeemed Villain. Aspects: Light, Shadow, Sarcasm.

[wyaldriddler](#)

I'm pretty sure EE is fucking with our previous expectations set up by all the various Have Dream Get Name shenanigans of older books when he has no intention of giving one to her right now.

Yotz

The Flipper. Aspects: Cynicism, Sarcasm, Irony.

[SpacyRicochet](#)

I wonder... Is (some variation of) Patriot available? And is it a heroic Name? 🤔

[ahd](#)

Probably neutral, like Archer or Squire. Aspects: Yes, No, For Callow!

*Dainpdf*

Vivienne is more of a patriot than Cat is.

grzecho2222

Nameless Queen. Aspects: Unchoose, Unbestow, Unname

*MetruX*

The Stranger. Aspects: Dead, Alive, Neither.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Motto: "Not fucking applicable" or "Next!".

[sengachi](#)

Heretic Queen: Deny, Swear, Bestow, so Named for rejecting the gods Above and Below alike.

(Swear as in oaths, but with the obvious and obligatory snide commentary from the Named peanut gallery about Cat's language).

*Dainpdf*

Still hold to the idea that she gets a Queen name, in Liesse. Pattern of three, twice refused.

Alex

The Dead King opens a Hellgate and invades Liesse, giving him power to create permanent portals out of his own hell to attack wherever he sees fit. The final confrontation happens there.

*Dainpdf*

Uh, why would he? He already has a greater breach; plus, Akua's hellgate-on-demand spell was broken, and its power source removed.

*Alex*

Oops, I didn't think it through. Completely forgot about the power source. Just thought it was plausible.

Thought process went: He essentially founded Praesi magical theory and thus could probably coopt the system, the place is practically consecrated to the hellgods with how much death occurred there, and hellgate-on-demand seemed up his alley (i.e. permanent fast-travel portals to anywhere so he's not stuck in Keter).

That story would allow Cat her third run at a Queen name too now that she rejected it once (the "heroic queen" name) and Black ruined it for her once (the "Black Queen" name).

Plus, well, bad guy and flying fortress seem to go together.

*Dainpdf*

The Miezans practically founded Praesi magical theory; he precedes that, I believe. What he did do was perform the greatest single known act of diabolism to date (perhaps save for our girl Akua).

But yeah, I can see the Dead King making some move that essentially forces Cat into taking the Name.

*RanVor*

Damn, this chapter destroyed me. After two days of arguing for Cat, I find out she doesn't even believe in it herself.

*Nairne .01*

Actually, the fact that she is fighting despite not knowing if she is right is pretty heroic.

Sure the main driver may be fear of admitting she is not right, but both that and the belief that she is right, have something in common.

She refuses to admit that she is wrong, that what she seeks is wrong.



So she struggles and that's not something anyone can keep doing.

*RanVor*

What she seeks is not wrong. The Liesse Accords might be the only thing actually worth fighting for in this world if they are what I think they are. The question is: is it achievable? If it's not, the price of trying is going to be horrific.

The Big Grey himself admitted that her goal is noble, but it's not going to work, because everyone else is too scared and/or arrogant to compromise.

*Dainpdf*

He also said he thinks she is tainted and so anything she accomplishes also will be. Whether he is right remains to be seen.

*Dainpdf*

That was what it looked like, but she has found she has an answer. The Accords. She's not as certain as she once was of her path, but that's growing up. She's still got something she believes in, and she'll fight for it.

[Antony444](#)

Well, that promises fun negotiations with the Crusaders. Both sides completely exhausted, one in danger of starvation and with the Army of Daoine on its rear. I can already see the sparks from here...

The long dialogue between Cat and Indrani was beautiful. Shows deeply why some villains abandon the concept of restraint and humanity bit by bit. You realise the world is far more complex than you had any idea...and you don't have the weapons to deal with it.

[ahd](#)

Odds of the crusaders keeping the truce terms, now that they know that killing the Woe is the only way to not lose?

Juniper could just quietly pack up the army and withdraw in good order through a portal, and then the Hunt can enjoy themselves with Rozala's last desperate attempts at foraging or resupply parties. Archer snipes the remaining heroic party's horses and baggage train, with the Hierophant waiting if the Saint tries to close for melee. By the time the heroes have finished walking to Hedges, Pickler has rebuilt enough of the new model siege train and the Watch are manning the walls.

Priests who have starved mostly to death are mostly no longer a factor.

That's the Callowan BATNA.

grzecho2222

Still waiting for the missing bell from island to be resolved

[Walter](#)

I feel like Cat gets \*this\* close to understanding, then zooms off in another direction.

Like:

1: I told William that the flags don't matter, it's all about the people living happily

2: If I surrendered and joined the crusaders we could defeat Malicia/Black with far less bloodshed and far more certainty of victory

And she gets this incoherence, she calls it out! So whatever her motive is, it isn't the people of Callow anymore. If she cared about them she'd have joined up with Cordelia, regardless of whether that ends up with Proceran princes in charge. They can scarcely be worse for Callow than her own reign, after all.

But, like, she isn't pot committed re: the flags either. Like if she admits to herself that she doesn't know or care about the callowan farmers that Akua's impression of her was caring about, then why isn't she working much more closely with Malicia/Black?

She is holding back an awful lot, with the notion that it is gonna get sane people to bargain with her, but she threw that aside when she lined roads with crucified prisoners.

I guess I just don't get what her objective is. If she isn't after the people's safety, because she isn't joining the Crusaders, and she isn't after evil's victory, because she won't work with Black/Malicia and she knows nobody will deal with her, because she is a fiend who constantly does murders...what's the goal here?

RanVor

The lasting peace. The situation where nobody is fucking anybody over. Forcing everyone to reconsider their position and stop constantly trying to genocide each other for kicks or ideals.

[Walter](#)

I can't really believe that when Robber is on the staff, right? Like, the people Cat has spoken to in recent memory

are, I wanna say, Akua, Juniper and Larat? None of whom has any interest whatsoever in peace?

*Novice*

Those people doesn't have to be interested in peace. They're not the queen.

[hoyboy](#)

She isn't going to be able to change until she starts questioning her own will to power and whether she, a violent teenager, should be unilaterally deciding the course of an entire nation.

Alas, questioning that would basically be questioning both her own notions of wanting greatness in her youth and the ideology drilled into her by her parental unit emulator.

*Dylan Tullos*

hoyboy:

There's a lot of sunk costs fallacy involved, too. If she changes course, then she has to admit that she was wrong earlier, and that all of the lives she sacrificed were lost to no purpose. That's hard for anyone to acknowledge.

*Dainpdf*

You forget that, much like Praes wants Callow as a buffer nation vs Procer, Procer wants them as a buffer nation vs Praes. Procer is not all fun and roses. Cat is struggling in the hopes that she can make this work, not just for the sake of people right now, but for the future. Is conceding to Procer really an acceptable choice, looking forty years down the line? Look at what happened to the Pilgrim's homeland.

*RanVor*

If the Accords fail, surrendering to the crusade is indeed the least horrible of all the awful options left to Catherine. It just doesn't solve anything but the most immediate problems. There's still going to be a war with Praes a few years down the line. And then another, and another. The Callow is still going to bleed, and the next chance to change the status quo is not going to appear in her lifetime, if ever. Assuming she doesn't get executed on the spot, which is almost certain.

*RanVor*

Also, being a buffer nation is pretty much Callow's explicit purpose in Creation.

*Dainpdf*

Plus all the frontier nobles using Callowans in battle like they do their levies in Procer.

*Nairne .01*

Is it? I mean look at it. The crusade will not destroy Praes. The alchemy induced undeath released in Liesse was not the only thing the Tower has that's marked as a Red Protocol (correct me if I put the wrong name here). They'd be put under the grinding wheel again because when she'd surrender, they'd start conscripting in Callow (pilgrim or no pilgrim at the table), and when the tower retaliates it will be Callowans who die first.

*RanVor*

Sure, it's very bad. But surrendering to Praes might be even worse in the long run. Unless Black gets his way, but that's one helluva gamble.

Basically, if the Accords fail, Callow is fucked forever, no matter what.

*RedoneAgain*

I have to wonder, do the gods above and below really correlate properly to good and evil? The elves are firmly on the side of good but, I can't imagine them worshipping the gods above. Also there was an overseas empire that had both a villain and a hero ruler. It doesn't sound to me like they worship the gods above.

*RanVor*

The fact that their servants are each other's sworn enemies doesn't mean they have to be. The entire Good Vs Evil war started because they had a philosophical dispute, after all. I imagine them sitting around the table and playing the situation like a game, with Below getting pissed when Above try to cheat. Then Cat enters the stage and scares the shit out of them all with her revolutionary ideas. They start to panic and unleash everything they have at their disposal to bring her down, plunging the Creation into chaos in the process.

*Nairne .01*

I'd think Gods wouldn't panic like that. Creation was around way too long for them to not experience all kinds of things in their dispute and they act accordingly.

[wyaldriddler](#)

That's one of the core questions of the story. In the initial description you can't actually tell which side is which. Plus good and evil as described IRL are kinda terrible descriptions to apply to the Guide. They break down below the surface level.

*RanVor*

Actually, I'd say the Evil is pretty accurate. It's the Good that turns out not to be very good after closer examination.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

There's a whole lot of small "e" evil in Calernia, and a real shortage of small "g" good.

The Wandering Bard has a better claim to be "practical evil" than Black in some ways; her plans are practical, but she's definitely evil. The main difference between her and the raving madmen who want to remake all of Calernia according to their grand plan is that she's actually succeeding.

The Gods Below seem to be utterly indifferent to human welfare, but they're honest. You pay, and they deliver. Look at Hanno's mom; she gave her life, and they gave her revenge and ensured that her husband would be buried. In an awful way, their deals are fair, but you don't want to be in a place where you have to make a pact with them.

The Heavens seem to be nice when things are going their way, and horrible when they aren't. In peacetime, they have pacifist healers from the House of Light helping people and trying to build a better society. As soon as things go off the rails, though, they send Bard to restore the status quo by any means necessary.

The Gods Below are a merchant will sell you anything from heroin to nuclear weapons if you're willing to pay the price. The Gods Above are relatively benevolent rulers who will provide you with medicine for free, but they'll do anything to make sure that their narrative isn't disrupted.

*RanVor*

You do have a few good points here, Mr. Genocide. I didn't want to speak with you, but I'll make an exception and tell you this: the Bard is doing the same thing as all the Heroes, just with less pretending and more efficiency.

*Dainpdf*

The “whatever methods to win” thing seems to be a thing of Evil, however. Which is at the heart of her paradoxical nature.

*RanVor*

Remember that the side of Good never faced the Practical Evil before. They always won easily with their usual methods, unless facing the enemy with an overwhelming advantage, like the Dead King. But the Evil has changed and the usual methods don't work anymore. That's why the Heavens have sent their special agent, the Bard, to do the dirty work that needs to be done if they are to stay on top.

*Dainpdf*

I'm pretty sure the Bard has been around since ancient times. Black speculated the only things Team Evil got that could be the counterbalance for her would be the Kingdom of the Dead or Empress Triumphant.

*Jecherio*

I think Cat will get a neutral name. If you guys remember in chapter she talked about “regulating” things. I think the Liesse Acords will be a game changer in how the battle good vers. evil will continue. I very much looking forward to how it will play out

*Jecherio*

Remember the Hierarch? I see some interesting paraells between him and her.

*RanVor*

The Hierarch seems to be the Bard's Spanner in the Works. I wonder if it's a part of the Tyrant's plan. I don't know if he's a Hero or a Villain, but I don't think it matters. He probably considers all the gods Foreign Despots.

He is, in a sense, very similar to Cat.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Well, they are both Foreign Despots whose existence is an affront to the People. And they're both playing a different game than the traditional Good v.s. Evil.

I love the moment when Anaxares declares that if the People have decreed that he is a Person of Value, then the "people are wrong, and in need of purging."

He gets even better when he turns to the Wandering Bard and tells her that the Gods "drew no lots and hold no appointments." His particular brand of crazy might be terrible in its own right, but he's definitely not going to be a puppet of Upstairs or Downstairs.

*Dainpdf*

In this world of "with us or against us", however, he's still closer to Evil. And that's probably enough.

[BarthHumphries](#)

I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Procer to realize, "Oh no, we just spent a whole bunch of money and manpower on a crusade, that we lost, and that we pointed in the wrong direction because here comes the kingdom of the dead behind us.

[BarthHumphries](#)

And I expect Cat will have to join with Procer to fight the deadie baddie.

*RanVor*

WHO DOESN'T VOTE IS A CRUSADER!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[ahd](#)

The Heavens will it.

*DD*

Cat is constantly beating herself up, which is fine for character development, but I feel like we're rehashing at this point. This gives us some insight into Archer but I don't feel like it advances Cat in any way.

The whole deal seems anticlimactic in a way I can't verbalize.

The feeling may be childish, like a kid wanting a clear winner or loser. Again, it's hard for me to verbalize, making me doubt my own intelligence. Maybe I'm just impatient after the many non-Cat threads.

*Dainpdf*

Well, the pacing has been haywire. We had a battle, then a stop when the lake formed, a long interlude with lots of cliffhangers (each promising an unfulfilled return to action). Then we get battles, Akua takes to the field, culminating in Cat waking up... And bam, slam the brakes again. It's quite jarring.

*Dainpdf*

I really liked the chapter in concept. This conversation with Archer puts a cap on all the development Cat has had so far. We get to see her rebuttal to the Pilgrim's "evil is toxic" position, way back before the war really started, and to Archer's "the only winning move is not to play". It feels like she's finally ready to move on to the end of this particular arc. On the other hand, the pacing on these last few chapters has been all over the place. It's been stop-start, and this chapter is another sudden stop from a hundred. It feels jarring and out of place when we had just started revving up with Akua taking to the battlefield, then Cat waking up. Also, the delivery here was confusing, and some points were quite difficult to unravel, not due to complexity but because of awkward phrasing or framing. Still, overall a great chapter. Thanks!

*RanVor*

Irrelevant to the chapter, but I wonder how much of the Praesi villainy is actually a product of them having nothing to lose.

Praes is a nation of no hope. They are taught from the moment they are born that they are doomed to fail no matter what they do. The gods have forsaken them, everyone hates their guts, and their dreams and ambitions are all meaningless. In an environment like that, it's very easy to decide that if everyone thinks you're a monster anyway, you might as well be one.

So they go on a mad rampage against the world, looking for vengeance on those who look down on them, but only managing to justify the prejudice against them. Trapped in a vicious cycle, they cultivate their hatred and wounded pride, passing it down to the next generations.

They are probably too far gone to change that, but it's kind of sad when viewed this way.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Common Praesi do live in a hopeless society. They can only wait for the next famine, or an invasion that will see them



conscripted as cannon fodder. I can see how easy it would be to decide that if everyone treated you like a monster, you might as well be one.

Highborn Praesi are different. They seem to enjoy their Role as the villains of Creation, rejoicing in their mass sacrifices and backstabbing. "Iron sharpens iron" is the creed of a culture that rejoices in treachery and evil, seeing Evil as a means of self-improvement.

Both mindsets are born out of the same circumstances, but the common people chose to endure their Role while the rulers chose to embrace it.

*Nairne .01*

But you have to consider how the mindset started for the Highborn Praesi.

Was it the first sacrifices to make the fields fertile when they decided they are above the masses?

Was it something else?

I'm curious.

[vuthuha912](#)

That is why I want them to get out of the whole thing so bad and why despite the failure of Black to reign in Evil, I still want him to survive and try again. It is as hopeless as it can get at this point. He obviously loves Praes – the center of his world. He wants it to live on regardless of what philosophy it follows. Survive and have some sort of hope for the future. Black is obviously a product of his culture – that is why he is evil but he has the fortune of clear sight to know what the root problem of his country was and do something about it. I never care for his evil deeds or I kinda get it.

No Gandhi is going to rule Praes and made a substantial change. You need to be the Black Knight or Dread Empress to actually have a shot at fixing things. And even that is not enough. With the shitty relationship between Procer and Callow, even if we went begging on our knees for a trade agreement, it is not gonna worked because they would rather have a lunatic rule us for convenience than actually help us. So he went and force Callow into selling him grain at a fair price. Very villainous, very evil but so so human. It is like humans were born to suffer.

He is pragmatic and he is evil but he is someone who still fights for a chance at the future rather than sitting there and drowning like so many of his countrymen. If he died then Praes might have to wait several centuries to get another

chance or it might not even get that. The pattern might be too deep to be broken and Praes is forever trapped in this hellhole of starvation.

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## Chapter 19: Recovery

*"To seek to ascertain the worth of even a single a soul through morality is to force unnecessary mysticism onto a simple matter. As in all things, supply and demand determine the price."*

– Extract from "Bought and Sold", a collection of the teachings of the Merchant Prince Irenos, founder of Mercantis

"I'll admit it," I said. "I was expecting a library."

My previous trips into dreamland had not led me to expect a great deal of nuance in the matter, though admittedly that'd been my own mind. Might just be that Masego was a little less straightforward in his way of looking at the world. The lack of swamp and shambling horde certainly implied as much. Instead Hierophant's dream was order gone mad. A pane of crystal under my feet, tethered to the centre of the massive structure by a long length of gold, kept me aloft. Unfortunately that did little to put my old fear of heights from rearing up its head. It was one thing to leap down from the sky when I knew my legs would unbreak themselves within moments, another to have only a thin sheet of crystal being the only thing keeping me from falling into endless void.

"Fucking Hells, Masego," I muttered. "Would it have killed you to put up a railing?"

Aside from the very real possibility of falling down forever, I had to concede there was a strange beauty to what I saw. It reminded me, in a way, of the depiction of astral spheres I'd once seen in Black's mansion in Ater. Though, instead of circling the sun the way mages had along ago proven Creation did, everything here was circling the sphere of shivering translucent flame held within a deep basin of gold. From it spanned long tubes of gold holding up lesser spheres all wildly different. Crystal and frost, roiling wind and swarms of small silver constructs. My own platform, like all the others, circled around the central sphere with a slow and measured ticking sound. I could glimpse gears and cranks beneath the basin that kept it all moving along. I shivered, though there was no wind here. Perhaps *because* there was no wind. There was something subtly wrong about what lay before me, though I would not deny its eerie splendour.

It was not a perspective, the way the cold machinery behind Black's eyes could be understood. It was...

"A way of understanding Creation," I finished out loud.

My voice felt dim and there was no echo. The void swallowed it all. My platform kept moving, and I shook myself out of the fugue. Odds were that I'd be able to find Masego within the sphere at the heart of this. I looked down at the gold support beam and winced. It was round, after all. If I slipped after making my way down... Well, I wasn't sure what the consequences of falling into the void would be, but considering Hierophant's mind was bound to have some very nasty defences I suspected it would not be pleasant. Not that my own little journey into Winter dreamland had been a treat. My fingers clenched. *Don't think about it*, I told myself. Winter had been trying to grind me down, by lingering on the remembrance I was only playing its game.

"So shimmying across that beam is a bit of a stretch," I decided. "That leaves trying to move from sphere to sphere."

I turned my gaze to the moving structures. While I couldn't discern the exact pattern yet – some beams extended at specific sections of the rotation, while others withdrew – I could at least grasp the likely length of the beams. And, more importantly, if one was ever going to come close enough for me to leap across. One, two, three – no, just two, that last one was moving back without warning and staying there. It'd have to do. I considered allowing a full rotation to take place just so I'd avoid running into any surprises, but there were no guarantees the pattern would remain the same every time. And, by the looks of it, this was going to take a while. Not all spheres were rotating at the same speed, but mine was fairly slow. Hard to properly measure time and distance in here, but I'd guess at least two hours for a full turn? Leaping uncertainly would be a risk, but so would be waiting that long when I was uncertain of the relative time flows in here and outside.

"I understand you're a man of deep and complex thought, Zeze, but you're not making this easy," I sighed. "You know what's the worst people have to deal with, in my mind? Condescension Queen and Lady Backstab. And that one endless horde of dead trying to kill them, but let's be honest – that's not exactly out of our wheelhouse."

I'd kind of expected one or both of the twins to materialize and mouth off after that, but I remained alone. Shame. Probably could have made rope out of intestines, maybe used bones for a hook. I paused.

"I'm not being unnecessarily gruesome there," I defensively told the void. "I don't know how to make rope out of hair, and to be

solid enough to hold my weight skin would have to be tanned first."

Nothingness did not answer. Pointedly so, I felt.

"Well, fuck you too," I muttered.

It wasn't murder if they were projections of your unconscious mind, I comforted myself. Probably. I'd never looked up if the Empire had laws on the subject. Testing the platform beneath me, to my distaste I found it rather slippery. That was not going to be pleasant. I tried to see if Winter was willing to get involved, but I was reaching for nothing. No, I thought. Not nothing. It was just *distant*. Interesting, but it wasn't helping me in the slightest at the moment. The first outer sphere passed close after I spent half an eternity dawdling in the middle of nowhere, but I let that one pass. The sphere was wind and barely contained. Too much of a risk. The second rotated close after the rest of eternity passed me by, and I winced. Fire. Silver flames that flickered without a sound. Well, it wasn't going to be pleasant if I stumbled into those but it was still better than falling. The boots on my feet were old, nothing like those I now wore though I vaguely recalled having owned that pair before being apprenticed to Black. The wiggle room for my toes was nice, but the softness of used leather less so. I had to balance my weight carefully when I took a running start.

"Nonononono-" I valiantly screamed, realizing with horror halfway through the leap that the sphere was withdrawing.

I had no power to call on, no mantle or Name that could save my hide at the last moment. The stark understanding of my helplessness brought back something I'd begun to forget – fear. Not the dim worry for events yet to come that haunted my every hour since I'd taken the crown, but the colder thing that was having to look death in the eyes. I twisted forward, and my fingers caught the edge of the platform. My life was not owed to my own merits. The sphere had just withdrawn only slightly.

"Oh Hells," I panted, forcing my other hand to clench so the trembling would stop while I brought it up to clasp the platform's edge.

I felt sweat drenching my back, another sensation I'd near forgotten. My palms were growing moist as well, and that was a lot worrying since they were the only thing between me and falling.

"Godsdamnit, Masego," I said. "Godsfucking-"

I took a deep breath, then pulled myself up with grunt of effort. It was awkward, and my palm slipped when I got my leg over the ledge. I ended up falling awkwardly on the side, rolling in panic

towards the fire to avoid the fall. Wait, had there really been enough –

*The Conjurer was an utter fool, yet somehow he still lived despite Masego's best efforts. His lips twisted into a sneer and he traced Form and Force, weaving the formula his words shaped through them. Air clustered into three arithmetically perfect spheres and shot forward, though in his irritation he had allowed the proper angle to/*

*Seven full months had he studied the theory. It was the simplest working he knew, transmutation of power into heat and light, yet his every deviation from the original formula to craft his own had resulted in failure. The numbers were perfect, he knew it, but somehow the spell would not/*

*"We're not bleeding people, Apprentice," she said accusingly. "We're not that desperate." He blinked, more out of sheer affront than surprise. What kind of a blunderer did she take him for? He opened his mouth to snap/*

– I rolled out of the silver flames, my body shivering. That had felt... I patted my own stomach, reassured to find it flat. For a moment there'd been a disconnect and I'd expected to find otherwise. I closed my eyes and laid there for a moment before slapping my own face with an open palm. The sting snapped me out of it and I dragged myself into a crouch.

"Memories?" I murmured, glancing at the sphere.

Maybe. I'd felt genuinely nettled throughout all three glimpses. The third time had even been directed at myself, which was giving me a headache since his recollection of that conversation was a lot more vivid than my own. There'd been a common thread. It might be the same for every sphere, a sort of archive. Gods, his mind was so weird. I was starting to feel a lot better about the murder swamp in my own. I shook myself out of the trance. The rotation had continued while I was elsewhere, and for longer than I'd thought. I couldn't even see the crystal platform I'd started on anymore. Still, screwed as that had been I was in a much better position now. There were twice as many spheres circling close to this one than there'd been for the last, and I picked on that looked like an orb of pure white marble for my second leap. There was no nasty halfway surprise this time. Time was hard to gauge, in here, but by my fourth leap I felt like I'd made some decent progress. I was more than halfway through, though difficulties had come with the advance. This close to the centre of the structure the spheres moved a lot quicker. And, I saw with a frown, the platforms around them were smaller. Not a lot of room for mistakes there.

I bid my time, reluctantly, until I picked one out whose rotation seemed steady and the sphere on it not too dangerous. A slower

one passed by, but I wasn't going anywhere near something that looked like a hole of darkness sucking in everything if I could help it. A constantly moving jigsaw of ivory wasn't honestly much better, I'd admit to myself, but at this point there was only so much pickiness I could afford. With another heroically shrill scream I leapt, and it went perfectly. Angle and swiftness, all aligned as they should be. Then my boot touched the crystal, and with a sinking feeling I realized it was rough instead of smooth. Which wouldn't have been much of a problem if I'd adjusted my stance before jumping. I had not. I stumbled with all the grace of cart rolling down a hill, my forehead going into-

*He did not understand why the orc kept seeking his company, though as long as he came with a shatranj board Masego would not refuse the company. Campaigning, much as Father had implied, was a dull thing to suffer through. It was only when Hakram sat across him, sliding open the shutters holding the pieces, that he realized he'd been awaiting Adjutant. That he had not ceased his dissection earlier because there was nothing more to learn from the subject, but because he'd been looking forward to their evening game. "White?" Hakram offered and/*

*"It's a sprite," Archer said, shaking the glass bottle. He'd known at a glance, of course, and the angry buzzing of the lesser spirit indicated displeasure at the rough handling. "I am not unfamiliar with them," Masego replied. "They are quite common in western Callow." The strange woman chuckled, tossing the bottle into his lap. He hastily grabbed it. "Magelight's supposed to be hard on the eyes," Archer said. "If you're going to keep reading after dark, use that instead." He started in surprise. Had she caught it for him? Why would she/*

*"They were the rooms of the Wizards of the West, you know," Thief said, leaning against the threshold. Masego did not quite succeed at hiding his start. She'd emerged without warning, as was her wont. Not even Summer's light cast a shadow on her aspect. His eyes swept across the room, finding only furniture and a bath in the Soninke manner. "There is no trace of their presence," he informed the woman. She shrugged. "Figured as much," Thief said. "But there's old stories about the location making it easier to align with 'otherworldly powers'. Thought you might want to have a look." The tone was defensive, he was certain. It held all the right markers. Did/*

My face was less than an inch away from shifting ivory as I balanced uneasily on my feet. The roof of my mouth was dry. I licked my lips, retreating half a step. That'd been much more intense than the last. More nuanced as well. I'd felt the confusion shifting to understanding like it was my own. I still remembered what it felt like, people's faces being so hard to read. Was that how he felt all the time? I'd thought he was uncomfortable with touching because it was the way Warlock had

raised him, but that hadn't been the way at all. I just... hadn't known what the touching was for, and I'd hesitated to act until I could correctly identify the reason. It'd been like living a world full of masks, so very few of which I could read. Slowly I calmed down. Touching my face helped, the touch of my own fingers on my own flesh. I didn't even bother to assess how much time had passed, since I already knew I wouldn't like the answer. The spheres moved, but I waited patiently for my openings. Another two leaps, and as I stood besides a sphere of lightning-infused amber I timed my last one.

I'd underestimated how massive the central sphere truly was. At least as large as the royal palace in Laure, and the gold basin that held it was even larger. The trembling translucent flame in front of me was unlike the other globes I'd encountered. It was not full, only a thin barrier. Through it I could make out lights and shapes, some still and others in movement. Steeling myself, I marched through. Heat licked at my skin, ignoring my clothes, but there was no rush of foreign memories. Inside the sphere, as I had thought, Masego awaited. He was far from the only thing in there. Constellations of instruments of all kinds filled the firmament of this place, gold and silver and obsidian and a hundred other tools – some I had seen before, others never even imagined existed. They all clustered around Hierophant, who stood with his back to me as he studied something I could not make out.

"Distraction," Masego said absent-mindedly. "Kill it."

The only other living entity in the sphere moved. I looked back at my own face, my twin snorting and unsheathing her sword. Not my twin, I thought. She didn't wear the same clothes as me, neither in this place nor back in Creation. She wore the same plate I had that day when we fought the Princess of High Noon, and her smile was too broad to be entirely human. It was a caricature of daring and insolence, not something lips could actually do.

"Masego," I called out.

"Ah, apologies," he replied patiently. "Please kill it."

Flicker.

The other Catherine was no longer that. Archer idly nocked an arrow, the boundary between her scarf and her face blurred. Her appearance was even stranger than my not-twin's had been. She was less detailed, like a rough painting of herself. It was when the string went as furthest back as it could that she sharpened, and in that moment she was *stunning*. The hungry gleam in the eyes, the easy arrogance in her stance. She wasn't more beautiful than the real Indrani was, but there was an *intensity* to her that I'd never seen in Archer. Like she was leaving an indelible mark on this moment. The surprise of it slowed me down, and throwing

myself to the ground did not help quite enough. The arrow went through my chest and I grunted in pain.

Flicker.

Adjutant slowly spun his axe as he advanced towards me. More statue than orc, all that he was set in stone. The weight of his presence was feather-light, at first, but the longer it was there the heavier it bore down on me. He bared fangs of carved bone as too-clever eyes followed my rising to my feet. The eyes were the most expressive part of this statue of Hakram, inhumanly perceptive. As if they were the only living part of him. I broke the arrow's shaft, biting my lip to avoid screaming.

"Hakram," I said. "Don't do it."

He kept advancing.

"Hakram," I barked. "I order you to desist."

Still advancing. Fuck.

"Masego," I screamed, and then not-Hakram was upon me.

The moment he struck, he was a statue no longer. He turned into flesh and blood, strength uncoiling like a trebuchet released. I tried to catch his wrist, but I might as well have been wrestling that trebuchet. He smashed me into the ground effortlessly, painfully jarring the arrowhead still in my chest.

"Zeze," I yelled. "Don't you-"

"Wait," Masego said.

The entity froze, axe a hair's breadth away from my throat. Hierophant turned, and I grimaced at the sight. No blindfold on his face, i here. Hollow burnt-out sockets studied me, balls of Summer flame hovering within.

"I know you," he said.

"Catherine," I reminded him. "Your friend."

He frowned. His face blurred, then became calm again.

"Are you quite certain?" he asked.

*Shit. He doesn't remember anything that's in the spheres outside, does he?* I had no idea how much of the man I knew was standing in front of me.

"Masego, you need to wake up," I said. "I came here to get you back."



"Don't be absurd," he chided me. "There is so much left to study."

He gestured towards the thing his body had been hiding and my eyes widened. It was a sphere like those outside, though much smaller. The ball of Light was wriggling violently, a wound in it kept open by silver pincers.

"It is much clearer, without the noise," Hierophant told me. "We are making great progress."

I forced a smile.

"That's good," I said. "Tell me more about that. I want to see. But I'll need to get up, for that, and there's a blade at my throat."

Flicker.

I saw Thief's face, for a heartbeat, and then the entity was gone. Masego was gesturing.

"Come, come," he said. "You're familiar with the Ligurian theory of magic, of course."

I got up, hand on my throat.

"Of course," I lied. "It's my favourite."

He offered a beaming smile. His face blurred and he was calm again.

"You're not trying to trick me, are you?" he asked.

"Of course not," I hastily replied. "I uh, just really hate the Jaquinite theory."

Gods, I really should have listened more closely when he talked about that. Was being an occasionally shitty friend going to get me killed? That'd be fitting piece of irony.

"As you should," Hierophant sniffed. "Procerans. Their idea of a proper formula is to get down on their knees and *pray*."

"Just the worst," I agreed, slowly coming closer.

He gestured again for me to stand by his side.

"Now, the Gigantes do shroud their sorcery behind unnecessary claptrap," he lectured. "But I believe Gharan the Wise was correct when he theorized they are the eldest race on Calernia to have developed a comprehensive method for use of the Gift."

"Only makes sense," I said.

I was close enough to knife him, now, but would that actually help? Academic question anyway, I didn't have a knife and not-Thief could be anywhere. I glanced at the sphere he was inviting me to watch, and my vision swam. I could almost make out something. A memory, though I didn't live it like the others. Marchford. Night, with hundreds of columns of fire moving according to my will. A ritual repurposed, my first real stride towards understanding the deeper mysteries of High Arcana. I closed my eyes.

"You were the Apprentice, then," I said.

"Just a title," he dismissed. "As milestone that denotes understanding reached, but of little practical worth."

"You're not anymore, though," I said. "You're the Hierophant. How did that happen?"

A little heavy-handed, but I had a lot of detachment to bludgeon through here. Subtle wasn't going to work. Masego smiled. His face blurred. He was furious.

"Distraction," he said. "Unimportant."

"Name transition isn't important?" I probed. "How often have you seen that phenomenon?"

His face blurred, returned to calm. I'd survive to hear a reply, then. Apparently improving one's vocabulary really *was* a life-saving skill, who knew?

"Not enough," he said. "But it is all contaminated. Too much bias. Not enough left to examine after removal."

"Oh, that's all right then," I shrugged.

He nodded, pleased at my agreement.

"Difficult research isn't for everyone," I continued. "I'm sure someone will eventually get around to explaining it to you."

His face darkened.

"I do not need to depend on the findings of others," he said.

"Obviously you have to," I said. "I mean, you're just not capable enough to study it with the bias intact. You've said it yourself, it's too much."

I would have felt a lot worse about trying to trick him in this state if he hadn't ordered me shot moments ago. Hierophant dismissed the sphere of Light with a wave of the hand, and reached out. Plucking out a distant sphere of water in a way that

should not have been physically possible, he set it in front of us.

"It can be done," he insisted. "Simply a matter of discipline."

"I look forward to your findings, then," I smiled.

His face blurred, and remained that way.

"You interfere with the process," he said in an utterly flat voice.

"I would never," I said and snatched his hand, forcing it into the sphere.

White light, blinding. A knife going through my back.

"No," Hierophant's voice barked. "No, *go away*. Catherine?"

I dropped down on my knees. Was that blood in my mouth? Fuck, it was just a stabbing. Thief was nowhere that good at killing people, I called bullshit. The spots went away and I looked at Masego's mortified face.

"Hey, Zeze," I grunted. "Been a while."

"Cat," he murmured. "You're – no, doesn't matter. I can end it."

His fingers threaded through mine, softly, and as he squeezed we woke.

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## *Byzantine*

Name dreams... I wonder if the Hero version is just as screwed up.

### *TripleJ*

I think that it matches the ideological difference between what is defined as Good and Evil in this story. Good is not about kindness nor about helping anyone, it is about accepting the plan of the Gods above. The hero version is probably of angels torturing them about being humans until they give up. All contact with angels has basically been "browbeat your soul until you surrender" in the story so far. It is wrapped with an aesthetic that is about a positive order of things, but the core of it is humanity's submission.

Evil is not about murder and pillaging, it is about striving for your own goals and going beyond the acceptable to reach

them. Cat and Masego had dreams that are about their struggles, about what they want to achieve – it may be horrible and twisted, but at all points they are expected to have agency and change things. It was the same even when Akua attempted to enslave Cat. The way out is always through choice, requiring human agency... wrapped in horrible cruelty on all sides.

[TeK](#)

And we wonder, why Heroes are so reluctant to see a reason. They have Stockholm syndrome.

*werafdsaew*

I think we saw a glimpse of why in the Prologue of this book: an attempt to deviate from the pattern by the Paladin was put down swiftly by his Angelic Choir.

*TheCount*

[quote]In the beginning, there were only the Gods. Aeons untold passed as they drifted aimlessly through the Void, until they grew bored with this state of affairs. In their infinite wisdom they brought into existence Creation, but with Creation came discord. The Gods disagreed on the nature of things: some believed their children should be guided to greater things, while others believed that they must rule over the creatures they had made.[/quote]

It might be just me, but i always thought the gods below wanted the mortals to be guided to greater things, while the ones above wanted to rule them.... (but then, it might be my fondnes for intrigue acting up.) after all, who better to guide them than other mortals? so far, the villians were the... more creative types, you could say. at least as far as i could gather. though, im not sure about the gnomes or other continents.

and it might be just me, but the gods above reeealy dont like if people have opinions.... or personality for that matter (what with the mass brainwash lone swordy attemped).

*NerfContessa*

Same

.

*usernamesbco*

That was my interpretation, too.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Probably. Catherine and Masego's minds aren't treacherous in ways reflecting their Names, but their flaws...and Heroes are human, too, despite their best efforts.

### [Mental Mouse](#)

We saw Hanno's, which was pretty rough.

### *Antoninjohn*

Cat has seen into the madman's mind that has perspective to see the Gods work in creation, that's probably going to give her some nifty new abilities

### *Rook*

Such as his ability to inflict total confusion with a lack of tact and an inability to read the mood.

One of the only things we've seen so far that can completely bypass all magical protections and name shenanigans

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Having autism isn't a fancy martial arts technique, though.  
<.< Autism: for life, not just for a fight.

### *Nordvegr*

Why fight it? It's a great gift. I may have been cursed with not understanding people, but the tradeoff for understanding numbers and things is thoroughly worth it.

I currently work retail, to practice and patch up my weakness. I've worked this job for six months without getting fired, so I'd say it's working.

### *Dainpdf*

The ability to interact better with Masego, fueled by new understanding?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

A 3D representation of the Tree of Life. OK. Those get mindbendy very quickly even without murder-happy figments along for the ride.

### *Annubisk*

I'm thinking it's more like an orrery not Yggdrasil

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Less Yggdrasil, more Sephirot (no, not long white hair).  
Think [QBL](#). 😊

You can find mobile 3D renditions not along traditional lines that look... odd. I prefer the Ari configuration, myself, but... hey. \*shrugs\*

*jacobhollander*

Now I'm curious as to what the minds of the other members of the Woe look like.

*Dainpdf*

I'm curious to see what Aoede's mind looks like. Also Hierarch's. He'd probably put it on trial, as a Foreign Despot.

*grzecho2222*

Wandering Bard – Stage on which faceless puppeteer plays out stories to public of shadows and silhouettes of light, while donning masks made from screaming faces and discarding them to ever growing pile  
Hierarch – Quorum full of identical, indescribable people that argue and vote what they want

*Dainpdf*

That's quite creative. I like.

*grzecho2222*

Thief – storage room full of stolen things?  
Hakram – military office mixed with archive?  
Archer – battle arena mixed with high class tavern/ehm?

*RanVor*

That's probably what Cat would expect going in. As we've seen, it's not always accurate.

*My very own name*

Oh god I want more! Hierophant's back 😊

*Leonard Inkret*

Back in the game

[wyaldriddler](#)

Ow. Zeze has a fucking militarized mini Creation in his mind.

Go him.

*naturalnuke*

Zeze you spectrummy little madman, you really need to get better reception in there.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Cat will \*never\* let him live down the fact that she had to get stabbed in his own mind before he woke his lazy ass up.

*Naeddyr*

Look, if you get stabbed once by someone it's obviously their fault, but if you keep on getting stabbed \*everywhere you go\*, well, maybe it's a bit your fault?

*Milpool*

I doubt Cat would ever deny it's totally her fault. She would gripe about it, but she would definitely go, "Yeah, okay, I pretty much ask for it." Of course, so does everyone /she/ stabs, so it works out. Turn about is fair play.

*Dainpdf*

Maybe add some complimentary snacks, some railing, and danger signs on the more dangerous spheres. Oh, and please do something about this scandalous nether void thing you have going. It's so last season.

*Snowfire1224*

Hey I'm the first comment! Interesting insight into Masego's mind. Love the new chapter

*Snowfire1224*

Never mind ont eh first to comment. The page hadn't refreshed yet.

*Ox*

So, is cat going to glean something on how to pull on winter now!? I want an akua level power up!

Or, is this something seperate, could it be that this draws her closer to the boundary of god and mortal by seeing a glimpse of the god perspective?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Boi. Zeze is a hell of a lot more abstract than Cat.

*Parker*

Well obviously. I love Cat but she can be very...direct with her reasoning and solutions. It's only recently that she's begun to think further ahead than the current battle/war

*Highwayman*

Archer and Zeze sitting in a tree,  
K I S S I N G

Too soon? 😏

*Rook*

Less kissing, more discussing magical theory while being slightly confused as to why she's sitting unnecessarily close

*Dainpdf*

Pft, that ship has been teased for so long I worry a shoujo anime pattern has been ground onto it and they'll NEVER actually confront it.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

The problem might be more incapability than plot suspense.

We have no doubt now that he considers Archer beautiful. But is beautiful sexy? By which I mean, while he might consider her the most beautiful person he knows, is he equipped to even try at deeper emotional or even physical intimacy? I'm leaning towards him being a demi-romantic asexual. His response to an actual physical encounter would probably be something like "well, that was somewhat pleasant, but people waste all this time obsessing about THAT?"

Though if he did give it a try, he probably wouldn't give a shit if she wanted a non exclusive poly-sort of thing, so who knows, could still work.

*Dainpdf*

That might be the diagenetic reason. "Plot Suspense" is mostly a non diagenetic one. They can coexist.

Plus, I hesitate to attempt to determine a character's sexuality and romantic inclinations based on so little information in this regard.

*Agent J*

Has it been teased? Is a plutonic friendship so grand an impossibility? Intimacy is not tied to romance and Masego has shown neither the inclination towards nor the understanding (beyond academics) of that particular subject.



I suspect the closest we'll see Masego get is if Fadila coaxes him into it so she can get a genius child prodigy out of him. It's only an experiment, Masego. Don't be a pansy.

What? No, I'm not trying to sink your ship because I'm staunchly on the S.S. Team Catcher. Whatever gave you that idea?

*Dainpdf*

I was mostly joking, but yes, the ship has been teased. EE gave us plenty of scenes framed for romance, and has given this quite a bit of fuel. Does this mean Archer and Hierophant have any interest in each other or will ever, in a romantic sense? No.

But, in a narrative sense, the ship has been teased. SS Team Catcher? I'm afraid I missed a reference. Also, \*platonic.

*RanVor*

Catcher = Cat + Archer.

*Dainpdf*

Ah. I was confused by the use of a personal name for Catherine and a Name for Indrani.

I'm more a fan of Vivirine/Cathienne myself (especially since I feel there's more narrative support for it), but I'm not much of a shipper.

*grzecho2222*

I am more and more sure that they will confirm they feeling in the most dramatic moment to defeat something or someone with THE POWER OF LOVE and make themselves default winners of the fight

*RanVor*

After all this time it would be weird if they \*didn't\* pick up any tricks from Cat's Book of Narrative Magic.

*Cicero*

Love how to Masego the Woe are primarily there to kill distractions that get in the way of his research.

*Novice*

I was thinking that the Woe being the most familiar to Masego right now, or that he trusts them the most is why they're the guardian to his mind. But your comment makes the most sense.

grzecho2222

We see Cat when he feels safe  
We see Archer when he desire something (peace and quiet in this moment, but still)  
We see Hakram when he is unsure  
We see Thief when he is wary and smells a trap (also Thief attack is backstab)

[ahd](#)

Goodness. No wonder back at home in the palace Masego spends so much time jacked into the Observatory.

Blissful, distraction-free flow state. If only he could cast with absolute positioning from in there.

*Robert Allaband*

Sigh, poor Cat. Her first thought in solving anything is to kill something and use the body, be it horses, goats that explode and now figments of the imagination.

*Dainpdf*

She was taught by the best.

*Naeddyr*

Oh really, an ornery sorcery in an orrery, normally auguring archery.

[Antony444](#)

Well...no wonder the Woe are behaving like this. You look at the inside of their minds, and all which awaits you is insanity...

*RanVor*

Don't be like Masego, remember to vote for Guide!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Say EE, you don't happen to have or be familiar with someone with autism? Because I have autism, and that description of Zeze's problems with interpreting expressions and physical contact is about as close to a perfect description of my experiences you can get. "Involuntary egocentrism" is what I usually call it. Gorgeous chapter.

*letouriste*

if he doesn't, he would have probably consulted some site about that in details. there must be some forum for autist problems somewhere, a place to talk about life-hacks for understanding facial expressions

*Dainpdf*

There are also probably experts in the field he might have consulted, and also fiction written with autism in mind. True, some of it is terrible, but some of it is good.

*and proud*

Or he's a reddit.com/r/drama member

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

This does explain why Akua's agents could not seduce Masego – he could not read the signals that they were giving him!

*JackbeThimble*

You can't drop a box of pencils on the internet without someone counting them, autism isn't exactly mysterious to anyone who spends much time in online culture.

*TheTime*

-“We are making great progress”

-His face blurred, and remained that way.

“You interfere with the process,” he said in an utterly flat voice.

-“No,” Hierophant's voice barked. “No, go away. Catherine?”

I don't think Hierophant has alone in there. something is clearly with him, in some way, and I don't think it's just the Woe's reflections.

[crysjal](#)

I imagine the thing that's with him in there is his name. Like Cat having had her beast Hierophant has an aspect that constantly wants to uncover mysteries of creation which was also present in the mindscape.

*WuseMajor*

Well or he's still got a chunk of demon in there too.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Or the construct thing which wore the faces of the Woe. He commanded it with similar inflection.

[HappyNap](#)

Gods below, but I feel stupid – I am pretty sure Zeze is autistic, or at least something akin to it, and it's been pretty obvious... And I haven't even considered it, because I haven't been looking.

As always, extremely well written Erratic

[shieldredblog](#)

Curious to see what results his intense study of the Light will bring.

He can already use Hierarchy/Order to make it useless.

*letouriste*

"Magelight's supposed to be hard on the eyes," Archer said. "If you're going to keep reading after dark, use that instead." He started in surprise. Had she caught it for him?"

yeah masego, take care of your eyes! \*snicker\*

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

That probably happened before he lost his eyes to Summer ...

[superkeaton](#)

Cat's finally coming around to the realization that rogues are bullshit.

*Dainpdf*

Your search word "rogues" returned no results. Perhaps you meant: "heroes"?

*Dainpdf*

Nice chapter. Masego's mind is much more appropriate for him than the library, though that was also the first place my mind went.

*Shequi*

"Hierophant's dream was order gone mad."

Oh \$h!+

A Demon of Order, which the Praesi call a Beast of Hierarchy.

Big flashing warning signs on that...

*grzecho2222*

I wonder if the dark orb is made of bad, dangerous, unpleasant or unwanted memories or is it reepresentation of forgetting  
Also mind in parts that are all visible from center, but getting

to the center is very hard and they are all on poles over abyss that probably can be cut off the center and thrown into the abyss. As if someone was afraid that Demon might get into and try something...

*JJR*

I thought the dark orb was the result of that demon of absence.  
*werafdsaew*

>> They were the rooms of the Wizards of the West

Was this in Arcadia?

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

I suspect that this was in the Palace in Laure.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

It is a sad that Kat knows how much blood to expect when stabbed in the back, and can call BS when the spirit in Masego's mind exaggerates the damage.

*Aru*

During Masego memory of Archer .....reminds of parallels between Black and Hye (Ranger).....to Masego and Indrani

*Silverking*

One thing I noticed about this chapter is Cat's reaction to her dream-state. I had hoped that she would have gotten an upgrade, but now it makes sense: progress requires accepting some aspect of your Name, and while she's willing to use and be bound with Winter, she refuses to ACCEPT Winter. To her, Winter's emotional endgame is becoming an oath bound dominating sociopath, who ends up dying alone amid its own chaos (as we see in the fairy cycle). Unless and until she can reconcile some part of that for herself, she's not going to be getting any power ups from that method.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Masego's mental image of Archer comes from Book 3 Apprentice Interlude when he first sees her shoot <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/08/02/interlude-apprentice/> .

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## Chapter 20: Onset

*"Proceran promises should be treated like stew: unless you know every ingredient, best not swallow."*

– King Charles Fairfax of Callow, the Rightfully Wary

Archer's elbow was pressing into my eye. I blinked and craned back my neck before she could smack me again, turning in the bed. I carefully extracted myself from the pile of limbs over me, careful not to wake either of them. It was easier than I'd thought, since somewhat unsurprisingly Indrani was hogging the covers. Masego was laying back with his face towards the ceiling, still like he'd been put to rest in a coffin instead of passing out by my side when we came back from his mind. The eye cloth had been tugged down at some point, baring an eerie glass eye and partly covering one of his cheeks. I wrinkled my nose. Archer reeked of yesterday's fighting, so clearly she'd not bothered to clean up before piling on top of us. She murmured in her sleep in a tongue I'd didn't recognize, then promptly spread her legs where I'd been before. She was not, I noted with amusement, granting Masego any more room in the process. If anything she was coming closer to edging him off the bed.

I'd not taken off my tunic before falling asleep last night – and it still surprised me I'd felt the need to sleep at all – but I sat to pull on my boots. I splashed my face with the water basin more out of habit than any real need, the tepid liquid doing nothing to wake me up. A dreamless night, huh. Been a while since I'd had one of those. I made my way out of the tent quietly, stretching my frame when the sun bore down on me. If felt *rested*. Like I'd been tired and no longer was. It was a small pleasure I allowed myself a moment to properly savour. The Army of Callow's camp was only beginning to wake, dawn fresh to the sky, and I wouldn't truly be needed for at least an hour. If Hakram were around there'd be a meal waiting for me somewhere, along with the night's reports, but he was very far away. Last I'd heard he was bringing the latest recruits up Quicksilver River, intending to link up with Kegan's host before joining us.

The camp fire closest to my tent was deserted save for a single person, tending to a kettle hung over the flames. I didn't need to look twice to recognize Vivienne. She did not turn, though I was certain she'd heard me approach, instead putting down a pair of cups on a flat stone and reaching for the kettle. I raised an eyebrow. The twin bells set on silver made it pretty clear where she'd gotten those. Had she nabbed old Fairfax dinner sets? I smothered a fond smile. Of course she had. Why would even bother to ask? I dropped down at her side, glimpsing the leaves inside the cups. Tea, though not the Praesi stuff. Smelled... Ashuran, maybe? Wasn't the stuff Aisha got imported from across the Tyrian Sea anyway. Wordlessly, she poured the boiling water into them

without spilling a drop. I claimed one, inhaling the scent. I tended to enjoy that more than the drink itself.

"I hope that was part of the tenth," I said. "If there's silver missing, the palace seneschal is going to be pissed."

Thief smiled, using a long spoon of silver to stir her tea.

"Stealing from the palace is a hanging offence," she said.

"Not since we revoked Mazus' decrees," I objected. "It's a whipping and a fine now, I think?"

"As Her Majesty says," Vivienne drawled.

She'd never actually denied it, had she? I sighed.

"All right," I said. "You were waiting for me. Out with it."

"We'll be sitting with the Procerans at noon," she replied before taking a sip from her cup. "Addressing our diplomatic approach is in order."

I hummed, inhaling the fragrant steam again.

"Our strategic objectives are still more or less the same as when we started to march," I said. "We need them on the other side of the passage, and to stay there long enough we have breathing room to refit while we prepare our next move. Coin too, if possible. I doubt they'll agree to actual war indemnities, so we'll have to get that through the supplies if we get it at all."

"I've been in contact with the Observatory," Vivienne said. "The situation abroad is evolving."

"The Dominion's armies should be in southern Procer, by now," I said. "But I'm guessing there's more to tell."

"Klaus Papenheim has finally begun his offensive in the Red Flower Vales," my spymistress said. "No word as to the results of the first battles yet, but the Carrion Lord seems to be holding."

I grimaced.

"He'd better," I said. "If the crusaders punch through, our army's in no shape to take them on."

"I've also had word from Praes, though the news is a fortnight old," Vivienne said. "Nok was sacked by the Ashuran war fleet."

I let out a low whistle. I wasn't exactly pleased at the loss of life that'd be involved there, but it was an impressive achievement for the Thalassocracy nonetheless. Praesi cities were layered with centuries of wards and sorcery, not to mention the

pack of horrors the aristocrats kept bound in the basement for rainy days. I'd known the Ashurans weren't exactly pushovers, considering they had the largest fleet in Calernia, but most their wars had been fought at sea. Last large-scale engagement I could recall they'd fought on land was when they'd landed armies to help Levant rise against the Principate, and it'd been the incipient Dominion that'd done the heavy lifting there.

"They withdrew after?" I asked.

"Set half the city on fire in the process, after looting it," Vivienne said. "The Wasteland legions arrived two days too late to help with the defence. The Empress is taking a beating at court over it. Thalassina's threatened to rebel if they don't get a Legion garrison. "

"Whoever's in charge of the fleet isn't a fool," I mused. "Nok's the easiest target in the Empire, relatively speaking. They spent most their history under the thumb of one city or another. It's nowhere as crucial to Praes as Thalassina, but they made the Tower bleed. All the wolves will be drawn out by the scent of it."

"I would not wager that the Empress is too preoccupied to sabotage us if she so wishes," Thief said. "But the real pivot remains the battle in the Vales."

"You think Milenan and Malanza will want to stretch the diplomacy out until they know the outcome down south," I frowned.

"If the Carrion Lord is driven back, their negotiating position significantly improves," Vivienne noted. "If he wins, they are no longer sole bearers of the shame of defeat should they make bargain with us. From their perspective, delay has no drawback."

"Except for starving," I said.

She nodded, sipping at her cup.

"I would expect Prince Milenant to state the ongoing continuation of yesterday's arrangement is a condition for continuing to negotiate," Vivienne said. "Something along the lines of coercion souring the process of peacemaking."

"I've got no reason to – ah," I said. "They'll fold early on something major, then argue I'm negotiating in bad faith if I'm not willing to agree."

"Precisely," she said.

"We're not even peacemaking, not really," I sighed. "They don't have the authority to call off the Tenth Crusade. The most we can



get is a very narrow truce that doesn't violate the letter of Proceran laws on contributing to crusades."

"It would be reputational disaster for them to agree to even that much without something to show for their retreat," Vivienne said. "We'll need to give them something."

"I can't move on them having a presence on our side of the passage," I stated flatly. "You know very well how much trouble that'd be for us."

She shook her head.

"Their ambitions to expand into Callow are checked, for the moment," she said. "I find it dubious they will attempt to overturn that state of affairs given their weak position. What they need, Catherine, is a way to save face. A way to accept terms that will not make them pariahs in the Highest Assembly."

"Reputation, huh," I mused.

I drank from the tea, though its pleasant fragrance did not extend to the taste in my mouth. Whether it was eating or drinking, the enjoyable parts of it were mostly gone.

"The way I see it, what they're most afraid of back home is Hasenbach," I finally said. "It's horrible for their reputation to make a deal with me, but won't see them overthrown. The First Prince, though, she'll toss their asses out in the cold if she has half an excuse."

"It would greatly consolidate her hold on Procer if the largest opposition bloc was publicly disgraced," Vivienne agreed. "Your point?"

"We hand them a way to kick the mess upstairs," I said, eyes narrowing as I stared into the flames. "Like you said, they don't have the authority to negotiate for the entire crusade. Just themselves. So if they're presented with something they can't accept or refuse without Hasenbach..."

"It is her reputation at stake, not theirs," Vivienne mused.

I set down the cup.

"I think it's time we brought Aisha in on this," I said. "Unless you became fluent in Proceran legalities since we last spoke."

She rolled her eyes. That was a no, then. With a groan, I got up. Time to get to work.

Seven tenths of diplomacy, as far as I could tell, was bickering over symbolic or largely irrelevant details. We wasted a full hour trading envoys with the crusaders just to the order the issues would be addressed in. That and the language that would be used for the negotiations. They pushed for Chantant, but I was having none of that. My knowledge of it wasn't good enough for easy conversation, and I wasn't using a translator for something this important when nearly all the opposite royalty could speak Lower Miezan without trouble. I folded on it being their pavilion and tables we met at, then conceded to their proposal of only twenty attendants in exchange for picking the tongue and the first issue. At least Aisha managed to horse-trade the give on attendants for a limitation on the number of attending heroes. Five was more than I wanted, but there was no realistic chance of the Pilgrim and his sharpest knives not being at the table. All of the Woe save for Hakram would be attending, regardless, so I wasn't feeling overly cornered when it came to the balance of Named power.

My delegation ended up split more or less half and half between Praesi and Callowans. For my homeland the two heavyweights were Grandmaster Brandon Talbot and Baroness Ainsley Morley of – currently occupied – Harrow. I wasn't eager to involve the latter, since she was not a well-known quantity, but it wasn't feasible not to. She was the ranking noble in my army and her holdings would be a point of negotiation. Even if it wouldn't have been a grave insult to keep her away from the table, I would have involved her. Baroness Ainsley had already proved she wanted to look after her people. She deserved a seat, no matter my personal misgivings. On the Praesi side, the most important were Marshal Juniper of Callow and Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara. The latter had picked out everyone else in our delegation save for the Woe, keeping the balance between provenances while digging out the scribes and learned officers that served as the closest thing the Kingdom of Callow currently had to trained diplomats.

The Proceran delegation was, in comparison, a gallery of royalty. Prince Amadis and Princess Rozala had always been a given, but there were a full six crowned heads in attendance. Thief provided names and sparse details quietly. Prince Arnaud of Cantal, by reputation a loudmouthed idiot. Princess Adeline of Orne, whose brother and predecessor had been killed at Black's orders. Prince Alejandro of Segovia, who'd publicly broken with his mother's old alliance with Hasenbach. Prince Louis of Creusens, allegedly so badly in debt to Amadis he couldn't even take a piss without the older man's permission. Save for the heroes, the other attendants were all kinsmen to one royal or another. It was the Named I studied most closely. The Grey Pilgrim's face was the usual serene mask but there were younger heroes with him. The sorcerer I'd fought before, which formal introductions revealed to be Rogue Sorcerer. A woman bearing sword and board and watching me unblinkingly was introduced as the Silent Guardian, while the

woman with the red face paint I'd once cut the arm of was the Painted Knife. The last was the Forsworn Healer, and I frowned at the sight of him.

No Saint. That was only half a relief. If she was here, she'd be trouble but I'd at least know where she was for sure. I glanced at the heroes, frown deepening. Silent Guardian to hold me, Painted Knife to check Thief and the Sorcerer to delay Masego. The Healer to keep them going, and the Pilgrim to tip the scales. The five heroes had been chosen so they'd be able to hold up against the Woe in a fight. *But if they think it's going to turn to violence, why is the Saint not here?*

"... and Her Majesty, Queen Catherine of Callow, First of Her Name," Aisha finished, and I offered a polite nod to the Procerans watching me.

There'd been a Catherine Alban that served as queen regent for her son, actually, but by Callowan tradition that did not count as reigning precedent. Prince Amadis took a seat first. At the centre of his side of the table, before I did. The etiquette of that was against him – as the ruling sovereign of a nation, I had the highest status here and none should be seated before me. I didn't feel particularly insulted, on a personal level, but it was an insult. Offered right after the introductions. While I was less than invested in etiquette, I was invested in this negotiation not being a complete shitshow. So, as Prince Amadis leaned back into his seat, I met his eyes. Silence stretched under the silken pavilion. Slowly, I cocked an eyebrow.

"I was under the impression Arlesites were a mannerly people," I said, then waited a beat. "Your Grace."

I let another moment pass before sitting down and gesturing for my entire delegation to do the same, regardless of the higher status of the royals on the other side.

"You have a reputation for preferring familiar manners, Your Majesty," the Prince of Iserre smiled. "I apologize if offense was taken."

I did not think it a coincidence that *familiarity breeds contempt* was a common saying in both our homelands. Procerans had a reputation for being able to speak flowery flattery while meaning the opposite that was apparently well-earned.

"With friends, certainly," I smiled back as the Proceran delegation sat in proper order. "Are we friends now, Prince Amadis?"

"Rulers sharing an alignment of interests, mayhaps," the older man said, his Lower Miezian without trace of accent. "Yet is that not the cradle of all great friendships?"

I inclined my head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. I flicked a glance at the heroes, which were all seated at the left edge of the table save for the Pilgrim. He was at Malanza's side, between her and the Prince of Cantal. Aisha made up my right side, Thief my left. Rank had not been the prime consideration in those arrangements.

"Before beginning, I believe it necessary for the nature of the involvement of your Named to be clarified," I said.

Aisha's notion. Prince Amadis had been introduced as the head of the Proceran delegation, as we'd expected, but the status of the heroes today was vague. Legally speaking, anyway. Several of them weren't even Proceran, and those that were should have no authority to speak of if this was considered a negotiation between Proceran royalty and the Queen of Callow. If it was a conference between representatives of the Tenth Crusade and a villain queen, however, that was a whole other matter. My Staff Tribune had predicted it would be the latter and not the former – otherwise they'd have no legal authority to stand on without the permission of the First Prince and the other sovereigns at the head of the crusade.

"The Chosen have graced us with their presence in an advisory role," Prince Amadis replied.

*Good*, I thought. Then it was the Prince of Iserre and his fellows I had to settle with, not representatives of the Heavens. We had, at least, the legal prerequisites for any treaty made here to be binding. Not that it assured the deal would be respected. Aisha had reluctantly informed me that the most prominent precedent for treaties between Procerans and an Evil polity was attempts at deals with the Kingdom of the Dead – which were broken by either side as often as not. There were treaties with Helike as well, but none relevant since the League of Free Cities had been founded. It would be shaky grounds to try using those as a yardstick. I nodded at Aisha, who bowed deep in her seat and addressed the table with a graceful smile.

"We would now open formal negotiations between the Kingdom of Callow and the lawful leadership of the invading army currently standing on its sovereign territory," she said.

There were too many people for me to watch them all, so I kept my gaze on the two I knew best: Amadis and Rozala. The Prince of Iserre's friendly smile did not waver in the slightest, but Malanza's brow twitched. Not pleased. The language as presented by Aisha treated the crusaders coming here like any other foreign invasion, the kind the Principate had tried for centuries with various degrees of success. It stripped the Procerans of the handy excuse of 'the Heavens told me to', which might allow them to wiggle out some responsibility for their actions. They weren't going to accept that, of course. But now the bargaining started.

Prince Amadis glanced at one of his diplomats, the middle-aged man bowing just as deep before responding.

"We cannot treat in good faith under these terms," the man replied. "We can, however open formal negotiations between the Praesi vassal state of Callow and the mandated expeditionary force of Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer."

Not presenting themselves as crusaders, but still as being here on Hasenbach's orders. I kept a frown off my face. They knew we weren't going to accept Callow being termed as a vassal state, since they'd effectively be making a deal with the Tower by intermediary if we did. I was fairly sure they could break any terms made if ordered to do so by the First Prince, if it unfolded like that, since the Highest Assembly had formally passed a motion to declare a crusade against Praes and a vassal state would be considered within the scope of that. It went back and forth for a while, until something like a compromise was reached: negotiations were now being held between the Queen in Callow and the mandated expeditionary force of the First Prince.

Aisha had tried for Queen of Callow, but they'd gotten out of that by pointing out that unless the Highest Assembly passed a motion or Hasenbach recognized it by decree, they couldn't legally recognize Callow as a sovereign state with me as its ruler.

Legitimacy was the issue here. My only claim to the throne was conquest, really, and even that was a little iffy. As it stood the treaty would still be binding, theoretically speaking, but it was made with me as an entity and not Callow itself. It became worthless ink if someone put my head on a pike. Thief flicked me an unsurprised look after, having predicted the implication of the other part of the terms. The Procerans, by presenting themselves as an expeditionary force, were paving the grounds for any bill incurred over supplies to be sent to Hasenbach's court instead of coming out of their own pockets. I sincerely doubted that Cordelia would flip me so much as a copper if anything less than an oath to the Heavens was involved, so we'd have to get creative about getting the coin if we were going to get any at all. Still, that they were trying to extricate from this at all meant they were taking the process seriously. A good sign, after that tumultuous opening. I caught the subtle movement of Prince Amadis' hand before anyone else on my side.

"The delegation recognizes the Chosen known as the Grey Pilgrim, formal advisor to the Prince of Iserre," the middle-aged diplomat announced.

The old man rose to his feet.

"I seek clarification from the Queen in Callow," he said calmly, "on matters of intent."

I looked up and fought back a sigh.

Wasn't it traditional that things had to at least go *well* for the villain before the tables were turned?

---

*Rook*

A useful tool is never allowed to rest for long. Is Akua already out of the box and keeping quiet, or is the Queen of stabbing and goblinfire arson seriously going to try treating with Procerans without her?

*SpeckofStardust*

I think she has to be actively drawing on winter to do that, which would not be allowed considering she'd then be 'armed'. At a diplomatic meeting. It wouldn't look good at all.

*RoflCat*

She might just be called out for this if it come down to it.

After all, the other side seem to want to deal with the one who would love to kick their asses (and probably can) instead of the one person trying not to murder them all and say "Fuck off and die"

*stevenneiman*

She might have asked for advice before, but she couldn't do it now without giving the crusaders, especially the Grey Pilgrim, too many hints. She knows that the Pilgrim has the power to detect truth or lies, but she has no idea about what else he can do except that he doesn't seem to get the full context of something that reads as a lie. He might very well be able to detect her calling out Akua or even turn it against her.

*Useful tool*

I think when Akua was referring to useful tool it wasn't in reference to herself, but to Catherine. She still in her arrogance believes herself to be in control on some level. And it fits with Catherine being the one asleep at the time.

*RanVor*

She was most likely referring to you.

But seriously, if that was true, why would she give up her freedom to bring Cat back? It makes no sense.

*Tool*

Why would Akua classify what she was doing at the time as resting? Fighting a battle against heroes is not the definition of resting. The only one resting at the time was Catherine.

*RanVor*

\*Not\* fighting a battle against heroes \*does\* qualify as resting, and is exactly what Akua was going to do immediately after thinking those words.

Why would Akua refer to Catherine as her Empress if she believed she was in control?

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Pretty sure the advice of a shameless RPG villain wannabe would be a liability. I'm more sure of that than I am that Akua wants to end this crusade.

*SpeckofStardust*

no.

[HappyNap](#)

Oh \*what\* a surprise the Grey Pilgrim is doing skullduggery again. Raise a hand if you're surprised. Nobody? No? Yeah, didn't think so.

A vote for the Guide is a vote for diplomatic resolutions;  
<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Dainpdf*

Skullduggery? How so? All I see is negotiations between Catherine and the Royals, then him contributing to his side. How is that skullduggery?

*Metrux*

The point is he just ignored negotiations and went right on to accusing her of... Something. The ending didn't make it clear what exactly he thinks, but he is obviously talking about Akua.

*Dainpdf*

I wouldn't say accuse, per se. But if you look at it, veiled accusations have been thrown from both sides from the start – both that Cat was an underling of Praes and that Procer was invading a sovereign nation.

*nerferf*

Wasn't it traditional that things had to at least go well for the villain before the tables were turned?

Welp your not currently playing the villain in this invasion remember, the heroes are and they need a victory before the table turns on them and then they get defeated

*Rook*

Especially since she's not technically Name-bound right now.

One thing about a Name is that it isn't just a strength, It's a shackle as well. Binding you to either Above or Below and all that entails.

Winter isn't exactly daisies and sunshine but the court itself isn't technically Evil in and of itself, the same way Summer isn't innately Good or anything.

*Jane*

I think it was, actually, with Winter being aligned with Evil, and Summer with Good – that's one of the big reasons why Winter was always slated to lose. Summer wasn't *nice* by any stretch, but they were technically *Good*, in the same way a fanatic Knight Templar would still be technically Good because they were standing on the right side.

I'd have to look up what chapter that was covered in, though, to be certain.

*Ninja*

Except Winter didn't always lose. Both courts won only to destroy themselves after doing so in an endless cycle.

*Jane*

Hm... I don't recall what chapter it was discussed in, but I remember that being the King of Winter's hidden motive for drawing Cat into the story – so that she could break the cycle, by merging the two courts, thus destroying Winter itself. He no longer even wanted to try to win, just to end the game.

It's also explicitly stated at a couple of points that Winter is the otherworldly reflection of Villainy, and we



know that Villains are currently always fated to lose in this world, at least in the long term. It would be unusual if Winter didn't have to abide by the same restrictions.

*Mr. Nobody*

Nope. Winter always had to lose so summer would reign Arcadia yet again.

If I remember correctly, Summer didn't last long because they would burn themselves in war until there was nothing left and no enemy to battle.

Just like in Creation, where there wouldn't exist Good without Evil(or even the story, for that matter); Both Summer and Winter can't survive without their counterparts.

You can see this dynamic even on the perpetual war between Praes and Callow, in the statistics gathered by Black.

*esryok*

Winter would always lose if it came to a direct confrontation before their intrigues had weakened Summer. They definitely won some of the time.

*goliath1303*

This is definitely wrong. If it came to a direct confrontation then Summer would win. If, however, intrigue and subterfuge were used, then Winter won. Just go back and look at the dream Cat had after getting her heart back(I think that's when it was.) Summer won on the battlefield, but after Winter was gone they turned to infighting because only one could have the most. Eventually everything burned out and was scoured from existence. Winter though, won when they were the knife in the dark. By the time the hosts of Summer assembled they were a shambling incoherent horde that was easily swept aside by Winter. After that though, Winter turned on itself. Because eventually there would be only one last mouthful, they backstabbed and poisoned each other.

So ya, Summer usually won but Winter definitely had the ability to do so occasionally as well.

*d\_o\_l*

Winter is a *\*reflection\** of evil. It isn't the same thing as evil as it exists in Creation.

*Jane*

Do we know enough about the metaphysics of the realm to say that conclusively?

We know that Creation is essentially a protracted argument between the Gods, but I don't know if Arcadia is part of that or not. If it is, wouldn't it logically be part of that argument as well, as that was the entire intent behind Creation?

I mean, the lack of Names and such suggest that it's apart from Creation, but maybe the gods above and below simply choose a different means of intervening in Arcadia, and the main characters, being human, simply don't know enough to have heard about it. It'd be a bit of a superfluous detail to introduce when the Fae are just an antagonist to be driven back to Arcadia, after all.

Besides, wouldn't being a reflection of Evil still influence her standing in the world? It's not as though she doesn't go full scenery-chewing Villain when she gets too hopped up on the Winter, after all, and she always carries a fragment of that around, even when she's "normal". Sure, she can overcome that, just as she's overcome her role in the last three books, but it still influences what actions she can reasonably take.

[wyaldriddler](#)

We do since the discussions in book III clearly laid out that Arcadia is a beta version of Creation. Evil \*technically\* maps to Evil and Summer \*technically\* maps to Good but they are different and not a part of the traditional Creation Good vs Evil story.

*Jane*

Ah, right, I'd quite forgotten that (despite having quoted it below, ack).

That said, what happens when you take a piece of Creation 1.0 and put it into 2.0? They were still made by the same people with the same intent, after all – it's just that it might not be wholly compatible. Does the narrative logic of the world adapt to accommodate it, or is she kind of a "bug" now, someone who ought be powerless instead being a demigoddess?

I could see a plausible story making use of either scenario.

[Euodiachloris](#)

It also worked the other way: the King of Winter imported Named from *Gods' Argument: Mortal Combat* into *Gods' Argument* (now available on limited access, legacy servers!).

The Woe were bugs wandering around Arcadia, able to break things. 😊

### *MetruX*

Actually it's been stated, by hierophant even, that Winter seems to be a reflection of evil, not that it is, because: A. Winter can and have won some times, but just like summer, when one wins they destroy themselves in some fashion, leading to B. They are not two sides alone, they have a cycle WITH spring and fall, the two can't survive alone.

Also, they DO have Named, only one was shown, the Rider that she confronted there in the beginning, so they clearly are a part of creation, even if set apart, the same as the heavens and the hells, only that Arcadia is more neutral and what happens there is partly a reflection of what is happening/did happen recently on creation.

Both Summer and Winter have villainous traits, one being starving and needing, the other being full and destroying, while Spring is growth and peace, Fall goes to deterioration and lack, by spending more than can be made. But also we have The Wild Hunt only during Spring/Fall, and a Fae from one of the four is always from there, doesn't exist on other seasons, except for the Hunt, since any Fae can become a part of it.

### *Dainpdf*

As Ninja stated, they both have components of Good and Evil. Summer is irascible and attempts to exterminate everything in sight, while Winter knows of diplomacy, treaties and alliances. They're both destructive at their core, of course.

### *Jane*

From Book 3, Chapter 36. It was the first quote I had handy.

While I may be misreading the passage, it seems to state that Winter is meant to bound to Evil as much as any Name is – even if Winter is not pure lowercase good or evil, as nothing in the world is, they're meant to embody the concept in a way that regular mortals don't.

## *Euodiachloris*

It looks to me like a lot of assumptions about 1) how Arcadia maps to Creation, 2) what Good and Evil within Creation are like and 3) that ideas from the "beta" version got closely mapped.

Because, if all Summer and Winter are just meant to be testing the concept of "two predetermined factions locked in constant struggle", neither need map to any other two sides locked in struggle in any other realm. Because *the struggle* may be the key feature being put through its paces, not the nature of the participants.

In short: people in Creation may have wrongly pegged a lot of things.

*Dainpdf*

Thank you for the quote. That does indicate Winter is probably more villainous and Summer more heroic. Guess I was mistaking Good and Evil, and good and evil. Still, some things to think about: First, that quote is speculation, as the Empress reminds; second, the idea would be that they \*mirror\* Evil, not embody it. And reflections can be muddled.

*stevenneiman*

As Ninja said, Winter and Summer were both capable of victory, the problem was that that victory was rendered meaningless by the renewal of the seasons, which inevitably turned each victory for Summer or Winter completely pointless. The King of Winter basically chose to sacrifice the hope for more meaningless victories in exchange for introducing a new agent who would allow something, anything to happen that hadn't happened to him before. It wasn't an attempt to win against Summer, because he'd done that enough times to grow sick of it

That said, Good and Evil to certainly lend a lot of theme and flavor to Summer and Winter, such as the way that Summer puts on a facade of compassion even for people she has decided to kill, or the way that Winter's biggest weakness is the fact that its members can't work together worth a darn. You can think of the Fae as being like the Thermians from Galaxy Quest, except if Sarris was also acting the way he does because of the show, and instead of pulp sci-fi they had watched a fictionalized account of world history. The Thermians aren't actually the crew of the NSEA protector, but they devote themselves to imitating it as best they can. In the same way, the Summer and Winter courts aren't

actually Good and Evil, but they adopt a lot of the same trappings as if they were.

*Charlie Hegarty*

Well, she worked pretty solidly for team Evil before stabbing her mentor and taking control over Callow, which she enforces with a Legion of Terror whilst still technically being subordinate to the Tyrant of Praes.

Plus, her actions in this crusade: leading the wild hunt into the enemy camp to slaughter their officers, wielding doomsday spells and killing heroes.

All make her, honestly, still come off as the villain of this piece to me.

*TeK*

Yeah, she defeated foreign attempts to destabilize her country, an attempt to brainwash an entire city of innocents into a mindless army, took charge and provided leadership in period of political disturbance following previously mentioned foreign attempts to meddle in their politics by subsidising unstable political elements and, allegedly, providing indirect military help to rebels of another nation. Then she went on to protect her country from an otherworldly invasion, defeating a coup in process, and annihilated crazy genocidal maniac, which wiped out one of biggest cities of Callow and threatened to take over the continent. Than she consolidated leadership even more, recreating so much needed bureaucratic structure and helping refugees all over Callow, while also establishing de-facto sovereignty to her homeland. And now she trying to stop foreign invasion while being pretty much the only party willing to forgo her interests to avoid bloodshed. How is she NOT a Hero?

See what I did there? Nitpick handfull of detail, and you can paint anyone as anything.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

One man's hero is another man's villain.

[mjwabby](#)

"My Staff Tribune had predicted it would be the latter and not the former – " I think this is backwards, if I understand the rest correctly- Aisha predicts that they would act as Proceran royalty (former) not as members of the crusade (latter), right?

*RoflCat*

No, they're trying to pin it as they're under order of Hasenbach, that way they can throw all the responsibility to her.

*Morgenstern*

Yes, but \*as royals of Procer\* NOT as crusaders... because otherwise they \*would have no authority to treat AT ALL\*, as I understand it so far. Thus, "latter" and "former" \*are\* mixed up, imho as well.

*Simurgh*

But in the end they aren't negotiating as royals of Procer. They're negotiating as representatives of an expeditionary force under the First Prince.

*Agent J*

EE has mixed them up before, rather consistently if memory serves. May just be he's under the impression they hold their opposite meanings.

*Jane*

You know, the nice thing about being an *Evil* kingdom is that you only have to bother with the diplomatic niceties if you feel like puffing up your ego. Everyone knows who the greatest power is and that they ought be respected, and if either of those are in question, a few new screaming heads in a hallway will clarify the matter quite nicely.

Seeing hours wasted on who gets called what, with the distinctions actually *matter*ing instead of just being handy labels for "The Queen of Callow (who we really don't want to be Queen)" and "The Invading Army (Hasenbach sent us, take up payment with her)", makes one wonder how more states haven't slid into Evil just as a matter of convenience. Imagine how much more productive leadership could be if they didn't have to spend so much time parsing their statements!

/tongue in cheek

*Rook*

Frustrating and time consuming maybe, but not impractical. No one is an island, so dealing with the diplomatic bullshittery is not any different than arming yourself before gouging each other's eyes out in a fight, or lighting up a fire and putting on a jacket for the cold. It's just a tool to manipulate and adapt to the environment.

Considering that even legitimate justifications like Lone Idiot's contrition for his crimes or the Diabolist's right of

birth weren't enough to keep them alive, swapping to evil on the basis that observing niceties is annoying would be a good way to have very little Weight. You'd be almost certain to die in your first engagement.

*Jane*

As I said, it was a joke 😊. Any time saved on working out who to call what (something that probably only takes a long time the first time, anyway) would be more than lost on the constant scheming for promotion via killing your boss. Well, assuming that's common in more than just Praes – I don't get the feeling Helike or the Dead King waste too much time on that.

*Novice*

To be fair, all these diplomatic procedures have their roots in RL history as well. Down to the Holy Roman Empire using the term King in Prussia but not recognizing the monarch as King of Prussia so as not to piss off the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

*Rothschwerth*

Similarly, Wilhelm I was crowned German Emperor instead of Emperor of Germany after obliterating the French. However, I don't see Cat becoming an Empress just yet.

Your comparison might be very fitting as Frederick the Great (a contemporary of Russia's Catherine the Great) shifted from being King in Prussia to being King of Prussia after reconquering Prussian soil in the First Partition of Poland. I don't remember whether there's any historically Callowan land in Procer, but I would be amused if a Partition happened.

*Dainpdf*

I get the impression both Good and Evil only come to the table when either they believe they'll have a great negotiating position, or their arms are twisted into it. Such as is the case right here.

*JackbeThimble*

...Is no one going to talk about the Woe's sleeping arrangements?

*Jane*

We're just all pretending we're above making prurient jokes about the three of them.

*Highwayman*

Now we know Archer is the kind of person that doesn't shower before she sleeps.

*Oshi*

Exhausted friends/family slept in the same bed?

*Daemion*

It was just the one time... if it becomes a habit to share a bed, then we can gossip. 😊

*Dainpdf*

Now we just need to get Vivienne and Hakram on that bed. And make Cat sleep again.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

"I seek clarification from the Queen in Callow," he said calmly, "on matters of intent."

"goblin munitions for all!"

*Highwayman*

Any no party like a goblin fire party.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

dem gobbos 'r' on da loose b0sS

*JJR*

Those munitions are lit fam.

No seriously, we need to run.

*superkeaton*

Well fuck me, that felt short. The majority was lots of words to describe even wordier words and time wasters.

Still, a necessary evil. I'm interested to see what Pilgrim has to say.

*Novice*

I don't why I find "a necessary evil" funny, but I do.

*Draconius Sinister*

I... don't fully understand what the Pilgrim is going for here. I get that he's forcing Catherine to show at least some of her hand here, either telling the truth and giving th Procerans an idea of



what she wants overall and what they can get from her, or a lie that will bind what exactly she can and can't fight for. Everyone seems to have a very firm idea of what he's after specifically though, and I'm sitting here like a dummy.

In regards to the other Heroic Named... well, Catherine is treating with those sent by Hasenbach, not the servants of the Heavens working in the Crusade. That gives the heroes leeway to torch and burn the camps while the Queen is away. Maybe it won't be what happens, but with how the Saint of Swords has acted thus far... Also, if Cat loses her army to a technicality, I'm getting the feeling that it will be slashy-freezy time for the royals in the tent. Hell, Larat might even get the crowns he's waiting on.

*nerferf*

Well pilgrim has no clue what to do at this point, he was so used to doing his support role for other heroes that at this point he has no idea what to do given he's playing a main antagonist for this chapter of the invasion

I mean at this point it's become obvious the heroes have no idea how to fully use narrative other than heroic tropes with a villain playing along and never faced this situation without the bard doing the thinking for them

*werafdsaew*

To be fair the only other Villain who leaned against villainous tropes is Black, and he doesn't tend to leave his opponents alive.

*Anon*

Well, presumably, as Cat has already 'told' the Pilgrim she'd be fine helping them march against Malicia if they left Callow alone, he should already know her intent.

This feels more like a probe to ascertain if Cat has already got a plan for dealing with Hasenbach to get peace accords written and signed – Cat doesn't have any strong declaration to answer, but I imagine that Procer will start to pull back if she clams up.

(Also, yeeeeeeeees @ more Archer being overly friendly, and Thief/Catherine shared jokes)

Amadis posturing when his side is low on food, morale, and was on the verge of a rout seems... a little odd to be so petty, but it could just be a ploy to gauge Cat's emotional state, I suppose?

*Jane*

Pilgrim might just be trying to figure out what the blazes is going on, since "Cat" gave some lines he found rather alarming during "her" monologue before fighting the Heroes. He might think she's a supremely gifted liar, or has some personality disorder, and is trying to suss out the truth before they do anything irrevocable.

Alternately, he might have guessed something strange happened during the battle, and is taking this opportunity to out her trick in the middle of the conference, knowing that it has a good chance of blowing everything up.

*Dylan Tullos*

Jane:

That's an interesting theory. Akua did a decent Cat impersonation most of the time, but the part where she claimed to rule by right of birth is incredibly out of character.

If he's able to figure out that she was possessed by Akua... well, all of the outcomes there are bad. It's just a question of how bad.

*Barrendur*

Tedious chapter, and preceded by a tedious chapter; I think the story has become dull, irritating and unnecessarily complicated. For the first time since the story began, I found the updates too boring to read in their entirety; I only skimmed the last two chapters, and I did not vote for APGtE.

*Mr. Nobody*

"Oh no... Not politics again! Give me a dumb MC swinging a sword and throwing fire balls everywhere!!"

"Dialogues...? Who needs dialogue?!?! I WANNA SEE SOME ACTION!!!"

"Damn... I almost fell asleep reading this. Let's watch some of Michael Bay's movies, I need more explosions."

*Jane*

Honestly, I find chapters like this more interesting than the battles. There are so many more ways to win (or lose, poor council we never knew) a peace than there are a battle.

*Adurna*

Very much agreed. So satisfying with the interplay interspersed with introspection.

### *Draconius Sinister*

I actually agree with Barrendur. Politics has its place, and I do enjoy seeing the maneuvering and working around each other each side is doing, but I read primarily to see a protagonist fight their battles, and Cat has made it clear that the battles she shines brightest in are the literal ones.

I don't really understand the argument that some have made that Politics keep it interesting because it isn't like fights, in that the outcome is uncertain and the protagonist isn't guaranteed a victory. I get that it's unlikely that the protagonist in a given story will ever suffer a permanent loss in battle, unless if it is to change their character or give them something to work against, but how are politics any different? In both Cat is the protagonist, and the way the story has been building ever upwards in scale, we know that Cat will need both the personal power of Winter and/or a Name, to fight the Forever King and the Dead King when they make nuisances of themselves, and will need an army behind her, so she is unlikely to suffer any permanently crippling defeat in battle, be it personal or on a larger scale for her army. At the same time, we know that the Dead King and Forever King both have armies that Catherine CAN NOT TAKE in a fight alone, so she will have allies, which means narratively, she must succeed at negotiations at one point or another.

What I'm saying is that the political fights are just as predictable in outcome as the fights: Cat will win the ones she needs to. Talking down to someone because they'd rather read about demigods duking it out than the finer points of a ceasefire is needlessly rude, and hypocritical, just because their interests don't align with yours.

I'm with Barrendur, in that I'd rather not read again about how the Procerans are dicks, and the exact advantages and disadvantages have in a negotiation, again. That doesn't mean I'll begrudge you enjoying the verbal sparring or the introspective analysis of the situation, and how best to eke out a 'win' in unfavorable circumstances. Cat is guaranteed to win either way, eventually, and we're all just along for the ride. Let's all enjoy the parts we enjoy and let others do the same, no?

### *Metrux*

I agree with your last declaration, which is why I disagree with the rest. Barrendur was rude, and honestly the wording there infer that he would rather have it changed, which isn't good for the author neither for the

other readers. Sure, the ones that came after him shouldn't be rude to him in response, since this doesn't solve anything, but being rude to them in turn, and even more agreeing with Barrendur... You're just making more fire.

If what you say at the end is truth, please, just let those people have their fights and enjoy what you enjoy. I very much like the fights, and I very much enjoy those political chapters, because as much as victory is guaranteed, we never know what victory truly is in politics. To take example from your text, she needs to be there, strong, and with an army... But needs it be her army? Need it even be her own personal power? For the tone of the story it probably will be yes, to both questions, but that is not defined, and Erraticerrata has a way of surprising us, so yes, I do find political confrontations more open in their end. Though the fight chapters tend to rise more our emotions. Each has their shine, and being told by someone that what you like is "dull, irritating and unnecessarily complicated", that it was too boring to read, and that he stopped supporting the author for making what we like... Surely you can understand WHY they got rude and angry with him, even if they shouldn't do it?

### *Draconius Sinister*

I'm not particularly mad at anyone myself, and I understand why people have gotten a bit mad. I'm just saying I agree in the sense that I prefer fights to politics. I certainly haven't gotten tired of the story, but things do feel like they're dragging a little bit, and somehow the chapters also feel super short of late. Sorry for the essay before, I was mostly venting about other people dismissing the fights outright in earlier chapters, and saying the politics were the only interesting thing. Still mad about seeing that conversation however many weeks back...! Sorry for coming off like an asshole, didn't mean to!

### *mórrígan*

We're, what, three chapters out from a six-chapter streak of uninterrupted action? (Contingent still had what I would consider 'action' though this is up for debate.) Perhaps you should give it some time before long jumping to a conclusion? If the story continued on the path that the Interludes set for them – that is, of \*\*\*ACTION FIGHTS EXPLOSIONS\*\*\* every chapter – it would \*also\* get 'dull and irritating,' though not as 'unnecessarily complicated.'

I'm not sure if you noticed, but this is a wonderful, novel, and completely never-seen-before device we call \*pacing.\* By giving us downtime between encounters, we don't get \*bored\* by the constant fighting, and that's a \*\*\*good\*\*\* thing.

Also: I'm not sure where you've been for the past three books? This has happened over and over again over the last few hundred or so chapters. Action – downtime – action. The pattern hasn't changed since Book I: Chapter I and I'm baffled that \*just now\* you're noticing it.

*Engineer*

I'm feeling like I usually feel after a chapter of Mother of Learning.

*Gunslinger*

Atleast the wait is 2 days instead of 1. 5 months

*Letouriste*

What? Every chapter has been released in 1 month top.

*Letouriste*

Wait what? You felt all this from a chapter so short? This chapter was nothing special too. No way that can compare to a MoL one

*Metrux*

A chapter alone is like a stick alone, can be broken easily. To see the true strength of a book you need to see the entirety, just like a tree. Mother is great, I love it, but this story here is better when it comes to characterization, which leads to greater emotions being shared. Yes, this one chapter is smaller "not that special", on the long run. But it compounds with all the rest of the story, showing change, defeat, victory and hope, all in much less lines.

All in all, you're entitled to your opinion, but just the same you shouldn't scorn someone else's opinions.

*Dainpdf*

I don't know what the Pilgrim is going for here; the last line makes it sound like this is supposed to be an "oh snap" moment, but I have no idea why his question is important. Maybe it's a throwback to something I forgot?

This felt a bit short, not sure why... Might be the fact that the chapter was mostly connective tissue, with little real meat to it.

I look forward to Friday.

*Adurna*

His ability to read either truth or emotions from the answer means that it is a potent tool to limit Cat in what she says (can't say she is playing for too much more than she is) or at the very least gauge how honourable her intentions are.

*Dainpdf*

Well, I guess. That doesn't seem nearly dramatic enough for Cat to have the reaction she did.

Was it because the heroes are getting involved in the negotiations? Because, if she didn't see that coming, she needs to rethink her assumptions.

*RanVor*

For me, it seemed more like exasperation than "OH SNAP".

*MetruX*

A lot of people seem to not notice, and it's understandable, because this is very much an indirect and diplomatic way of inquiring about her changes as Akua. And in a way she can't ignore, neither can she truly lie, since he can tell the lies.

Does this seem more dramatic for you? :3

*Dainpdf*

That doesn't seem to mesh well with my notion of intent. I don't see what it has to do with the Akua thing, exactly.

[Walter](#)

The question of 'Where is Saint' is unreasonably terrifying.

*RanVor*

No. It is reasonably terrifying. The only reason for her not to be present is being a part of some vicious plot that will see Catherine fucked over at least twice before the end of the day.

*Amoonymous*

Yeah, but if that happens then not only is Cat and crew playing the heroic role, they're doing so as the party that was backstabbed (however "technically not a backstab" the Procerans try to play it off, it's still a backstab) while negotiating in good faith.

When it comes to stories, that sounds like the type that would hand Cat a win in this universe.

## NZPIEFACE

They literally started this off saying that they couldn't talk in good faith.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

It is certainly possible that Saint is missing as part of a terrifying plot.

It is also possible that she's missing because she's a terrible diplomat and should never be allowed to participate in any negotiations.

Now, I'm pretty sure that there's something bad going on here, but that doesn't mean that there's no possible alternatives. Saint wasn't there the first time Grey Pilgrim spoke to Cat, either, probably because he wanted to talk with Cat when she wasn't distracted by Saint trying to kill her.

*Dainpdf*

That, or everyone else knew bringing her to this would be counter-productive, since she'd be hostile and work against negotiations, where they're apparently going for delay tactics.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

There is another reason, and a very simple one. She has near-violently disagreed with this sitdown happening at all. Breaking truce could have very real consequences for all involved, and there's a risk that not only might she attack the Callowins, but attack her own side if she feels they are betraying the heavens. I have no doubt they at least put her somewhere where she can make things go bad for Cat very quickly, but her not being here isn't just an obvious trap.

*RanVor*

Nah. It would be too simple.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Agreed. I just think it will be smarter and nastier than a straight backstab.

*RanVor*

Well, I guess it's also possible that they deliberately held her back specifically \*because of\* how suspicious it looks, counting on Cat to misjudge the situation and make a mistake. But I think it's less likely than that:

\*after the negotiations concluded\*

Cat: Oh, and if I may ask, where is the Saint of Swords?

The Saint: I'm in ur base killin' ur d00dz lol

[\*ahd\*](#)

Saint and Bard are holed up somewhere having a good chat and a drink.

*Rook*

The Saint is so fucking OP that she's scary when she's there and scary when she's not

*RanVor*

It just occurred to me that the Pilgrim might decide that stopping Cat is more important than the state of the army, and lie about her intentions, knowing he'll be believed unconditionally. And the Saint is already in position to launch a surprise attack on the Army of Callow in case the negotiations go down...

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

If that's their play, they'll have locked themselves into villainous roles, regardless of which side powers their Names.

I think Pilgrim has yet to wrap his head around the whole "our Heroes are their Villains and visa versa" cultural thing. Or, that Callow has been gradually developing a "screw both sides for making us their battlefield, yet a-bloody-gain – RESIST the invaders (any of them)!" narrative over centuries. 😊

Roles do gradually shift; so do which tropes go with which tale. 😊

*RanVor*

No one seems to take into consideration that not everyone is as genre savvy as Cat. The Heroes never needed to learn to think in terms of narratives. They never faced the situation that couldn't be overcome by acting stereotypically. They might not even realize that by doing something like that they give her an advantage. Or they might consider eliminating her army valuable enough to risk it.



Also, their judgment is most likely clouded by the Heavens, and the Heavens want Cat dead really badly. Sure, it's not very heroic to backstab the enemy during the diplomatic meeting, but that's always the problem with the Greater Good types – they always regret the things they're doing, but never enough to stop.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

The Wandering Bard is considerably more genre-savvy than Cat, or even Black, and she's the one pulling the strings. The Heroes don't have to be geniuses when they're being advised by an ancient monster that knows all the rules and loopholes.

"Always regret the things they're doing, but never enough to stop." Funny, that's exactly what Cordelia said to Cat during their conversation.

*RanVor*

If you didn't notice, the Bard isn't here with them.

As for the other part of your comment, remember the conversation we had under Chapter 17? I DO NOT INTEND TO REVIVE IT.

*RanVor*

Also, I just reread that conversation and Cordelia didn't say anything of the sort.

*Dylan Tullos*

"And yet," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "you still wear the crown and muster your armies for war. Sentiment is only meaningful if followed by action. If your grief at all the woe you have caused changes nothing, it is merely self-pity."

Agreed on not reviving our earlier argument. That wall of text ate most of the comments section.

Good point about the Bard. I just don't think Grey Pilgrim is the kind to break a truce; he seems extremely Lawful, and Saint listens to him. He'll try to maneuver Cat into a bad position, but I don't see him backstabbing during a conference.

The Heroes we've met so far have been honest. Even the grimdark Lone Swordsman always kept his agreements, and

Grey Pilgrim's Name and Role is that of a wise, kindly advisor, not an antihero.

*RanVor*

I don't really consider what I wrote about the Pilgrim very likely. It's just crossed my mind as a possibility. Who knows what he might be capable of with the Choirs whispering in his ear...

*Jane*

Actually... I think Cat might be less genre-savvy in certain ways. It's been implied in the past (a couple of books ago) that Black was deliberately failing to tell Cat of certain commonly known things in the belief that not knowing how Names "should" work will make her stronger. I also recall Akua having been surprised at her ignorance in... Book II, I think, sometime after she tried threatening the orphanage? And in how she hadn't a clue as to what a Pattern of Three was until she was involved in one, while several other characters have actively attempted to exploit them, sometimes successfully (Akua), sometimes not (the foolish Paladin this prologue).

That said, though, we also have how the Pilgrim and Saint attempted to read the flow of her story last battle, predicting that she might rise from her unconscious state to save her friends at their time of greatest need. That didn't happen, and they questioned its plausibility on the basis of her being a Villain, but they went full meta in *how* they guessed it would happen – they didn't try to read the state of the battle, or of her personality, just what the shape of the story looked like. That suggests to me that they're more used to thinking in terms of genre than they are the actual parts of the story – which doesn't *necessarily* mean they're good at it, since even a small amount of genre-savvy presumably goes a long way in a setting like this, but I wouldn't necessarily bet against it.

Of course, depending on his goal, he might have to ignore his instincts and play a gambit he expects to blow up in his face anyway. If he thinks these negotiations will end in a long-term disaster for the continent, he might well be willing to inflict grave harm on himself and the army in order to avert it.

*RanVor*

"That said, though, we also have how the Pilgrim and Saint attempted to read the flow of her story last battle, predicting that she might rise from her unconscious state to save her friends at their time of greatest need. "

You're right. I did forget about that one.

How do you do those citations anyway?

*Jane*

(blockquote)text(/blockquote). Just replace the ( and ) with .

Careful, though; it's quite easy for the blockquote monster to eat your entire comment if given the smallest of typos to work with x\_x . With the lack of an edit function, your comment can end up far more unreadable than if you'd just used quotes or italics to indicate you were quoting someone..

*Jane*

...Erm, while you've probably guessed this already, that suspicious blank after "with" should read > and < . Just flip them around when you're ready to invoke them.

*TeK*

Nobody picking up on tidbit about Nok? Thallassian fleet is led by their leaders son – one whos body and soul are owned by Empress. And now he showing unexpected savviness in Praesi politics by attacking Nok. The city is sacked – minus one High Lord, Legions "unfortunately were too late" (or were they?), now is the time to ask, what Malicia is thinking?

*Gunslinger*

He's in Malicia's pocket but I think Black's interlude pointed out that as long as his father was still alive he would be followed.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah but if they own the commander of the fleet, there's no way they didn't know when the city was going to be hit. They totally could have gotten the Legions there in time if they wanted to.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Man, if only the sword in the stone was still around.

*Decius*

Cat has the best chance possible right now to get the Pilgrim on her side. She offered earlier to assist the Crusade to Praes, now's the chance to get them out of Callow for good.

*mavant*

Haven't read the full chapter yet, but man that OT3 ship tease

*Dylan Tullos*

The strategic situation is interesting.

Ashur is doing their job; by raiding the cities along the coast, they're putting pressure on Malicia and tying down the Legions stationed in Praes. Every legionary garrisoned in a Wasteland city is one legionary that isn't free to oppose the Crusading armies further west.

The Dominion is on the march, and if their armies are able to get through the Stairway, they'll simply overwhelm the remaining Army of Callow. Even if the Stairway is somehow closed or blocked, Pappenheim may have the sheer numbers to force the Red Flower Vales through attrition. With his army and those of the Dominion, he has a huge strategic advantage against Black.

Prince Amadis is a clever man, but I don't see him getting out of this. Cordelia has no reason to agree to any treaty he makes. She's already gotten thousands of fantassins killed, accomplishing one of her objectives, and now her internal opponents are openly negotiating with an Evil ruler. If they strike an agreement and retreat, it would be simple for her to cast the blame on Amadis and destroy him politically.

Cordelia has already accomplished one essential goal; Catherine has killed enough of her fantassins so that she no longer has to fear an unemployed mercenary army. Now she's on the verge of discrediting her political opposition. Once that is accomplished, her only remaining goals will be tearing down the Tower and bringing Callow back to the side of Good.

[Tohron](#)

Of course, there is one caveat here – Catherine knows that one of Cordelia's goals in sending Amadis and Rozala was to get them killed or discredited, and the two of them probably won't be happy to play along with that.

*Dylan Tullos*

Tohron:

Catherine can do her best not to kill Amadis and Rozala, but they've already lost a huge part of their army, and they're engaging in delicate negotiations with an Evil ruler. At this point, it would be very hard for them to put a positive spin on "Made a deal with Evil that had us retreat back through the Stairway".

The only way I can see for Catherine to avoid discrediting them would be to let them stay in Callow, which she's not willing to do. Charging Amadis and Rozala for food on the way out would humiliate them further, rubbing in their defeat and making it impossible for them to revive their plans.

[vuthuha912](#)

Seriously, Malicia doesn't think like a military leader at all. Cat should take her words as suggestions at most. If your army is there with you because they are paid to do so, killing you is the way to disrupt the entire thing. It is important to grasp the relationship between enemy troops and the commander. If it is skin deep – murder the top. If it is as thick as blood, be prepared to fight a drawn-out war. Various factors in the Procer army are paid and have no great loyalty to the state. It can be used to great effect.

And Cordelia also achieves the objective of depriving her country of useful manpower, a large sum of money, and straining its delicate economy. People need land to actually settle down and revitalize the economy. She should have gone with land reforms first. No one should be seeking war that closes after the last one. It is a surefire way to get your nation to collapse. No matter how just the cause, constant war really can ravage a country.

[sengachi](#)

I'll bet when Akua was doing her false hero monologue she made some statement parallel to a previous statement Catherine had made, and the Grey Pilgrim registered it as a lie from Akua but a truth from Catherine.

Also I'll bet the Saint of Swords is in position to destroy Cat's army if need be. Juniper isn't the only one who knows you can win a war without going for the head of the snake.

[sengachi](#)

I loved, absolutely loved, seeing Indrani, Masego, and Cat snuggled up together. That kind of casual intimacy means a lot to me and it really warmed my heart seeing the three of them be together like that.

*Talmora*

I am slightly depressed and annoyed at how this book is going. Barely any victories to Cat's name besides limiting the amount of assassination attempts. And now it sounds like Pilgrim is going to screw her over more....again....for like the third time.

[shyntar](#)

"Wasn't it traditional that things had to at least go well for the villain before the tables were turned?"

[tyizor](#)

As shyntar implied, Cat's not playing the villan role this time. She's forced it onto the heroes ironically.

*Byzantine*

You know, I don't she forced anything on them. I think they walked into it entirely on their own, of their own free will. Catherine, in fact, tried to stop them from doing so.

*werafdsaew*

That doesn't look good for the negotiation.

[wyaldriddler](#)

At this point, since I consider Saint and Pilgrim to be decently intelligent and genre savy, otherwise they wouldn't be alive, I figure they are going for a story which we don't know about. My current guess is some kind of beleaguered queen redemption story.

Which ah... well that's gonna be the third time Cat says fuck you to the Choir's.

*Byzantine*

The thing is Cat doesn't give two shits about Good or Evil. She's just trying to do the right thing for Callow – which seems to be really pissing off Good.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

There's another possibility,  
One I HOPE is actually the case. Archer commented, after her go-round with Saint, that Saint is Old and she thinks Saint drawing heavily on her Name is getting to be more than her body can handle.

Think about the sort of stuff Saint's been doing. She's been cutting gashes in the air, to use as hand and footholds to the first time pursue and cut bits off Cat as Cat withdrew running on flat shadow-panes...and then the second time did the same thing, only a LOT more of it, to gain the necessary altitude to go after Cat while Cat was on Winged-Zombie.

All that Sky-Parkour, move after move after move, each move beginning with drawing on her Name enough to gash Reality enough to create grip-points out of thin air...above and beyond engagement after engagement, each and every day, if not multiple times a day, for pretty much the last seven days. To say nothing at all

of all the conventional running and cutting-to-pieces of hundreds of Callowan soldiers. She's been forced to defend herself with her Name from Masego's very best efforts to alpha-strike her, and then had an extended engagement with Archer.

Saint may well be running on fumes, and (likely at the Pilgrim's earnest suggestion) is using the duration of diplomatic whatever's to rest and recharge.

I truly, truly hope it's that. Otherwise the whole Villains Don't Age thing is a meaningless issue of cosmetics. If aged Heroes retain full youthful vigor/constitution, then all Heroic aging means is they cosmetically look worse than the Villains. That doesn't really jive with the issue as it was explained very early on. To say nothing of the fact it would make Ranger a LOT less distinctive.

What I've been hoping to see for a bit now is some sign that all this 110% the Saint and GP have been giving to shield the younger Heroes from the lethal results of their errors has been whittling them down. Otherwise they're frankly OP. Even after staving off the Absolute Positioning Flood, the GP was merely tired-seeming for all of one day, but was splitting and re-purposing the Summoned Summer Sun the very next morning.

The GP and the Saint have been at it flat-out for some time now. They're very old, and it'd be incredibly interesting to finally see a chink in their invulnerability. Or..as someone else said, the Saint could be flatly opposed to treating with Catherine, and is using as non-participation in the diplomacy as the BS-figleaf justification she's going to use to explain how she can strike treacherously while negotiations are ongoing, and still be a "Hero."

*RanVor*

The Heroes being OP is one of the crucial plot points of the story. I wouldn't be surprised if they just got more powerful with age.

What makes you think Hye Su is a Hero?

*Metrux*

They age, don't exactly loose power. The whole gig is that THEY DIE TO AGING. If you trully think about it, villains can live forever. Heroes can't. So even if they stay at the height of their power until the day they die... They still die to age just like a normal person. You'll never see a 200 years old hero.

*Metrux*

A. She's a trainer of both Heroes and Villains; B. Her legend was big before the Calamities, and she did fight against several Villains; C. She has a Name that can be Heroic or Villainous; D. No one knows if her not seeming to age is because of Villainy or her elf ancestry, which means she could be the closest thing to a immortal Hero, or even a true Neutral party. It's been said before, when Cat was learning, that not even Black is sure if she is Hero or Villain.

*RanVor*

All of that is true, but from what we know about her personality, she seems more Villainous than Heroic. In the Guide sense, of course, not in the normal sense.

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## Chapter 21: Tug-of-War

*"Invading Callow is much like drunkenly playing dice: the odds are never as good as you believe, and you know you've reached bottom when snake eyes are involved."*

– Dread Emperor Malevolent III, the Pithy

I pricked my ears, gauging the enemy. Most of the Proceran delegation had either skipped a beat or seen their pulse quicken when the Pilgrim rose to his feet. That was telling. Since it was dubious anyone that high up in the Proceran pecking order was faint of heart, the implication was that this particular play had been kept close to the chest. There were only four who'd not had a physical reaction of fear or surprise: Prince Amadis, Princess Rozala, Prince Arnaud and the middle-aged diplomat who'd been the mouthpiece for the opposition so far. The first two were only to be expected, and the last a given, but the third? That was interesting. Arnaud of Cantal did not strike me as the kind of man the other two royals would keep deep in their confidence. Has he found out on his own? If he was spying on the leaders of the northern crusade, that was a possible angle for Thief to exploit. Turning him seemed unlikely, but if his spying apparatus could be infiltrated... Something to discuss with her later. I made a note to have Vivienne dig deeper into the man, as there was apparently more to him than his reputation. The Grey Pilgrim's words were followed by heavy silence and I did not hurry to respond.

This, I knew, was the beginning of the deeper game. The war behind the war, where Named would claw at each other like animals to get the morsels of narrative they needed for the final victory. The thing was, as it stood, I was winning that fight.



I'd repeatedly made overtures for peace, brought up whenever I could that the enemy was invading my homeland for mostly petty reasons and avoided – as much as feasible – falling into the kind of villainous stand that would get me winning in the short term and killed in the long one. As long as this remained a negotiation between mortals, for mortal motives, I came out ahead. Sure, they were a better hand at diplomacy and likely I'd end up unable to capitalize on several of my advantages. But that was fine, in the greater scheme of things, so long as I walked out of this pavilion with some gains and my narrative intact. There were earthly logistics to this, and Black had made an entire career out of proving those could win a war regardless of the subtler workings of Creation, but I was confident that as long as I held my ground story-wise I'd emerge in a position to begin the sequence of events that'd get me to my objective.

Which meant that I had to avoid engaging the Pilgrim as much as I could. I had a knack for stories, twisting them and using them. It came naturally to me. But the opposition had actually *lived* through hundreds of them. The experience gap between us was overwhelming, and that was without even taking into consideration whatever tricks the Heavens were sure to have bestowed upon him to make sure he'd keep coming out ahead. I could not confidently state I would win against the Grey Pilgrim, so my safest path was not to fight him at all. Ironically, my sharpest tool in ensuring that was something I generally had little patience for: etiquette. Instead of replying to the old Levantine, I leaned towards Aisha.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I said. "But isn't it a severe breach of decorum for someone without a formal role in negotiations to directly address a queen?"

The lovely Taghreb's lips quirked.

"That is so," she said, pitching her voice so it would be heard by all. "Under Tower law, such a transgression is punishable by flaying of the left hand and foot."

Several of the Procerans' hearts quivered.

"It has been the stance of your delegation to advance the Queen in Callow as an entity separate from the Tower's rule," the Pilgrim said, face serene. "Was this a misrepresentation?"

I did one the things I hated most in the world: I kept my fucking mouth shut. The moment I got involved the narrative was back in play. *Lose, I told myself. Let him win the small things, so long as you get what you came for.*

"Observations on the nature of Praesi law are no admission of anything else," Thief coldly noted. "To pretend otherwise is

disingenuous, and might be taken as an attempt to sink honest negotiations. Is that the intent of the Proceran delegation?"

I sat straighter in my chair. Thief was one of the Woe, and the Woe were under me. Would anything coming out of her mouth contribute to the tapestry the Pilgrim was trying to weave? Not if I contradicted her, I suspected, but if I was remaining silent... Best to stay on the safe side. Picking out a sliver of Winter, I formed a ring around her index on the hand beneath the table and squeezed it lightly. She inclined her head slightly to the left, acknowledging my warning as I allowed the construct to dissipate.

"A curious thing, that seeking clarity would be taken as offence," the Pilgrim said. "Regardless, there is precedent."

The Proceran mouthpiece bowed again.

"As far as the year seventy-four, Chosen recognized as titled advisors have been allowed to address to the Highest Assembly directly," the man said. "As far one hundred and eleven, the same have been granted right of involvement with negotiations held with foreign powers."

Seventy-four, huh. That was the year eight hundred ninety, by the Imperial calendar – Procerans begun theirs after the founding of the Principate, which had only taken place a year after Triumphant's fall. Considering the current Imperial year was thirteen hundred and twenty-seven, that was not a young precedent. It shouldn't matter, though, and if I'd picked up on that, Aisha should have as well. Living up to my expectation, the Staff Tribune advanced where we remained silent.

"Proceran custom is not universally binding," she pointed out. "There is no such precedent for our delegation. Regardless, right of involvement would not equate right of *interrogation*."

The middle-aged diplomat smothered a smile. A mistake had been made.

"Queen Eleanor Fairfax granted privilege to voice thoughts and questions freely to the contemporary Wizard of the West, after her coronation," the man said. "This is a matter of public record. That privilege has been maintained through every known Choosing since."

I kept my face rigid. Was that true? It might very well be. Records were sparse about the Old Kingdom, nowadays, save those that related to mundane matters – where the Empire's rule tended to come out as a more prosperous, if also more tyrannical, alternative. My teacher had been thorough in taking the knife to anything that could feasibly become fodder for a hero's rise, and knowledge about past Wizards of the West would have been high on

that list of proscriptions. *Except he wouldn't have been able expunge Proceran records, not in depth anyway.* The man's heartbeat was steady, which could be an indication he was telling the truth – or merely that he was a very good liar.

"The Proceran delegation has not recognized ours as being representative of the Kingdom of Callow," Grandmaster Talbot said, cool voice cutting clearly through the hesitation. "Only of the Queen in Callow, making such precedent irrelevant. Which it would be even if otherwise, unless by some labyrinthine exercise of reason an equivalence between the attempted murderer of Queen Catherine and the ancient servants of the now-extinct House Fairfax was established. Which it was not."

Brandon *fucking* Talbot, I thought, smothering a grin. Riding in lance high at the last moment, proper knight that he was.

"Lack of recognition for Proceran law endangers the entire process of treaty-making," the middle-aged diplomat warned.

"Forceful imposition of foreign customs on the same process is not a standard this delegation is willing to establish," Aisha replied pleasantly. "We do not recognize the attempt to establish precedent by the Proceran delegation, and move the first issue on the program should now be addressed."

"Is this to be who you truly are, Catherine Foundling?" the Grey Pilgrim said, soft voice carrying across the pavilion. "A villain hiding behind petty excuses, unwilling to even speak with those you deem foes?"

My fingers clenched. The fucker. He had a lot of nerves saying that, after he'd tacitly allowed the Saint to try to kill me under a godsdamned truce banner. I leaned forward to – *let him win the small things, so long as you get what you came for.* My teeth came down and I bit off my tongue, knowing I would not be able to keep silent otherwise. If Masego's weakness was the need for utter precision, then mine was the inability to just keep my fucking mouth shut. Blood filled my mouth as Winter lazily coursed through my veins, repairing the self-inflicted damage. I swallowed as discretely as I could. The violent urge to respond was not gone, but the immediacy had ebbed. I kept my eyes on Prince Amadis, who was eyeing me with a mixture of disgust and fascination. I bared reddened teeth at him, watching his muscles clench to suppress a flinch.

"Shall we proceed, Your Grace?" I asked.

He inclined his head by a fraction. Good. I'd weathered the first blow, but if I knew anything about patterns that was the first of three. I would have to remain wary. Aisha had thought it odd that the Procerans had not fought back harder on the terms of truce and retreat being the first subject addressed, but now we knew

why. They'd intended on flipping the table before it even came to that. Now, though, they were stuck actually discussing it. Withdrawal from the Tenth Crusade for the royals had never been in the cards, much as it irked me. For them to put their seal to a treaty binding them to that would be high treason and sustained heresy under Proceran law. One of the ancient First Princes had passed that motion through the Highest Assembly, after a few Arlesite principalities dropped out of one of the crusades against the Kingdom of the Dead. Their agitations in the south while the rest of the Principate was busy dying up north had been so deeply despised by the surviving princes they'd been willing to limit their own prerogatives to see the deserters punished. No, our wiggle room was narrower than that. The first opening was that, technically speaking, the Tenth Crusade had been declared on Praes. It would be damaging to their reputation to make a deal with me, but not actually illegal.

The second was that I wasn't asking for peace, only a truce. The terms we were after were eighteen months where none of the signatories or soldiers under their command could enter Callow, which was where we first got shafted by the premises agreed on. They managed to have it defined as 'the lands under the rule of the Queen in Callow', which gave them some flexibility. The moment a part of the kingdom renounced my rule, it was fair game again and they could get involved without breaking the letter of the agreement. Or, and I was just guessing here, if a disavowed heroine like the Saint just happened cut my head off – well, it would be convenient coincidence that there were no longer any lands under the rule of the Queen in Callow, wouldn't it? I was going to have to watch my back very, very carefully in the coming months. Eve more so than usual. Aisha began bargaining forthree years of truce and slowly allowed herself to be whittled down to fourteen months, though at least she got a concession out of it. The fantassins across the field were in the employment of the princes and princesses attending, but that was a matter of contract. Those could be released, at which point the terms would no longer apply to them. Horse-trading for six months less of truce, Aisha managed to extract they'd sign the treaty as well. None of the companies would be able to just sign up with the Iron Prince's host instead.

A goodwill clause forbidding the fantassins to simply disband their companies and reform under a different name was written in, because even *I* had seen that loophole coming. It was when we moved to the second subject, supplies, that Thief's predictions came true and they began their attempt to fuck us in earnest. You'd think they'd at least provide dinner first. Bad form, Amadis. Going at it with only wine made it look like they thought we were easy.

"As a sign of good faith, we would require that the Army of Callow continue to provide supplies while negotiations are

ongoing, at the previously agreed cost," Prince Amadis requested, meeting my eyes directly.

It wasn't the first time they'd tried that. Fairly early on they'd narrowed in on the fact that my diplomatic training was lacking compared to Aisha's or Talbot's, and since they'd tried to get me involved as much as possible. Best way for them to do that was to ditch the mouthpiece and let the Prince of Iserre do the talking: he had enough status that etiquette dictated I couldn't just foist the thing off to Aisha if he spoke to me directly. It was a play on their part, we both knew that. But it also left me with no real reason to call them out, and if these talks imploded because I'd walked out without a damned good reason? That was the story of a villain queen so arrogant she was willing to starve dozens of thousands for perceived insults. It did not bode well for me. This was going to be a pivot, I knew that and the Pilgrim most definitely did. It meant every word spoken today had *weight*. I'd be eroding at my own gains if I pulled out now, and even if it likely wouldn't be enough to flip the entire story the opposition didn't *need* that, strictly speaking. Just my position being weakened would make it much easier to kill me. Was this the second blow? No, the confrontation was too indirect. The Pilgrim had made himself the speaker for Above, it wasn't something that could be handed to Amadis like a plate of pastries.

"While we are not willing to make that concession, we share your worry on the appearance of coercion," I blandly replied.

Meaning it wouldn't look good if it appeared we were negotiating with a loaded crossbow pointed at their balls, though we were both aware there were plenty crossbows today to go around. The Jacks had confirmed Hasenbach had her own scrying-capable mages in play, called the Order of the Red Lion. We also knew, from Masego, that they were at least a decade behind Praesi spell formulas when it came to that, which meant they couldn't do relays and their range was limited: they could chain the reports manually, but that was tricky business. Hierophant's best guess for the crusaders getting news from the battle at the Red Flower Vales was a delay of two days. Knowing Black, he was very unlikely to gamble it all on the first day. He'd stretch it out through series of fortifications, made even more efficient by the narrow valleys and steep slopes of the Vales. That provided us with some room to manoeuvre.

"We are willing to immediately provide three days' worth of supplies, at the agreed on cost, to prevent that misunderstanding," I continued calmly.

Prince Amadis' heartbeat quickened. Anger. *Yeah, you princely shit. We saw that one coming.* There was still risk involved, should Papenheim somehow win an immediate and crushing victory –

or, more probably, if Black decided a strategic retreat out of the Vales was the correct decision – but odds were the crusaders would have to make the deal without knowing the outcome. They *really* wanted to avoid that, of course. But outright feeding them for three days yanked away their pretext to push for better terms. They could still delay until the days were past, but then we'd be the ones with grounds to protest bad faith. *And we both know Kegan is coming. Your window of opportunity is narrow.* If they failed to make terms before the Deoraithe arrived, their bargaining position took a hit. Juniper had urged me to send Larat to fetch Kegan's host, and I'd already made up my mind to agree if we didn't walk out with a deal by the day's end. It was a naked threat, sure, and before the meeting began I'd worried about souring the process by resorting to it. But they were already pushing back pretty hard, and if they were stretching things out on purpose threats were not a line I was unwilling to cross.

"The gesture is appreciated," Amadis said evenly. "However, I worry this could be misconstrued as impropriety. Rumours of bribery would damage the reputation of all involved."

My eyes narrowed. We were making the crusaders pay for the supplies, it was hardly a fucking bribe. Princes were touchy about their reputation, though, so while it wasn't a good reason it was a halfway plausible one. *And it wasn't a reply we anticipated, though we should have.* I glanced at Aisha, but she could be no help. Fuck. There was probably a way out of this, but I couldn't think of one at the moment.

"We can table the matter for the moment," I conceded grudgingly.

"As you say," the Prince of Iserre replied, the hint of a smile on his lips as he inclined his head.

Aisha bowed in her seat, then addressed the table.

"We now address the third subject on the program," the Supply Tribune said, "as requested by the Callowan delegation. Provenance and direction of promised coin."

In other words, who was going to foot the bill for the supplies they were getting. That was going to be one of the trickier bits, Vivienne had told me. The Procerans were going to try to pass it all to Hasenbach, but we might have a way around that. For 'practical reasons' we were going to suggest they provide the coin themselves, though it would be framed as a loan on the part of the First Prince towards them. Our turn to screw them over the negotiation premises, for this one. As an expeditionary force of the First Prince, they had legal grounds to agree to that – if they were Hasenbach's mandated minions, anything falling under war reparations was ultimately her responsibility to pay for. Aisha had noted some of them might consider it a worthwhile trade

off to have the First Prince owe them money, since by leveraging that debt they might avoid political retaliation for a retreat. Thief had been more dubious, arguing that they'd balk since Cordelia might manage to get out of paying them anything back. It was going to come down to finesse.

"The delegation recognizes the Chosen known as the Grey Pilgrim, formal advisor to the Prince of Iserre," the mouthpiece intoned.

Well, shit. We were halfway through the list now, so in retrospective I should have seen it coming.

"In matter of direction, I seek clarification," the Pilgrim said. "The Principate of Procer is currently at war with the Dread Empire of Praes. As it could be considered treason for any coin paid through this treaty to come to gild Imperial coffers through either commerce or tribute, a question must first be addressed. Does the Queen in Callow intend to pursue formal independence from the Tower?"

I closed my eyes and thought. Why would he care about the gold? Coin didn't mean shit to heroes. No, he had a reason to ask this that shaped a story. *Independence from the Tower*. Callow already was independent, effectively speaking, but there'd been no open break. Malicia and I knew it was just a matter of time, but the current fiction it wasn't was useful for us both. If it was discarded, what was the result? Most likely, Malicia had to declare I was in rebellion even if she did nothing immediate about it. That was the part that had me wary, though. She couldn't do anything about it right now, not with Ashur marauding the coasts and a city freshly sacked. So why would the old man be after that? *Pilgrim might not know about Nok, though*, I mused. No, wrong way to think about this. If this was a political play it'd be the Procerans doing the talking. Since it was the Pilgrim, he was leaning on the pivot for some reason. Malicia declared me a rebel. What did that mean, in the greater scheme of things? Ah, shit. *Evil turns on Evil*. That was his play. And it was a story old as the First Dawn, too, so if I caught even the hem of it in my fingers it was going to drag me through seventy fucking Hells. Stories repeated so often they were considered self-evident truths had a way of pushing themselves to the fore no matter what the people involved wanted.

All right, then. What could I do to avoid the pitfall?

Couldn't argue there was no need to have the talk, this time, since that could be taken as me trying to frame the Procerans for treason. It'd turn this from truce talks to 'Evil queen lays a cunning trap', and that fucked everything up. I couldn't lie in front of the Pilgrim, he'd see through it and that got me back in the deep even if 'the Heavens told me it was untrue' might not hold up too well as a negotiating position. Flatly admitting I was going to just led me to a different problem, so that was

straight out. Could I maybe keep this contained, force an oath whatever was spoken on the subject wouldn't get out of this pavilion? *No*, I decided. I didn't have enough of a leg to stand on, and it wasn't like the Procerans would jump for joy at the prospect of being oath-bound to someone holding a fae mantle. *If you can't dodge, attack*, I thought. Instead of avoiding *his* story, what story could *I* make? Liberating rebel wouldn't hold, not while I was wearing a crown. I'd only ever managed to squeak into heroic Roles when the opposition was... less than flexible, anyway. Treacherous lieutenant to Malicia? I could fit the boots, but it wouldn't get me anywhere I wanted to be. Praesi stories would just make it worse, as a rule, so it had to be either Callowan or old and worn enough it was up for grabs by anyone.

Unless... *Akua*. She'd been on her own idea of good behaviour since Second Liesse, which had taken a while for me to puzzle out. She should have been scheming to get out, and to be frank she probably was, but she was also very much trying to be useful. To get out of the box more often, in part, but there were deeper reasons. I had beaten her, or at least she believed as much. According to the sack full of razor blades that was Praesi philosophy, that meant she was my follower now. That was an old story, and though the Wasteland had practically turned it into a religion it wasn't *just* a Wasteland favourite. Or Evil's in general. Early crew of heroes runs into a seeming enemy they fight out of misunderstanding, then fall together either facing a common foe or when the misunderstanding is finally cleared. Everyone's friends, some cackling villain gets stabbed in unison and the Heavens pat everyone's ass approvingly. Hells, that was more or less how Archer had ended up joining the Woe now that I thought about it. So I needed to be metaphorical Archer, fighting the crusaders out of a silly misunderstanding somehow involving three bloody days of battle and at least thirty thousand dead.

*I am a crusader*, I thought. What did I want? To fuck over the Wasteland, a sentiment I wasn't exactly unsympathetic to. *Kill Catherine Foundling, since she's an abomination and also an asshole who keeps killing our guys*. How did I cease being the asshole who kept killing their guys? Well, maybe if they stopped trying to kill m- no, not productive. Plenty of heroes were guy-killing assholes, I reminded myself, in and of itself it wasn't a deal breaker. Larger perspective. Looking down from Above, what was happening in Callow? *Praes is still in charge*, I thought. The borders, the separate laws and the coinage wouldn't matter to something like the Hashmallim. A villain was still on the throne, the former apprentice of the Black Knight. My army was more than half Callowan, these days, but I still had a detachment of mass-murdering Praesi household troops and the greenskins. Goblins had an unfortunate propensity for stabbing, and orcs *did* eat people. Wasn't even that large a part of their diet, and it wasn't like they ate people alive – it was illegal, if nothing else – but even occasional corpse-eating did tend to disqualify people from



standing on the shiny side of the fence. As far as Above was concerned, I was a Dread Empress wearing the Queen of Blades' clothes.

But I was in charge in their eyes, wasn't I? The legalities we'd been quibbling about all day didn't mean dust in the eyes of the Gods. That was the whole reason to remove me, wasn't it? A villainous ruler for Callow was bad for business, regardless of the earthly practicalities involved. Which meant that if I made a choice, Above took that as a choice for all of Callow. There was an opening there. If I pulled the rug out from under the heroes, it worked for the entire kingdom. My eyes narrowed. I didn't have to stop being a – unfairly characterized, I believed – murderous asshole. I just had to be *their* murderous asshole. Metaphorically speaking. Probably. And the way to achieve that... what was the name of Cordelia's Friendly League of Upstanding Nations again? Ah, right. I cleared my throat, meeting the Grey Pilgrim's eyes with a grin that was all teeth.

"To answer your question," I said, "I intend to seek signatory status with the Grand Alliance within the year."

Pandemonium erupted, the Pilgrim's face went blank and my grin only got wider.

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*ruduen*

The combination of Catherine learning to keep her mouth shut and learning to read the flow of stories is quite a dangerous one, indeed.

I think that's even one step beyond not monologuing.

*Dainpdf*

She already did the latter, some – look at her confrontation with the Winter Fae. She's just way better at it now. But the tongue biting moment is powerful.

[ClickPause](#)

Just a little bit of confusion here, couldn't she have said the deal was with the Queen in Callow, not with the Dread Empire? She already said that before, in pretty much the same context.

*Dainpdf*

The problem is that, on paper, she's still under Malicia, and so money paid to her could end up in Praes. This would either make her betray Malicia or force her to accept feeding them at no cost.

*Sylfa*

It would be treason of them to give money that is known to go to the Tower, thus it would be unreasonable for them to agree to it. It would possibly also be construed as a hidden trap she tried to make them fall into, by later sending proof they committed treason, thus turning the admittance of the money potentially going to Praes into a story of the villain's treachery being unveiled by the clever, handsome, and so very very good old man that never would have considered attacking someone under a flag of truce especially after he vowed to not allow such acts to happen.

I reckon she could have simply answered that all the proceeds would go directly to the displaced peasantry to feed them, which recently suffered an invasion that forced the peasants to flee their homes and fields.

Reinforcing that the invasion is causing suffering for the good people of Callow and making it a truly good act to give all that money to be used for feeding them when they will have a poor harvest due to not being able to plant in time. Since Praes doesn't have a food export that would guarantee the money doesn't go there.

Her choice seems to be juicier, but I figure it would have been enough to dodge the stories they tried to push her into. And also not be treason for them to agree to.

*stevenneiman*

It's kind of an interesting thing to note how her tragic flaw, talking when she knows she shouldn't, is a classic of both heroes and villains. On the Villainous side everyone knows what happens to villains who monologue, but it still happens enough to keep it fresh in people's minds. On the heroic side, everybody likes a smartass protagonist who won't shut up, with the exception of the villains who think he should be intimidated.

Here, she's also done another very interesting narrative thing, turning one of her story elements (pragmatically mandated self-mutilation) against another (not keeping her mouth shut). I'm curious to see if there's a special significance to this.

Finally, this is a brilliant play in one final way. By basically declaring that she's going to hold against Malicia while simultaneously "struggling" with her old habits and the power of Winter, Cat just made herself the most outmatched hero present, which means that she pretty much just stole the Grey

Pilgrim from them and there's pretty much nothing they can do to get him back. Even if he doesn't want to help her, his Name is going to make him, because that's what he does. He helps outmatched heroes.

*Taichi22*

i hadn't even realized this.

Oh, I'm looking forward to this shit. Grey Pilgrim is gonna be the tsundere grampa to Black's hardcore dad.

*Dainpdf*

But she's not playing a Hero role. She stated she didn't think she could swing that. She's playing "redeemable villain."

*stevenneiman*

She's been playing up the fact that she's just looking after her own people from the very beginning, sought peace that didn't involve the Principate looting her homeland at every opportunity, offered to help deal with the real threat, and now she's indicating her willingness to join with the forces of Good. That definitely seems like a redeemed (past tense) villain to me, especially given that she's playing on the war being a big misunderstanding. One with major risks of backsliding, perhaps, but redeemed nonetheless.

*RanVor*

She's doing the same thing as always – trying to con the Creation into recognizing her as someone she isn't. And, as always, she is succeeding admirably.

*Dainpdf*

Redeemed... When her forces include Orcs and Goblins, with said Orcs actually getting the permission to snack on dead enemies? That's not going to fly.  
Nor is the use of goblinfire, which Cat now knows includes diabolism in its fabrication.  
Cat can play the peace-seeking goals card, but that at best gets her to Well-Intentioned Extremist.

*Metrux*

Well, don't know about orcs, since we know nothing of their own culture, but goblinfire was ALSO used by heroes, the Lone Swordsman being the one mostly shown. Also, she used a sword made of an angels feather, and she's a villain, so... Yes, it is going to fly, because this is not humans looking at each other and pointing:

"This is evil!". It's reality in this world saying "This is how this story began..." and reality give no shits about the true nature, only about what it seems like. That, more than anything, is what differentiate Good from good and Evil from evil.

*Dainpdf*

She actually says in the chapter that it wouldn't.

*Byzantine*

She's playing "Villain seeking redemption by becoming a hero." It typically counts as heroic.

*Dainpdf*

It sort of is... But she's playing it at the "asshole with potential for good" phase. Again, she consort with maneaters, murderers and diabolists. One of whose souls she has bound to her cape.

*Parasol*

She needs to make sure that she avoids the 'redemption equals death' trope then.

*RanVor*

Oh shit. I haven't thought of that. It would be a perfect opening for the Heavens to fuck her over.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Here, she's also done another very interesting narrative thing, turning one of her story elements (pragmatically mandated self-mutilation) against another (not keeping her mouth shut). I'm curious to see if there's a special significance to this.

I don't think so... "biting your tongue" is a classic trope, Cat just made it literal.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh yeah....

*Daemion*

Brilliant move. Malicia will love it.

*Someguy*

Especially since it fits so perfectly with the principles of her tritease for the end of the Age of Wonders.

*Oshi*

She might actually. If Praes survives and Callow joins the alliance. She might be able to leverage this into a peace treaty (probably with concessions that let her pacify her opposition) and achieve what she wants...

*RanVor*

Actually, I thought about that for a bit and came to the conclusion that Malicia wants pretty much the same thing Catherine wants for Callow, but for Praes. So yes, she would be very pleased with this resolution.

*Dainpdf*

Can't invade Praes by land if you can't invade Callow and they won't let troops through.

*MetruX*

They already offered to let troops through, so why not?

*Dainpdf*

Because if this offensive starts to go badly Cat has no reason to keep that offer up, and actual incentives not to. Mainly, that Malicia has her economy by the balls. At the very least, the Crusade would need to negotiate passage with her.

*Unorginal*

Riveting Diplomacy

*Unorginal*

That's a phrase I never thought I'd say.

*Jane*

Well, *someone* clearly hasn't spent enough time reading about the Three Kingdoms period in China!

/mostlyjoking

*Taichi22*

The Romance of Three Kingdoms is about this good when everyone goes to sit down at the table, but there's usually

a sword dance or some poisoned wine about half the time, because they really don't give a shit about good etiquette.

[vuthuha912](#)

Not really. Most banquets are quite peaceful but the one with sword dancing and poison wine is the more interesting one. Cao Cao attended a party for ousting Dong Zhuo earlier in the story, but nothing happens. People were honestly plotting to kill Dong Zhuo and not interested in turning on each other.

*Dainpdf*

I started reading this thinking "oh gods, we the phantom menace now".  
I was wrong.

[onedollargum](#)

Phantom menace \*wishes\* people bit off their own tongues to stop talking. XD

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nah, that's the audience's desires pertaining to some of the dialogue used in SW:Ep1.

*Byzantine*

Well... She did offer, at the very start, to ferry them all straight to the Tower to tear the whole thing down. It should not be a surprise she is entirely willing to flip sides – and the table – to end this pointless war, break Callow free, and end the narrative that keeps getting Callow invaded.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Of course, any truce that observes the lands ruled by Catherine means that if she takes the tower, all of Praes falls under the umbrella as well. All she has to do is beat her own "allies" to the throne.

*Jane*

Unfortunately, the truce only applies to the signatories and their soldiers, who only constitute a small portion of the Crusade (especially after having been bloodied by Catherine); the rest of Procer's armies, and their allies, would still be free to attack. It also only applies for fourteen months, several of which would be eaten up by *claiming* the tower.

It *would* be a delicious abuse of the terms of the truce, however!

*Insanenoodlyguy*

If she successfully applies, which she has to at least be aiming for now for Grey to not being happily calling BS, it's going to be expanded a lot farther than that.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Ah, but lying Villains lie. So, she was lying. Had to be. It's a trick. Somewhere. Therefore, she was twisting what seemed to be the truth into a big, fat lie.

She has always been the Tower's creature; Villains will always want to climb it, thus will she remain, despite her suggestion of toppling it; doesn't mean a thi— Oh, Crap. xD

*beleester*

No, villains never lie, if the truth will hurt more.

And they \*especially\* never lie when the heroes have a lie-detector. They just come up with a plan that doesn't involve lying, and then smugly say "If you think it's a trap, why don't you check your lie detector?"

[onedollargum](#)

Not to mention she's a fey queen, and Catherine mentioned earlier how much they'd want someone like her under oath if she can't break it.

*Goddam impressed*

Cat you brilliant fucking bitch!

*PotatoMan*

What

[superkeaton](#)

Catherine scores a point.

How do you escape being the Villain? By becoming the asshole ally, the "befriended villain turned Good". Petition the Alliance and suddenly you can put a positive spin on things.

Also, that bit about her biting off and swallowing her own tongue was delightfully horrifying.

*RanVor*

And flashing her bloodied teeth to Amadis.

*White*

Get wreeeeeeeeeeeeck, scruuuuuuuuubs!

*Dainpdf*

In the immortal words of DJ Khaled: "Congratulations, Pilgrim. You played yourself."

*Draconius Sinister*

Weird to think of Cat sitting there silent for a minute or two thinking this through, but glad to see she kicked the Pilgrim in the conversational balls.

*werafdsaew*

Yeah time slows down when the Names have to make a decision of great import. It has happened quite a few times already.

*Byzantine*

Yep. Remember: Names are stuck in a narrative, so if the world needs to give them time to think they get that time.

*MetruX*

Also important to remember that in most negotiation tables the way of speech isn't the same as in a normal conversation. It is slower, and no one will call someone out for taking their time to think. After all, everything is a weapon or a shield in the negotiations, and making someone answer faster could very well be seen as bad intentions that, theoretically, shouldn't be upon a negotiation table.

*Yotz*

>with a grin that was all teeth

So, Cat finally realized her true nature as a Cheshire. Fascinating.

*Jane*

While I doubt this is actually the case, I like to imagine that between being Fae and having a construct body, her toothy grins at times like these end up becoming *unnaturally* toothy. Like, "Human mouths aren't supposed to stretch that wide or have that many teeth" toothy.

*Dainpdf*

Sharkerine. 'Nuff said.

*Jane*



Well, that's a beautiful play. Now they pretty much *have* to accept truce terms, or Hasenbach will use their recalcitrance to bury them.

"We could have had Callow on our side *without* a hundred thousand dead and constant rebellions, but you couldn't even be bothered to bring me her offer?"

Combined with how their disastrous performance in the Crusade will tarnish their reputation, she could easily use such a thing to ruin their houses for a generation, even if she had no intention of taking Cat's proposal seriously.

Of course, I imagine this will cause her some longer-term problems, but hey, that's Future Cat's problem. And Cat has never shied from causing Future Cat new problems – she knows full well how many headaches she deserves, for having caused her so many problems in the past.

Hm. I wonder if Pilgrim still gets a third chance, after a play like this?

*wagnerap*

Pilgrim made two diplomatic narrative plays, somehow I think the the third play will be a sword in the back. I just can't see this not being the princes graveyard, though it might become it anyways if Cordelia hangs them.

*Oshi*

Why would Callow be the cause of the graves? The Regicide is nearby.

*Death Knight*

I imagine the Princes being forced to accept the truce to save their own asses will really, really, REALLY rub the Saint the wrong way. Enough to finally snap en end them all.

*RanVor*

Because the way Juniper mentions the Graveyard of Princes in her writings implies it was caused by Catherine.

*MetruX*

Wouldn't she making they do something that gets them killed count? I mean, there are more than one way to kill a man...

*Someguy*

I thought the Graveyard of Princes is Cat's Treaty table where she destroys their political ambitions/careers and ensures that they will not profit?

*RanVor*

I'm not sure if that can be called an example of Catherine's battle tactics, which is what the Graveyard of Princes was first brought up as.

*Jane*

Mmm... It just doesn't feel like the right moment for this to be the Prince's Graveyard. There's been too much focus on the Heroes for that, and not enough on the Princes. Not to mention, it still feels like there's more to be done with Rozala and Arnaud – and if they don't die here, that pretty much just leaves Amadis ready to die, and that's not really enough.

Plus, the narrative feels like its been building towards a hard-fought diplomatic victory, and switching to a major Heroic ambush feels like it would undercut that. I could see a spiteful attack by the Saint to close things out, especially if EE has no further use for her, but I don't see the rest of the army going along with that at this point.

*Komploding*

If Saint does bite the dust, that would leave a spot open in the heroic group Saint and Pilgrim talked about earlier, Cat technically isn't a villain because she has so much Fae in her, could she somehow wind up in that spot? The Heavens don't seem to mind abusing technicalities to get their way.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Note that the Summer Court is open too

*Dainpdf*

Two plays: the first met with refusal, the second met with an unexpected pull of the rug. The fact that she made a twist out of it is important, because it takes momentum away from the Pilgrim throwing a second twist at her on the third act.

*crescentsickle*

What's interesting is that the Pilgrim should also know this intimately given his age and experience. This set of three isn't a turn, but a rising action for his opponent to demolish him in the third play. Since it's focused on these talks, I'm not sure it will extend into the future, a guaranteed win for Catherine hanging over his head.

However, I wonder if he'll actually try to play for the third act knowing he'll lose anyway, because Catherine has locked herself into a narrative where she is, nominally, a hero fighting against the oppression of Evil Praes.

If he plays the third act, and loses horribly at turning things around on her, she wins in a very big way at nailing down that narrative... locking her in as an actual hero, putting her at odds with her close band of followers, against her mentor, against Praes, etc. In that situation, even if the Pilgrim loses the third act very hard, he will win overall, both with cat sabotaging herself and for turning someone away from Evil.

It'd be a moment underscoring "Win the battle, lose the war."

*Dainpdf*

Cat underlined the fact that she can't play a heroic role in this one. Not with who her allies are, and without turning on Praes. She's going for the "redeemable hero everyone loves" role. Like an early anime antagonist. The Pilgrim didn't anticipate this. He considered her beyond redemption, so he didn't think she might go for that. That's why this is so potent – it's clearly a twist from everyone's reaction.

I think he expected her to try for a twist on number three, with the narrative momentum already greatly against her, and with the advantage that he's a Hero. Now he needs the twist, and a double twist at that, so he'll have a hard time.

*Metrux*

Also, as she noted before, any choice she makes serves for all of Callow and her band of Named. Because, for the Heavens, it doesn't matter the technicalities, she is the villain queen. So, since they don't matter, anything she does is with the fullness of her followers behind her.

[onedollargum](#)

I'm not really sure why the Pilgrim would want to disrupt this process though. If she seeks to join the good guys, Catherine becomes "Good", is no longer a "Villain", and therefore is no longer "corrupting" her company by ruling as a "Villain".

The only ways it's likely to fail is by either Catherine not seeking status in good faith, or by First Prince refusing her out of political reasons.

The narrative supports her, given she's already made so many overtures for peace. The thing I'm worried about is that this twist is the something the Narrative drove her to do. Where's the Catherine who swore to slay demons and angels both, to keep them out of Callow?

*Dainpdf*

I think the problem is her being Evil will taint her joining the alliance. This is the story of the Fae all over again: Summer tries to invade Winter. Winter sues for peace. They accept and are joined... Only for Winter to cunningly devour Summer from the inside. And guess who is the sole heiress of Winter right now?

*Dainpdf*

I don't see Hasenbach putting that argument forward. Doesn't seem like it'd play well with her base, especially after she spent all that energy whipping them up for a Crusade.

*Jane*

Well, I also don't see the negotiations failing, so she'll never have a need to use that argument 😊.

It's just, a request to join the Grand Alliance (with sincerity verified by a famous Hero) is *really* something that needs to be kicked upstairs, especially when you're well-known to be disfavored by the First Prince. It would be presumptuous for *any* Prince to settle such a matter themselves, but it would border on treason for someone known to be working against her to sabotage such a promising alliance.

If they were sweeping through the area, easily annexing it, they'd have the bribes to buy enough allies in the Assembly to blunt any objections Hasenbach could make, as well as clearly framing the issue as the desperate flailing of a defeated leader not worth treating with, but when it looks like Cat could draw things out for another bloody year if diplomacy fails? Villain or no, it's too good an offer for any politician to deny serious consideration to, and everyone involved knows it.

Besides, regardless of what Hasenbach might privately think, she's been looking for a plausible reason to destroy Amadis and his allies. This would be giving her one on a silver platter; why *not* take advantage of it to solidify her political position?

*Dainpdf*

The thing is that it's not a promising alliance. Cat asking to join would actually be pretty terrible for Hasenbach because, if Amadis fails (which is looking likely and is the only situation this is relevant) she won't be able to afford more war with Callow; on the other hand, letting Callow under Cat to join the alliance would be political suicide domestically and would also taint her vision for it. Oh, and it would make it almost impossible to invade Praes by land without the cooperation of Callow.

*Metruux*

Okay, let's start... This is a double play. Actually, could even be counted as a triple play. First, we have the heavens, headed by the Grey Pilgrim, who wants Cat dead or turned. Since she is not lying, and planning on asking withing the year to join a crusade, he can't go against her. It would be against himself and against the heavens to simply deny it, especially since he might loose after the denial.

Second, we have the first prince. She wants Amadis out, for her it doesn't matter if he dies or not, she only need him to loose power so that he won't stop her plans from the inside. He loosing the war, he going against her orders and not gaining enough alies, or he making another great blunder, all is positive for her, even if the war is lost. She probably sent him as a win-win for her, since if he wins, she won, if he looses, he lost. So, if they accept it, that's treason since they couldn't, and she wins. If they refuse, that's treason because they couldn't, and she wins. If they bring it back to her... They might not be traitors, but they still lost. She will love any of those, but might not like the implications for Callow.

Thirdly, we have the nobles on this host. They want to grow in power and prestige, and, most importantly, to get out of this alive. Their situation is desperate and they just lost. How they lost? Well, no matter what happens now, they are dead, either to war, to the heroes or to hasenbach, be it true death or political one. They are the biggest part of hasenbachs opposition, so if/when they come back, the ones who would "politically suicide" her can't do it.

You already brought this Callow won't let troops pass before, and I already said before, Cat already offered to do just that. This is a non-issue.

Now, let's start analyzing the aftereffects. Since she just declared that in good faith under a negotiation table, she became a traitor to the tower. Since all her

choices are also of her whole kingdom, if she is accepted into the crusade it actually means she changed from villain to hero, which means no one has an excusable reason to invade Callow. And since they know she will petition for that, but it will be months in time, it actually doesn't matter, because they are obligated to accept the chance she will join, and they can't in good faith do anything else but wait for her to petition it.

I think this should clear up some things.

*Dainpdf*

One: the Pilgrim is not so muhh the leader of the Heavens as their servant. The Heavens don't want Cat in the Alliance, because she is Evil and, as we've seen with the Fae story, Evil in an alliance destroys all. Plus, Cat alluded to the fact that the Heavens don't care for her.

Hasenbach doesn't want these people dead. For one, they're people she has a read on. For another, they are competent officers. As a last point, they also care for the country. And she wants to root out evil, create an alliance of good, not reduce her forces.

Hasenbach answers to more than just the nobles in this host. She answers to an entire country that hates evil, and in the alliance to a bunch of countries that do. She can't bring the squire of the Black Knight in.

About Cat breaking with the tower: she has done this \*precisely\* not to explicitly break with the tower yet. Because she can't, for narrative reasons.

*RanVor*

Just like Malicia answers to an entire country that hates good, except unlike Malicia, Cordelia can't just tell them to fuck off and do what needs to be done anyway.

*Dainpdf*

Oh, and a small addition: Cordelia doesn't want Amadis gone, just broken. And yeah, he has nowhere near the power to let Cat in. Even Hasenbach doesn't – it'll need to be discussed with the other countries.

But that's not an issue – Cat has only declared she intends to ask to be included; she hasn't actually asked yet.

*RanVor*

This doesn't matter. Cat declared an intent to join the Grand Alliance. No matter how full of herself she is, Hasenbach knows very well she doesn't actually rule it, and Callow is

too important for Procer to just sweep it under the rug. By refusing to take it into consideration, she risks reaffirming the Callowan enmity towards Procer and causing the kingdom to tighten its ties with Praes. By putting the matter forward, she risks letting a Villain into her precious Good Guys Club. Furthermore, Cat has yet to present any formal request to join the Alliance. Attacking in the meantime might yield the same results as an outright refusal. Basically, she has no option but to wait for Cat to make a formal request and then hoping it will be shot down before it's too late.

Cat has just bought herself all the time she needs to prepare for the next wave of the invasion.

*Dainpdf*

Oh, I know this was a brilliant play. As I said in another comment, I just think Cordelia will find it politically untenable to vote "yes" on accepting Cat.

None of the signatory nations will accept Callow, under Cat's rule, as a signatory nation.

In fact, notice the negotiations right now haven't even recognized that Callow is a sovereign nation under her.

Cat's declaration is useful mainly because it greatly strengthens her narrative, rather than because it will be politically useful. Unless she manages to twist Procer's arm into supporting her, that is.

*Forrest*

Except they likely would want to accept since bringing in Callow would be greatly beneficial to all of them. They only then would want to find a way to dispose of Cat down the line. Especially since foul play is not exactly out of their rule book.

*Dainpdf*

How? She is Evil. And Winter. If you'll look at the Fae story, you'll notice Summer generally doesn't end up well when it signs treaties with Winter. Also, outwardly, she's in league with the tower. Not exactly what you want when you're trying to invade Praes.

[sengachi](#)

Hasenbach: Let me get this straight. You were offered, by the Queen in Callow, free access through her lands to hit Praes. With her \*backing\*. You refused and decided to fight it out instead. Then you got your asses handed to you, your supply lines destroyed, and pushed to the brink of utter annihilation. Where, even after all the war and death, the Queen in Callow told you she still intended to sign on with the side of Good.





...and that what I get for lingering with empty "Leave a Reply" form for half an' hour...

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Pilgrims ought to be careful, they never know when a stray Cat might bite.

#### *Lord Chungus*

Luckily, they only bite their own tongues.

[onedollargum](#)

Cat got her (own) tongue.

### *TeK*

And now, if our little upcoming Dread Empress climb the tower, and if they give Callow (probationary) signatory status, Praes will be part of the Friendly League For A Good Guys!

#### *Jane*

"In retrospect, we *really* should have included a clause insisting that members renounce the Right of Usurpation."

-Cordelia Hasenbach, upon hearing of the ascension of Dread Empress Foundling.

#### *RanVor*

I very much doubt Cat will ever climb the tower, for one reason – all the quotes from Juniper's and Aisha's future memoirs refer to her only as Foundling.

#### *Jane*

At the same time, though, that she knows The Girl Who Climbed The Tower is pretty strong foreshadowing that she will. There's going to need to be an equally strong subversion, like how her transition to Black Queen was broken at a dramatic turn, for the story to go in a different direction.

Thematically, finding her ending through a different path than becoming Empress is quite likely, but following the narrative logic, there are some pretty important flags that will need to be set first.

#### *Byzantine*

I can see her climbing the tower... and knocking the whole thing down, once and for all.

*Jessica Day*

Dread Empress Foundling has a nice ring to it.

*Sparsebeard*

It's also possible for Cat to climb the tower AFTER those quotes in the timeline...

Not that I can see a scenario for that but still, possible...

*Insanenoodlyguy*

But that ones simple. Cat, upon taking over, struck, reworked, or just pain ignored a lot of the old rules.

First time her buddies took the knee and called her Dread empress, she rolled her eyes and said "for fuck sake's, call me Cathrine Foundling. That title sounds ridiculous coming out of your mouths."

*RanVor*

Ok, that \*does\* sound like something Cat would say.

*Edrey*

and here we have the crowns of seven mortal rulers and one, i can see this alliance really happening

*Dainpdf*

And so Pilgrim gave Cat just enough rope to hang herself... She tied it to an undead horse and made it run.

*Coincidance*

Oh shit Cat is evolving.



*Havak*

This series is probably the only one where I'm actually excited to read a full chapter of diplomacy.

*Silverking*

I understand the second trap that Pilgrim laid out, but I'm not sure I fully understand the first one. I think it's like...

Pilgrim: "Why don't we have a nice little one-on-one chat, put aside the politics, just old Hero and young Villain having an honest conversation, see how it goes?"

Cat: "Um, we've established that politics is the tone of the conversation, and this ain't no open forum for peasants. Either keep your comments in regards to the truce, or keep your mouth shut."

...or is there something I'm missing?

*Jane*

While we don't know the nature of the first trap, Catherine suspected there was an attempt to invoke a Narrative based on the lack of surprise from the Princes present and Pilgrim's nature as a Hero. Catherine shut it down by refuting Pilgrim's standing to speak, denying him an opportunity to start whatever his plan may have been.

It's possible she could have navigated whatever he had planned, just like she did the second time he spoke, but, well... He's a Hero with decades of experience on her, and she gains literally nothing from giving him the opportunity, so it was much more expedient to simply refuse to engage.

*Amoonymous*

From what I get, the Pilgrim was basically making the case that he should be free to be "at ease" with Cat and provide precedence for her to respond directly to what he's saying, which would fuck up the whole "Don't respond" strat they had going.

The second time, I guess Cat responded because it was a question their side HAD to answer in order for the negotiations to proceed, and if she called the negotiations off it would lead to that whole "Arrogant Villain Queen" ending (and refusing to answer would halt the negotiations, effectively). Also, due to the weight of the question, I'm guessing either the rest of her group didn't want to risk an answer or she kept them from answering...though that's just my guess of how it would have played out.

Maybe she could've tabled it like the previous one, but then that'd be too much or something? Obviously it would've been up to EE to decide how "Cat stays quiet" would've played out there, and maybe Cat would've chosen that option if she didn't think of such a twist (and also because even when she stayed quiet, they had SOMEONE answer, just not Cat – which could loop around to the "too important" bit).

*Decius*

The first interrogation could be dodged because it was just the Pilgrim asking on his own basis.

The last one could not be dodged, because it was the Pilgrim pointing out an actual problem that the official people being represented might have with the terms under discussion. If reparations are treason, then reparations can't happen.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Though I think it justifies for the third act a request that they clarify their intentions

*Insanenoodlyguy*

yeah, but cat already saw the pivot here. no doubt if she'd continued being evasive or gave some technically-true answer he could have worked with that for a final "gotcha" question, but she just twisted it around. Oh he can ask, but it won't unmake her now, unless she suddenly grabs the idiot ball, villian ball, or both.

*Anna*

A very hor chapter, nice nice!

[ahd](#)

Hor, indeed. (:

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I felt it wasn't quite hor enough

*RanVor*

Magnificent.

*RanVor*

This just warrants an outburst of Evil Laugh.

*Bonesawer*

Dammit, Cat!

It's really irritating to see her keep falling into the nationalism that it is becoming increasingly clear is her Villainous Weakness. It's her blind spot, in terms of problems both immediate and down the road, and ones that cut into her narrative and are going to be what she falls to. She just can't avoid falling into it when she has the option to.

Although, I must admit to being personally irritated by it more than the story justifies since I want Black to win.

*Take theirstuff*

She doesn't really want to abandon being a villain, she wants to create an antihero narrative. This would allow her to run callow peacefully while still being allowed to do whatever villain things she wants

*haihappen*

"The lovely Taghreb's lips quirked."

Is there any Taghreb present? If Aisha is meant, shouldn't that read "Sonike"?

*Shequi*

Aisha is Taghreb.

*BBM*

Queen of Blades. Huh. That's... Almost too an apt comparison. So, there will be an alliance, then Cat's going to backstab everyone, name herself Queen Bitch of the Universe and not all their little soldiers and ships will stand in her way again.

*Death Knight*

And grow dread locks and start using undead suicide goat rushes.

... I can dig it

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Why would she suddenly backstab anyone?

#### [donforrester456](#)

Starcraft reference, the Queen of Blades is the Zerg queen who allied with the Humans and some Protoss to help her gain control of all Zerg under the premise that she was a more reasonable option for Alien Overlord; then after succeeding in taming the Zerg, promptly turned around and backstabbed everyone. Although there are noises that she was mind-controlled into doing that.

#### [taliesinskye](#)

I don't think Cat wants to conquer the world or climb the tower or whatever else. She might do those things if they were the only way to protect Callow, but I think she'd strongly prefer to just have peace and be able to rebuild Callow into something prosperous.

#### [saiman92](#)

I don't get why this is such a great idea. I mean she thought about how breaking from Malicia would be bad and then she breaks with Malicia?

Once she is a signatory she will have to join the crusade against Praes. She has seen the data and she should know that even if they win, it would just mean kicking the can down the road...

#### *TideofKhatanga*

If she breaks from Malicia by answering "Yes, I do intend to pursue independence from the Tower", like the Pilgrim goaded her into with his phrasing, it's bad. It says nothing but "I'm a Villain backstabbing my villainous boss". It turns her into another footnote in History books, another backstabbing villain who met her fate at the hand of the righteous.

If she breaks from Malicia by answering "Actually, I wanna join the Good Guy Alliance Against Evil", her narrative isn't that of a villain betraying her boss because reasons, but that of a villain going for redemption. And THAT is a completely different narrative in terms of consequences. Most importantly, it's a completely different narrative for the crusaders, they can't simply shut the door on her. "The heroes deny the redemption of the villainess sincerely trying to reform" never

went well for the heroic party. They could argue that she's trying to trick them, but Cat doesn't have the reputation of a trickster. Also, Cat has put herself in the role of the wise ruler pushing for peace, refusing her now labels the heroes as "heavens-backed murderhobos waging an hypocrite war against a peaceful kingdom", which will weaken them HARD. It might actually give Cat enough plot armour to make her invulnerable for the remainder of the crusade.

*MetruX*

Actually, the true masterstroke is that they have to consider all of this, but none of it actually matters. Because this just gives her a year where they can't touch her, BEFORE she even makes the request, a year she needs to regrow her strengths... And, even more, they can't just say "okay, we'll wait for your petition" and then keep the army in her kingdom. This would be the same as refusal, and they can't simply refuse her, so they NEED to retreat and wait in good faith. Even the heroes shouldn't interfere because of Grey, except, maybe, the Saint.

[taborask](#)

So what's she going to do with the half of her army that's Praesi? Most of the greenskins probably won't care, but I find it hard to believe all of them will hate the High Lord's enough to make war on their homeland

[Euodiachloris](#)

Praes is very used to civil wars, power grabs, surprise coups and bits of it fending other bits from thinking about climbing the Tower.

Most would do what they always try to do: back the winning horse. One sin; one grace.

*RanVor*

You forget that majority of the Fifteenth sees Catherine as a revolutionary of sorts. Not only they don't mind going against Praes, they *\*expect\** it.

*BLH989*

I can see how this ends.

Saint of Swords: "There is no way in hell I'm letting you do that!"

Catherine: precedes to fill Saint's lungs with goblin fire and undead goats

Catherine: There! Now you have to let me join the hero club!

*1queenofblades1*

Hahahaha who says Catherine Foundling cannot into diplomacy?

The Procerans gave her the rope to hang herself. Cat just tied it around their balls and pulled.

*Someguy*

"It admittedly took me a few years to make my peace with the fact that Lady Foundling's take on diplomacy is essentially to bring a bottle of cheap wine and a sword to the table, then remind the interlocutor that while the wine might be awful it is still arguably better than being stabbed."

—Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

Cat just killed the 10th Crusade and turned it into the beginning of the "Uncivil Wars" mentioned in the chapter quotes.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Ooohhhhhh yeah. What chapters were these?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Hakram removed the wine, and by doing so broke the pattern?

*grrtt*

The first of the Uncivil Wars was the Liesse Rebellion, the second was the Summer Campaign, and the third was Akua's Folly. We don't know how many Uncivil Wars there are.

*nick012000*

How do you narrow your eyes when you closed your eyes in thought and haven't opened them yet?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

It's like drawing a circle extra closed

*Al*

Just caught up with the updates. What do I do now with my life?

*RanVor*

Wait, like the rest of us.

*Letouriste*

Don't worry, the release rate is fast



*RanVor*

It is indeed, although a part of me is still screaming it's not fast enough. I do my best to ignore it.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Read The Gods are Bastards, Mother of Learning, Ward, Iron Teeth, and Legion of Nothing.

Or if you're completely hopeless like so many of us and you're caught up with those too, pick randomly from a list of Hugo and Nebula winners. I bet no one here has completed that quest, getting distracted on tangents is half the point. I hit one Vorkosigan novel, and of course I had to read the other 17 before going back to the award winners list

*Eduardo*

Well, I am caught with all of those and to at least mitigate my adiction added Savage Divinity to the list. I am seriously considering that the author of Savage Divinity is a machine.

### [donforrester456](#)

Savage Divinity is going on ~2 years now, but yeah Ruffwriter is dropping 3 chaps a week excluding occasional vacations.

Also, his chapters come out on alternate days as PGTE, so you have something to read 6 days a week usually.

*Ethereal*

Read Unsong.

### [donforrester456](#)

I have. It's amazing, but... it's so very complex, and I find myself constantly knocked out of the flow of the writing and rejecting suspension of disbelief because of its form of worldbuilding. Which is not to say it's bad worldbuilding – it's very good – but it's a miss for me. Trying to understand the kabbalah references and whatnot, I have to say that my brain shorts out and every possible iteration of letters and numbers can be made to mean \*anything\* irl, if you go deep enough into it, so if I suspend disbelief of numerology and kabbalah etc. then I fall down the rabbit hole with every suggested 'meaning' made for a word. I mean, the story is internally consistent and logical within its own framework, but the nature of that framework to a math-minded person like myself ends up being as if I accepted

the premise that  $1=0$ , then tried to recalculate trig tables with that.

I don't know if that made sense. tldr: I like the writing, but I choke on the applied symbolism.

*Sparsebeard*

The wandering inn's author is surely the most productive though, I mean two or more 10000-15000 words chapters each week with no pause like ever.

And the story is probably my favorite one... although all the other stories listed are very great too...

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Wandering Inn has a lot going for it, but the author's word count is not one of those things. I think it would be better cutting it down by 1/3. There are entire swaths I skim over while rolling my eyes. Remember that week where every paragraph began with "This is a story of...". Ugh.

Don't get me wrong, the creativity and character development in that story is top notch. The writing just rubs me the wrong way a lot of the time.

*Sparsebeard*

I don't agree, while there may be some rare passages / expressions that may profit from editing, this is in a minority of chapters (well, I mean like most web novel it would probably change quite a bit if they were edited and PGtE is no exception).

There is still the fact that a LOT happens in most chapters of TWI, I mean most chapters have as much happening as many chapters of other series. For example, all of the negotiation between Callow and Procer would definitively have been one chapter, with perhaps other things also happening.

Not that this is a critic of PGtE, the author is also a machine, and it's a different kind of story where there seem to be script for the whole story with a clear beginning and ending.

Whereas, TWI is more like an adventure where the story is pulled by the characters' weekly choices in a set, awesome, world, you get the sense that the story can go on forever with characters appearing and dying according to the world's whims... It's kind of like a very long

tabletop RPG where every player pulls the game in it's own direction.

### [donforrester456](#)

I can't stomach The Gods Are Bastards – a bit SJW for me, leaning too heavily on those themes to distinguish the moral divide between good and bad guys – but I can recommend The Wandering Inn for nuanced characters and uplifting moments (seriously, I've cut onions more than once reading that one), and Savage Divinity for its brilliant pokes at Xanxia / reincarnation story tropes, as well as just amazingly solid writing. There are other stories that are good, but those two round out my top three with this one. TWI might end up being my favorite of all time.

### [Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Found the trump voter who got triggered by a female protagonist and never read past the first book

### [Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Wait no, that was uncalled for and this story has a female protagonist as well, so my rebuke makes no sense. My apologies. Anyone using SJW unironically is just hard to take seriously. If I may, I don't think you've read past the first book, which the author himself has he really wants to rewrite because it really isn't that good. It gets a whole lot better later on, with many of the things you might think of as SJW being either clarified or acknowledged for being somewhat hypocritical at times. The Silver Legions are still female though.

### *Sparsebeard*

Personally, I love both TGAB and TWI but I'll admit that I find TWI better as I might pass a few updates of TGAB and then catch up but will always read TWI's chapters within 24 hours of publication...

Also, you might want to avoid using loaded terms such as SJW which will trigger about half of the public if you want your opinions not to put off potential readers...

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Yes, I can see why someone who uses SJW as a put-down wouldn't like the beginning of TGAB. Ironically, the story AGREES WITH YOU in this! As another commenter mentions, the early chapters with Trissiny are to show how wrong she is despite being so certain she's right. That's not actually revealed until a bit later, and there aren't any hints that

that's what it's doing. (You'll see several pointed complaints about that I left in the comments, early on.) I would strongly advise anyone to just bulldoze through those early chapters if you have to, the story blossoms into so much more than that.

Counterpoint: if you did intend SJW as a dog whistle to see if there are others like you here, perhaps TGAB just isn't for you. (I think Webb himself would strongly disagree, it should be said.) The story espouses some "progressive" ideals, but it's always conscious about not coming off as preachy. It just depends on whether you approach the story with good faith or not. For some people, even acknowledging there are two sides to an argument is unacceptably preachy.

### [onedollargum](#)

Worth the Candle is also worth a look if you like tabletop role-playing games.

### *Gunslinger*

Bravo, this chapter was brilliant. I'm not sure how Malicia would take this announcement. It would still be official that Cat's breaking away, just without the narrative of evil turns against evil.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Part of her would be *delighted* to send Cordelia an honest gift basket of heating poltices and headache cures with a note amounting to "my sincerest condolences concerning your Foundling-related migraines – these might help... a little".

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Why are we assuming this requires Cat/Callow to break away from Praes? The whole point I thought was to be able to remain on peaceful terms with both.

To me the only question remaining is whether the delegation was *in shock*, or *in shock that she didn't see the obvious fatal flaw that everyone else did* 🙄

### [Euodiachloris](#)

I'm not assuming any break between Callow and anybody else. However, negotiating with all sides, attempting to take them to the cleaners while being a harder nut to crack than is worth the bother of cracking? Hello, Switzeland!

The proposed international Accords strike me as having a little Red Cross on them, no? 😊

*Thea*

They'd have to be poisoned though. To keep in line with Praesi traditions and all.

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

A mild laxative is technically a poison. Possibly a favouring, as well. 😊

*Nethermore*

"Catherine the Great" just doesn't cut it anymore. I propose "Catherine the Magnificent (Bastard)" :D.

[\*The Warren Peace NFL Report\*](#)

Ratface is the bastard. Cat is the orphan.

*Nethermore*

I case you weren't just being witty (or someone else isn't aware), I was referencing the "Magnificent Bastard" trope as found on tvtropes.org.

[\*The Warren Peace NFL Report\*](#)

I would have described it as "smartass", so thanks for choosing a more positive adjective 😊

*RanVor*

"Magnificent Orphan" doesn't have the same ring to it.

*Letouriste*

So cat want be piccolo-like? Interesting

*Mike E.*

That was good...now to see if the GP lies about Cat having been truthful with that statement (and I assume she is being truthful, else the GP's reaction would have been different).

Love that Cat is learning how to lose the small battles in order to win the big ones. There was another story (HPMoR) I read where one of the growth arcs for the main character was that they actually had to learn how to lose, vice escalating unnecessarily just so they could always had to win every contest regardless of the future cost.

Also Cat literally biting her own tongue (off) to keep quiet, nice twist of a common phrase.

*Byzantine*

A hero lying about a villain trying to turn good?

Has there *\*ever\** been a story that worked out well for the hero?

*Cicero*

Only if the hero is inexperienced, and then gets a mini-redemption arc to teach him the folly of rejecting other people's repentance.

*Byzantine*

Good point. I don't think Pilgrim can pull that and "wise old mentor" at the same time though.

[Evgeny Permyakov](#)

>"To answer your question," I said, "I intend to seek signatory status with the Grand Alliance within the year."

Aw, a very good non-answer. That's fun.

[onedollargum](#)

It's nice too, in the way that it doesn't say when exactly during the year she'll petition them, or how hard she'll try.

*Jonnnnz*

I am beyond annoyed with the Pilgrim here. He is overbearing with his twisting the rules in bad faith to murder Cat under the guise of truth. He pretended to be reasonable at the start, but he has shown exactly zero compromise other than on things he would have agreed to anyway. The kindly old man act is only skin deep when he bothers with it... And right now he is not.

[onedollargum](#)

Good doesn't really compromise all too often, it feels like. Might be a sign of where Catherine stands too, given that she doesn't really compromise either.

They both do care to reach an understanding though, even if they are fencing while doing it.

*MetruX*

Named don't compromise too often\*. It's actually what is needed to be a Named, as said by Black there after she became the Squire. To be Named is to hold something within yourself so firm it "makes you special". This kind of people tend to butt heads 😬

### *Tide of Khatanga*

He is a kindly old man, and fairly reasonable too compared to most Named. But he has a duty, and that duty is completely incompatible with letting this generation's greatest villain-to-be alive. The Grey Pilgrim's kindness isn't an act, it just doesn't extend to Evil.

He reminds me of a quote from Carlos Hathcock about killing a lot of people as a sniper in Vietnam: "Hell, anybody would be crazy to like to go out and kill folks. I like shooting, and I love hunting. But I never did enjoy killing anybody. It's my job. If I don't get those bastards, then they're gonna kill a lot of these kids we got dressed up like Marines. That's just the way I see it."

### *Agent J*

That's actually what I love most about it. We saw just how much of a charade his kindly geezer act was during his interlude. Analyzing and manipulating the princes/ses with remarkable ease. Using his cultivated image to great effect when dealing with heroes and villains alike. All with the single minded purpose to further the Greater Good. He's an interesting character. He reminds me more and more of the Wandering Bard.

### *Just This Guy, Ya Know*

I love that she "intends" to join to Alliance. Which she definitely can. She can just set conditions that it will be near impossible for the First Prince to pass. Doesn't mean she isn't being truthful.

Also, it gives her a way to isolate the Saint, which is always a good thing.

I wonder if joining the Grand Alliance means she actually a.) has to declare war on Praes and b.) actually has to contribute troops who will fight.

On the other hand, I do worry about the change that The Black Knight and Malicia were trying to cause, preventing the constant wars between Praes and Callow by folding Callow into Praes and making it so Praes wasn't on the verge of starvation regularly. On the other hand, if this then turns into a Praesian civil (or uncivil) war, that might work. If Praes stops existing and becomes part of Callow, then the Dread Empire is gone, there is no need for Crusade, she gets to wipe out the nobles, etc.

I do wonder what her game plan for what happens when she's gone is. She's working to set up an efficient bureaucracy in Callow like Malicia has in Praes, so those would hopefully continue to function, no matter how inept the next rulers are. Given that

Praes is a Roman Empire analogue, I am wondering about an Eastern Roman Empire here. The Byzantines were known for their impenetrable bureaucracy, but it did keep the Eastern half of the Roman Empire running for another thousand years after the fall of the west.

*Jason Ipswitch*

If an orphan girl from Callow climbs The Tower and becomes Dread Empress (with a little stop as Queen of Callow along the way), that seems like a win for Black's ideas. At least to me it does. Once it's established narrative that Callowans can become Dread Emperor/Empress, once little Callowan girls and boys dream of climbing The Tower, Black will have linked the two nations together in a way that will be nearly impossible to undo.

[cheeseyme1999](#)

that was Black's method, not his goal. Black is a man powered by spite, He looks at the heaven's winning every battle without putting in the effort and being as close to perfect as possible due to providence and he wants to tear the system down. If Catherine takes the tower as a villain and gets the crusade to fuck off then he's won, but if Cat joins the heroes it's a victory for good, not evil.

*Allafterme*

But you don't consider ramifications of such an action. Hasenbach wants everyone on her Grand Alliance. But if a villain, however how reformed, would immediately cause the Levant to drop them. That is 1/3 of the alliance. The Golden Bloom can't be invited like Hasenbach pondered too. It is a GREAT way to break the alliance from its seams...

*RanVor*

Well, this league is already kind of a farce, considering one of Cordelia's reasons for initiating a crusade was to stave off a war with Levant and Ashur, her fellow members of the Grand Alliance. What kind of alliance they are if they can't even keep themselves from fighting each other unless there is an immediate threat in the vicinity?

[wyaldriddler](#)

Evil? In the sense of how this story describes Evil at least.

[vuthuha912](#)



Or maybe he will like it. If he needs to choose between being Evil and getting fuck or being Good and getting better then he might choose the latter. Labels are not as important as the result. He is quite pragmatic. You know Praes is the center of his world, he loves that horrid place to death. Just like Tyrant said, his victories aren't a victory for Evil, it is a victory for Praes and Praes just happened to be an Evil country. If Praes somehow became a ... kinda Neutral or ... Good-ish country, it can get all the benefits, a chance for fixing the weather that won't end with failure, the chance for actually fixing the food issues, a better trade agreement with other living nations on the continent. It is a win overall for Praes. They lose their alliances with Helike and KoTD but it is not like the 2 nation are useful in anyway.

*Allafterme*

So Cat has become Friedrich I.?

[sengachi](#)

This chapter made me realize what the Wandering Bard's goal in pushing Black to the destruction of Liesse was. She was trying to get him to catch his finger on the hem of Evil Turns On Evil. Whether Malicia actually got weaponized Liesse was small peanuts compared to what the Wandering Bard was going for, which was Black and Malicia turning on another. Which they will.

It doesn't matter if both of them know it would be suicide. Malicia is being compelled to bury Black because they're both wrapped up in the Evil Turns On Evil narrative now. The Wandering Bard wasn't just trying to drive a wedge between two enemies of hers, she was hurling the two greatest threats to Good bodily into a fucking narrative woodchipper.

Good gods my fear of and respect for the Wandering Bard just shot up a \*lot\*.

*JJR*

It's a surprising move by Cat, but I think the Pilgrim can still turn this around on her with a simple question.

Pilgrim: "Seeking signatory Status is one thing, but finalizing it, accepting it, is another thing entirely."

Cat: "I'm not sure what you're getting at."

Pilgrim: "What I'm asking is; if we open the door for you, will you come in or stnad there with indecision?"

And then Cat bats someones water glass off the table and scampers away.

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## Chapter 22: Trip

*"A war fought and won for the wrong reasons, under the wrong cause, can be a greater threat to the Praes than simple defeat. Maleficent the First spoke of villains raising their own gallows, but failed to add that the killing stroke in a hanging comes from the height of the drop."*

– Extract from 'The Death of the Age of Wonders', a treatise by Dread Empress Malicia

"Preposterous," Prince Arnaud of Cantal blustered.

He wasn't the only one to speak up in the aftermath of that particular trebuchet stone being lobbed, but he was by far the loudest. And his heartbeat had not changed in the slightest, though his face was the very picture of angry befuddlement. All right, that one bore watching. I'd never met anyone this good at acting outside of the High Lords and *maybe* a handful of Named. I leaned back into my seat and riffled through my cloak pockets until I had my pipe in hand. The small satchel of wakeleaf parted under my fingers and I poured the contents into the chamber. I had a few matches, but also a quicker way. I coughed until Masego turned his attention from the book he was not-so-discretely reading under the table to me. I tapped the side of the pipe he'd gifted me with a finger. Scoffing, he flicked his wrist and fire bloomed within the chamber.

"Thank you, Lord Hierophant," I drawled. "As for the many statements of the Proceran delegation, I'll point you to the Chosen known as the Grey Pilgrim. A truth-teller of great skill, as I understand it."

The gaze of everyone in the pavilion moved to the old man, still standing and devoid of expression. *That's right*, I thought. *I'm not lying*. I didn't have to. I very much doubted the Grand Alliance would just hand me a tankard and invite me to sit at the table, but even a refusal would need more than just Hasenbach involved. The Ashurans would have to put the question through committees, unless their quasi-king Magon Hadast intervened, and more importantly the Dominion would have to go through the Majilis. Their inept, bickering and deeply divided equivalent to the Highest Assembly. The entire process could take months even for a refusal. And if they accepted? Well, it wasn't like I wasn't intending to make deals with all of them eventually. It was a necessary component to the Liesse Accords being adopted. It

was a different approach than I'd intended, but so long as it worked what did I care?

"The Queen in Callow did not speak a lie," the Pilgrim flatly said.

I'd been a bit too much to swallow to tell them outright I was telling the truth, apparently. Nice to know even the Peregrine could be petty.

"This is a trick," Princess Adeline of Orne insisted. "You are one of the Damned."

Fancy Proceran talk for villain, I took it. *The Chosen and the Damned*, huh. Somehow I suspected a lot of foreign heroes who ended up fighting against Procer also ended up, by pure coincidence of course, painted with damnation brush. I breathed in the smoke, then allowed it to billow upwards with my exhale.

"And?" I said. "I already offered the Pilgrim passage through Arcadia if your army was willing to assault Praes directly. I'm not exactly unwilling to kick in the Empire's teeth, Princess, and I was under the impression that was exactly what the Tenth Crusade was about. Or are there other concerns I don't know about?"

My smile turned a little colder at that. She did not flinch, but her heartbeat quickened in fear. The taste of it was just as intoxicating as the wine I was oathbound not to drink. Brave soul, that one, but out of her depth today. She wasn't in on the game the Pilgrim was playing. Prince Amadis began to speak, but the Pilgrim hastily cleared his throat to stay the man's tongue. *Wouldn't do to have the mortals fuck up your scheme, would it?*

"As a vassal state of the Tower-" the old man began.

"Is the Proceran delegation turning back on the premises of this negotiation?" Aisha interrupted smilingly. "You are addressing the Queen in Callow, Grey Pilgrim, by mutual agreement."

I beamed at the lovely tribune. Ah, Aisha. Always quick on the uptake, wasn't she? If it didn't have 'terrible idea' written all over it in red ink, it would be tempting to give her a whirl.

"Over twenty thousand men were butchered by the Army of Callow," Malanza spoke up. "You expect us to *ignore* this?"

"All a misunderstanding, evidently," I replied calmly. "I believed your expeditionary force to be an attempt at invasion. I regret what came from it, but you must understand that Callowans have a chequered history with armies crossing our borders after using massive sorcerous rituals."

There was a muted sound as Brandon Talbot choked on his tongue. The implied comparison to the Dread Empire ruffled more than a few feathers on the other side of the table, but they couldn't exactly deny the bird's eye view of it. Hasenbach's burning of a passage was admittedly more grounded than your average Dread Emperor's crowning disaster, but the similarities were there.

"Your alleged intent to seek alignment with the Grand Alliance is irrelevant to the negotiations being held today," the Pilgrim said.

I glanced at Aisha. I was pulling one on him so far but it wouldn't do to get cocky. The more we conversed the higher the chances he turned the tables.

"That is inaccurate," the Taghreb aristocrat replied. "As is would be unlawful to be a signatory of the Alliance while paying any form of tribute to the Tower, providing this statement served the purpose of answering your question."

So, I mused, watching Amadis across the table even though he was not the object of my thoughts. *You going to keep fighting this one, Pilgrim, or give ground and rally for the third?* I'd cut the grass under his feet by presenting myself as a possible ally, right in the wake of a bloody battle that saw no clear winner. He couldn't work the 'heroes with their back up against the wall' story angle with a foundation that weak, not while the Procerans were fed and under truce. 'Evil turns on Evil' had been his move, but I should have tiptoed around the pitfall by stating in front of a truth-teller that I was willing to slap some red crosses onto the armour of the Army of Callow and fight the Good fight. That'd make me the one prick in every heroic band that crossed lines for the Greater Good, if it worked. The Lone Swordsman of continental coalitions, if you would. *Two for two, so far. Parry and riposte. But we both know it's the third one that matters, don't we?* I puff at my pipe, allowing the wakeleaf to fill my lungs. The old man was studying me in silence, but I did not meet his eyes.

"The clarification was sufficient," Pilgrim finally said, and sat down.

Cutting his losses, I presumed, since I was no longer willing to engage. I remained silent as negotiations picked up again through intermediaries. The Procerans made an argument that reparations were not needed if this was all an accident, but Aisha turned it around by noting that the sale of supplies was a different matter entirely. That the terms of the truce specifically did not prevent them from entering Praes took the wind out of their sails, since they had to maintain the pretence that their 'expeditionary force' wasn't an army meant to invade Callow – if they strayed from that, they were entering a nightmarish quagmire of war reparations and official apologies none of them could

really afford back in Procer. My attention began to wane as the hours passed, tediously taking us to Afternoon Bell, but I forced myself to follow everything closely. I could not afford to be taken unawares when the Pilgrim intervened again. Yet none of the heroes spoke so much as a word, and I grew tenser the longer the sword remained hanging over my head. My side got its way when it came to terms of payment for the supplies, though the Procerans bargained down to only needing to pay a quarter of the total sum directly out of their pockets even if it was framed as a loan from Hasenbach to them. Odds were the First Prince would flip them the finger and that quarter was all I'd ever see, but considering I was essentially selling them back their own supplies I'd take it anyway. Even just having the documents would give me something to use when I had to treat with Hasenbach herself down the line.

The diplomatic claptrap continued, polite verbal fencing back and forth across the table. The crusaders tried to fuck us over what land was actually recognized as 'under the rule of the Queen in Callow', and to my distaste got the better of it. I couldn't exactly make the argument that the Red Flower Vales were mine when they were factually in the hands of the Legions of Terror, and that meant the northern crusade could move against Black down there without breaking our terms. It'd be months before they even got out of Callow, I told myself. And it would take even more time for them to recover and march on the Vales. By then Black would either have won or lost against Papenheim. If he'd won, I'd have to trust that he could hold the valleys regardless. I couldn't afford for him not to. And if he lost, well, the northern crusade would still be forbidden to go further than the Vales until the truce ran out. At that point I'd have more immediate problems anyway. We weren't halfway to Evening Bell and there was only a single issue that hadn't been addressed, guarantees for the treaty – though we'd have to double back to the supplies since that one had been kicked down the slope by Prince Amadis. It was beginning to look like we'd walk out of the pavilion with an actual agreement before nightfall, which had me wary.

The Procerans could have delayed much more than they had. We'd *expected* them to, as long as the battle for the Vales was undecided. This was going well, which meant I was about to have my knuckles rapped. Except the Pilgrim didn't get up. It was the mouthpiece that addressed the subject, and my fingers clenched under the table. This wasn't going to be straightforward negotiations, since it was about the mechanisms that would be enforcing the treaty. I wanted oaths to the Heavens out of everyone involved, witnessed by a hero, but Aisha had pretty bluntly informed me that wasn't going to happen even if I offered to make an oath of my own. Our best guess was that they'd push for something along the lines of the agreement being made public so anyone breaking it would have their reputation tarnished. We

wouldn't accept that, since they might very well get away with breaking a treaty with a villain with praise for being clever in screwing over the enemy instead of any backlash for dealing in bad faith. The compromise we'd be working for was material value being left behind as guarantee, as well as staggered departure for the Proceran host so we'd have a knife at their throat if they tried to double-cross us. Breaking a promise to the bearer of a fae mantle would come back to haunt them, anyway, so this was mostly a precaution to account for any outside solution we didn't know about.

Except after Aisha proposed my terms – as a starting position to be bargained down from, to my chagrin – the Procerans didn't offer what we'd expected.

"As a sign of good faith, we are willing to offer a royal hostage," the middle-aged diplomat said. "We would, however, require an accompanying observer and a guarantee of safety for both."

That had to be the Pilgrim's play, but I wasn't seeing it. There wasn't a good angle to use with the supplies deal, at least none that I could see, and after that there was nothing left to negotiate about. All right, then, royal hostage. What could he do with that? Assassinate the hostage after I took custody of them, so this entire treaty was ripped in half. If Malicia had made me an offer like this, it would be what I expected. Except that this wasn't the way Pilgrim did things. Sure, he'd basically put his seal on the Saint offering me under a – glamoured, I had to concede that much – truce banner, but that plan didn't fit with the way he'd approached this so far. Letting me die for the greater good was one thing, and he'd been pretty upfront that was essentially his intent when we first sat down for our fireside chat. But murder? No, that was going against the grain. He could be banking on either one of my people fucking up or Praes being out for blood, though. Not outright bloodying his hand, but shaping the situation so it would unfold the way he needed it to. *That* I could buy.

Except I'd have the hostage neck deep in wards in the safest place I could find, and Malicia wanted to use Amadis' gaggle of expansionists to make a mess in Procer. That wasn't to say if she decided it would be useful to weaken me she wouldn't assassinate royalty that wasn't Malanza or Milenan, the two she'd ordered me not to kill. But unless she had Assassin to call on, which I was almost certain she didn't, she'd have a very hard time pulling this off. I had the fucking Hierophant designing my defences, these days, and the Guild of Assassins in my pocket. It wasn't impossible but it would require a significant investment of resources at a juncture when her backyard was already on fire. *Pilgrim might not know a High Lord's seat got sacked and the court is up in arms about it, though,* I mused. Lack of

information? No, I could never assume that. Not with the Augur on the other side, and the pile of aspects the heroes had to draw from. Hells, it wasn't even off the table that one of them had a godsdamned angel whispering secrets in their ear. In what circumstances was giving me a royal hostage the correct move, assuming they didn't get killed?

If he wanted this treaty to work.

Was it that simple? That'd been treating him like an unmovable enemy when he was actually willing to work with me? No. *Be cold. Be clear. Be a creature of logic, because the moment you allow your judgement to be affected is the moment you lose.* My understanding of the Pilgrim, as based in fact, was that he was no more inclined to compromise than I. I desperately wanted someone on the other side to be willing to work with me, so I was painting what I wanted to see on the canvas. If he'd allowed this, it was because he saw a path to victory through it. And I couldn't discern what he wanted to accomplish from my point of view, so I would have to adopt his. *I am the Pilgrim*, I thought. *I have seen dozens if not hundreds of the villains, and I am apt at reading them. My truth-telling abilities may run deeper than that.* How did I trick Catherine Foundling, if I understood what she was after? She wanted the treaty to succeed, so – no, mistake. That was the shatranj board on the ground, not the one he was trying to win on. The villain queen has wiggled out of my plan to pit her against other villains by trying to make herself into the suspect ally on the side of the Tenth Crusade. That is an issue, since it makes her difficult to assault. But she took a stance, and every stance has vulnerabilities. What is hers? She is behaving like an ally, looking down from Above.

How much effort would it actually take, to *enforce* that?

My grip loosened under the table. So that was it. I'd already done it to myself accidentally with the Lone Swordsman, back in the day: the Pilgrim's play was a redemption story. It didn't matter that I was in charge of Callow, if I was no longer a villain. Sure, most redemption stories ended in death. Sacrifice to make up for previous sins and all that, passing the torch to someone that had the same heroism but less blood on their hands. That was just spice in the wine, though, since it got him all the benefits of Callow not longer heading down the cliff without having to deal the issues inherent in keeping me around after my bloody history. In a way, this could be considered an elegantly subtle assassination attempt. The Grey Pilgrim or someone he handpicked according to his understanding of me would be the observer in the Proceran terms, and then all he had to do was wait and let the story do the heavy lifting. I laughed softly, ignoring the odd looks it got me. Gods, I'd underestimated him. He was playing me on the earthly board to win on the story one. Callow, of which I was queen, needed the truce for practical

reasons. I needed the truce because it was a first step in getting the Accords signed. And so I would accept, knowing he was trying to kill me through it.

I admired the calculated methods Black used to kill heroes. I'd learned from them, emulated the techniques when dealing with the heroes who came into Callow. In that same distant way, I could admire what the Pilgrim had done here. My teacher was a villain, so he came at it from the perspective that the stories would get him killed. So he avoided them. The Grey Pilgrim was a hero, so he came at it from the perspective that the stories would get him what he wanted. So he leant into them. From an objective perspective, even if this was very likely meant to kill me, I could only commend how well I was being played. He'd read what I wanted, and was giving it to me in a way that led to his victory. And even deeper than that, he must know that even if I saw through this I'd feel bound to accept. Because I wasn't Black. I was not a pupil of martyrdom, but I did believe there were things worth dying for. If I paid my dues in blood to the Gods Above, Callow would avoid the slaughter marching towards it. All it required me to do was smile, accept, and kiss the knife that would slit my throat. *You have found the thing I most want in the world, and used it to kill me.*

There wasn't a fucking devil in existence that could have played it better.

"And the identity of the hostage and observer?" I asked, breaking in before Aisha could pursue the matter.

"As the leader of this host, it is my duty to serve as the hostage," Prince Amadis Milenan said, inclining his head towards me.

And it was no doubt a fortunate coincidence that this honourable sacrifice would make him the hero who'd gone into the wolf's den for the sake of his men instead of the ambitious fuckup who'd pissed away over twenty thousand men trying annex Callow. The other royals would return to Procer, where Hasenbach wouldn't be able to blame them – Prince Amadis, after all, was the official leader of the army. And the man himself would be out of the First Prince's reach to punish, not that she'd be *able* to after he'd become a hostage to save his men. He'd come out of this smelling like roses, a tragic figure who had fallen prey to the wickedness of the Black Queen. Meanwhile his allies in Procer would be building the altar of his legend so when he returned it would be to the praise of the thousands instead of blackened by inglorious defeat. Burning Hells. Even when I won, with these people, they *still* didn't lose. Both sides getting their way had felt like a better principle before I'd had to look the truth of it in the eye.



"And I volunteer myself as the observer," the Grey Pilgrim added calmly.

I didn't humour him with a reply. We already knew my answer. I leaned towards Aisha.

"I'm going to agree to this," I whispered in her ear. "Use it to extract concessions over supplies. You'll find them more flexible than anticipated."

Her dark eyes were troubled, but she was a Wastelander through and through. Her face became a mask and she did not argue with me in front of the enemy. I leaned back and my eyes turned to the Pilgrim. I was past pretending this wasn't his game.

"I'll accept these terms," I said. "I believe we're done here?"

The old man inclined his head.

"So we are," he replied.

I rose to my feet, flicking a glance at Prince Amadis.

"Aisha Bishara speaks with my full authority," I said. "She will finish these negotiations in my name."

It was not proper etiquette, but I did not have it in me to stay seated and smile across the table from a man who'd just arranged my death, however beautifully. I offered the bare necessities of courtesy before leaving, Thief trailing behind me with worried eyes. Hierophant only noticed what was happening when I was halfway out the pavilion, then got up and left without even the semblance of an explanation. I halted and looked up at the descending sun, after I exited the conference. The Pilgrim thought he'd won. But he didn't understand quite what I was after, did he? That for the Accords to work, there was a need for someone enforcing them from the side of Evil. Or maybe he did, and didn't believe it would make a difference. In the end, a mistake had been made today.

Whether it was his or mine, only time would tell.

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*Big Brother*

Woo! I'm loving this more and more the longer Cat and Pilgrim interact.

*Jeremy*

Well then. Things are going to get \*interesting\*. Although I must say that I'm sad Rozala isn't taking Milenan's place as Cat's hostage.

*Oshi*

Rozala isn't an ambitious twit Cat can hold against Hasanbach.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I was thinking more Cat could hold her against herself 😎

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

It gets cold at night in a tent

[SpacyRicochet](#)

She did already establish she had a very strict 'Don't f-ing invade Callow'-rule for people sharing her bed.

*Erfling*

Ah, but that was all a misunderstanding

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Speaking of ships, in this chapter it looks like Juniper do the equivalent of putting her name in tape on the stuff in the fridge before Cat decides to eat it herself.

*Dainpdf*

Aisha is a bad idea for more reasons than that. It starts with "Praesi" and ends with "noble".

*Insanenoodlyguy*

rereading, it might have been literal as well. So delighted with Aisha's back up she literally wants to pick her up and twirl her. That is still a bad idea for all the same reasons mind. You pick up a girl and twirl her, there's assumptions made about your intentions.

*ALKATYN*

She is already the defacto leader in military terms, letting her be a hostage would give her an even bigger reputation boost, and allow her allies to frame the failure of the crusade as his, with her nobly sacrificing herself. Also, Pilgrim et al would probably not want her around Catherine, since they both have ruthless pragmatic streaks and a focus on revenge it would be easy for Cat to convert her, at least in part. Milenan is an old style Proceran noble so thats less of an issue

[sengachi](#)

Also the real irony here is that if they gave Cat a hostage who actually had a moral compass Cat would probably have them turning against Procer within a month because, well, because Procer actually is in the wrong. So they kind of have to send her an amoral self-serving bastard to act as the 'poor heroic hostage who kills the evil queen' because anyone actually heroic wouldn't serve.

Steve

I was super hoping for that, too. Screw Amadis 😡

[ahd](#)

The Woe don't care if the Black Queen is an anti-hero or an anti-villain. The Hunt don't either.

Remind me again why Catherine Foundling can't turn in place?

*SpeckofStardust*

Meta reasons.

Personally reasons.

Practical reasons.

Take your pick.

*Byzantine*

Because as she noted, the story involved will try to kill her.

*ruduen*

Yep, a redemption story is quite possible with the lines that have currently been drawn. I was actually wondering if they were going to turn it into something else – if they provided a royal captive, put under the heaviest guards, then that would've provided the lines for an appropriate rescue story.

Still, since Catherine knows just what's going on, it's time to see just how much wiggle room she's found in this particular story.

*Someguy*

There is another way to fuck the "Redemption" story by leaning heavily on Pilgrims' Mentor Archetype. Twist it into a variant of the "Hero's Journey" where the mentor gives his life to save the "hero". In this case, setting things up for Akua and the Mantle of Winter as targets.

*Dainpdf*

Well, he *\*would\** be her fourth (she's had Black, Malicia and Akua) mentor figure... I think that's one too many.

*letouriste*

akua is not a mentor figure. just a rival you can learn things from

*Dainpdf*

Catherine specifically kept Akua around so she would teach her things. She's not a rival anymore. Still a viper, but a teachy one.

*Miles*

But none of her mentors have died yet. (Akua's death was before being a mentor)

*Dainpdf*

Yeah, but that's not my point. I just meant that after reaching magic number three it's probably hard to get another. Especially since she already had a "learning" name and ditched it.

Maybe if you count Akua as a tool instead of a mentor?

*jonnney*

The Empress, Black Knight, Heiropant's parents, several legions in the Vales and a good deal of the administration of her Army and government would all be big issues. However the main issue would be that Callow would rejoin the cycle of death and conquest with Praes that had plagued it for the past thousand years. I think she might could get away with ruling alongside a heroine, but if she switches sides her whole reason for grasping power in the first place evaporates.

*Jonnnnz*

Thank you.

Someone finally mentioned the obvious: the Gods have set up the continent with Callow being a target for a starving Praes. Black and Malicia's solution was that they become one nation. Cat saw the numbers. This agreement is poison in the long term because Praes will have to at least partially succeed each time no matter what treaties are signed to protect Callowan interests.

*Yotz*

As a tributary to the Tower, Callow brings Praes into the agreement, however tangentially. This would require

additional diplomatic talks between the Tower and the League, all while the Praes *must* be supplied with analogue of humanitarian aid convoys at least. Callow will carry the lion's share of it, of course – both as a gesture of free will, and a sign of loyalty to the treaty signed – thus fulfilling divine mandate. Oh, and Praes will surely skin them alive with border taxes in any future trade dealing – metaphorically speaking, of course – thus succeeding in their nefarious plans on dominating Callow.

Welcome to the birth of Realpolitik, gentlehomos.

PS: Gods will be furious, though. At least of the Above, for Infernal Diplomacy is a thing, you see..

*mavant*

> gentlehomos

Hey, some of us are gentlebis.

*Yotz*

Bu you *are* of Homo genus, are you not?  
If not, my apologies, my deer.

[Jesse Coombs](#)

My deer indeed for I am genus cervidae.

*Kazon and Dogar*

Except that Black's point is that a Dread Emperor/Empress that tries to enact something that will solve the starvation without taking from Callow will be made to fail. The (hilariously named) plot to steal Callow's weather failed and made it worse. Attempting to limit population growth was met with a quick death before it could be implemented. Black managed to divine that much clarity from historical records. The agreement you describe would be destroyed before it could be signed. That was the driving force behind the conquest: the loophole in the Gods-mandated plan in which Praes solves the starvation by taking from Callow, only this time with no need for human suffering in the process.

*Dainpdf*

Uh... It was stated that Cat can't be aligned to Praes if the agreement goes through. She basically stated that there's a snowball's chance in Summer that she's getting into the Alliance, without Pilgrim intervention.

*Agent J*

Yes, and she side-stepped the issue entirely “answering” the Pilgrim by saying she planned to join the Alliance. The Uncivil Wars are going to be a thing. The Girl Who Climbed the Tower is also a thing. She can’t be allied to Praes for the deal to go through? No matter. She’ll just conquer it.

[\*ahd\*](#)

The Empress would face a united Proceran host gated through Arcadia to the doorstep of Ater. Black is thinking about dropping Malicia in favour of helping Cat with her vision of a better world (see their last reported conversation); the Calamities (and Scribe, and, heck, maybe even Ranger) would leave Malicia to burn and follow Black in a heartbeat, and Hierophant’s other parent would follow the Warlock to join their son without even noticing there might be a problem. The goblins and orcs and ogres are playing their own game, but certainly would be welcome to come to Callow and settle/join the Army in a more congenial environment than Praes.

Over half of the remaining Army is Legion-trained but Callow-born. The hard Wasteland core of the 15th and adjacent legions is loyal to either Catherine or Black or both (see above about Black moving); and the Red Flower Vales legions have to have figured out that their Empress has suspended them over a bottomless pit of the One Sin by now, and might well follow Black.

The Broken Bells would just be smiling. A lot. Likewise the Daoine.

I don’t say this is the most likely scenario. I’ve given up scrying EE’s thoughts. But it’s hardly \*impossible\* that Catherine Foundling would break a story in a narratively-plausible way that nobody saw coming, is it?

*RanVor*

That much is true. The problem is, the objectives of Black and the Procerans are mutually exclusive. The entire point of this crusade on the narrative level is stopping Black before he actually achieves something that can’t be rectified. Remember, the Heavens don’t want peaceful and civilized Praes – they want a dystopian, militaristic shithole to serve as a punching bag for their flunkies. If they get their way, they will make sure the next Dread Emperor is going to be a power-hungry madman.

[\*ahd\*](#)

Last volume, yes, definitely. End of argument. Now, though?

Black's plans are in little pieces all over the floor (see also, his last reported conversation with the Dread Empress). He knows this, and is looking straight at that reality, and thinking about it. Maybe he is thinking it might be fun to have different plans, maybe with different goals. The Liesse Accords might fit the bill. Especially if he knew the Heavens were against that outcome, and he could get to work with Cat again to help her twist the knife in that direction good and hard. (:

Black's objectives *\*were\** incompatible with the Crusaders'. They might not now be.

The Yan Tei precedent exists in-world.

"Patterns cannot be broken," Black smiled. "But they can be... transcended."

*RanVor*

Actually no. Black's objectives remain the same, and his plan is better than ever. In fact, it performed so far beyond his expectations that he's content to let it run by itself for a time being, to see if he can get even better results. Malicia doesn't see it because she focuses too much on the mundane side of things, and too little on the narrative side.

Now, if Cat changes sides and truly joins the good guys, and not just technically like she's currently planning, then his plan will come apart because he invested too much in her to have her lost to his enemies.

Moreover, Cat's and the Procerans objectives are also mutually exclusive. She has been declared abomination by the House of Light, and any deal they make with her, including the Liesse Accords, is going to ruin their reputation as Calernia's foremost bastion against the forces of darkness. Not to mention that they actually believe it's their gods-given duty to combat Evil wherever it appears. They're not going to just accept a treaty that goes against the tenets of their faith – they will have to be forced to do so. As one of them, Cat will have to submit to the same philosophy. The Accords are a work that just can't be done from the side of Good, with their inflexible doctrines and deep-seated prejudices.

Furthermore, Black's and Cat's objectives are, in fact, mutually inclusive. The Liesse Accords is the perfect chance for Black to solidify his victory, but they can't be achieved without him successfully reforming Praes to a sufficient degree. So, they both benefit from each

other's work, but none of them benefits from the situation the Procerans are aiming for.

*MetruX*

"is going to ruin their reputation as Calernia's foremost bastion against the forces of darkness" is false, actually. They see themselves like this, but it's been noted, several times already, that all other nations see them as power hungry and backstabbing, that tried to conquer them one time or another. Who was actually the bastion against evil was Callow, a land full of heroes and reigned by one, generation after generation fighting evil, with the citizens themselves arming each other without anyone asking. Too bad they let the bastion fall and now the burning wreck came to glare them in the face, uhh?

For the rest, I mostly agree, it IS possible for Cat and Black to share the same end-game, though Black should probably die for it to happen, and it is practically impossible for Cat and Hasenbach both winning.

*RanVor*

The Procerans are seen by everyone as power-hungry and backstabbing because they totally are. They are also shielding entire Calernia from both Kingdom of the Dead and the Chain of Hunger.

*Oshi*

No some of the kingdoms are shielding them. Not Procer itself. More often then not they starve those kingdoms slated with the duty of it rather then help.

*RanVor*

Funny, the last time I checked the map of Calernia, Procer was the only Good country to have land borders with Kingdom of the Dead and the Chain of Hunger. Did something change since then?

*oldschoolvillain*

RanVor – you appear to be viewing Procer as a monolithic entity like Callow or Pears. It isn't. It's a bunch of kingdoms shoved into a sack together told to get along because they're led by the same elected official. Only a few of those Kingdoms border the chain of hunger and the



kingdom of the dead, while the rest border Callow and each other.

*RanVor*

oldschoolvillain – Procer is not monolithic, but it *\*is\** a united country under a common leadership. Basically, it's like the US, but with more intrigue.

*Onyavar*

@Ranvor, it's like the US but with small-scale civil war every decade.

[sengachi](#)

Cat doesn't want to throw down the Tower though. She's seen where that path leads. Good *\*must\** have an evil overlord to fight. Praes *\*will\** rise again and invade Callow once more if Cat violently overthrows Malicia, it's just a matter of time. If that outcome occurs, it's basically the undoing and the destruction of everything she set out to achieve.

So whatever outcome Cat goes for, it has to include Praes standing, with no reason to invade Callow, and with someone who's not Akua 2.0 in charge (though not necessarily Malicia).

[onedollargum](#)

The form of the story is basically: Praes, the Evil, always grasps. Callow, the Good, is grasped. The Praes collapses, Callow breaks free, and the story repeats.

If Callow breaks free, but both stay Evil, then the story breaks, much like what Cat did with Summer and Winter.

If Catherine turns Good thanks to the Proceran ploy, then Callow as a whole is Good. If Callow then breaks free, Praes is going to come knocking again and the story of misery continues.

*Edrey*

here cat have the role to unite both sides, callow and praes, winter and summer, and all calernia good and evil, and start a new age. the important is not just two countries but all the continent. so like summer procer must be forced

*RoflCat*

And of course the Above who want to continue the pissing contest, is not amused a mere mortal is ruining their game.

That's probably the REAL reason they've been going after her, much in the same way Amadis was invading Callow for achievements for himself, not the whole Good Crusade crushing Evil Praes.

*Blinks*

Could always have Callow conquer Praes.

*RanVor*

It has been done several times and it didn't help.

*werafdsaew*

She gave an answer in this chapter; for the Liesse Accord to work, someone has to be enforcing it from the side of Evil, and currently she is that candidate.

*RanVor*

It was outright stated in the second to last paragraph of this chapter – for the Accords to work, someone has to enforce them from the side of Evil. And there's literally no other possible candidate.

*RanVor*

Aaaaaaaaand I got ninja'd.

*Yotz*

I feel you.

*Morgenstern*

Actually, there might be. Black might well do it.

*Metrux*

Black is set, by himself, to die. There is no way for that, as much as so many people want to see him alive in the end.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

You've met some of the gods Above. Would YOU want to work with them? Gods it would be like working with Trump

*Novice*

We haven't met any of the Gods Above.

ALKATYN

Heroes have far less autonomy than villains it seems, they are effectively working as peices moved by the heavens, not players themselves. Cat has slight issues with being bossed around. They also don't get immortality, and can't do a lot of the ruthless things Cat tends to do.

### *Alivaril*

...Okay, I'm starting to notice a disturbing pattern of late: every time Cat gets a major victory in one chapter, the next crushes any happiness born from it. It isn't fun to read.

### *Jakinbandw*

I mean, nothing had happened here. The pilgrim thinks he's killed Kat by pushing her into 'Death equals Redemption' but let's be fair. Kat has beaten harder stories before. While Kat is still worried about it (because the grey pilgrim is very skilled at story manipulation) I'm not. Kat is just as good if not better.

Kat just went 3 for 3 (but stories dont like that so it makes the last one ambiguous.)

### *ALKATYN*

Re redemption equals death. She's already died at least 1.5 times, she might be able to come back again, though each time the cost is higher. Pilgrim could resurrect her, but its probably not side effect free

### *Morgenstern*

And the argument was that she is NOT going to BE redeemed... and thus, not die, either...

### [shieldredblog](#)

Hard to say what the side effects of resurrecting a villain is. She has already been resurrected but her soul never left Creation, as she was undead.

The pilgrim stated that Resurrection had side effects because souls hated being ripped from the glorious Heavens. I find this shady as all Hells.

If Cat was resurrected after a "true" death, technically he'd be ripping her soul out of the Hells? Could he even do that?

### *JJR*

Getting ripped from the Hells might not be as hard. On the one hand the Hell Gods might take offense to the theft, on the other hand I don't expect the soul being rescued to resist in the same way the ones being taken from the

heavens do. It also opens up a possible exploit in Pilgrims Redemption = Death plan. Visiting hell briefly and realizing that you are destined to end up there is a good excuse to run in the opposite direction as fast as you can. So, instead of Redemption leading to Death, Death leads to Redemption; but she can't be redeemed until after she is resurrected. And with deaths and redemption balanced out on the scales she would no longer have a guaranteed death hanging over her head.

[shieldredblog](#)

The Hells definitely seems to have a revolving door. Comparatively Heaven is shrouded in mystery. One reason I find it so shady. If it was as great as advertised, it wouldn't be so hidden.

Cat doesn't want to end up a Hero, so Death = Redemption is still bad.

*MetruX*

I really want you people to stop with Kat. She's Cat, it's from her name Catherine, and the K is just wrong...

*Clint*

That's not the only thing, this story keeps repeating the same exact events in different clothes each book.

Cat or her powers get injured and she is knocked out for awhile in each book.

Every time she starts to get ahead someone magically is 10 steps ahead.

Every time she has the ability to win before things get bad she doesn't take it for moral reasons and then turns around and acts like she won't do it next time.

*Antoninjohn*

The Hellgate was built on Procer silver under the First Prince's orders, in order to invade and ruin Callow. So the story has Procer playing the villain role to Callow with its massive ritual invasion and attacking with Demons and Devils

*Oshi*

There will be a band of 5. Whatcha wanna bet the band ain't what the Pilgrim thought it would be!

*thegreatfeed*

This was wonderful. I now want to test the owe's reaction to this.

ALKATYN

I suspect they will mostly not care, as long as Heiropant and Adjutant don't have to fight Praesi troops. Archer is neutral, Thief is hardcore Callowan nationalist

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

You must mean the *Woe*? I'm as good as certain that the *Owe* is a group of mixed Named socialists trying to take down Mercantis' corrupt and exploitative capitalist system from the inside. It'll make a fascinating spinoff, if you're into that kind of thing.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Although... that kind of tale focusing on Walpolian levels of financial and political skullduggery would be a gripping read of its own. 😊

### [superkeaton](#)

Brutal, Pilgrim.

*Death Knightt*

Well, it's not like you don't have a history of coming back from the dead, Cat.

*Mr. Nobody*

I think her soul will remain with Winter even after her possible death from the "redemption story" to enforce the Liesse Accords. (Apparently, Cat's soul is bound to Winter)

*RoflCat*

I think it'd be interesting if Cat ends up 'dead', then while Pilgrim was satisfied his plan work, AKUA came out to take over the body, declared herself 'successor to Catherine's will'

She could make it work too, because she's bounded to Winter, and Winter is very much Cat.  
(She's also bound to Cat's body's oaths, so Thief can also act as a leash on her)

We saw how it influenced Akua's mind earlier, so Akua explaining it that way would be 'true' to Pilgrim.  
Then later on Akua can just call on Winter a lot to bring Cat

back, because who needs Hashmallim to resurrect you, when you've got your very own Guardian Angel....Guardian Diabolist?

*RanVor*

I WANNA SEE THAT SO BADLY

[SpacyRicochet](#)

We already did have the 'Die for the sake of the story, but not really'-trick happen though. Remember that Cath was Undead while fighting the Lone Swordsman, just so he could deliver the finishing blow and it not mattering.

I'm pretty sure using the same trick twice isn't how nice stories are supposed to go, so doubt it will come to that.

I favor the 'Hero's Journey' above the 'Die conveniently'.

[Fuodiachloris](#)

There are other tales of redemption, too. The reformed villain who becomes bound to the kingdom/ ideals/ people they once tried to destroy as a repentant saviour aka Merlin.

Right now, that's Pilgrim. Kind of/ ish. But, if he gets himself deaded-by-mentorship rather than archived-by-Nimue, that leaves being bound to serve a land/concept open. And, Akua might take being bound to serve the Practical Evil-style Liesse Accords over getting wiped out, letting the Good guys win or becoming a Tower fixture.

Pilgrim doesn't know he's dealing with *two* "redeemable" clients, here. Both quite willing to nix his game plan.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Ohhh, that could work. Cat lets herself die, and then that redemption story is over... but she comes back. Free from the narrative, because she wasn't resurrected in the hero way, but by a villian.

*Argentorum*

Now the question is, what story will Cat try to write.

Though, in honesty, I'm surprised she didn't push for Milenza to stay, as the military leader of the host, or else pushed for the Saint instead of the Pilgrim. Obviously, she couldn't get both, but if she started with the Pilgrim, she could maybe bargain them down to sending Milenza instead of Amadis. Who knows.

As always, a great chapter.

*Cicero*

I would have asked for Prince Arnaud. That fellow has "dangerous snake" written all over him.

Better to keep your most dangerous enemy close.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Cat thinking that Malicia doesn't have Assassin near her or in "reach" so to speak, has basically confirmed for me that Arnaud is Assassin wearing a skin. We know he can do it.

*RanVor*

I thought it was because the Assassin is loyal to Black, not Malicia.

[sengachi](#)

I'm pretty sure Assassin is the one Calamity who's actually loyal to Malicia before Black.

*RanVor*

I'm pretty sure the only Calamity loyal to Malicia before Black is Black himself, and that's already starting to change...

*Metrux*

The assassin can lie to her special senses, he did so when she thought Black was gonna die, so he can't be Arnaud. Unless he is doing this just to show, or something, which I wouldn't put under him... Just would feel strange for him to do something like that.

*Cicero*

Err... isn't Assassin dead?

I thought he was disguised as Black and then killed by Akua in front of Cat?

Have there been any Assassin sightings and/or Assassin level assassinations since then? I don't recall any.

*Forrest*

They've hinted previously that Assassin isn't that easy to keep dead. (Like the vision trap Akua put Cat through, in the hero one they had to keep offing Assassin over and

over but he always came back. It was the tolltaker one that killed him by trapping him in a warehouse of goblinfire)

*oldschoolvillain*

I believe that Assassin's response to Akua's ordering Cat to kill . . . It, was "A hundred times before, a hundred times more.". That's not the response of a person who STAYS dead.

*RanVor*

Except the hostage has been given (allegedly) as a sign of goodwill. If she argued, they might have used it against her.

*Draconius Sinister*

Cool, they've accepted Cat as the 'she's an asshole, but she's OUR asshole!' In the group! Things are looking good for Cat being a part of the Anti-Dead King band, or maybe making her own with the Woewhile the Good guys run theirs into the dirt. Excited for more!

*Rook*

As graceful of a killing stroke that was on the part of the pilgrim, I can't bring myself to be particularly worried.

Sure she has a knife to her neck now, but when has she ever not? Every major pivot, every major turning point, the situation as been the same and so has the answer. Whether it was being offered a villainous name, or becoming a true successor to Black, or having the Winter Mantle knocking on the door.

A knife is at your neck and your goal is ahead. All you have to do is keeping moving forward, and lean into the knife. Self mutilation is an old friend by now.

[Imtiaz Ayon](#)

This is completely similar to cat's story in book 2. She gets over her head and gets crippled. Then gets trapped in a redemption story but refuses redemption.

And in book 3, she accepts the mantle and it opens her old wound when she was crippled. So, it's like a crippling. Now she gets trapped in a redemption story. But for a redemption story to work you have to actually repent.

At the end of book 2 her injuries healed and she refused redemption.

Similarly, at the end of this story, something will happen to her mantle and she will refuse redemption

*Highwayman*



Who else thinks there's still a plot twist from the 'grey' part of the Grey Pilgrim coming?

And wasn't Amadis the one who had a death flag show up a couple of chapters back? Something about a letter to his family or a painting.

*Cicero*

Letter to his wife. Reminiscing about how they met. Recalling how she was a love match that nearly cost him his throne, showing that despite all the ambition and greed, that he does truly love his wife.

All after having "a bad feeling" about the upcoming battle.

Not sure how much more prominent a death flag you can get.

*Yotz*

Well, he always might have had that reminiscence just to decide that this is his last Crusade, and he will be retiring as soon as he returns home...

*Metrux*

You know, now that I think about it, this could very well be a death flag for his wife, instead of him... Like, the loss is his in the narrative, but who dies is her, he "loses everything" so that something something can happen to him.

*RanVor*

I love the moment when Cat pointed out the similarities between the crusade and the Praesi invasion.

[\*Trikki\*](#)

I don't understand. Why does taking hostages mean it's going to be a redemption story? I feel that (not for the first time) Cat is jumping into conclusions.

Sure, it can become a redemption story if Cat isn't careful... but there are so many other possible outcomes! I don't understand why she came to this conclusion right away, though it sure as hell made this chapter more dramatic than it had to be.

*Rook*

Context.

Cat painted the story as a misunderstanding between allies to avoid a 'evil turns on evil' narrative, by using her status as

Queen to pull Callow into the role of a lone-swordsman type of gritty/misunderstood hero.

By declaring a royal hostage within himself as the overseer acting as a guarantee for the negotiated deal, he puts himself right next to Cat so that he can be in a prime position to try enforcing Cat's own play into a true Heroic redemption story, rather than one only in name that she's using to avoid the 'evil turns on evil' narrative.

The attack is placing himself safely within range of influence of Cat's camp, with the skeleton of a heroic narrative in place that she herself opened up. Not the hostage being given to the army of Callow.

### *James, Mostly Harmless*

I have a feeling that it will be Akua who is redeemed and ends up sacrificing herself. There were signs of her already being on this path when she was running Kat's body ...

*MetruX*

Once again, please stop saying Kat... Also, this wouldn't work, because Akua can't exist without Cat right now, and thus the only way for her to be turned is if Cat turns together... Which just nullifies the reason for this ploy.

*JJR*

Masego, is that you?

I guess we should have expected that artifact from Akua to be able to reach the comment section.

*Yotz*

It has nothing to do with hostages – hostages are purely mundane measure between signatories of the treaty. It is morally grey area at most.

The GP's play was to *support* Cat's motion. Since every his move ought to be to remove her from the position of Villain ruler, she obviously felt something is wrong with this sudden burst of support. From his perspective it was as if she said "I want to hang myself", on which his response was "Here, have this nice rope".

*Byzantine*

I think you and Cat may be giving his thoughts a bit more malice than they have. Pilgrim really doesn't care if she dies in the story, just that she stop being a Villain.

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Eh, I assume it'll make more sense as the plan gets fleshed out more over the next few chapters.

### [Trikki](#)

Yeah, I hope so.

Thanks for your comments Rook and Yotz, though I'm still not convinced. I see how this CAN become a redemption story, but the way I see it, Cat can easily prevent that happening. At the moment I just can't imagine any good reason why she was so concerned about Pilgrim's plan being successful. We all know that Cat is pretty good at breaking stories; there was no need to overdramatize the situation (especially since whatever story this is, it's still in its crib).

### *Daemion*

Cat needs to go along with the treaty, she needs it badly or everything falls apart. To do so means she locks herself into the redemption story and the narrative gets stronger the longer this goes on. The truce is supposed to last a year or so.

Last time she broke out of a redemption story she killed the Lone Swordsman. Killing the Grey Pilgrim wouldn't be enough this time as there are other heroes in play and it would ruin everything she wants.

What's she doing now is taking a large gamble, while the 'reformed villain' dies in most redemption stories doesn't mean she can't arrange her survival somehow (perhaps due to being mostly Fae). And even if she doesn't, she'd be content if her death allowed Callow to break out of its role as the continent's field of war and punching bag.

Of course, maybe getting a new name might raise her importance for the narrative enough to keep her alive despite all the death flags she allowed the Grey Pilgrim to raise for her.

### *Bob Johnson*

The thing I think Cat is missing is the fact that she IS fey, and not Named. She is bound to the story differently, I think. There has to be more than one story of a Lord or Lady of Winter leading a band of heroes to their demise.

### *Yotz*

I'd wager, her unease was nurtured by a combination of factors: firstly, she lost – with a single move GP put her in the situation where every her choice leads her to a

stalemate at best – a classic death funnel; secondly, her understanding that he is a proactive player in the game where all her previous opponents were mostly reactive, if not openly passive; and last, but by all means not least – his style of playing: more specifically, his ability to seamlessly shift between several gameboards, playing proverbial 4D-shatranj. Last factor means that she can not even undertake her favourite maneuver – for now, at least – if she is to steal the gameboard to hit him with it, he will simply shifts to another one, and then'll use her actions to achieve his own goals, all while depriving her of any significant gains.

Personally, I see her reaction as something akin to feeling that you get then after long and exhausting game you finally win only to remember that this was a quarterfinal – a brief respite, and you will be in the grinder again – this time, against even more dangerous opponent. In other words, she has a firm grip on the tiger's scrotum, all that's left – is to ride the bloody thing.

*Yotz*

To clarify – her previous opponents were actively playing their own games, but were mostly reactive in regards to her actions, thus allowing her to meddle with the outcomes. GP plays his game specifically against her. Each time she previously won a direct confrontation was due to some ace in the sleeve, or outright cheating. Now she is forced into a direct confrontation against the opponent who not only can see any attempt in subterfuge as a lie it is, but can force her into reactive position seemingly on a whim.

Can't wait to see precisely how she will inevitably turn that on him.

*werafdsaew*

I think it's due to the GP being around. There's no reason to do that unless he'll try something, and him being a heroic mentor means that can catalyses a redemption arc.

*Edrey*

i am thinking in black instead, he is cornered now. sure he can beat one side but now he is now with two armies in each side of vales. so now a story of a villain cornered and cat and black know it so they can use it  
the problem here ia the bard has jet to appear

*MetruX*

He... Is not, though? As mentioned in the chapter itself, they can't go through Callow to attack him, they need to go back from where they came, and take the long way around. When they get to the Vales Black's battle will be long gone, so it doesn't really matter.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

I see... everything is going to accord.

*Anony*

But she's like 95% Fae. You can't tell me no one has considered that they are functionally immortal.

*Erfling*

And utterly bound by the oaths they make

*Morgenstern*

... to \*request\* admission. Which should get denied. Even if it doesn't, requesting says nothing about actually accepting or not withdrawing. \*tongueincheek

*Morgenstern*

At least the emphasis on wording is usually a fav with such entities as fae, demons, etc.

*MetruX*

It would be possible... If she didn't have a super lie detector of incredible experience around, especially one that trains and "save" new heroes in a redemption story that would make her a new heroine... No, he won't let something like that.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

First,

To look at the Chapter properly, one has to grasp that Cat really sent GP's strategy flying with her Faux Heel Turn narrative. This is what he could cobble together from that. Not really some utter master stroke. Also remember, just because we read Cat THINK a thing, doesn't necessarily mean it is so. Cat's (rightly) very wary of GP's vast wealth of experience, so even Cat is likely to give his "success" more weight than may actually be there. Her thinking is obviously flawed, in considering the whole Hostage/GP-as-Overseer a master-stroke of a plan meant to death-flag her. That would've required the GP to FORESEE Cat's "Intend to Become Grand Alliance Signatory" stratagem, and he didn't.

Second,

I don't really believe the GP is out for Cat's blood the way Saint is. He 100% believes the whole If a Villain Rules, a Nation Grows More Evil thing...but as things began and proceeded, eliminating Cat was the only route to stop Callow from going down that road. He may genuinely be trying to get her redeemed, because he really wasn't thrilled with killing a girl in her early twenties to begin with. Especially since Procer and everyone else sat on their asses through the Conquest, necessitating Cat doing as she's done to avoid Praesi dominance of her homeland.

Third,

The GP has exactly ZERO practical experience, prior to Cat, with Practical Evil Villains. Villains like the Tyrant have been pretty much all there was to Villainy for the duration of the GP's time as a Hero. As much experience as the GP has in using Narrative to his Heroic advantage, he has zero experience in combating Villains trained to sidestep narrative pitfalls as their Prime Modus Operandi. He may well, PROBABLY IS, under the impression that Cat, especially at her tender age, doesn't understand narrative weight enough to really grasp what he's trying. Unless the Heavens have given the GP literally 100%-see-the-future precognition (and that kind of Agency-Denial wouldn't fit the Guideverse AT ALL) there's no frigging way the GP can anticipate that from here on out, Cat will be working at every step to avoid the narrative turning out his way.

Fourth,

Cat may THINK she's OK with dying to relieve Callow of its Eternally Conquered Mantle...but if she takes a really hard look around, she's going to see that the environment that's been fostered in Callow (by her, no less) has made certain there are ZERO viable successors to the throne. By splitting the political weight-lifters into two separate and fundamentally ideologically-opposing factions, Talbot and Kendall's factions will kick off a civil war the instant Cat is no longer around to hold their leashes. Then BAM, in steps either Procer or Praes, again.

Finally, Cat's been essentially Nameless since the Weapon-Black Queen Pivot got DESTROY'd by Black. I don't think it's a coincidence that the Name-limbo thing has continued this long...and the "Big" kind of Story the GP is trying to kick off with this Narrative Maneuver has Pivot written ALL OVER IT!

*mindsword2*

It could be a bit worse...

Where will they keep a royal prisoner? In the capital, there is the Songbird's Cage where you can keep royals under guard ("In later years, it had become where Callowan royalty held prisoners that weren't officially prisoners"). It was directly mentioned

this “prison” was used for the king’s mistress so he could keep her out of the way of his queen and then under lock and key to keep his queen away from her.

The story has a queen with a heart of ice with no suitable consort. Her land is oppressed by evil, which she wishes to destroy. In comes a royal prince she takes hostage from those who would help her. Where can she put this prince? In a safe secure place fit for royalty... which also is where the secret lover of the ruler is stored. I wonder if Prince Amadis is possibly going to make a play to be King and secure Callow for himself. Especially with the Grey Pilgrim attending Cat’s court. Merlin was an adviser to Arthur after all. And Cat pulled a sword from a stone.

Worse, we have seen in interludes that one of Cat’s big weaknesses at home is the lack of royal blood. Black and Malicia killed off anyone with even a drop of royal blood to prevent a return of the nobility. This could be a solution. Could also have Anne Kendal marry him, assume the throne with a royal consort.

*narcoduck*

lol Amadis is already happily married.

*Rook*

It should be exceedingly clear by now that Amadis and his personal plots really just do not matter much. He’s one part ambition and two parts mundane political intrigue, the only relevance he has is as far as what the big players – Hasenbach, Pilgrim, Black, Cat, Malicia – use him for in playing the bigger game.

The line of succession isn’t an actual pivot point right now and even if it were, the point of Royal Blood is historical callowan precedent for historical callowan rule. It’s not that nobles from any old corner of the world naturally have golden magic water flowing through their veins, the local context is what really matters.

If anything the old history between callow and procer/Praes means foreign royal bloodlines mean less than nothing in callow. Callowans would likely rather accept a stray dog as ruler than proceran royalty.

As far as the old royal bloodlines in callow goes, that essentially ended with the fall of house Fairfax. Unless a hidden heir gets unveiled by plot twist, all the emphasis now in terms of Callowan succession is on Cat/eventually Kendall, not the consort.

[Idiom Idiot \(@AintItK\)](#)

I think both players in this game of sacrifice chess are forgetting an important element.

Orphan she may be, but Foundling still has a father, of sorts.

And one of the classics of the redemption narrative is the redeeming sacrifice of a parent for a child. The child must go on, bearing the burden of two redemptions; to build a \*better world.\*

And I'll bet you, if nobody else, Black's definitely weighing that option.

*Cicero*

We already know Black is willing to accept death to see Cat succeed (in fulfilling his plans).

Black very well could accept this. Especially now that the Captain died. Ranger and Scribe might object though.

*RanVor*

And Warlock. Don't forget about Warlock.

*Argentorum*

Remember though, "Wekesa would eat every child in Callow if it let him pursue his experiments." As long as Cat doesn't kill Black, and Warlock and Heirophant have a nice little conservatory to play magic in, he probably won't care enough. And that's only assuming the Witch doesn't kill him, or else that they don't mutually explode.

Scribe and Ranger are the problems, and Ranger... well, she's a walking death flag, which is kinda the point, I gather.

*RanVor*

Wekesa would gladly eviscerate Cat if he believed she had \*anything\* to do with Black's death, up to and including being in general vicinity when it happened.

[Walter](#)

I feel like Cat is playing ten dimensional chess and the Pilgrim is legit not playing. Like, she reads correctly that he wants her to be redeemed. Then she extrapolates this whole sinister "redemption = sacrifice ergo he is getting Callow despite their defeat ergo let the story do the heavy lifting, well played my magnificent opponent", and he is just like "man I hope she can stop murdering so many people and become a worthy queen for the poor people of Callow".



## *Rook*

I think the opposite, the Pilgrim is the one plotting much more deeply than anyone else in the battle can cope with.

You don't get to be completely undefeated for decades against the most dangerous monsters the Gods Below can throw at you – with a Name that isn't even combat oriented – by being a simpleton with a pure heart. Remember that the kindly old man here has the genuine respect of a Named as brutal as the Saint, and is the kind of big name player that the Black Knight of all people was trying to avoid fighting when he destroyed the hellgate.

What he lacks in youth, stamina, or reality-warping physical abilities, he makes up for with experience and cunning. There's no way he could've even survived this long otherwise, let alone with such a scary track record.

## *crescentsickle*

Called it last chapter. The conflict of threes was a Rising Action on Cat's part, where she was framing the story as a hero. The Pilgrim's third play, the most important play, after two losses, was to lose especially hard. Give Cat exactly what she wants, and make it all the more potent for it, and lock her in to her narrative. Lose the battle, win the war.

## *ALazyMonster*

I really want to see Cat's accords succeed just because I want to know the full details. Also it would be interesting if they led to a new name like Arbiter or something since her goal is to have someone to enforce the peace she is trying to make.

## *stevenneiman*

I'm really excited to hear what exactly the Liesse Accords are. We know that they're something Cat considers to be worth everything she's done, but that the Pilgrim would consider unacceptable. We also know that Cat considers it possible to ram it down the Grand Alliance's throat if she has the upper hand, and that it involves Evil to a degree that it won't work without an enforcer on the side of Evil.

I'm sure somebody's here has guessed what they are by now, but I'm stumped.

## *Oshi*

I imagine them akin the Unseelie Accords from the Dresden Files. A set of rules pertaining to conduct between the powers (including heroes.villains)

*stevenneiman*

Possibly, but that begs the question of why the Grey Pilgrim would be opposed to such a thing. He's already agreed to (and in fact seemed to approve of) Cat's rules of engagement, yet Cat seems certain that something about the Accords would stick in his craw. I wouldn't be surprised if trying to expand the rules of engagement beyond the trial run here was part of the Accords, but I feel like there's gotta be more to it than that if she expect it to be a hard sell for the Pilgrim specifically. For all that the mortals claim to be calling the shots, I'm 95% sure that if Cat and Tariq both demanded something they would get it, and I suspect that he would support to RoEs on a broader field given the horror and loss of life it would prevent. I suppose he might object to the combined Good and Evil nature of the regulating body that would be required to enforce it.

*mavant*

I'm still worried about the Demon of Absence. What happened to it?! Demons of Absence don't just go AWOL!

*Rook*

Isn't it fitting for the demon of absence to be absent?

*stevenneiman*

I recall someone commenting about a few inconsistencies that seem to indicate that it might have had some kind of effect on the proceedings. Personally, I can't think of any way that such a thing could cause a problem in a way that wouldn't be super narratively unsatisfying. Also, Pilgrim said he'd deal with it and I think he will. He might be a slave of the heavens willing to do morally ambiguous things in the name of making his side win even when they're in the wrong, but I don't think that extends to not dealing with the threat posed by Demons, especially when that could be construed as a violation of the rules of engagement.

[CrysJaL](#)

So I'm really seeing a narrative comparison here.

The angels represent Order, being singular and constant in both power and number. Whereas Demons and Devils are chaotic, constantly changing and fluctuating.

Heroes and Villains follow this theme aswell. Heroes fight for the status quo, keeping things the same. Whereas Villains like Cat and Black become villains because they want that change to

occur. They attempt to force their change on reality whereas Heroes fight to prevent it.

But I have an observation to make with redemption stories. Some people here seem to think the redemption story could be used to convert Cat to a heroic name. However, from everything I recall in the story so far it's implied that a redemption story can only end with the villain's death (the villain dying doing the right thing trope because they're good now and suddenly it's a tragic death).

On a side note. Let's assume that Cat is redeemed through this redemption story (and survives somehow). Wouldn't that turn her into a Summer Fae? Summer has nobody holding any mantles either right now. So could that plausibly happen if Cat switched sides somehow? Thoughts?

[Tohron](#)

I'm not sure that the Order vs Chaos is a perfect fit. There are Demons of Order, and there have been two chapters titled "Order" which were about villains imposing their will (first Black, then Catherine). I think a more apt comparison would be that Good is about adhering to a single, unified standard, and Evil is about coming up with your own standard and trying to make others follow it.

*Cthulhu*

Um... Proctor violates Truce. Asshole hostage dies. No redemption arc.

And if Proctor can be tricked into violating truce by someone .... such as Black .... then Mr Pilgrim can report that justice was served. Cat avoids redemption and takes the stuffing out of Proctor moral superiority. The crusade ends.

Long live the Queen.

*Max Scherer*

Meh i hope she doesn't will be too long gone from Callow, because i hate something like this. Now Malicia could shit... The last time she wasn't in Callow it got to shit and i hope it will not happen again.

[vuthuha912](#)

Cat is playing the GP like how she played the Hashmallim. For a beneficial deal to stay, Cat needs to be alive to enforce it so GP will have to save her in case the entire thing falls apart. If the deal in the future was as good as she thinks then of course the GP will save her.

Did... Cat just has a dig at Black for his ways of sacrificing his life for his dream? Black hates Martyrdom but he is martyring himself to give Cat his position and force a Cat&Malicia alliance. He didn't have success but it was close.

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## Interlude: Red The Flowers

*"Red the flowers, red the crown  
Red this day of bleak renown  
How soon they forgot Eleanor  
Along every oath they swore*

*Red the flowers, red the wreath  
Red the sword that left the sheath  
Now a king lies dead on the grass  
Taught the vows of princes pass*

*Red the flowers, red the grave  
Red the biers of knights so brave  
They who thrice rode and died  
Under banners of olden pride*

*Red the flowers, red the right  
Red the fires this day will light  
For every slight there is a price  
Ours will be long and paid twice."*

- 'Red The Flowers', a Callowan rebel song written in the wake of the Proceran occupation of Callow

It had been some time since Amadeus had last inhaled the scent of carnage. The dawn of the third day brought with it strong winds and burning sun: the corpses were rotting in the heat, the smell of them carried to the third line of fortifications in the southern valley. The Iron Prince had ordered a halt to the offensive with nightfall, the crusaders setting camp among the ruined walls and bastion they'd spent the day taking at such great cost. Papenheim was not fresh to the art of war: he knew better than to engage a Praesi army under cover of dark. Especially one that'd had most a year to raise siege engines goblins would field and aim perfectly when the crusaders stumbled along blindly with torches and holy flames. Grem stood by his side atop the tower known as the southern half of the Bloody Twins, the unusually slender orc towering two feet above him. Marshal Grem One-Eye spat over the wall, staring at the enemy stirring in the distance.

"They're not wasting time," the orc said. "Papenheim wants to bludgeon through as quick as possible, looks like. You were right about that much."

Amadeus remained silent, for the moment. Grem had been of the opinion that there'd be probing attacks to weather but no serious offensive until the armies of Levant arrived to reinforce the Iron Prince's sixty thousand Procerans. The initial span of the war had lent credence to the orc's prediction, but after the crusaders up north passed through the Stairway the old Lycaonese had begun his march in earnest. There were political considerations at work, the Black Knight suspected. Cordelia Hasenbach had called this crusade and assembled the alliance, but mistrust still reigned between Procer and its temporary allies. Even just the impression that she intended to bleed Levant instead of her own armies would raise the spectre of suspicion within the Grand Alliance. The old fear of Proceran expansionism haunted her regime still. Amadeus could sympathize. Past Dread Emperors had burned all the Empire's diplomatic bridges so thoroughly most ruins were still actively smouldering. It had taken Alaya more than two decades to craft a rapprochement with Ashur, and it'd still all gone up in flames after only a few months of diplomatic correspondence between Hasenbach and Magon Hadast.

"I'm not so certain he's fully committed," Amadeus finally replied. "The First Prince needs blood on the floor to show her allies, but Papenheim has not been careless in his advance. He's willing to trade but not outright sacrifice."

"Thinning our numbers *is* the best way for them to win this," Grem conceded. "They've certainly got the levies to throw away."

The legions garrisoning the Red Flower Vales numbered six. Twenty-four thousand men in full. The First under Grem was holding the southern passage along with Mok's Third and Sacker's Ninth. Marshal Ranker and her Fourth were leading the defence of the northern valleys, commanding the freshly-rebuilt Twelfth and Nekheb's Tenth. That last legion they'd had to employ sparingly. General Catastrophe, as they were fondly called by their living soldiers, fielded a legion of undead captained by necromancers. But even alone the dragon was a force to reckon with. Combined with foot soldiers they could torch along the enemy at no great loss? Nekheb could turn around a battle, if well deployed. They were also, unfortunately, very vulnerable to heroes. Dragonslaying was an old heroic staple, and there was at least one hero on the opposite side with an archery-related Name. Wanton use would only result in the death of one of their primary assets.

"We've been light on losses so far," Amadeus noted. "And we still hold three of the five defensive lines in both passes. It cost them at least seven thousand to get this far in."

"Less," Grem replied. "If our effectiveness estimates on their priests is solid, anyway. We'll need to start deploying our contingencies today to blunt their momentum."

Amadeus looked at the glittering wall of steel forming in the distance, brow creasing.

"You hold command," he said. "I am here in an advisory role."

The orc barked out a laugh.

"Meddling's in your blood, Amadeus," he said. "You can't help it."

"And yet my role remains advisory," the Black Knight mildly replied. "I would caution you that sending Warlock onto the field before the enemy revealed their own Named casters will have consequences, but the the choice is ultimately yours."

Marshal Grem One-Eye half-squinted at the enemy, then cracked his neck. When they'd been young, the orc had done it purely for the satisfaction. Now his bones creaked and bent with age, the one enemy neither of them could defeat on the field.

"We've got a few tricks to deploy before ol' Red Skies gets off his arse," Grem decided. "Let's see how they like the taste of those."

Amadeus inhaled the scent of it again. Blood and rotting flesh, shit and steel and a hundred other small things drowned out by them. It was still thin, for now.

It would grow stronger before the day was done.

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Klaus had been raised to the old military dictum of never assaulting a fortress unless you had three times the enemy's number. Back in the Empire the first Terribilis had noted in his *Ars Tactica* that twice the number was sufficient if you had spellcaster superiority, but that was a worthless piece of advice for anyone but the Praesi. You couldn't go up against the Dread Empire and expect your spellslingers to be up to snuff. Much, as he had discovered over the last two days, like you couldn't expect dwarven siege weapons to be a match for goblin engineering. The first day had been opened by an artillery duel and his host had not come out the better for it. The Empire's trebuchets and ballistas fired further and swifter than the catapults and trebuchets bought from the Kingdom Under, and the

knock-off scorpions brought by the Arlesites had been about useful as tits on a sparrow. Not a single one of the them had survived long enough to come into firing range. If the old general had twice as many men he could have swept through one line of defence after another, taking the losses as he went. But as things stood? If he went it half-cocked, less than a third of his army would emerge from the meat grinder to set foot in Callow.

The outer walls in both valleys were old Proceran fortifications taken by the Kingdom of Callow the last time the border principalities botched an invasion of the Vales, later repurposed to serve as defensive lines facing the other way. They were, essentially, piles of stone twenty feet high with steeply sloped hills behind them the Praesi had set their engines on. No bastions, no towers, nothing more elaborate than stones piled up high with mortar holding them together. One-Eye and the Carrion Lord had defended it with a bare few hundred, regulars and sappers, so he'd launched an escalade under cover of the artillery duel. Within the first half-hour of the offensive he'd lost over two thousand soldiers. Sappers lobbed their munitions onto the ladders, killing as many with the fall as the explosions, while crossbow volleys fired straight into tightly-packed ranks earned swaths of dead. They'd taken the damned walls, of course. Fortifications that bare couldn't be held against his numbers, and he'd half-expected the enemy would let him have them uncontested. Instead the Praesi had defended for less than an hour, taken maybe three dozen casualties and retreated with all their engines intact. That'd set the tone for the second day.

Another four thousand gone to take the kind of defences you saw in your average Lycaonese border town. Low walls and towers, a single central bastion. He'd sent the heroes in with the first wave, with massed mage support, and run into a godsdamned wall. The fortifications were warded so thoroughly nothing he had could crack them in the slightest, and the grounds fifty feet from the foot of the walls were seeded what Praesi called lily fields. Hidden pits with spikes at the bottom. The assault's momentum shattered, Legion mages began torching everything in sight and the entire attack would have collapsed if not for a Chosen called the Fortunate Fool. Klaus had considered the man essentially useless, considering he had truck with more herbs than your average alchemist, but the hero had stumbled his way onto a safe path through the lily field by sheer happenstance. The other Chosen rallied the levies and led an assault on the walls in the southern valley. None of the Damned had come out to meet them, at least, something he'd been assured was a consequence of the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods refraining from entering the fray.

It'd taken most of the day to force the Praesi back in both valleys. He'd called a halt after that, well aware his men did not have the stomach to march into whatever nastiness the Carrion Lord had awaiting. Or the ability to match goblin nightsight: all torches and priestly glows would accomplish was mark targets for the enemy siege. Now the third dawn had come, and steel would be bared again. The defensive line ahead would be the beginning of the real fight, he knew. On both sides, though at different lengths from a bird's eye view, the valleys narrowed into passes flanked by cliffs. Those natural defences had been the seat of Callowan fortresses for centuries, the rock Proceran offensives broke on. The Bloody Twins, Alamans called them. Massive towers forty feet high sitting atop slopes at an angle of almost sixty degrees. There were dirt paths leading up, but they were not wide. Forcing the Twins was going to be ugly business, but it had to be done. They were the high point of both valleys, the terrain going down towards Callow after them. Claiming the high ground would allow Klaus' fucking engines to finally start being more than expensive targets, and with the fortresses still awaiting ahead he'd need every advantage he could get.

Klaus swatted Ratbiter absent-mindedly to keep him from chewing away at the red marigolds that grew everywhere in the valleys, and were allegedly responsible for their name. They were said to have been gold, once upon a time, but had since grown red from all the blood spilled on these grounds over the centuries.

"De Guison," he called out, and the mageling snapped to attention. "Contact the northern front. We're beginning our attacks."

The man made a three-act play out of obeying a simple order, but the old general's attention had already left him. He gestured for his personal hornblower to sound the offensive and eyed the grounds he needed to take before getting to the southern Twin. Almost four hundred yards of more or less flat grounds, before getting at the foot of the slope. Then another half hundred, marching up one of the continent's most viciously designed natural fortresses. He was going to lose thousands just on the approach, and that'd be if the Praesi had no surprised awaiting. He knew better than to expect that. There was a reason he'd ordered for the Fortunate Fool to run ahead of the first ranks, the silly-looking idiot in silks taking point so good soldiers need not die. His instincts had been correct, he discovered shortly.

The Chosen walked over innocuous-looking grounds and was blown high into the sky by an explosion about a hundred yards from the bottom of the slope, landing on his back a dozen feet forward. Where he blew up again. Under Klaus' sceptical gaze, five explosions were chained in a row until the man arrived halfway through the evidently mined field. He got up, looking a little



charred, and patted himself in panic to put out the flames on his chest. The Prince of Hannover was familiar with the effects of Praesi demolition charges, and he silently reassessed how bloody difficult this Chosen would be to actually put down. A few streaks of lightning shot down from atop the Twin but the Fortunate Fool ducked them by a series of very coincidental trips and falls, before waddling back to the Proceran lines and loudly claiming victory. Klaus now had a basic notion of enemy mage range and the concentration of buried charges. The assault proper could begin.

"Priests forward," he ordered his standard-bearer. "Sweep for the munitions."

The robed brothers and sisters of the House of Light strode forward as ordered, and it was but a few moments before streaks of light began hammering at the ground in an advancing wave. The growing narrowness of the valley here ran to their advantage, for once. Less territory to cover. Munitions detonated in plumes of earth and smoke one after another, destroying the traps at the unfortunate cost of breaking up the terrain. Advance would be even more difficult. The enemy waited patiently for them to finish, silhouettes atop the tower unmoving. The murder holes and larger openings for scorpions were bristling with steel, a promise of death yet to come.

"Mages and engines, forward," Klaus told his standard-bearer. "Our vanguard is to prepare for advance on my signal."

*Never get into a siege with Praesi*, he'd once told his niece. He still believed it, though he had no other choice. The Legions of Terror as forged by the Reforms were one of the finest war machines on the continent, and in this series of valleys he couldn't even use the major advantage his people had over the Empire. Cavalry. Instead he was forced to play to the enemy's strengths, to his distaste, and because of it this was not so much war as a slugging match of piled corpses. Dragged forward, the catapults were set down and panes of opaque yellow light formed to protect them.

The third battle for the Vales began.

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"We are witnessing," Grem gravely said, "the birth of a Proceran combined arms doctrine."

Amadeus hummed in agreement.

"It was only a matter of time," he said. "We showed the effectiveness of it during the Conquest. The Principate was too preoccupied with the civil war to catch up, but they've had time to breathe since Hasenbach took power. She gave her uncle free

hand to reform the Principate's war doctrine, and Papenheim is no fool. Catherine faced much the same tactics up north."

The old orc grunted unhappily.

"If she'd listened to Istrid's daughter and gone ahead with Bonfire, she wouldn't have had to," he said. "It was a solid plan. Would have taken Procer out of the war, and without the Principate the crusade collapses."

It was a natural consequence of his former apprentice having folded two legions into her Army of Callow that Amadeus had gained plethora eyes and ears among her officer corps. The Duni had mostly used these to keep abreast of her war strategy and arrange his own accordingly. Scribe's agents in her army, on the other hand, had been waging a war with Alaya's own spies in the ranks. He'd preferred passing information to her amusingly-named Jacks rather than carrying out the killings through his own proxies, though on occasion more direct intervention had been needed. He was quite pleased, in fact, with how quickly and solidly her network of spies and assassins had grown. The Thief was proving skilled at the art, though it would be years before the Jacks were in the same league as Alaya's agents or Eudokia's. Penetration in depth was difficult to achieve with such limited time and coin.

"It would have painted a target on her neck for every single hero on the continent," Amadeus replied. "The choice was correct."

"They're already out for her blood, Amadeus," Grem grunted. "It's a crusade, not a petty border dispute."

"The difference is in being a target or *the* target," the green-eyed man said. "No villain can survive the amount of heroic focus Bonfire would have brought. The initial stages would have been a success, but within a few months a band of heroes specifically geared towards killing her would have been grown or assembled."

"A few months would have been enough to cleave Procer in half," Grem said.

"Perhaps," Amadeus shrugged. "But it would have signed her death warrant. She is cleverer than that."

The hint of pride in his voice at that, he did not suppress. His old friend caught it easily enough.

"She stabbed you, Black," he growled. "Don't wave that away as youthful enthusiasm, because we certainly haven't."

Eudokia, to his occasional headache, had made that abundantly clear. He'd had to outright order her not to take revenge.

"One who rears a tiger should not complain of stripes," Amadeus quoted in Mtethwa.

"Your tiger put on a crown and raised an army after stealing three legions," Grem growled in Kharsum. "We're past stripes."

"My tiger beat back an army twice the size of hers strengthened by the two most famous living heroes on Calernia," the dark-haired man laughed. "Three legions, one of which was always hers, is a paltry price to pay for that."

"She's going to turn on the Empire, Black," the Marshal warned. "We all know it."

Amadeus leaned against the crenelation as ballistas fired around them, hammering at the shields protecting the Proceran engines. The stones those were lobbing at the tower bounced off harmlessly or shattered. Wekesa had found it an amusing irony that the warding scheme he'd used here was a variation of a Callowan work. The very same that had once protected the walls of Liesse, dispersal of impact across the entire structure. The crusaders could fire at the Twin for months without making a dent, if they did not focus their fire.

"Is the Empire as it currently stands so worthy of survival?" the Black Knight murmured. "I think not. If it cannot adapt, then let it perish. Out of the ashes we will raise something other than a snake devouring its own tail, shattering the world with its throes as it seeks to sate empty hunger."

"Dangerous words," Grem said.

"Yet here you stand," Amadeus said. "Without ever having obeyed your summons back to Ater."

"It's illegal to order a Marshal back from an active war front without evidence of treason," the orc said.

The Duni turned green eyes to his old friend, brow quirking. The orc looked away.

"She won her games," Grem One-Eye finally said. "But she still played them."

They left it at that, eyes returning to the unfolding battle. Papenheim had learned over the last two days the price of an infantry advance on Legion-held fortifications, even with dwarven engines providing cover, but he had little other choice than to repeat the previous performance. He could not starve out the defenders, nor did he have another path than the Vales to march through. The old bottleneck that had kept Procer at bay for centuries was bleeding it once more. Grem ordered for mage fire to be held as the crusader vanguard advanced, passing the engines

and charging towards the slope. A handful of heroes were at the front, but Amadeus saw no need to intervene. They'd likely be able to shatter the tower gates if they made it there, but there was the rub. *If*. The orc that was the highest-ranked officer in the Legions of Terror waited until the enemy was fully committed before ordering the mages to send the signal. Up on the mountaintops, faraway, there was an explosion. Months of work by sappers, all for this single moment. Amadeus counted seventy-nine heartbeats before the water began pouring down from the very discreet channel carved into the mountainside.

There was a deep mountain lake, far out of sight. Digging a tunnel through hard rock and corking it with a dike had been a wonder of goblin engineering. He'd been quite amused, hearing that Catherine had dropped a fae lake atop her enemies up north. What the sappers had devised was not so different. The stream of water, quickened by the slopes, hit the outer edge of the Proceran lines. A few were killed by the sheer weight and momentum, but the real damage came from the spread of water sweeping away everything it touched. And continuing, at that same steady pace. Mages moved their shields to contain the situation, struggling to find the location the water was pouring from – it was hidden by an illusory ward. All they achieved, in the end, was to contain the flood until the pressure grew beyond the ability of their hodgepodge spell formulas to weather. Priests intervened as well, weaving fences of light, but they were not sufficiently organized to form a comprehensive wall. The water went around it. Surprise, Amadeus mused, was the most dangerous weapon in any army's arsenal. Still, it would not be long before heroes intervened now. There was a flare of Light from Papenheim's camp moments later, and the illusory ward broke. The fences and shields immediately shifted to block off the opening.

"Send the second signal," Grem ordered their signal mage.

A streak of red light splashed across the sky, and twenty heartbeats later another explosion sounded. A chunk of the mountainside broke open and water began pouring again. A plan with a single point of failure, after all, was no plan at all.

"The bouquets?" Amadeus asked.

"As soon as they shift," Grem replied, eyeing the battlefield. "Lukran, tell the sappers I don't want a single Proceran engine on the field to survive this engagement. They're naked as babes in the woods."

Left shieldless, the dwarven machinery was methodically broken down by the goblin-manned ballistas as the Proceran mages and priests refocused their efforts towards the more immediate threat of water. They split, much as Grem had predicted when the general staff had planned this. The mages shielded one entrance, the priests the other. Amadeus personally would have focused on

swiftness instead of optimal impact, with heroic intervention being in the cards, but he trusted the orc's instincts.

"Bouquets," Grem ordered with a feral smile.

Sorcery flared as the mages lines wove tendrils of air, each hooked to a heavy wooden barrel. Within moments a hundred of them snaked through the sky, coming to rest above the mages and priests. The spells petered out and the barrels fell. Hasty tongues of holy flame and sundry spells shot up to intercept them, but there were too many targets to handle. Many of them were duds filled with rocks, regardless. Others simple munitions. Of the hundred barrels, sixty-three fell with impact by Amadeus' count. Twenty-one of those were a mixture of smokers and sharpers, and exploded with billowing poisonous smoke. Twelve were filled with goblinfire, and the battlefield turned into a hellish green landscape in the blink of an eye. The mages and the priests broke, no longer able to hold back the waters, and the streams began to pour out again. Prince Klaus Papenheim had sent eight thousand levies and fantassins as his vanguard, with fourteen mixed catapults and trebuchets to cover them. No engine survived. Fewer than two thousand infantry did.

When night fell over the Vales, it was to the flickering of green flames on still water.

—

"Report," Klaus ordered, exhaustion bare in his voice as he sat slumped in his seat.

Princess Mathilda of Neustria was pushing forty these days. It never surprised him to see it. He remembered Mati as the rambunctious child that had been close as kin with his sister, a mischievous devil in mail skirts that never laughed as brightly as when she was shattering rattling skulls with that monster of a mace she wielded. Neustrians as a rule kept a closer eye on the happenings down south and had been known to twine their lines with those of Brus and Lyonis on occasion – unlike most Lycaonese royalty, who'd sneer at such thinning of the blood – but Mati had never been one to have an interest in courtly games. It was an old compact of the Four Houses that soldiers from the the southernmost Lycaonese principalities would reinforce the walls and fortresses at the border when the thaw came and warbands went on the march, but Mathilda had never been one for half-measures. Every year since her crowning, she'd taken all soldiers not garrisoning the border with Brus to fight the Plague as soon as spring arrived. Klaus did not consider her an exceptional tactician or strategist, but her the sight of her distinctive green armour on the front had a way of lighting a fire in men's bellies. Lycaonese had a well-worn love for royalty that led from the front. The princess' face was streaked with dirt and her short red locks pressed with sweat against her face.

"They dropped the mountain on us, Klaus," the Princess of Neustria told him in Reitz. "The *fucking mountain*."

Klaus leaned forward.

"The Warlock took the field?"

She shook her head.

"We think it was munitions," Mathilda said. "Wasn't sorcery, the mages say, and there were explosions. They must have mined the side through tunnels. I sent in my vanguard and the entire cliffside toppled down on it like some titan's flyswatter."

"Gods Above," the Iron Prince croaked out.

"That bloody dragon made a pass right after, blew fire straight through my priests," she said, passing a tired hand over her face. "The Silver Huntress put a magic arrow in one of its wings, but it's the only wound it took. It'll be back tomorrow."

"Casualties?" Klaus asked.

"Maybe two thousand dead, twice as many wounded," the princess sighed. "What's left of my priests is getting the wounded back on their feet."

"They went straight after our priests and casters," the Prince of Hannover said. "They're trying to cripple those before a decisive engagement."

"They're doing well at it, too," Mathilda said. "And I don't need to tell you morale went down the drain. There'll be no volunteers for the vanguard tomorrow, I can tell you that much. Doesn't help that our two alleged heavyweights have been sitting pretty this whole time."

"Chosen logic," Klaus said. "They say the Sovereign of Red Skies and the the Carrion Lord will remain out of the battle so long as they do the same."

"The other Chosen are bloody useless," the Princess of Neustria bluntly replied. "Oh, they're a pretty sight leading the charge. That Levantine girl, the Champion? She's been at the front of every offensive. But we're swinging at mist, Klaus. They can be as good at killing Praesi as they want, we're not fighting Praesi. We're fighting falling mountains, and the Champion's no use there. We need the Witch and the Heavens' hatchet man."

The Lycaonese balked at the notion of needing Chosen to win his battles for him, but there was also truth in this so he held his tongue. Outside, in the distance, water still burned green. Seven days and seven nights, that was said to be the lifespan of goblinfire. Unless he was willing to send his soldiers wading

hip-deep in a lake topped by a hell of alchemy, there would be no more offensives in the southern valley. The Praesi would shift their forces accordingly, reinforcing the northern Twin, and there would be no chance breaking through there against the full muster of the Empire's finest.

"Then we will have them," Prince Klaus Papenheim. "Even if I must drag them to the front myself."

—

Hanno had died twenty-one times since morning.

He'd used his aspect in a similar manner before, but those had been shallow readings. The seeking of similarity so he could draw on the experience of his predecessors to make up for his own shortcomings. Never before had he sought lives and memories purely to learn how to kill a man. His enemy had made it difficult, nonetheless. Heroes rarely survived their first encounter with the Black Knight, and those that did were usually engaged by other Calamities on the second meeting. He'd found a single instance, the Rebel Knight, who'd bared her sword at the man twice. Three years after the Conquest, a hidden bastard child of a branch line of House Fairfax who'd inherited the same Name as Eleanor Fairfax herself. Flight after the first engagement had bought her an hour before the Black Knight caught up and slew her in her wounded exhaustion. Some other lives had taught him near nothing of use, like the Merry Brawler — the knife through the back of the neck that'd killed him only served as a reminder that the Carrion Lord preferred to kill without any struggle if he could. The Unconquered Champion had yielded the greatest amount of information. The Levantine hero had trapped his foe in his domain and teased out more tricks than any other before or after him, in large part because five mortal wounds had been needed before the man died.

Memory by memory, death by death, Hanno had woven together a whole. Sitting with his eyes closed in a tent muted from all noise by Antigone, his sword in his lap, he had studied the many murders of the Black Knight. The man had limitations. Hanno had almost thought otherwise, after their duel in Nicae, but he now saw his mistake. When recalling the skills of his predecessors his plunge had been too shallow. Mere versatility was not sufficient to kill the Carrion Lord, not when he only brought to the fore part of the skills called on. That was, the White Knight now understood, playing the villain's own preferred game. The Black Knight was himself a jack-of-all-trades, facing him with a similar approach would only lead to the victory of the older man's greater experience. The method had been incorrect, and so he had adjusted. Studied the swordsmanship the villain had learned from the Lady of the Lake, the weaknesses of that tutelage. And, upon finding them, Hanno had spent hours seeking

the right combination of lives that would allow him to capitalize on those weaknesses. Three would be required: the Flawless Fencer, the Lance of Light and the Barehanded Pugilist.

The sequence was adaptable to the villain's own approach, but the result would ultimately be the same. He'd sought a handful of other lives to draw on as contingencies, should tactics he'd seen employed through other eyes be employed again, and another pair as escape and disengaging sets. Night had fallen, when he emerged from the trance, and he remained seated. Tired down to his bones and struggling to master the lingering echoes of the lives he'd dug so deep into. He would need rest before he was ready to fight. The tent's flap parted and a masked of painted stone topped by long dark tresses stared at him. Antigone, still wearing the face the Gigantes had bestowed upon her. Hanno suspected that of all the host around him, only he understood the significance of that. The favour of the Titans was not lightly earned, and no less terrible than their wrath.

"Hanno," the Witch of the Woods said, her words from no language known to man and yet perfectly understood. "The Champion wishes to speak with you."

The Gift of Tongues never ceased to invoke wonder in him when so displayed. No man or creature that could understand the spoken word would ever fail to understand his friend.

"I am done," the White Knight said, voice rough with disuse. "Come in, both of you."

The inside of his tent was bare save for a bed of straw and his armour, and so he had no earthly comforts to offer either women as they entered. Neither seemed to mind. Antigone disdained any life but that of the wilds, and Rafaella's cheer had already proved undaunted in the face of greater discomforts. The Witch's long cloak-tunic pooled around her as she sat gracefully, surrounding herself in coarse green cloth that revealed only sandal-clad feet. Rafaella, on the other hand, slumped down in a cacophony of shuddering armour. The Valiant's Champion snarling badger helm was dropped into the dirt as she shook free the long braid going halfway down her back, her tanned face split in a grin. She was not wearing, for once, the wolf fur cloak she'd claimed from someone that was no wolf at all.

"Have good day, yes?" the Champion said.

Hanno inclined his head.

"I am ready," he said.

"Good," Rafaella hummed. "My day, up and down. Easterners drop mountain on me. Tried to fight it, went not so good."



Hanno glanced at Antigone, her green eyes finding his own through the mask.

"The Legions detonated a cliffside onto the Proceran advance," she said.

The White Knight's fingers clenched. His work had been necessary, but he grieved that it had allowed the Carrion Lord to weave the deaths of so many through his inaction.

"Then dragon came," the Champion continued, sounding noticeably more pleased. "Went on dwarf machine, told soldier: 'Bald Procer man, I stand on machine. Throw me at dragon.'"

Hanno's brow rose.

"I take it he did not," he half-asked.

Rafaella sighed.

"He said 'no, stupid savage, if I do this it kill you'. I say 'maybe if I feeble Procer soldier like you, but am glorious champion of Levant'."

The tanned woman scratched her chin thoughtfully.

"Bald Procer man not happy about that," she mused. "Left and did not reply. Think he complain to tall red princess about it."

The Ashuran snorted. Proceran royalty had avoided him like the plague after the first time he'd been called upon to render judgement in a dispute and a cousin of the the Prince of Orense had been judged as unfit for continued existence by the Seraphim. Oddly enough it had warmed some of the Lycaonese to his presence, though the true gain of the affair had been the end of the insistent invitations to share cups of wine by the rest. He doubted any of what Rafaella had mentioned would be brought to him as a dispute to arbitrate.

"The Warlock still waits," Antigone said. "The Carrion Lord with him. None of our companions ever reached them."

"They were not all meant for this war," Hanno quietly replied. "For many it is beyond the scope of their Fate, bound as they are elsewhere to other works. They must be careful, lest sudden death find them. The Grey Pilgrim is not with us to forgive such mistakes."

Rafaella discreetly traced a sign on her leg at the mention of the Peregrine, expression sobering. To see her act *bashful* when they'd first met the man had been an almost frightening experience.

"You ready now, yes?" the Champion asked. "Time for fight."

"At dawn," Hanno replied calmly. "The fourth day is the beginning."

"*Finally*," the Witch of the Woods murmured.

Hanno of Arwad breathed out slowly. The sentence had already been given.

It must now be carried out, at last.

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### [asherino](#)

Thanks for the black chapter, erratic!  
More black chapters pls. Maybe as patreon rewards for higher tiers? doesnt matter if they're only for flavor.

### *Antoninjohn*

Giants wroth is bad, Giants really hate Procer, Witch of the Wilds is helping Procer. Looks like the Giants are going to intervene on Procer's ambitions

### *Highwayman*

Well, it isn't the goblin fire party I was expecting, but nowadays I take whatever I can get.

And the Champion's wolfskin cloak from something that was not an wolf...  
Someone's gonna get hurt real bad real soon, methinks.

### *Darkening*

I actually got angry when I read the bit about the cloak. That is less than Captain deserved, however bad she may have been.

### *Someguy*

I envision the following:-

At the dawn of the fifth day Black's battle standard hung a new talisman which had been added to their demonic paraphernalia.

There, suspended in the breeze, hung the remains of the Valiant Champion.

Her skin, rather. Flayed from her body by the orcs, sewn into sacks which bellied in the breeze, and smeared with the

excrement of goblins. The skin-sack had been cleverly designed so that it channeled the wind into a wail of horror. The skin hung suspended by the hair of one who had once filled them in life. The Blackguards took great care to hold it in such a manner that the crusaders and remaining heroes could see her face.

[hoyboy](#)

Nah, Champion's coming for Black's skin next.

Yotz

*Pools of blood glisten so brightly. Death cries echo so harmoniously. We drink deeply of fear and pain. Only thus we can soothe our fiery hearts.*

On that vein of thoughts we may as well repurpose old Rusty Prince's *fucking engines* into the literal copulation machines. And chain them into a train, for good measure. Well, Bad measure. Without brakes, of course – for there ain't no brakes on *that* bloody thing...

ALazyMonster

I feel like this description came from a relic from one of the item guides for exalted. Probably one of the Infernals or Abyssals items.

David

Nicely stolen from Drake and Flint's Bellisarius series.

[daegone823](#)

It like that comic Invincible a sign of respect to the enemy. I mean the Champion claimed that they had songs about the Captain, she respected her as an opponent. Lets face it the captain had it coming she is a villain and has murdered countless people in fits of rage her damage has been so widespread, she spawned many heroes to counter her.

Without the Black knight maneuvering the Calamities they would have died long ago. Still Champion is similar to Chat who wove the banner's of her enemies. I like a little equality in my stories when you die your number is up good or evil. So make the best of your story while you can.

Daemion

Who is Chat?

JJR

She was the hero who sacrificed herself to strike the final blow against the demon of absence, remember?

*RanVor*

If skinning your enemies and making clothes out of their hides is so evil, why the Hells are *\*they\** allowed to do it?

*Yotz*

Pro'bly 'cause of Monsters forfeiting the right to not being skinned upon becoming a Monster. If she'd were killed in her human form, she'd retain her skin intact.

*RanVor*

It's still fucked up.

*Yotz*

But that only if you count Monsters as people. Which is definitely *not* the statement Above will ever accept.

*RanVor*

I don't care what Above accept or not, they themselves are more fucked up than anything else in APGtE.

*Highwayman*

Same here, but its not entirely without precedent though (Cat's Cloak of Woe).

*Metrux*

Well, except for a single soul, the cloack is made of CLOTH, like any other cloack... The distinction is from where this cloth came from. So, not using parts of dead things.

*RanVor*

But a soul *\*is\** a part of a dead *\*person\**. The actual difference is that Cat isn't supposed to be above this kind of thing.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

To be fair, Champion might consider this the greatest respect she could give a fallen foe.

[sengachi](#)

Straight up blocking both valleys with goblinfire or trying to detonate massive caches of goblinfire under the crusade's entire army is just begging for heroic intervention to turn the

goblinfire back on you in the worst possible way. This is probably the smartest possible use they could have made of it.

Gods, heroes do take the fun out of everything. They make all the really big, grand tactics nonviable.

*Argentorum*

"She won her games, but she still played them."

Facts.

Also the heck does Malecia think she's doing, recalling her marshal during the middle of an invasion? Does she *\*want\** to lose this war? If Klaus gets through the Vales with too many men, there's no way Callow holds, bound by truce or not.

*Someguy*

Recalling a Marshal in the middle of a war...Is she asking to follow in the footsteps of Emperor Gaozong?

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yue\\_Fei#Death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yue_Fei#Death)

*Yotz*

There is a possibility. Though, that was probably the "attic promotion" move to weaken Black. Then again, now that Marshal had shewn his colours, that possibility becomes frighteningly inevitable.

[sengachi](#)

Nah. Malicia isn't that stupid, she knows she needs the best she's got to defend the Vale. Rather, I'd guess this is part of a long strategy. She *\*knows\** Grem would refuse the recall order (on legitimate grounds, yes) but she'll finagle that into Grem's removal after the worst of the immediate threats is dealt with anyway.

Outright removing Grem One-Eye is a no-go, but if you start setting up the pieces a year or two in advance and get Grem to voluntarily bow out of the political process you're assembling against him, well, that might be doable.

*Oshi*

If nothing else it's a way to make sure Black gives something up to keep Grem where he is. No matter the path Malicia prospers.

[vuthuha912](#)

It is such a shitty move. When you are fighting for your country, the last thing you want to know is your Empress

is prepared to fuck you over once the fighting is done. I mean this is the tamer version of Zhao King and Li Mu during the Spring and Autumn period. Worse, if the story evolves to the Yi Sun Sin Version or the Yue Fei Version then I don't even know what to say. Please Gods Below, don't let Black become the next Han Xin.

*Jonnnney*

I think she is less worriedly about heroes toppling the tower than she is about Catherine climbing it.

*JC*

Aww I hope the next few chapters aren't about Black and Warlock getting absolutely creamed by these heroes, but I'm pretty sure it will be that.

*RanVor*

Actually, I think this is the shittiest moment possible for Black to die, narratively speaking. Not long ago he witnessed his lifelong best friend betray everything he believed in. If he died now, before taking any action to deal with the consequences of what was undoubtedly the turning point of his life, this entire plotline would amount to nothing.

He's probably still going to die before it ends, but not now. It would be a total waste of an excellent plot thread.

*PotatoMan*

So Hangnail attacks next interlude? Dope

*nerferf*

The whiteknight still doesn't know that that fight before with black was all about bard vs black vs tyrant and only included him as the tool

Ya figured bard giving black a victory monologue after black went down should have tipped him off

Poor bastard is a dead man walking, gonna be funny though

*Darkening*

Pretty sure Hanno was pretty out of it when Bard showed up and gave that speech to Black, he got caught in the backlash along with Black.

*Mr. Nobody*

Are you sure about that? Don't forget the possibility of Black being in a pattern of three with Hanno. Black always tries to avoid those, but last time Hanno was pretty much trashed by Black and survived; I can already see the story taking shape. Although Black is no fool to engage him in a fair fight, I expect Hanno to have a few tricks up his sleeve to make Black confront him again.

*\*Sigh\**

Champion really managed to bring my hate for the Heroes on this story to a new level.

Really, it's frustrating to see her being alive for so long. Even Akua was more likable.

*nerferf*

Nah, too obvious that bard took the spotlight and overshadowed whiteknight and took the main role for the gods above in that story and made the heroes into the support cast given she sacrifice them to kill captain at the same time

I think that happening there allowed Hierarch to banish her when she tried to strong-arm him since she couldn't use her bystander/ ignore me to just manipulate things given it may only work as long as the story sees her as a side cast

*MetruX*

The thing is, that as a very experienced Named, Black can recognize when there is a pattern. He said himself that no pattern arised between him and White, which just means, in his book, that he will soon die and the White is predestined to confront ANOTHER Black Knights, who he thinks Catherine will be.

*nerferf*

Yeah, he said that before cat lost her name after that clusterfuck at liesse

And given that at this point its more likely cat would get a ruler name if she ever can given her fae nature that belief is void

If anything from that story i would say black started a pattern of three with bard given he beat her in that showdown of the callow rebels, lost to her in the free cites clusterfuck and they still havent had the 3rd confontation

*Metalshop*

Love the poem at the beginning. I could stand to read a whole chapter of nothing but Callowan songs and folk sayings.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Ugh, I could not. Please do not do this

*goliath1303*

I wish EE had don't something like this. I didn't make it much past here on my last read through, but considering the story is over and I've never heard of a chapter like that I'm guessing it didn't happen. One of the nice things about reading a story is that, if you don't like a part of it/the whole story, you don't have to read it. So if such a chapter was written, people who like the songs and poems, like Metalshop and myself, could enjoy said chapter. While we were enjoying it you'd be totally free to be on some other website complaining about the free media you were enjoying, other people's opinions, or whatever had the dubious luck of catching your attention that day. It's actually a win-win for people like us, we get to read some awesome songs and poems AND we get to do so knowing there's a good chance you won't be around! Of course that chance is only good in a relative sense and in actuality the fact that you would dislike it would actually make you more likely to read and comment on it.

*Someguy*

I'd prefer the full Play-script for "The Many Deaths of Dread Emperor Traitorous".

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

I would pay a far from insignificant portion of my meagre earnings to read that.

*Agent J*

I'll pay double to watch it.

[superkeaton](#)

Ah, we finally get to see Black and Grem! And they did not disappoint. Grem's as clever as Black's made him sound and I always love to hear Black doting on Cat.

That Hanno though... The boy really was specifically made to kill Black, wasn't he? We'll see if his LEGO strategy works. I'm also immensely curious about what makes the Giant-taught mage so dangerous to the Warlock.



It does hurt a bit to find out that the Champion skinned Captain. I hope her husband never finds out...

[daegone823](#)

Hano was made to counter Chat his whole being is to counter her style of fighting along with her role. His healing actually damages anything nearby hurting Chat who is close ranged fighter. His aspects of ride will counter her use of un-dead horses. His other aspect of recall gives him an experience leverage being able to adapt to enemies and having a large wealth of knowledge at his fingerprints. This counters chat who relies on others for experience and is not a battle tested as other names.

Black tried to end the white knight several times but was unable to because he was not "his" enemy. He tried to initiate a rule of three battle sequence but was unable to. His role afterward was to be an evil obi wan for Chat making the ultimate sacrifice so that Chat could reform creation. The Malicia ruined it all with her death ray mega weapon.

S00000 Chat vs White Knight is final fight most likely.

*Mr. Nobody*

Chat...? B B

*Yotz*

**Cheshire Cat.**

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

IT'S SPELLED KAT I THINK PLZ UPDATE

*Daemion*

Seriously, please stop using "Chat" as name. It's just annoying. Thanks.

[CrysJaL](#)

I disagree. His kit is built around beating Black. He has the memories and skills of all the heroes Black killed and through that can adapt to Black's skillset whilst also learning how to counter everything. His entire power revolves around being better at Black's own game. He knows Black's tricks, he is also unpredictable for Black due ti his variable skillset and as a result Black can't plan for him as he otherwise would.

*Decius*

Black knows exactly how to handle a hero that is built especially to kill him.

Have him fight Warlock.

*goliath1303*

C-A-T Cat. It's 3 letters and is literally probably the most common go-to example of an "easy word". Pre-preschool age children are able to master it. It appears multiple times in almost every fucking chapter of this story. It's not funny, cute, endearing, or anything but annoying. It's even worse than Kat.

[vuthuha912](#)

Maybe it is the spellcheck. My spellcheck always underlines Cat's name when I type it in. I don't like typing Catherine as it is too serious and formal.

*Darkening*

As I recall she mostly just has a whole lot of raw power, since the point that was made is that she'd beat Warlock out in a slugging match. I'm sure she's fairly talented, but a slugging match is the last thing Warlock would get into if he could avoid it. Hedge mostly gave him trouble because she had a counter for every one of his tricks. I expect he'll find some ways to attack from unexpected directions.

*Oshi*

Not the last one

*Argentorum*

Where do baby villains come from, I wonder.

Above acts like it has the monopoly on righteous vengeance, but if Champion doesn't die here (this tying off her arc under Black's own revenge), it wouldn't surprise me to see one or more of Captain's kids getting a name. Hell, maybe even all together.

Mother who tried to keep them from the dark realities of the world killed and skinned by a hero? Said hero literally wearing their mother like a scarf? Yeah, this is the stuff revenge stories are born from.

*RanVor*

Above *\*do\** have a monopoly on righteous vengeance. Any kind of vengeance against them or their servants is non-righteous

by default because they get to define the righteousness. But that just means their righteousness isn't worth a shit.

[CrysJaL](#)

But as we have seen with Cat, they don't have a monopoly on the "heroic" stories. Riteous vengeance, fighting to kill the monster that slew your parent is certainly a heroic story. But also, villains can fight villains. Who is to say that heroes cannot do the same thing. Within narratives it often turns out that "they were good all along" but it wouldn't stop the riteous hero from delivering the final blow before the revelation.

*Type*

You know, I think I hate the Champion now.

[Aaron Wagner](#)

Someone please write the fanfiction where Captain's children (her curse I believe was on her bloodline after all) exterminate the entire champion bloodline.

[hoyboy](#)

Wait a minute! Strike that, reverse it. Thank you.

*Yotz*

Oh, you mean The Curse befalling the Champion's bloodline, so they will hunt, torture, and skin alive their brothers and sisters until the entire bloodline will cease to be in a cacophonical crescendo of *glorious* self-annihilation...  
Naughty, naughty boy!

[hoyboy](#)

Literally what the poster above was advocating.

*Forrest*

I'm pretty sure they said for Captain's children to kill of Champion's line, but hey.

*RandomFan*

The poster above was advocating that Captain's children and further descendants would kill off the Champion's line. If you reverse it, Champion's line gets the curse, but that wouldn't take away Captain's line's curse, and so you have a glorious conflict of cursed vs. cursed, even while Champion has to deal with her spawn being the same

type of monster she's killed so many times. Cursed is probably an evil name by default, too.

That'd be a fun story, especially since Champion is the type of person who wears the skin of thinking creatures as a boast.

*esryok*

In fairness, Catherine smokes narcotics using the carved bones of thinking creatures. And our friendly neighborhood orcs consume thinking creatures. I'm down for being mad at Champion for taking trophies from a well-liked character, but I give her a pass on the "and also she was sapient!" part.

Actually, I'm pulling a Masego here and going with "eh, Champions gonna Champion." I'm enjoying seeing such an archetypical murderhobo wandering around an otherwise serious fantasy world, and haven't got enough room in my brain to be mad and delighted at the same time. Delight wins!

[hoyboy](#)

OMG OMG OMG I LOVE CHAMPION SO MUCH.

Hope she uses Black's skin as a cloak too.

*RanVor*

This comment section is in dire need of a "dislike" button.

[hoyboy](#)

I'm very sorry that WordPress does not allow you to suppress dissenting opinions by committee like you can on reddit lol.

Also, hope Wekesa gets a mandala enema,

*RanVor*

And I hope I'll never see you comment here again, but hey, you don't always get what you want.

*Allafterme*

Sadly

*Mr. Nobody*

I don't even know why he's still reading this despite his dislike for the mc and her companions. But who cares?

There's a lot of masochists out there, and I won't condemn their twisted tastes and terrible use of time.

*Jonnnney*

Trolling is a thing

*lennymaster*

Everything has its limits. Especially trolling.

[TeK](#)

You are new here, ain't ya?

[vuthuha912](#)

It is a little bloodthirsty and unnecessarily cruel. And Black is quite short and his skin is ... not really magical or useful. It will also be too ... villainous for a Hero.

[blitzxsblitzxs](#)

I don't like this. In a narrative sense Black is setting his side up for a big loss. In stories, the villain's armies usually have the upperhand initially before the heroes rally the tired survivors into a big comeback victory.

*Oshi*

Except they don't. Papenhiem has a host of 50k. He lost a fifth of it and still has twice the number the legions field. The story is 300. Black might die but they will lose the war. The bard will interfere to stop this and change. It should be fun to see how.

*IDKWhoitis*

If White Knight gets KO'd somehow, the offensive will fail, with or without Black. Grem can hold this line if there are no Named on either side. Also, Bard may not be allowed to intervene, since the main plotline of the war may be Cat's play to be Chaotic "Good". The Bard doesn't get to pick where she shows up, and she may not be able to interfere.

*SpeckofStardust*

eh without the white knight and the Witch they wouldn't be able to break though until the reinforcements from the Levant got here.

They got stopped on the third defensive line.

Considering each line got progressively harder to break, and that they failed to break the third one today...

## *Darkening*

I kinda read it as this being the toughest part, since it's the height of the slope of the pass and it's downhill from here, that'd make it easier on the people assaulting the later walls without having to contend with the ridiculous elevated hill. And given that natural benefit, you'd probably invest most of your effort into fortifying that natural choke point. I'm sure the later walls aren't pushovers, but the Bloody Twins are probably the high point of the defenses in a lot of ways.

## *Rook*

It's not about how hard your swing is, it's about whether your swing hits correct target, and in the way you need it to. The overall narrative flow of the battle right now is less important than the initiative he gains in being able to make the first strike in the Named struggle against the White Knight & co.

Especially since the WK is a reoccurring opponent (warning signs, that nearly never happens against Black), with nearly the perfect skillset to counter Black. Drawing experience from every Hero he's has ever killed removes the issue of being impossible to adapt to Black due to being brutally murdered on the first or second confrontation. On top of that it gives Hanno every skillset he could ever ask for to try taking him down.

This comes on the back of a greater context in Black having several death flags to begin with – no rule of three triggering, Captain falling, a successor in place and independent enough to rise on their own, and having predicted/planned for a very likely death around this exact time. He's currently more vulnerable than he has been in an extremely long time. He needs to play this fight like he's a titan skating across a thawing lake in order to ensure winning or even surviving this battle.

Forcing the Heroes into making the opening move against the Legions is 100% the correct move here.

## [Euodiachloris](#)

This is what I love about the set-up: Hanno is currently built to counter the old Black Knight – this Amadeus, however, is the doting daddy who loves and supports his stab-happy daughter. He's not quite the same old Black Knight supporting his Dread Empress. 😊

## *Insanenoodlyguy*

That's why I'm thinking that Warlock is going to blow Hanno away, while a confused Witch gets stabbed repeatedly by shadows.

*Jonnnney*

That story involves the villain being on the attack. Not too many stories about the villain dying while defending the outer reaches of the territory he conquered 20 years prior.

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> The First under Grem was holding the southern passage along with Mok's Third and Sacker's Ninth. Marshal Ranker and her Fourth were leading the defence of the northern valleys, commanding the freshly-rebuilt Twelfth and Nekheb's Tenth.

Is Mok the vampire general, or that was the Eleventh and the legions were shuffled around?

*Brent Chance*

Mok is an ogre general I believe.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Yes, ogre. The name gives it away, ogres have simple monosyllabic names like goblin names all end in -er

*werafdsaew*

The hostility between Black and Malicia's camp surprises me; I thought they patched things up after their talk in the Epilogue of the previous book. And wasn't Malicia the one who said that their differences would be settled privately?

*Yotz*

Guess that's as private as it can get – official handshakes and proclamations of unity, and Polichinelo's secret of undercarpet moves against one another.

[ahd](#)

That wasn't patching things up. That was Black implying that the Foundling Queen's plan to make a better world was a better bet than the Dread Empress' plan to loose every horror she could find to save her skin.

And the Dread Empress either not listening or not caring about her Black Knight's opinion of the strategic situation. I'd be thinking with my feelings, too, if I'd just lost the magic fortress that I'd put years of work and used up entire provinces of resources to have built.

*Jonnnney*

Their differences between each other will be settled privately. Their differences involving how to deal with Catherine and Callow aren't private

[TeK](#)

Nah, they don't have hostilities. Merely a friendly disagreement about whether or not Cat should be brutally murdered. Ya know, in Praes, assassination is a mere sign of respect, and poison is used as a gods damned flavoring. What supprises you?

*RanVor*

Red the flowers, red the crown, vote for Guide 'til Ward is down!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What's your problem with Ward? It's an awesome story as well.

*RanVor*

I don't have anything against Ward specifically. I just want Guide to be on the top again.

*lennymaster*

I do have a problem with Ward, or rather Worm. I think it has dominated the Top Web Fiction List -undeservedly- for far too long. I do not consider it to be bad, merly mediocre. The thought it might, or rather already has, inspire other authors to cover up weaknesses in their writing with pure gruesomeness fills me with dread. It is a fact after all, that there are alwayes trendsetters influencing others to follow their lead.

Like Harry Dresden caused a slew of run-down, more or less dark and tragic hero mages, being physically and emotionally abused into one halfhearted finale after another.

Or twilight the creation of half baked vampires, that were just about as bad as the original, but were so dark and gritty, or completly overpowered, because they did not sparkle and HAD to drink blood.

Or the countles OTHER versions of magic schools after Harry Potter.

It is a fact that medicore works, like Harry Potter, or Worm for that matter, fill market niches and thus become trendsetters. I do not claim that all of those books are bad, hell some even achieve greatness, but most following such trensetters are worse then the originals.



There are always exceptions, like Aleron Kong's Chaos Seeds, who, riding the epidemic of terrible LitRPGs, created an amazing series. But that is what they are, exceptions. That is why the adulations for Worm/Ward on sites like these, going even so far as to immediately challenge even a harmless call to vote for Guide and beat Ward.

I know, many people familiar with my posts consider me annoying, constantly harping on about Worm whenever somebody mentions it, but I love reading Guide, I love reading the discussions about it afterwards, but every time I see Worm/Ward mentioned, it soures my enjoyment.

*Matthew*

Worm is amazing. Also, as a pure accomplishment, it is unmatched. Three War and Peaces worth of words in two years.

*Daemion*

I think the Wandering Inn might beat that. There's also a story about a deceptive chest that gets large updates quite often.

Worm was cool and funny, all the other Wildbow stories afterwards were basically the same setup with different themes and were missing the humour of it. Ward is still interesting but also not very exciting. It doesn't draw me in at all.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

@Matthew

Sounds like you'd like Jack Kerouac's On the Road. It's much, much shorter, but the book was written in a single mad typing session over two or three days.

Like Wildbow, Kerouac had done lots and lots of work on different aspects of their stories in the months and years prior to writing, and I think that's the real key. Do your foundational work first before that transcendent creational flurry is possible.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

You thought Worm covered up weaknesses in its writing with pure gruesomeness? What weaknesses, exactly?

I think Worm is among the very best sci-fi ever written. It's what George R.R. Martin aspires to: an epic sized story that's coherent throughout and that has a satisfying ending that lives up to the massive scale of the story; the ending is what really sets Worm apart for me. There are a lot of writers who know how to build up an epic world, but don't

know how to craft an ending that answers all the important questions believably, without some *deus ex machina* to fudge things (ahem, Peter F. Hamilton).

I have faith Brandon Sanderson will achieve this kind of ending for Stormlight.

*the verbiage ecstatic*

Worm is fantastic, a super-fun read, and a tremendous accomplishment in terms of how well it sticks the landing after so much escalation and build up. But best sci fi ever written, really? I don't think it (or Practical Guide, which is also really enjoyable) is anywhere near in the same league as:

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

The Martian Chronicles

Dune

The Fafherd and Grey Mouser stories

His Dark Materials

Starship Troopers

Cryptonomicon

A Wrinkle in Time (and sequels)

... to name the ones I can think of off the top of my head

I think the web serial genre is great and I love the disruption of traditional publishing, but people have been writing really good books, many of them in the sci fi and fantasy genres, for a LONG time.

Sanderson's books (which I haven't read yet and am sure are great) are pretty much the only traditionally-published novels I see called out in threads like these... there's a LOT more to the world of amazing sci fi and fantasy writing than that!!

*Naoru*

Worm is really good, but Ward falls behind. So far is... something. All the good parts come from wanting to know what had happened to characters that were in worm, and the rest is rather bland. Abuses of infodumps in the beginning, has a lot of chapters that go nowhere and it just not as good as worm. Only now it has started to warm up after arcs, which is A LOT. I read it just fine, and is not a horrible story by any means, but it doesnt deserve top one, and I think is there for all the worm fans that just vote blindly for ward. The guide and The wandering inn are so, so much better, both of them.

*Leonard Inkret*

The song is beautiful

*taovkool*

The song was nice. Black's 'proud dad' moment was cool. And dragons are apparently very weak against heroes? Makes sense, I suppose.

*Darkening*

Especially archers sounds like. Since a smart dragon could just stay flying and breath fire and avoid the epic confrontation with a knight or whatever. (Though I'm sure champion launching herself out of a catapult would be suitably epic enough a moment to give her a fighting chance at reaching it and killing it.)

[sengachi](#)

Dragons are the ultimate hero bait. Any hero narrative a dragon gets even remotely tangled up in is going to end with a dead dragon.

[blitzxsblitzxs](#)

Heh. I just noticed something. White is pretty much tailor made to fight Catherine, right? But what about Akua? She fights way differently compared than Catherine. Where Catherine is a melee-focused fighter where she will surely get trounced by White's many methods, Akua tends to trap and confuse her enemies before bombarding them with spells. I can nearly see the fight happen. White dominating the fight and Cat on the backfoot before she suddenly switches with Akua who throws White offguard. White switches to style designed to fight Caster type opponents then Catherine comes back in with a brutal melee throwdown. The two of them switching back and forth to match White's switching. It's ironic that it's similar to White's Recall Aspect.

*MetruX*

If this trully happen I'll only laugh, because diferently from Cat, White can't reutilize the same powerset. So, each time they trade and make him trade in turn, he loses another option, until he wins by being a hero on his last legs, or he has nothing else to throw in the fray.

*sutortyrannus*

"Killing heroes, in Amadeus' eyes, was much like peeling an onion.

Layer by layer it went, until all that remained was the weeping."

*RanVor*

Unfortunately, I don't think the construction of chapters allows for this kind of POV switching.

*Mr. Nobody*

Maybe it will not be in a single chapter, but I can see how massive of a cliff hanger it would be if deployed.

Cat's chapter >>> Akua and Hanno's interlude >>> Cat's chapter wrapping up the fight

*Greg*

That would be an interesting twist, that she has to switch between practical and monster evil just to confuse the White Knight.

But honestly? At this point Hanno actually seems like his tricks would lose handily against Cat as she is now. He is a good counter to Black, who is supremely skilled but constantly stated to be weaker and more vulnerable once you can actually hit him. So was Squire; she just made accepting mutilation for victory into her shtick. But Winter Queen Cat? She has ridiculous regenerative abilities, necromancy that seems not weak to Light, and unlike Black, is apparently able to tank an Angel's intervention long enough to finish off a hero.

Which is a sign, I think, that Cat truly is succeeding in forging her own, unforeseen path, because the nemesis the Gods Above seemingly made to end her is not particularly suited to her new form. Saint and Pilgrim seem to be Heaven's greatest BS heroes right now, and they were sent not after the decades-proven hero-killers, but against Cat and her band of slightly less competent killers. I think that says something, and it's not about striking the weakest link with overwhelming force.

*Sol Invictus*

This\*

Cat has a Rivals Team Up story in her pocket. That's an unbeatable story whenever it's first used.

Also I would like to point out that Akua said that the only reason that she was able to control Cat's body is because she found a stray piece of Winter and made it her own. This is after Saint cut the winter mantle. Odds are the stray piece that Akua found was the one Saint cut off.

[Antony444](#)

I can't help but find it a bit amusing that the Procerans' hopes are now based on two more heroes taking the field. The Crusaders

began with an advantage of two and a half against one, it's now two against one.

Plus no matter what they say, it's not the last fortification they have to deal with. There are two more behind this one. And the siege engines of the Crusade becoming once more useful is not really realistic given the rate they're losing them.

At least it validates completely Cordelia 'Stairway' strategy. If they had not opened up a passage in the mountains, it would have been Black and Cat waiting for them with near fifty thousand troops. The Black Knight and One-Eye in command with five more villains to make the passes a hell on earth. Pilgrim and Saint aside, it would have been an even more crueller massacre than the one we see occurring right now.

Heroes against heroes aside, the fate of the battle is definitely not in Procer's favour. The Legions are unbloodied and morale must be excellent for them. The Crusade must attack on a narrow front, the Black Knight and the Warlock are fresh and rested. Praes troops have gotten used to slay heroes. Cavalry is impossible to use here. Judging that Catherine lost roughly ten thousand to slay twenty thousand when she was on open-terrain and overwhelmed by heroes, the Army of Papenheim is going to crumble under the corpses soon. Unless the Witch of the Woods is an army-killer and managed to take down Warlock in one round, it is going to take more than three dead men for each egionary they kill. Given that they are already down to less than fifty thousand...of course reinforcements are coming from behind, but Procer is soon not going to have this problem of excess mercenaries and war veterans. Between Cat and Black, already thirty thousand have died...but the real threats have not come out of the shadows.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I think I have insight about what the Grey Pilgrim might do! I have a Russian blue kitty, and if you know about cats then you know that she's just as grey as anything.

So if she were in the story, she'd stalk Catherine mostly ineffectually, then run away the moment everything isn't going perfectly. If the Grey Pilgrim is anything like my Grey Cat, Catherine can probably find him hiding in the closet or underneath the bed afterward. Oh, he'll lash out with his claws probably, but he won't really put up a fight, and once she's stroking his back hairs he'll be purring in no time.

Incredible plot twist if true!

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Dropping mountains on soldiers, that's one new way of getting stoned.

SMHF

I have a feeling the end result for Black is going to mirror Cat's... the battle ending with him retreating from the Vales but leaving the Crusaders utterly devastated and unable to advance. Which I'm totally fine with, as long as he gets to kill Champion... bitch really pissed me off with that whole skin thing .>:\

*Letouriste*

Same:/ I like her and I know this is hypocritical when cat bound akua to her mantle but knowing captain, the feeling of her being skinned is horrible:(

*Thea*

But Akua actually enjoys being Cat's...

*oldschoolvillain*

I think that the cloak was an actual cloak that Captain wore, not a mantle made from her carcass. Hanno has been much more traditionally heroic, as opposed to the vainglorious assholes who have composed the bands facing Catherine. He considered the claiming of sword tips as gruesome back in his interludes – I don't think he'd casually note an ally of his wearing a skinned enemy, no matter how Villainous.

[blitzxs](#)

"And, upon finding them, Hanno had spent hours seeking the right combination of lives that would allow him to capitalize on those weaknesses. Three would be required: the Flawless Fencer, the Lance of Light and the Barehanded Pugilist."

So White's aiming for precision attacks to get through Black's defenses? All three of these Heroes emphasizes quick and accurate thrust attacks to overcome opposition instead of the heavy swings and brute force most Heroes tend to utilize. Makes sense, I guess. Black's always fighting in the assumption that the Heroes he faces will always be stronger than him in raw power so he tends to avoid direct clashes and instead waits for opportunity before striking with quick and accurate strikes kinda like his spar with Captain where he avoids getting into a melee contest where he will certainly lose and instead waits for an opening before ending the match with a single attack. White's aiming to overcome Black in his own game.

*Morgenstern*

The Lance was the one who could call a horse for quick attack, if Black tries to retreat, if I remember correctly. The Fencer is about being able to counter his incredible melee skills (one

on one), I guess, if not being about a weapon he is not really comfortable with. And the Pugilist is about a fighting style much different from a sword fighter's, when going in close, for the additional surprise and/or avoiding easy countering (like Cat who surprises enemies by fighting like a brawler instead of a normal sword fighter), I'd guess.

*Author Unknown*

Did anyone notice? Where the hell is Bard?

[Euodiachloris](#)

We theorise that she is currently stuck between Creation and Nowhere due to how her tactics got called out and her banishment by the Hierarch. In short: she's not finished with Time Out. It's put a ginormous wrench in a number of things for the Gods Above.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I thought being stuck between Creation and Nowhere was kind of normal for the WB. Like, I assumed that's where she always goes between her appearances in Creation. She's definitely not in Creation contiguously, right? So now she just can't make it to her scheduled appearances for a time, is the theory?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Bingo. That, or her schedule has become messed up thanks to Cat, Anaxares and to some extent the Calamaties not sticking to the Stupid Evil tropes while nicking off with scuffed heroic ones they clocked over the head in some dark alley. Well, I'm doing Anaxares a disservice: he genuinely is refusing to pick any broad category beyond Blue And Orange Democracy.

*Oshi*

I still don't really understand that. Her sudden disappearance was because the Hierach refused to be manipulated? How is that even possible?

[Euodiachloris](#)

She poofed in a very surprised puff of logic – since the guy had a logical and valid point (on top of his Name having been created by her in the first place).

*Matthew*

I miss Black. Again, he and cat should kiss and make up.

## [Euodiachloris](#)

They're both stubborn and downplay their emotional needs. Soooooo, it's liable to be a while. And, when they do meet again, it'll result in a competition of who can downplay their enthusiasm to make it up the most.

My money is on Black, by the way. He'll swing around to so downplayed, it amounts to a whopping big trench in the ground the size of a canyon. 😊

*tbarim*

Theory on the weakness of joke characters.

Comic relief characters (Bumbling Conjuror, Hedge Mage, Fortunate Fool, Dread Emperor Traiterous) nullify attempts to harm them through annoyance, thereby lightening more serious stories or fights.

Conversely, my guess as their weakness is the moment when the story turns back to serious. The more sudden the switch, the better.

*Zoolimar*

Yeah, that seems to be the case. But we still haven't seen one of them having a "Serious Side" switch. When a normally light-hearted, smiling and happy-go-lucky character actually stops smiling and takes the challenge before him seriously. Such archetypes are capable of completely wrecking the opposition and frequently sport overwhelming power that they normally don't use for different personal or story related reasons.

And a Name capable of flipping from, for example, Fortunate Fool to Brutal Gentlemen (say they share the Switch aspect and have 2 unique aspects each) would be just the kind of unfair advantage that Gods Above like to use.

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Would irony work?

Not a 1:1 comparison, but in the classic movie **Seven Samurai**, one character is introduced as someone with the personality to keep everyone's spirits and morale up in the dark and trying times to come; it turns out he's the very first to die.

[sivarajan](#)

The dragon was called Nehebkau, wasn't it?

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)



You know it is 😏

JJR

So, when is Black gonna light the hidden caches of Goblin Fire that were hidden deep underground in this valley ever since the conclusion of the Conquest?

I can't imagine he doesn't have any. Until the stairway this was the only land path into Callow, and while dropping the mountain/lake was impressive, it wasn't a kill-the-entire-invading-force level of impressive. Then again, maybe heroes would mess it up somehow, they tend to do that.

The other option would be to use a Demon of Absence to make everyone forget that the valley even existed in the first place. Of course, for all we know the empire already did that to a few other valleys, and left the one open to encourage future crusades to be forced to use it. Absence is somewhat interesting in that regard, it's hard to say that anything concerning it hasn't actually been done. I have to wonder how the hell containing the demons was even discovered in the first place. Probably started as a hypothetical hell that seemed to be missing from the numbering scheme and gave anyone who thought about it a headache.

[TeK](#)

Because absolutely fail-save villanous plan bound to fail every time. So no, such obvious and absolute solutions as Bonfire, droppng an actual mountain at the Vales, to shut them up for good, just burn it all in goblinfire, or use demons would backfie SPECTACULARLY. Ever wonder why Black covered in goblinfire only one of two passes? Or more importantly, used goblinfire only when there was another route for enemy? Because if there's no exit, Heores will make one, it'll accidentally lead straight to your only weakness/source of your power.

[sengachi](#)

You know, if I'd heard that Cat had killed some noble cousin and was relieved at how it cut down on asinine dinner invites, I'd laugh. Because her, her I'd trust to only kill someone because they legitimately deserved it (or at least if she thought they did). And her relief would be tinged by the recognition and understanding of how fucked up it is that she's taking petty relief in someone's death. I could trust her to course-correct if she'd made the wrong decision, and so it's easier to laugh along without guilt.

But Hanno? Hearing he did the same is fucked up. Because I \*know\* he didn't actually give any thought to why the noble died. He just did as commanded by the Seraphim. And I do not trust the Seraphim's definition of judgement, not when what we've seen of

angels so far has basically been defined by 'absolutely zero fucking chill'. But the worst part? It's how he takes his relief so casually, with no tinge of guilt or remorse, because he is \*certain\* that he is right. He has no doubts, or qualms about the fact that he just murdered someone. And sure, maybe he was right to do so. Maybe she did something truly unforgivable. (Given Procer's nobles I give it 50:50 odds).

But maybe she didn't, and Hanno would still be joking to himself about not getting dinner invites without a shred of self-reflection. And that horrifies me.

### *RanVor*

For me, Hanno is one of the most repulsive and tragic characters in Guide, simultaneously.

He is repulsive because all he does is walking around and putting people to death with impunity, and he doesn't even accept any responsibility for what he does. He's basically a glorified executioner. His conscience is always squeaky clean because he lets someone else make all the hard decisions for him. "The Heavens' hatchet man" is the most accurate description of him I've seen so far. It fits any Hero, really, but none to the same extent as Hanno. He basically gave up his free will to become a walking, talking weapon of the Seraphim, utterly incapable of any independent thought.

He is tragic because all he really wanted was to help people who got wronged by an unfair justice system, but he realized he was incapable of doing so. He had no way of determining the guilty party and the appropriate severity of a punishment without a shade of doubt. Anything less, and he wouldn't be any better than the earthly justice systems he despised so much. This led him to be easily manipulated by the Seraphim into submitting to their will.

Basically, he wanted justice but got Justice instead.

### [TeK](#)

Second that. If to choose between a repentant murderer and the one who thinks he actually did a good thing, I would choose the repentant one hands down. Then again, they are both still murderers, and both to some degree are forced to do those things by their life's circumstances. They both took it upon themselves to do terrible things, because those things are right. Just as Cat kills regardless of her grief at the loss of life, Hanno does so too. But the fact of the matter is, to be able to do what they do, and still retain some humanity, they need that illusion of rightness. If Hanno didn't believe that Serafim always right, would he be able to kill so casually? Would he be able to sleep at night? Without that ironclad

certainly that all Heroes share, most would broke, unable to protect innocents. And their place would be took by those, who are already monsters and kill without shred of regret. And monsters protecting you from other monsters is a really bad idea. This is why at war propaganda dehumanises the enemy. This is why the rate of actual shot that kill is so low. Most people kill accidentally, because noone, noone with healthy psyche wants to be the kind of person that kills living, breathing human just like him.

What I meant to say is not that he didn't do nothing, but that, from Hanno's perspective, he was dissapointed by humanity so utterly, he clings to Heavens word, because if they can be wrong too, how the hell he supposed to live? He may just as well kill himself.

### [ironvale](#)

Hm. Wasn't the Champion mentioned to be one of those old class heroes? Not the Good or good kind, just the ones mentioned in epics?

So, I'm not surprised if she considers Captain fur cloak as the highest kind of respect.

Also, here be dragons, aka hero food. Villains beware.

### *Captain Amazing*

The White Knight's tendency to find insights in other heroes will be interesting when he examines Cat. He'll see that she repeatedly goes out of her way to beg them not to attack her, even at the expense of strategic losses. Maybe he will be the one to turn back.

### *TotesOlive*

I really really want the Valliant Champion to die in a completely pointless and non heroic manner, and in a painful way. Maybe backstabbed by the procerans, or getting buried in a hole.

### *burguulkodar*

I like how Black has no pity on the Proceran host, unlike Cat that didn't want a massacre, it is everything Black wishes for.

I never like binding your hands because of a "story". Cat should have annihilated everyone in the Procer army, and then dealt with the results afterwards.

I also hate the saint of the swords and the grey pilgrim. They are too OP, much cheats.

Plus WTF Hakram wasn't in the war??? We still do not have a single hint of a GOOD answer for that, and just because he needed to accompany Kegan's army is moot.

A +1 named would have made a difference in Cat's fights. Maybe killed more heroes. Heroes are in dire need of dying over there.

[vuthuha912](#)

Well. Black certainly has no pity for the Proceran host because they are trying to kill his friends, his sort of daughter, his countrymen, etc.

I am sure that most soldiers or generals adopt the same mentality as Black in order to do their job. When you don't see the other sides as people, it is easier to kill them.

But, Cat is trying to go for peace here so she needs to consider the position of the other sides for her peaceful solution to work.

Black and Cat should totally cooperate in this. The other side won't come to the table unless their war was unwinnable so Black needed to hit them hard enough through war. After Black did his job, Cat can do her diplomacy with the Procer on a more equal footing and actually make it work instead of relying on the goodwill of the other side as she did with Cordelia at the beginning. I think this was the original arrangement between Malicia and Black but Malicia just abandoned the team.

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## Interlude: Sing We Of Rage

*"Sing we of rage,  
In Tower and field  
Of this dying age  
That will not yield*

*Sing we of steel,  
Forged in the east  
As turns the wheel  
And carrion feast*

*Sing we of empire,  
For which we bled  
Of flickering fire  
Now all but dead*

*Sing we of foe,  
Of victories won  
And that first woe  
Tyranny of the sun*

*Sing we of ruin,  
As again we tread  
West, ever pursuing  
Fate writ in dread."*

– ‘The Tyranny of the Sun’, a Praesi song written in the latter stages of the Sixty Years War. Banned by decree of Dread Emperor Nihilis.

Wekesa eyed the sculpted mancala board with a frown, sipping at a chilled Aksum red. The handful of stone seeds in his hand rustled as he flicked his wrist, counting those already sown on the board. Dark eyes moved to Eudokia, whose calm visage betrayed nothing.

"There's two missing," he noted.

Scribe's face displayed only wounded indignation.

"I am insulted, Wekesa, that you would resort to such implications simply because you are afraid to lose," she gravely told him.

"This is senet all over again," he sighed.

In all fairness, he'd been the one to start enchanting dice. Though in his defence, Amadeus had never once played without trying to sneak in a loaded pair and Eudokia had a knack for making pieces disappear when no one was looking no matter what they played. Hye had tended to 'accidentally' flip the board when it became clear she was losing – even when he spelled them stuck to the table, which rather eliminated plausible deniability for the half-elf. The only one of them who'd ever actually followed the rules had been Sabah, and... Wekesa's face darkened. The passing months had done little to bury the grief of that. A friendship four decades long could not be so easily let go of. Not when her killer still breathed.

"Calm, Wekesa," Scribe quietly said. "Nothing was forgot. Nothing was forgiven."

The dark-skinned man waved his hand in dismissal. He was not Amadeus, to sink into himself at the first sight of anything that would disrupt his composure. He would mourn his old friend properly, and no part of that involved forcing his grief into a box to be addressed only when convenient. He drank deeply from his cup of wine, setting it down. The shiver down his spine that

came from someone crossing the wards informed him of Black's arrival before the man strode in sight. Amadeus' eyes studied the board, then crinkled in amusement. Ignoring the Warlock's languid invitation to sit, he leant over it and snorted, a finger flicking at the latest seed Wekesa had sown.

"Someone's in trouble," the pale man lightly said.

Warlock inspected the board again, and unsurprisingly found one of the empty houses now held a seed. That smug bastard.

"You're not even playing," the mage complained.

"It's sad how sore of a loser he is, isn't?" Amadeus told Eudokia with a saddened sigh.

"Hardly becoming of the famous Sovereign of Red Skies," Scribe agreed solemnly.

"You won't get away with this, you perfidious dwarves," Wekesa said. "There will be retribution."

The allegedly dignified Black Knight smothered a grin and finally sat down at their side while Warlock began to put away the stone seeds before he could be conned any further. Eudokia's protests that they had a bottle riding on this and the act was a clear concession went superbly ignored. He wasn't letting those two cheat him out of another prize piece from his cellar. 'Loshe would have his hide if they grabbed another bottle from Kahtan, the current High Lady was curtailing the sales to better hike up the prices. The two savages didn't even enjoy the vintages, anyway, they just loved robbing him blind. He'd nearly cursed Amadeus to lose all taste when he'd seen the man drink a forty-year-old Okoro red with *cabbage and mutton*. In the first Sanguinia's day that would have been a hanging offence, and was a little cannibalism from the Tower really such a high price to pay for proper stewardship of taste? Good and loyal friend that he was, unfortunately, Wekesa still offered Amadeus a cup. The green-eyed man declined, as he usually did when there was a battle on the horizon. Warlock had always considered that a peculiar habit, considering the effects of alcohol could easily be burnt out of the body by any competent Named.

"Onto the sordid business of war, I take it," Wekesa sighed.

"Dawn is an hour away," Amadeus replied. "It has been long enough, and yesterday was a severe defeat for the crusade. The real threats will come out today."

"Your request has been ready for near a month," the sorcerer shrugged. "The array as well. I foresee no trouble there."

"I have no worry of that," his old friend said. "I came to speak of the Witch of the Woods."

"Of which we know precious little," Wekesa pointed out, though his gaze flicked to Scribe.

She shook her head.

"As far as we know she has spent most her life in the Foloi forest, which is beyond our reach," she said. "Attempting to gather intelligence in Gigantes territory is an exercise in futility. They kill everything that crosses the border without warning. All the Eyes have been able to gather is second-hand, overheard conversations. And even these are rare, save for the unreliable."

The Warlock sipped at his wine, unmoved. It would not be the first time they faced a heroine whose history was essentially a blank slate. It did make the killing more troublesome, but not overwhelmingly so.

"If she was truly taught by Gigantes spellsingers, she will be using Ligurian formulas," Wekesa said. "I'll concede that for greater workings they are without match, but they lack the flexibility and breadth of Trismegistan sorcery."

"Those greater workings are my exact worry," Amadeus said. "I remember my histories, Wekesa. The last time spellsingers fought with a Named Praesi sorcerer, plains large as half of Callow were turned into the Titan's Pond."

"I am hardly Triumphant," Warlock chuckled. "And the Witch is no true spellsinger. She has not spent a few hundred years accumulating power and perfecting her craft. There will be collateral damage, to be sure, but I did not toil for months on our warding schemes to protect your armies from dwarven toys."

Black inclined his head in concession, but his eyes were not in agreement.

"I would not bind your hands on your first encounter with an unknown quantity," he said.

"Yet," Wekesa said.

"We cannot afford the losses that large escalation might entail," Amadeus said. "I won't bar you from using sorcery falling under Red Skies protocol, but I'd ask that you keep in mind the possible consequences of it."

The dark-skinned mage finished his cup, rather irked that such good vintage must be treated in so cavalier a manner. War truly

was hell, he mused. Setting down the silver, he offered his friends a mild smile.

"I will attempt coddling, then," Wekesa conceded. "Let us see how long *that* lasts. And what will you be doing while I get my hands dirty?"

"Settling a philosophical question, in a manner of speaking," he said.

Warlock raised an eyebrow.

"And what would that question be?"

Amadeus smiled that old smile of the damned, the one that had been the ruin of realms and the death of armies. A madman's smile.

"Can a man cheat providence at dice?"

—

The army had risen in hushed silence, but Hanno could feel the thrum of excitement going through the soldiers. Yesterday's defeat had put fear in the hearts, yes, but also thirst for retribution. The vicious schemes of the Praesi had given birth to the old wroth that was always the fall of Evil, that burning determination that came from witnessing the senseless destruction sown by the Enemy. *Yet they are not so senseless, these monsters*, the White Knight thought. That they were abominations could not be denied, the paramount fiends of this era, but Hanno had studied the Carrion Lord. The man's actions followed his own barren sense of integrity, though no one sane would truly apply that word to the works of the Black Knight. It made him dangerous in a way that few villains the White Knight had witnessed could be. No less mad than the Emperors of old, perhaps, but there was cold method to the madness. Hanno had learned the hard way that underestimating the Calamities on the field would only lead to death. He thought of the sisters he would never hear again, snatched out of Creation before they had truly lived. *We give you nothing*, the Seraphim had promised as they anointed him. *We take everything*. As in all things, they had spoken truth.

Antigone stood crouched on the ground, watching the burning waters. Pyres of green flames that were birthed beneath the surface and spread from there, unheeding of the laws that bound true fire. There was nothing in the world, they said, that goblinfire could not burn. Some priests in Procer had called the substance the distillation of unholy hunger, the sins of the East made into liquid flame. The impossibly massive wolf that the Witch's mount and mother both was lying on the ground, her muzzle resting on her paws as she warily watched the heroine she had raised weave sorcery. Lykaia, her name was. Hanno had expected



the Champion to started eyeing her as pelt and trophy the moment they first met, but to his surprise Rafaella had swiftly taken to the wolf-mother. The opposite was also true, Antigone assured him, though it could be hard to tell. Lykaia's notion of mothering occasionally involved being batted around by massive paws, though in all honesty the Champion seemed to rather enjoy that. Perhaps he should have anticipated that Rafaella would be utterly delighted at the opportunity of wrestling with a she-wolf larger than most houses. Antigone sliced across her palm with a stone knife and pressed the blood into the earth. Hanno felt the shiver of power scatter around them, massive and then gone.

Lykaia whined until Antigone sighed and presented her bleeding hand for the she-wolf to lick, almost nudging the Witch off her feet with an affectionate nuzzle he suspected was a reminder to take better care of herself. Wiping away the slobber covering not only her hand but most her arm – though, Hanno noted, the wound already seemed to be closing – the Witch of the Woods bowed her head to him by the slightest fraction. She did not move like a human. She was a beast of the forest, at times, but at others he could only see the Gigantes in her. Chin tucked in, if hidden by the mask, crown of the head made slightly lower than his.

*Respect-deference-accomplishment.* The giants could express broader nuances of relation and hierarchy in a single gesture that the land of his birth could with millennia of tiered citizenship. Hanno kept his back straight and tilted his face slightly to the left without moving his neck. *Praise-gratitude-companionship.* He was careful not to move too far left, lest he imply subordination on his part. By the mores of the Gigantes, what he had offered was already intimate warmth. Antigone's head straightened into neutrality, though slowly enough the implication lay she was pleased with his response.

"It is done," the Witch said. "When you are ready."

Hanno breathed out, watching the spread of burning green before him. He unsheathed the sword at his hip, mere steel forged at the hands of men. The lance strapped on his back would remain there until it was needed.

"Now," the White Knight said.

Antigone stomped her feet on the ground, where her blood still lingered, and Creation howled. She did not control it, not the way a spellsinger would have. The Witch had not spent centuries permeating her body with the light of moons and stars, woven a second soul out of sunlight or aligned herself with the celestial spheres. She could not sing hymns to the world and make it dance to her will. Instead the power of her aspect flared, and for a moment she was one with the fabric of Creation. A single cord sounded where she had spilled blood, and the vibration reverberated beyond mortal understanding. The winds stirred the

burning lake and quickened until a whirlwind of water and fire was birthed, emptying the grounds where so many had died yesterday. The Praesi's own murderous alchemy, turned against them as it went howling towards the tower men called the Bloody Twin. Hanno of Arward began his advance, endless ranks of crusaders behind him, as sorcery bloomed ahead.

—

"Okeanos Risen," Wekesa said, reluctantly impressed. "Using an unseemly shortcut, but still nothing to sneer at."

Especially on freshwater. He'd never heard of Gigantes using this particular working away from the sea. Ashurans, when they'd still been Baalites in more than name, had learned the hard way that attempting to invade the Titanomachy from the water only resulted in the sharks growing fat. There was no audience atop the tower for him to expound at, as Amadeus had ordered room be cleared for him to work undisturbed, but speaking his thoughts aloud did tend to bring a sense of satisfaction to his work. He'd gotten into the habit when teaching Masego, as it helped his son understand his conclusions if he was privy to the thoughts that led to them. It was unfortunate that Masego still lingered at Foundling's side, though Wekesa had made his peace with it. Much of his enmity for the girl had ebbed since she'd thrown away her apprenticeship to Amadeus and ceased being a dagger at his throat simply by existing. Eudokia was furious that process had involved their old friend being stabbed, but Warlock was not particular bothered. Not since he'd noticed that Black's agelessness had taken a tint of youth in the aftermath. She'd offered his first and oldest friend a second lease on life by her actions, and he considered that to settle the balance of the threat she'd once posed.

She'd still have to die, of course. Alaya would insist on it as soon as the politics of the act became acceptable. It would make a bit of a mess, but those two would bind their wounds and entwine their fates anew after enough time had passed. They always did, no matter what shallow wounds they managed to inflict on the other's pride. Perhaps it was in order that he suggest Amadeus spend a few years in Refuge, after the dust settled. It would do wonders for both his mood and Hye's — Wekesa was of the opinion she'd cease gallivanting around the continent picking fights with gods for a bit if she found her lover returned to her bed. Alaya would be miffed at losing her right hand to a 'vapidly murderous vagrant', as she'd once described Ranger to him, but Wekesa was rather miffed at her himself. This whole Liesse affair had been gauche in many ways, including the implied insult to him. That she'd never approached him about building such a doomsday device implied she'd believed he would refuse her and go straight to Amadeus. It was a disregard of the trust he'd thought there was between them. He was not inflicted with Eudokia's

blindness, to believe Black should be crowned. Alaya was better fit to rule Praes, and more apt to deliver the peace and quiet that was his preferred state of affairs.

Warlock had no intention of spending the next two decades of his life breaking millennia-old wards, banishing demons and immolating every practitioner in the Wasteland with a modicum of talent for theoretical research. Which was the very likely consequence of a reform-inclined Duni climbing the Tower. That killing one of his few friends as a prerequisite only made the notion more unpalatable, as did his suspicion that Amadeus crowned would find everything admirable about him devoured by the demands of the throne. Shaking the thought, Wekesa waited for the whirlwind to properly and come within the preferred action range of his prepared answers. The addition of goblinfire to the assault was a clever improvisation on the part of the enemy, and did indeed complicate matters of containment. The alchemical flames would begin devouring any solid ward upon contact, and a working of this strength could not be easily be contained with a flawed warding scheme. That was not to say, of course, that there was nothing he could do. Screens of sorcery bloomed before him as he observed the strings of power that had initiated and now maintained the whirlwind. Examining the formula directly was not a real possibility at this range, but he *could* glean from understanding of it from the observable phenomenon.

The central element was clearly a Creational cascade, the signature element of Ligurian sorcery. A controlled release of power into the world that accumulated ever-deeper orders of effect. The main difference with records of Gigantes sorcery was that there seemed to be no guiding element at play, no 'song' – though that was merely a mundane and narrow term for what was in reality an exquisitely complicated verbal control technique. Interesting. Ligurian sorcery required the caster to have a deep understanding of Creation's workings that Praesi would call High Arcana, though the way Gigantes understood the world in a fundamentally different manner meant there was little overlap with Praesi High Arcana and the Titanomachy's preceding equivalent. The implication here being that the Witch of the Woods, though taught by the Gigantes, did not share their inherent understanding. Aspect-based bridging, most likely, relying on her Name to expand the capacity of her mind. Aspects did tend to be passing, however, and that would explain the lack of so-called song: the Witch had glimpsed the web when calling on her power, but had not kept that understanding afterwards. Once loosed, her control on her spells was either thin or non-existent.

"How kind of you, my dear," Warlock murmured, "to gift me a whirlwind."

Runes formed around his wrists as he set boundaries in the area the winds were about to enter, weaving the forces that would attempt to modify rather than disperse. A hundred feet from the tower, the working fell into his ward and without a word Wekesa activated it. The first part was elementary: he stretched the spinning upwards, thinning the board whirlwind into a much taller pillar-like structure. From there, effect was easier. The forces were dispersed where they had once been concentrated. He flattened the pillar into a sphere and tossed back the burning water and winds in the direction of the advancing enemy army.

"Do try to make this interesting, child," Warlock said.

Power flared, and this time he was able to watch the cascade unfolding. It was beautiful, he thought, in the way only the very highest of sorcery could be. A single mind touching a facet of the godhead through will and knowledge. The burning sphere shivered and winked out, leaving nothing behind. His eyes narrowed. Matter could not simply vanish, and there had been absolutely nothing left behind – not even air, as the absence had drawn it in. The cascade had not been a physical effect, which meant...

"The Riddle of Kreios," he said softly. "Now *that* is a memory I will have to extract and study."

The Witch of the Woods had inflicted the passing of time inside boundaries, which was masterfully absurd. One of the great riddles of sorcery was that there was no such thing as time – it was a sapient construct, a recognition of entropy – yet there was a force that could only be called this that could be manipulated by magic. The Witch had enveloped the sphere inside folded time until the goblinfire devoured everything within, a beautiful parry. Had she called on Kronia's Sickle instead the alchemy would have attempted to devour the time actively quelling it but Kreios relied in the conceptual passing of time, not destruction through it. An important distinction, one that had crafted an envelope instead of an attack: she'd let the goblinfire itself do the work, an elegant solution. And one made possible only by his actions. If he'd not gathered the goblinfire together and she'd employed the Riddle, entire parts of this mountain range would have vanished – and likely parts of her army with it. No mere spell-slinging savage, this one.

"Let us test the depths of your knowledge, then," the Sovereign of Red Skies grinned, and runes burned around his wrists.

—

Hanno led the assault without looking at the sorcerer's duel echoing across the valleys. He would trust in Antigone, that she was the match of the Warlock and would allow no harm to come to them. He'd acted to ensure that much, by sending all other heroes

to the northern valley. With only he and the Witch present, Creation's grooves would not be filled with a plethora different stories that all weakened each other by allowing none to be come into the fullness of being. The Witch of the Woods would fight the Warlock. The White Knight would fight the Black Knight. The clarity of this would be as dangerous a blade as the one in his hand. In the Twin above engines and crossbows spewed death at the advancing crusaders, checked only by the shields of mages and the fences of priests. Praesi sorceries lashed at them both, tearing holes that were filled with steel and stone with eerie coordination. It did not matter. With him at their head, the crusaders roared and advanced. Sword bright with the Light, the White Knight pushed through storms of fire and clouds of poison. They dispersed like mist under the sun. Darkness fell in a rain of needles, men they pierced convulsing in violent throes, but Hanno screamed his challenge and they shattered like glass.

"Carrion Lord," he yelled as in the sky above lightning fought spinning lights. **"I summon you, Black Knight."**

His words rang like a thunderclap across the valley. A gauntlet thrown, and not easily refused. Not without consequences greater than whispers of cowardice. A duel of champions for Above and Below was an ancient thing, and not disdained without earning the same disdain from the Gods. The gates of barded steel and iron at the foot of the tower slowly opened. Out came a silhouette riding a dead horse. His plate was simple and worn, his lance a thing of blackened steel and the sword at his hip goblin-wrought steel. As he rode a dark cloak streamed behind him. The helm, as always, hid his face save for eerie green eyes and hints of pallid skin. Bringing up his shield, the Black Knight moved as the gates closed in his wake. Hanno felt it, the cold thing behind the flesh. The cogs of steel ever-turning. His power was faint, even fainter than on their last encounter, but the taste of it had not changed. The presence of two aspects wreathed the man like two ravens on his shoulders, urging the villain to Lead and to Conquer. An old monster drenched in blood, come at his summons.

"It ends today," the White Knight said.

The monster cocked his head to the side.

"Uninspired," he replied, and the lance descended.

Lives flooded through Hanno's mind and he chose the first he had prepared: the Lance of Light. His Name took his reflexes, his training, and replaced them with another man's. The Knight went deeper still, until his eyes no longer felt as his own, and only then did the Light boil out of him. The radiant mount pawed at the grounds, scorching them, and his lance rose to match the abominations. Hanno was no jousting but Felix Caen, Duke of Liesse, had been the glory of Callow's knighthood long before he led the doomed charge in the East that earned him his Name. The

stance came easy to him as breathing and he watched the Black Knight lead his mount to face him. There should have been a hush over the battlefield, but no quarter was offered or given. The Legions still spewed death from the tower, though their crossbows and engines were alien to him. No less, he thought, should be expected from Praesi. There was no honour to the Wasteland, nothing but barren hatred to be found past the Blessed Isle.

"Come, slave of the Tower," the Lance of Light laughed. "Breaker of heroes. Come and die."

The mounts charged, death flying around them, and it was all wrong. It should have been an olive-skinned southerner, a vicious lady of the Hungering Sands with lips like fresh blood, not this pale leech before him. He would crush the thing anyway. Already the Lance could see the sequence, the alignment of men and horse, the way the tip of his lance would go through the throat. Then the man's shield went down, hand hidden, and the Lance of Light spurred his horse. Death, death was offered to him and he would deliver it in the name of House Alban. Then the Praesi threw himself off his horse at the last moment.

A heartbeat later, as the Lance passed by it, it *exploded*.

Hanno landed on his back, breath stolen from him and smouldering. He hastily rose to his feet and found the Black Knight awaiting him with the flat of his sword resting on his shoulder.

"That remains a *surprisingly* effective trick," the monster mused. "I really should send her a thank you note."

The White Knight frowned. He was talking. Bantering, instead of pressing advantage. Pale green eyes flicked to him.

"Shall we get on with it?" the Carrion Lord drawled. "There *is* a war on, in case you hadn't noticed."

"You," Hanno said. "What have you done?"

"Blown up a rather expensive horse," the Black Knight said. "With the dark and wicked spell of wick and cheap matches. My coffers aren't what they used to be. Tremble, White Knight, for my power is truly boundless within reasonable limits."

The White Knight bared his sword, and let the Flawless Fencer flow into him. His stance changed. Sofia of Nicae had always been heavyset, nothing like the slender girls whose beauty was praised by the men, but she did not mind. Her only true love was the blade. This one was well-fitter to her hand, the weight of it perfect for her craft, and she closed the distance with anticipation thrumming in her veins. Praesi, this man, but she'd killed that ilk before. Bands of them had kept roving the Free Cities for years after the Dread Empress was unceremoniously

thrown back into the sea by the coalition. It was not as satisfying to slay those as Ashurans, but it would keep her sated until supper. The foe was a sword-and-board man, and not half-bad. He danced properly when she struck, his parry technically perfect and riposte appropriately vicious. She elegantly turned it downwards, then struck across the throat. Ah, just a little too slow. She was off her form today. She circled around him, letting the slope weaken his stance, and offered a feint towards the eye. The shield went up, she closed the distance even as he struck and spun with him as he adjusted. Elbow to the back of the head, then she dropped under his answering swing and hit his helm with the pommel of her blade.

The man worked through the pain, but his stance was broken. She drew blood at the juncture of his elbow, slid around the shield bash and hacked down on the extended fingers of his blade hand. She hummed approvingly when he decided he'd rather lose two fingers than the grip on his sword, then rewarded his courage by kicking his knee and forcing him down. He swung where she would have been, were she an idiot, but instead she kicked dirt into his face. Then, as he struggled with that, she kicked his chin and laid him down hard. Time to end this, then. The Flawless Fencer vanished back into the flood and the White Knight clasped his sword.

"You are not him," Hanno said.

"A question almost theological in nature," the thing noted. "Nefarious did have a certain knack for blasphemy."

"This is a trick," the White Knight hissed. "You shy from judgement."

"Shall I give you a lesson, child?" the abomination said. "I so rarely get to monologue, but this is fortunate happenstance. You see, whatever I tell you will not matter. Not in the slightest. You are, by your nature, incapable of learning what I would teach. If you did it would destroy what a more poetic man might call your soul."

Hanno grabbed him by the throat, raised him up. The thing laughed.

"What have you done?"

"Agency, boy," the abomination said, sounding amused. "You have discarded yours like a petty bauble and never once considered the cost. Blind faith is such tempting notion, isn't it? Being able to believe in an answer, in a force, without ever questioning it. Certainty and blindness. I have always wondered at the difference."

"Where are you?"

"Ah, already better," the thing said approvingly. "But your true question is – why did you ever think I was here? And so the circle closes, and we return to the matter of faith."

He could have squeezed, snapped the neck, but he needed to know. To understand the trap so he could break it.

"The answer, of course, is providence," the abomination said. "You are here because that elusive golden luck of heroes told you I would be here to face you. And I am, in a sense. That is the rub, you see, when one relies on something one does not fully understand. If you do not know the rules, you do not know how they can be *cheated*."

"You cannot cheat the Heavens," Hanno snarled.

"Ah, but providence is a different matter," the villain said. "It is a force, you see, not an intelligence. It cannot reason. If the greater part of what is me is here before you, well, that is the guidance it will provide. Never warning you that a mind and a body are very different things until it is much, much too late."

And just like that it fell into place.

"You are in the other valley," the White Knight said.

"Praesi, Hanno, have so many flaws," the abomination mused. "Sometimes it seems as if it is all we have. Yet there is one among them that I always believed to be a virtue, in its own way. All it takes is the faintest hope we will get away with it, and we will sit across even the Gods, smile and *lie*."

"There is nowhere I will not reach you," Hanno replied quietly.

He dropped the abomination, and it did not even attempt to rise. Its lips quirked into a smile, thin and narrow and vicious. A blade-smile.

"Do enjoy your victory, White Knight," he said.

When Hanno's blade cut through his neck, the body already had empty eyes.

—

Amadeus of the Green Stretch breathed out. After a moment he rose to his feet. The sounds of battle could be heard at the bottom of the northern Twin, heroes and crusaders having reached the gate and struggling to break it. Ranker was behind him, looking to the back of the tower, and without a word he went to join her. Both of them stared down.

"Is it done?" the old goblin asked.



"They are both committed," the green-eyed man replied. "My death was the agreed-on signal. Warlock will cover the retreat."

"Then now is our part," the Marshal of Praes said.

"So it is," the Black Knight agreed.

They looked down at the two legions that had moved to the northern passage overnight, swelling the ranks of the three already under Ranker's command. Amadeus bared his sword, raising it high. The responding clamour drowned out the world.

"Well, old friend," he murmured. "I think it's about time we went on the offensive, don't you think?"

---

*SMHF*

There is only one sin, defeat!

There is only one grace, victory!

Lets vote Guide back into the first spot

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*nerferf*

Thank you for writing

Awesome, that's the black we know and love

*SpeckofStardust*

Well they (the crusaders) would have been better off on attacking via only 1 path old monsters are everywhere after all the fact that only 2 are named is irrelevant.

.

*stevenneiman*

Remember Irritant's Law? Heroes can't win if they have a large enough numerical advantage, at least not against a foe with enough skill at plotcrafting, which Black has in spades. Also, the reason they attacked as they did was because they expected to have the element of surprise by going through what was a sodden hellscape of green flame five minutes ago. They just didn't count on Black's incredible powers of contingency planning.

*Rook*

They attacked that way because they had no choice after the losses they initially suffered. I don't think any of the crusaders thought that mopping up a goblinfire lake with a tornado would catch the calamities by surprise.

They're some of the most notorious living villains on calernia; well known for routinely murdering Heroes like chickens, as well as having a walking natural disaster of a caster named the Warlock in their number.

*stevenneiman*

I suppose. I guess it was only the fact that Black managed to weasel his way out of a meaningful killing blow that really seemed to take them by surprise.

*SpeckofStardust*

Considering that White was destined a win here, it also means that none of the other heroes can kill him in this war, only white. As I already stated there are too many monsters in this fight.

And when dealing with monsters You don't split up the goddam party otherwise your in horror trope land.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Reasons why Bloodborne works so well as horror: all the fun and games of Shadowfell. Just little old you to try running though it.

[Liliet](#)

It's not a party is the problem.

A band of 5 is a single story-entity, much stronger when together, and splitting it up is inadvisable.

Multiple heroes who aren't part of a band, or are parts of multiple bands, are subject to Inverse Ninja Law instead, and are MUCH better off acting independently/separately.

*the Manton Effect*

It's odd that you say he wins by virtue of story, even if it fits so well with what's happened. In a recent chapter Catherine observes that he makes such a good villain largely because he's so good at avoiding the narrative. His whole schtick is being against the grain, and winning because of it. "win despite the rules...", he says. But is he really so against the grain?

*tynam*

Winning despite the rules isn't the same thing as being able to ignore them. Black understand that the rules are going to apply to him no matter what he does, and so his whole life is about disrupting the narrative and rules-lawyering the loopholes, avoiding the situations where the rules can defeat him.

Black's most impressive power is the ability to walk away when the table is rigged – as we see him do in the free cities.

*Antoninjohn*

Now those heroes die and Procer losses all their Chosen but the White Knight, Witch of the Wilds and Champion. Without the Heroes, Procer's army is no match for the Legions of Terror

*Someguy*

Without the army the remaining heroes are just attempting Illegal Immigration. Scribe should just send a lawyer with a set of Writs and criminal charges to Hanno. Since he likes to defer personal responsibility so much, lets see how Judgement will enforce or break Praesi law.

*Gunslinger*

His judgment is that of the Gods and they don't care about Preasi laws

*Yotz*

Yeah, well, Imperial Bureau of Legal Immigration and Sundae cares not for their "freedom of faith" or whatever! They still need to fill out declaration 13b-17/11 in triplicate – to begin with.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Hierarch could make this work, but Callow does not have enough government to do so.

*stevenneiman*

Maybe, but you gotta admit it would be funny to flip his own schtick back on him just to see how he responds. Especially if you make it obvious that you're being no more arbitrary than his own masters.

*Someguy*

Judgement eating it's own tail due to earthly realities makes for a better Story. Hanno's Role is perfect for such a

Praesi tale, his half-Praesi blood creates such a wonderful opening!

[Adam G Pugh](#)

Separate the Procerans from their children and lock them in cages!

... too soon?

*therealgridlock*

Well if a third of illegal immigrants to praes were unrelated to the children they brought with them, it would actually make praes the hero to return those children to their rightful guardians in the country they were stolen from.

Child trafficking is no joke.

*therealgridlock*

Oh yeah, post script here, but since slavery is super illegal in most of calernia anyway, except in like, stygia and mercantis (if you're rich) they would be even MORE strict on illegal immigration, coyotes, and child trafficking.

Though it's also a world where vampire pedos in pizza basements would make sense, so maybe that's not a good thing to be comparing our world to.

*Rook*

They might actually lose Champion. She's not with Hanno and the Witch right now, meaning she's cut off from the other heavyweights and further weakened by the overlapping stories of the many green Heroes involved.

I'm almost wondering if that wasn't half the point of Black's play. I wouldn't doubt that beneath the steel and gears he's far, far more upset about what she did to Captain than even the other calamities. She was basically to him as Hakram is to Cat, for longer than either of the latter two have even been alive

*RanVor*

Well, Black is very good at suppressing his emotions, and though it looks similar from the outside, it's not the same as being emotionless. He's still very much upset about Captain, he just forces himself to ignore it, lest it clouds his judgement and gets him killed, which isn't what Captain would want at all.

### Stable

I see it as more likely that Champion will kill again. She's (apparently) stupid, never gives up, always cheerful and hits very hard: perfect villain-killer while they are all left wondering how she does it.

In other words: she's an anime hero. The horror!

### *Letouriste*

She has talking problems in the hero language so no, not an anime protagonist;) this is funny enough to be a side character though

### *Jonnnney*

I have a feeling they are going to lose more than Chosen. The first prince might be losing her favorite uncle

### *taovkool*

And once again, Black showed why he was not one to be fucked with. Cheating the story with Assassin. First round on him, even with Hanno winning the duel.

Yet, after all this, there's still no sign of the Bard, and Hanno's dialogue showed that she's not with his band. Not fighting against Kat either. So where the hell is she then? Dealing with the Tyrant? The Thassalocracy? One of the major player not shown on the board is a major concern.

### *danh3107*

It wasn't Assassin, it was a body puppet like the Empress uses. I think anyway

### *beleester*

I think you're right. Assassin is his own person, he wouldn't describe himself as "Black's mind is here, but the body is elsewhere." He also hints that it was one of Nefarious's spells.

The description of him as a thing rather than a person does sound rather like Assassin, but it's not quite the same.

### *nerferf*

Still banished probably, we still really into the beginning of this uncivil war's after all, once the tyrant, goblins and dead king and/or triumphant enter the arena then she may pop up to escalate the mess

## *Byzantine*

As Pilgrim and Saint noted bard only shows up at the grimmest moment. She is very likely nowhere right now, awaiting the next moment she is needed.

### *Raved Thrad*

Nah, if Bard isn't at the scene, then she's off somewhere either drinking or regenerating her liver and waiting for her next Story Teleport.

### *Metrux*

Except she was genuinely beaten and banished? It might take a while until she can come back to existing.

### *Raved Thrad*

The worst possible implication of this is that Bard is actually Mxyzptlk, interfering in this dimension for fun.

### [Mental Mouse](#)

Or, as she said, she's... nowhere. Back in the dicebox until she becomes relevant again.

### *soonnanandnaanssoon*

I don't think he cheated with Assassin actually. I think he possessed a body using Necromancy.

### *RoflCat*

Possibly trying to 'unfix' what Hierarch has done.

After all, that was her last known location, and it sure as hell did NOT go the way she wanted.

### *Jonnnney*

Her story may have been bound be in conflict with the Hierarch due to his lawful condemnation of her actions. There is after all a third front to this war a pair of crazy Named, one of the old breed and another something new, attacking principalities via the waning woods. There is also the fourth front to consider. Someone needs to be keep the recently awakened Dead King in check.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Excuse me but it's spelled **Chat**

### *soonnanandnaanssoon*

Tremble, White Knight, for my power is truly boundless\*

\*Terms & conditions apply

*Highwayman*

I love it that he actually outright admits it.

*stevenneiman*

I think his secondary objective in this was to basically let the air out of Hanno. On one hand he gave Hanno an “epic” “final” “battle” “against” him, but then made every effort to not only render Hanno’s victory meaningless but turn the entire thing into a joke at his expense, to rob his very serious character of narrative weight. Notice how Black also gave a villainous monologue but it focused on Hanno being a bland and uninteresting character.

It’s just like what Cat did to the Saint of Swords. Remember how she used to be so badass, then Cat made her out to be a second-rate bully and the next time we see her she starts doing her impression of a pincushion? Same principle at work here.

*Someguy*

I agree with what you say and want to add to it. There is another principle working against Hanno, he is half-Praesi.

If Black “was his father” (heh) the Narrative momentum (Force :P) would be with him. But he isn’t so the usual results of victories for Praesi “heroes”(?) has greater momentum. Remember: “Victory, most fickle of friends.” – Taghreb saying.

*Rook*

Pretty sure they have deflating dramatic flairs refined into a regular engagement doctrine. He handled Ubua the exact same way as Hanno, and even used the same ‘uninspired’ response to their final dramatic line

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Who the fuck is Ubua, is that how we’re all agreeing to spell Akua now? Why even have consistent names? My two favorite characters are Gertuiop and Nolp, obviously

*JJR*

Ubua comes from one of Masego’s interludes (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/12/31/prodigy/>) where he meets Akua but only remembers about 75% of her name.

*Metrux*

Ubua is the "ofccicial" other Name of Akua. I completely agree we shouldn't change the characters names, like Cat's, but this is a special case since it's canon :B

[daegone823](#)

In a flashback apprentice has a long conversation with Akua. Father Warlock is proud of his son for talking to people, Aunt Sabah asked does he have any idea who he was talking to. He remarks Ubua after using all his powers to remember her name

[Euodiachloris](#)

More than that: you could argue that both Black and Warlock haven't so much gone for outright ridicule and embarrassment, but the kind of (viciously pranky) avuncular training experience they would hand any young pups who come at them while just a little too full of themselves.

By framing the engagement that way, they aren't going for mentor positions, but stressing that they are masters who don't really want to fight these brash beginners, but the hot headed fools just won't let it go. So, the (accidentally/on purpose fatal) slap-down they get is for their benefit... (Evil, remember – training is *supposed* to carry a risk of death.)

No, really. xD

*stevenneiman*

I guess that's another way of looking at it too. He didn't play up the personal sympathy as much as Cat did with her "I didn't seize the throne to kill kids" speech, but he definitely gave the sense of a tired old man wishing he didn't have to deal with this. And the fact that he's borrowing just a little from the stories of deadly sink-or-swim mentors certainly helps keep Hanno on the back foot even if it isn't likely to be what brings him down.

*Metrux*

Another interesting point to keep in mind is that this is the first time he borrowed one of Cat's tricks, just in the first battle after been given a "second chance at life" from her. In a way, this can change the relationship of their Roles, from Mentor and Student to equals, or even make her the Mentor, like in "The best student surpass the master". I don't think this is what it'll be, since Erraticerrata does love to make us



confused, but I'm pretty sure this signifies a change in their relation.

*stevenneiman*

That might actually help protect both of them. Black can drop his old mentor position, and meanwhile it seems to argue that, having arguably surpassed her mentor, Cat's story is over. On the other hand, that might not be it because he's borrowing something from her that she developed when her journey was only just beginning, so it can't really be a sign of her conclusion.

I think it might be trying to shift the tone of the mentor story, from "mentor passes the torch to the next generation", which is usually lethal, to "taking an apprentice breathes new life and joy into the mentor", which is an oddly twee story for the likes of Amadeus but he's not choosy if it lets him survive without sacrificing his objectives.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Wekesa, for one, is all for embracing the twee-est twee that ever twee-ed, as long as it puts a naughty-boy smile on Amadeus' face and adds zip to his pranks.

... He and 'Loshe make a ton of sense as a couple.

*Bonesawer*

We should be very, very scared that this encounter resulted in a draw by the Heavens' standards. Neither one of the Named inflicted grievous damage on the other, and we already know that losing armies counts for little in terms of victory or not to the Heavens.

If this encounter counts as the second of a pattern of three, we have to rely on outside intervention to save Black in his third. With his narrative weight, there's no way he can lose and come back having rebuilt his power for a recurring nemesis.

The options as I see them are that this didn't count as the second since they never truly engaged (I doubt this since it had serious consequences), one or more of the Calamities is going to have to sacrifice themselves to save Black from dying in encounter #3 (not sure about the groove made by Assassin during Liesse, could go either way) which isn't preferable, Cat's going to have to save him from Hanno possibly at the cost of some of her remaining morals/goals (this is the ideal goal as her goals, while gray, are pretty insignificant and/or stupid and could improve with

replacement, especially as a result of a reforming of the bond with her smarter teacher-father), or Black dies and everyone is sad (the least desirable outcome for obvious reasons).

*MetruX*

We already know they have no pattern of three, especially since this is NOT their second battle. Remember, they already battled twice and there was even an interlude in which Black remarked how strange it is a pattern didn't arise. At the time he thought it was because he would never live enough to complete it, but this was shown as not true, so there must be another reason why no pattern appeared, which we don't know yet.

[daegone823](#)

Black already remarked how in the first fight the heaven's had built a hero to counter Chat. The heaven's planned on Black dying since by a squire merely existing the Black Knight will eventually die. Then Chat taking his name Would face the White Knight who hard countered her with his various abilities, OP summon every white knight hero to counter her, shiny horse to kill any undead minion she summoned. That was the plan until Black destroyed the array and the Squire severed ties with the Black Knight.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Heh heh heh...

*Dainpdf*

\*while supplies last.

[daegone823](#)

Ok so I get the fencer but who was the lancer trying to kill?

It seems that the deeper the white knight sinks the more he forgets himself and objective mudled. Dipping to deep into aspects which he has been doing can turn back onto him. He could loose his own identity if the heavens deem him unworthy and loan out his body.

Also Witch of the Wilds and wolf mother already to cool for me another amazing named IMO has been introduced and she is coupled with my other favorite hero the Champion to cool!!!

[wyaldriddler](#)

Also of note is during the bit with the Flawless Fencer, where “she” thought she was off her game. Hanno’s aspect makes him think he is those he chooses, but \*they\* are not \*him\*. Their bodies do not \*match\*.

*stevenneiman*

Transgender people exist even in the real world, despite having to spend a lot more than a minute or two trapped in a body that doesn’t match how they identify. What really strikes me are the way that the Lancer was annoyed at not having his actual nemesis to kill and the Fencer took note of things that Hanno already knew. Both of those much more strongly imply to me that heroes Hanno Recalls get dropped into the situation clueless.

### [Mental Mouse](#)

Hanno is still surprisingly green – he has a lot to learn about making best use of that Aspect.

*beleester*

Lancer was there to fight Black on horseback. However, as it turned out, Black was \*planning\* to be unhorsed, so it didn’t matter.

We didn’t see the Barehanded Pugilist, but I imagine it’s a similar idea – if Black realizes that he can’t win a sword fight, he’s likely to go for a grapple, where the Pugilist would have an advantage. (Catherine does the same thing – if she’s fighting a “proper fencer” she tends to drag the fight down into the mud and mix it up with her fists.) Hanno planned to overwhelm Black in a specific area of skill rather than try to be a jack of all trades, which is Black’s strength.

*Someguy*

There is no need to win every battle when losing results in Enemy strategic overreach. When you know you are going to lose anyway, just set things up for your General to win.

### [daegone823](#)

Every time I see warlock fighting I always get the feeling he is so OP that creation will fuck him.

- Fight with lone swordsman under dog, death flag
- underdog fight again against the hedge wizard avenging her sister double death flag
- Now he is all alone vs a Knight hell bent on killing him an evil ruler and a witch who has sided with nature against a guy who literally makes pig/dragon abominations.

Peta and US marshall vs Mad scientist

*oldschoolvillain*

That's the area of all Named casters. Warlock is only so powerful because of his specific approach to wizardry and how much knowledge he has to apply.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

But Warlock earned his power through time, study, hard work, and cleverness. He's even more legit than Hye

*MetruX*

Yeah, he didn't even use his Name powers here. He would, arguably, have this same power under himself without a Name, as long as he had the same time and resources to study. This is why he is so OP: he has no need for god given powers, he steals the powers for himself.

*Dainpdf*

If the heroes always win, you just have to hand them enough Pyrrhic victories...

*RanVor*

Surely you mean Terribilic victories, don't you?

*Dainpdf*

Nah. I'm not actually from Calernia. Where I'm from, we say "Pyrrhic". Long story.

[sengachi](#)

Or get them to burn their ordained victories on valueless kills.

[Jesse Coombs](#)

"... had learned the hard way that attempting to invade the Titanomachy from the water only resulted in the sharks growing fat."

That is an EXCELLENT line. XD

*Highwayman*

Wolf-mother... Loki in drag???

*Yotz*

Given that Mother to Sleipnir demonstrably have no preconceptions against motherhood, can we call it "in drag" really?

*thegreatfeed*

Wow. You have really mastered how to tell a battle from both sides. These are becoming my favorite kind of chapter.

*Gunslinger*

Holy shit, this was so worth staying up for. Black is fucking awesome.

I wonder if the implications of calling him Amadeus of the Green Stretch means he lost his Name?

I also wonder if the body double was Assassin again, though the line about Nefarious suggests it was a spell to possess.

*Gunslinger*

>So it is," the Black Knight agreed.

Well I guess he still has his name. It's mighty fun to see goody two shows Hanno get toyed with.

*Yotz*

About "of the Green Stretch" thing – it may be a narrative tool to underline miniscule personality shifts – as in, the Black Knight murders people, Carrion Lord leads the Legions, and Amadeus of the Green Stretch just quietly enjoys every moment of his life after recent unexpected metaphysical rebirth.

Probably not, though – just name-cycling to lower the repetitiveness of text.

*Dainpdf*

His mind was there, which is why Hanno's providence misled him. That wouldn't have been the case with Assassin.

*beleester*

To be fair, Assassin can also copy plot powers to some extent. Black was able to get himself captured in a sacrifice play to help Catherine, even though Black was never in danger and Assassin doesn't die when he's killed. (I don't think it was Assassin this time, though. Assassin is described differently when he's revealed.)

*Dainpdf*

That was against a villain, who didn't have "providence" guiding them. Plus the whole "I summon you, black knight" thing.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, but the crux of that story was *Catherine's tragedy*, it did not directly concern Amadeus, only Cat's perception of him – which Assassin was fully capable of substituting.

This story is very much about Amadeus himself getting judged.

*Ein*

I honestly think Assassin is in the body of the hostage prince, either to kill Cat or to kill Pilgrim (causing peace talks to break down). Cat will probably gib Assassin in the process Warlock is probably going to die though. Black's death will probably be at the end after all the others are dead, solidifying the accords via martyrdom.

*RanVor*

That makes no sense. Why would he do that? It would fuck over everyone Assassin is supposed not to fuck over, \*especially\* Black and Malicia.

*MetruX*

Technically those talks, and even Cat alive, could be seen as bad to either Black and/or Malicia, so... It is possible Assassin would move against her or against those negotiations. The thing is, we don't know how loyal and crazy assassin is, if he is more alike the Warlock he will never get in between this unless specifically asked to by Black, but if he is closer to the Scribe... Then yeah, she could be assassinated any day now.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Then there's the theory that Assassin is Scribe all along. Though I have an alternative take: Scribe is Assassin. By which I mean Eudokia operates openly with her true Name and pretends to be the named Assassin. It just so happens the same powers that make you a wonderful background administrator also make you great at stealth kills and cheating death.

*1queenofblades1*

"Do enjoy your victory, White Knight."

...Black what are you doing? Black no. Black stop. Don't try and game a pattern of three. You aren't Catherine. That's her shtick. Stop stealing her shtick.

*oldschoolvillain*

He TAUGHT Catherine her schtick.

[shieldredblog](#)

I don't think pattern of three has anything to do with it. He's simply trading victories. Allowing the White Knight to "win" while winning himself at the other tower. He's simply betting his own victory against the miscellaneous Heroes will be greater than the WK's, as the Warlock will be minimizing his losses.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Yup, Above has explicitly allowed only Cat to initiate pattern with Hanno, last time Black did not get it either.

*Byzantine*

That was actually a mistake by Black. Cat is not squire, nor will she transition to Black Knight now. So who knows why Above did not let a pattern of three form between them.

*Wolfkit*

But that was back when Catherine was still Black's successor. It's not impossible that what went down at Akua's Folly changed things enough to allow a pattern of three between Amadeus and Hanno.

*Jonnnney*

I don't believe the above nor the below is capable of forbidding a pattern from emerging. It is the story that drives creation it what allows patterns to emerge.

Regardless Black has no reason to want to start a pattern of three with Hanno or any heroes for that matter. The only reason he would want one would be to extend his life, but he doesn't put much value on his life. Besides it is much harder to game the system when the rules are so concrete.

*stevenneiman*

I don't think that was a pattern of three, though it was similar. When Hanno pronounces judgement, he gets something similar to the last part of a pattern of three, where he is fated to win. When black tried to win the fight Fate and the Heavens threw a hissy fit about him interrupting, which was why

there was the backlash that nearly killed him anyways. This time, he's just allowing Hanno to safely dissipate the free victory in a harmless manner. Cat's trick was slightly different, playing two patterns of three against each other. The first one let William kill her but she had to be allowed to come back for the second, and the Akua was dumb enough to make her contingencies clash and give away that second pattern before she could cash it in. Also, having inviolate schticks is stupid, and neither Black nor Cat tolerate stupid, unless they can use it to get someone else killed.

Yotz

He *really* ought to send her a 'Thank you' card.

[Euodiachloris](#)

And a plain sorry one. But, the thank you card should have a mobile illusion of the horse blowing up in White's face. Because. 😊

*Shoddi*

As the Chief Vice Sub-Assistant Understudy Intern mage in the Praesi Department of Research, Development & Reanimation, I may have a solution for you.

We have developed a process by which we painstakingly engrave elegantly coded runes onto a thin card of silver. The runes produce a Ligurian sorcery-inspired envelope of the concept of folded time. Via a process of (mostly) non-destructive memory extraction and transfer, a brief 5-7 second moving image can be inserted into the time envelope and infinitely looped. When the user activates the card, the small 2-dimensional replay of the image will begin.

The current designation for this creation is the Gravure-Imbued-Filigree. GIF, for short.

Yotz

Bah! Gravure Imbued Filigree is a yesterdays news! If you want to use something closer to *the* cutting edge of modern arcanotechnics – use Animated Paratemporal Necromnemonic Gravures.

*Dainpdf*

This felt more like his schtick than Cat's. Catherine has a tendency to juggle multiple narratives and pull the rug from under people, while Black goes more with a judo style where he lets people get exactly what they want, but in a way that kills



them. He refuses to engage the narrative, as Cat said a few chapters ago.

[sengachi](#)

Narrative judo. I love it.

*Raved Thrad*

Or, as one of my friends would call it, Psychological Jujitsu.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

IIRC he tried to initiate a pattern of three with this white knight before \*and it didn't take\*—indicating that he's not really Hanno's heaven-intended target.

[sengachi](#)

I think he's intentionally hamming it up, while also being as over the top faux dramatic as possible, as a tactic to get Hanno to burn through his allotted heroic drama.

You can only pack so much heroic drama into a story before it gets stale and another narrative needs to take over after all.

*stevenneiman*

Hanno is a serious hero who stars in a serious story as the victorious protagonist. Take away the seriousness and the victory will follow, at least when it actually counts. It's just like what Cat did to the Saint of Swords. Laurence the mighty champion of Good is unstoppable on the field, but the Archer can take on Laurence the second-rate bully with semi-accurate delusions of grandeur.

*Raved Thrad*

I just pictured this entire story as a campaign, with the GM telling Hanno's player, "Well, you just lost several Plot Points there. If you're not careful, you'll run out of Plot Points and a mere goblin is going to kill you."

*MetruX*

Why did this make me laugh so much? Man...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Meanwhile, Amadeus can freely indulge his sardonically dramatic streak: 1) the official skull ring means bowing in drama-comedy's direction at every chance is expected, 2) he genuinely doesn't view Hanno as his One True Enemy™ and moral

antithesis (that's WB – and, he has evidence of this), 3)  
he's refusing to frame this confrontation as a grand clash  
between Good and Evil – it's a spat; an intense session at  
the gym, really.

[shieldredblog](#)

A paragon of Villainy.  
No rule unchallenged.  
No law unsullied.

*taovkool*

That sounds a lot more awesome than it has any right to be.  
Mind if I steal it?

[TeK](#)

Fascinating. I want to learn more about Assassin with each passing moment.

As I understand though, Warlock would not survive this battle. I do wonder about Black. I doubt that he would die, given that Cat essentially gave him a second chance, which is noted by Warlock. This chance is not so easily thrown away. Heavens might be stacking the deck in their favor, but their whole shtick is playing by the rules. They cannot not play by them, and so Heroes can't too, and there lays their greatest weakness. By rules of narrative causality, Black has to live, otherwise there was no meaning in Cat's sparing him. Wekesa played his role, what he has to do now is go up in flames. And so now he stands, all alone against two Heavens finest. His fate is pretty much sealed.

Black though? He has to at least kill the Champion. I don't know how the fuck Heroes missed out on the fact that revenge will be at least attempted, and attempted in full. Champion is bound to get what's coming for her, what with her wearing Captain on her shoulders only solidifying further her fate. And other Heroes are even more vulnerable. It's been mentioned that their Fate is not one of Crusades, that their being there already puts them at risk. Plus the fact that Heroes are the more vulnerable the more they are plentiful, and this is not a good story for them.

Also, I found it funny that Black story now is one of some kind of redemption. He is (allegedly) a father who betrayed his daughter, and now stands protecting her and his country against invading hordes. Wekesa, much the same, protect his family too. And I lost my thought.

I do wonder, exactly how Assassin masquerades as Black, why Heavens can't catch up on that, and why they didn't use this earlier.

*Gunslinger*

I don't think it was Assassin. The line about Nefarious suggests it was a body double sorcery like the one the Empress uses.

[TeK](#)

If it isn't Assassin, then it wasn't Assassin back when he played the exact same trick at Ubua?

*Forrest*

No, I do believe that was Assassin. The difference is that back then, Assassin looked like black even out of his armor, whereas here the fake was just covered in armor.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Ubua Ubua

Sorry but I don't put much stock in anything you have to say. How do you misspell a name you JUST FUCKING READ

*Raved Thrad*

JFC what are you on? Either you're on some seriously fucked-up drugs (in which case, keep them away from me) or you have absolutely zero ability at reading comprehension.

*Morgenstern*

It was just explained AGAIN on this very comment page just a few comments above, how "Ubua" is an IN-STORY joke mis-use via fault by Masego that Captain onyl strengthened instead of weeding it out...

... while a thing like "Chat" is NOT in-story at all. What the heck are you raving about "Ubua"; while you yourself were calling for "Chat"? Was the "Chat" thing meant as irony? o0

*Morgenstern*

And yes, I know the "Chat" thing is meant for Cheshire Cat, I've followed the comments. It's an out-of-story nickname by posters. While "Ubua" is IN-story and thus has much greater credit to be used... so why are people still railing on about "Ubua", while accepting "Chat"? It just doesn't make sense...

*stevenneiman*

I agree with Gunslinger on the fact that I don't think this was Assassin, albeit for slightly different reasons. Black essentially said that the trick worked because a majority of him was there, and my guess is that because he is a mastermind having his mind there was enough. He was controlling the double through some kind of presumably magical link, and it was his scheme that put it there. In a sense Hanno was fighting against Amadeus, but in a way that Amadeus could let him blow his free win on to no real gain.

Also, I have an unlikely but awesome thought about how he might avenge Sabah. Praesi have a history of commanding the dead, Sabah had an Aspect related to taking orders, and I doubt the Champion is expecting an attack from her own trophy cloak.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

That actually makes some Narrative sense as well. If he does this, he stacks "Avenging a fallen comrade", "Heroes artifact/weapon fails/turns against them", "Coming back from the dead for One Last Stand" and "Villain commander uses Undead Weapon" against the Champion.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

It also makes sense from a world mechanics perspective. When Ranger invaded the Dead King's domain, the three undead heros that she faced retained their abilities and memories. The same is probably true of Evil named, but there are fewer of them around because Evil tends to burn their dead.

*thegreatfeed*

Also fits with her aspect.

*MetruX*

Well, for one, Warlock is as much experienced as Black, has more power and is, arguably, harder to defeat, one of the reasons he is sent as their secret (not so secret) weapon. So no, he shouldn't even be in danger from those two upstarts. If it was Grey Pilgrim and the Saint, or one of the two with the Witch that should be his counter? Then yeah, lot's of chances for death raining today. The way it is it's more like they robbed the heroes of their victory here to get it elsewhere.

Also, that is absolutely not Assassin. 1. He said the bigger part of him was there, while Assassin just fakes it, as noted in how Cat could see something strange in him; 2. He was in a Story about the duel of them, he couldn't let someone else do it; 3. When they last employed assassin, Black did his own things while assassin posed as him, but here he was clearly in some kind of coma to control this other double; 4. He himself says this came from a previous emperor... And I very much doubt

other emperor would have done the same thing with his own Assassin, even if he did have the same capabilities.

All in all, I think you're not meta enough :V Go play some munchkin -qqq

*Metrux*

P.S. The last part is a joke, don't take it seriously.

### *Idiom Idiot (@AintItK)*

At a place that could be referred to as the Two Towers, the Legions of Evil are about to charge the forces of Good, downhill, and since they're attacking westward in the morning, with the Sun behind them. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mE3280hF-VA>

### *Raved Thrad*

I really can't wait for White Idiot to get his comeuppance. I admire how he's trying to manipulate the story, just like Black, but he's so damn lazy that he doesn't deserve to win. After the setup, which includes his past life research, all he really does is go with the flow and expect things to work out for him. Well, that and scream "cheater!" when things don't go his way. As someone once said, if you're not cheating, you're not trying hard enough.

It's a shame White Idiot can't appreciate how Black just shafted him:

"I'm going to use the rules to punish you."

"Okay."

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"Not following the rules."

"But you're supposed to follow the rules so I can punish you."

"Tough. Anyway, your friends are all going to die now. Later!"

"Raaaaaaaaaargh!"

On another note, this story is really making me hate the "good" (or is that Good?) guys the way Skyrim made me hate (high) elves. Bravo. You know the writing is good when your emotions get involved.

*stevenneiman*

Good does have to be capitalized if you're referring to the cosmic faction. I'm not sure if the lower-case version can be used for something like saying that eating vegetables is good for you. And yeah, a lot of the heroes are very unsympathetic. I do have to admit that I quite like some of them, like Champion. I know she killed off another sympathetic character, but she's just so funny, and I like the way she doesn't act self-righteous (like how she told the Tyrant she wanted to try

and impress lovers with his skull rather than droning on about how much of a bad person he was).

Hanno is probably the one I hate most, given that he basically gives the "just following orders" defense for murder except that he placidly continues following those orders after doing so. I don't think he's exactly lazy, so much is fanatically inflexible in his thinking. He'd have to be, since it's the only way not to go an ineffectual kind of insane from the guilt of his actions or the fact that the beings he works for are basically eldritch horrors with no more regard for human well-being than Cthulhu.

*Dainpdf*

Do remember that, as someone who met the angels, he's a victim of mind rape. Even Cat almost gave in to it, and she is \*Cat\*.

*stevenneiman*

True as that might be, I don't think it gives him much excuse given that he chose to be mind-raped rather than have to make his own choices. He's not like William, he actively sought out and seemed to be hoping for exactly what he got.

*Dainpdf*

He was looking for an ideal of justice after looking earthly justice in the eye and finding it wanting. He had faith in the system; when his naivete was shattered, instead of embracing that he sought to recapture the ideal. Well, he did find it in the hands of the angels... or at least that's what they told him. He wasn't searching for the angels. He was searching for an ideal, and he grabbed the first one he got.

*Agent J*

That's... depressingly pathetic. When his blind faith in the system was proven stupid and his naivete shattered he... pieced it right back together and threw that same blind faith at the first substitute he could find? Hanno sucks...

*Dainpdf*

You ever hear of cognitive dissonance? It's not so much depressingly pathetic as depressingly human.

*beleester*

No, after being failed by mortal justice, he decided to only trust divine justice instead. He doesn't trust the

system or anyone else, because they're fallible humans. Even Hanno himself is a fallible human, so he doesn't trust himself either.

(Yeah, he's got better morals than the Ashuran committees, but that's not a high bar to clear.)

But the Seraphim aren't human. When they claim to have divine knowledge of good and evil, beyond what any human can possibly know, they might *\*actually be right.\**

The belief that all humans are irretrievably sinful, or that true Goodness is so far above us that we could barely recognize it as human, isn't that strange or even that obviously wrong. John Calvin thought up something similar 500 years ago, and he didn't have an angel speaking directly to him to help things along.

### *Euodiachloris*

Problem is: in this setting, humans were specifically designed to *not* meet Seraphim approved standards as part of the wager/war/question. That's... judging the program for the network designer's decisions using upper management's blue sky ideas of how the system should work, not the network as it works on the ground, with all its tweaks, both logged and misplaced.

In short: seriously, angels – quit throwing a fit every time the modem goes wobbly and the game lags. You installed both the modem and an always online MMO.

### *Dainpdf*

"Was also thought by some christian guy centuries ago" is not exactly a ringing endorsement of sanity or reasonableness.

### *Raved Thrad*

I'm hoping Black or Cat, depending on who puts him down, sends him off with the words "you've been judged and found wanting." These "heroes" deserve a big dose of irony, preferably served with a side order of death.

As for the gods being eldritch horrors with no regard for human well-being, that's to be expected of gods. It's when "Good" humans lack all empathy that they themselves have no regard for the well-being and suffering of other humans, because "deus lo vult," that they become monsters. There's

nothing wrong with eldritch horrors acting like monsters, whether they be Above or Below – it's in their nature. It's how Good subverts the nature of their followers that the true horror lies.

Each time a hero, and other people on the side of "Good," have had leisure to reflect on the human cost of the war, it's always been "How dare they perform such acts of villainy! So many men dead, from horrors we've not seen before! All we want to do is kill them, and in turn they unleash terrors unimaginable on us and these poor men following a righteous cause!" Each time I read something like that, it serves to underscore that these people truly are monstrous. They may, indeed, be fighting monsters, but they themselves are no less monstrous, and the fact that they cannot see that is equally monstrous.

*Jonnnney*

"Judged and found wanting" would be a good epithet, but I'm hoping for "Justice only matters to the Just" and stabby stabby in front of the seraphim. Spitting directly into the eye of an angelic choir is more Cats style anyways.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Hmm... that line might be why a pattern of 3 did not form between Black and White.

The line, and the meaning behind it parallel with Hanno so well, it might be a final challenge for Cat.

*stevenneiman*

I agree with what you're saying about the Gods being arguably blameless for their nature. The real difference between Good and Evil is, I don't recall anyone being mentioned who actually regards themselves as servants of the Gods Below. They might be business associates of the Gods Below, or people who take inspiration from the Gods Below, or even minions of the affiliates of the Gods Below, but no servants. Whereas at least 30% of heroes, and quite possibly a lot more, do regard themselves as servants of the Gods Above, and even more than that take self-righteous pride in that fact.

But my original point wasn't that the Gods Above are reprehensible. Moral judgements are pointless against anyone who is so far beyond the potential for punishment. It was that Hanno had to sacrifice his capacity for critical thinking in order to allow the Heavens to subsume his will so thoroughly when they have such different goals than he does.

*Raved Thrad*



It's not just a lack of critical thinking, IMO, but a critical lack of empathy: not only can he not put himself in the other guy's shoes, but he (and just about all the other heroes we've seen so far) seem to have no concept of collateral damage, as inflicted by them, when it comes to furthering their goals. Three thousand dead soldiers? That's just a stepping stone to killing the Black Queen. The only time they stop to count the casualties is when it's inflicted on them. "ZOMG seven thousand dead! How dare she kill so many! It's like she doesn't want us to kill her!"

The gods can't feel empathy for mortals because they themselves are not mortal. It can be argued that they cannot understand the trials and travails of mortals because they will never face similar problems. That Hanno himself has suffered through some of the worst things that can happen to a human and still dismiss the suffering he and his fellows cause is what makes him a monster.

[hoyboy](#)



Literally all of this moralistic whining can easily be levied at "Practical" evil, Cat included.

[TeK](#)

It comes to the exact cognitive dissonance we've been talking about. With Cat, we expect here to have flaws. We see her as a Villain, but more importantly, as humans. While our perspective on heroes is tainted by all these modern media, comicbooks included, that we really can stomach them having flaws. I mean come on, they are heroes, why the hell they are not all perfect immortal Supermans with impeccable ethics?

It's easy to hate Good until you realize that most of the time they're fighting against people like Akua and Wekesa. You know, the ones who respectively deployed and invented Still Waters. And if you find no concern for human life and/or rights a problem, boy do I have some bad news about Amadeus for you...

*RanVor*

On the flip side, it's hard to like the good guys when they're D&D-style murderhobos who just slaughter everything that gets in their way and only get away with it because they happen to be pointed in the right direction.

*Dainpdf*

Uh... They're not.

A murderhobo just kills any NPC without asking who or what because they want loot and XP. That's not what the heroes do.

If you must find a comparison, they're like DnD paladins who err on the side of "exterminate evil".

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Good, as embodied by White, would think that it makes perfect sense to say "Kill them all, Good will know their own".

*Dainpdf*

We haven't had any indication of wanton murder from White. He's Knight Templar, perhaps a Well Intentioned Extremist... But he's not a murderhobo.

[shieldredblog](#)

He's not a murderhobo. He is however a religious nutcase so extreme that he believes all humans shouldn't be allowed choice or reason. He believes that the Gods are so above humanity that all human opinions and ideas are damned and pointless. Essentially he wishes for slavery so deep that its basically a rejection of sentience itself.

*Dainpdf*

I think you mean sapience. But yeah, Hanno is a nutcase. He's just the nutcase that doesn't let an entire city of noncombatants be turned into zombies so he might have a superweapon afterwards. One which summons demons. The things that damage reality itself. And, again, he's angel addled.

*MetruX*

I do think most heroes ARE murderhobos, since the classic murderhobo don't kill everyone, only the ones he can get away with. A good murderhobo will never kill the weapons shopkeeper, unless he can grab everything in the shop afterwards and not be hunted for it. In the same vein, most Heroes do like to go from a fight and a party to another, killing Villains and common people alike for their own reasons. Sometimes those people are not even on the side of Evil.

Hanno is not a murderhobo, though, I have to agree. Sure, he makes no actual choices and leaves it all for the angels to decide, but he also doesn't judge every single person that comes in front, neither does he grab stuff from the dead.

Champion, though? Saint? Hells, even Bard could be considered a murderhobo, if a meta one instead of robbing valuables...

*Dainpdf*

Common people? When have we seen Champion kill those? The only one we've ever seen put commoners at risk was William, and even in that case it was not guaranteed they would die.

And we've never. Never. Never seen a hero kill people for loot. Saint is violent, trigger happy even, but you will notice that for all that she actually protected people from the Watergate. As for the Bard, I'd call her Magnificent Bastard, really.

[shieldredblog](#)

Hanno has straight up murdered people, he reminisced about it last chapter. He settled a dispute between Crusaders by murdering one of them and presumably damning his soul to the Hells. He gets away with it though because being an instrument of Judgment makes him immune to consequences in countries that worship the Gods Above.

Also it's been said that Angels of Judgment are more dangerous and damaging than Contrition. If he starts losing and an Angel tells him to wipe out a city, he wouldn't hesitate for a second.

*stevenneiman*

The thing about Good is that it doesn't fight Evil because it does harm, it fights Evil because it's Evil. In one of her

interludes, Cordelia Hasenbach noted that Malicia was improving the standard of living in Callow, but she noted that only as an advantage to her enemy, and not even one she could appropriate for her own use. The other thing is that Evil, in the rare but vivid cases where it does lash out, it does so out of frustration and desperate futility, created by the fear that inciting disasters of the most spectacular sort is the only thing they can do that the forces of Good won't undo, without regard for whether they helped or harmed actual people.

A good way to think about it in my opinion is to imagine a world where 1% of black people become serial killers. A sensible person would try to figure out why in order to prevent them from becoming serial killers, and if that failed find better ways to identify those serial killers, but the approach of Good is to exterminate all black people. The one place this metaphor breaks down is that it's completely hopeless to try and exterminate Evil because there's an artificially imposed balance because all of the stories require the existence of both factions.

*Dainpdf*

If you pay attention to what the Pilgrim said, you'll notice that Evil rulers are apparently a hazard upon the morality of the people. Just by ruling the country tends towards becoming like Praes or Helike.

And while living conditions may be improving, do recall how much they worsened first. Think of Mazus and co.

Also, gotta remember that the people of Liesse aren't exactly enjoying improved HDI right now. You could say Malicia greenlit the project due to being afraid of invasion, but Procer has been under pressure from the Chain of Hunger and the Kingdom of the Dead for ages and they haven't resorted to massacres of civilians or demons.

*MetruX*

You're only seeing it from Praes point of view. There is, actually, much more comendable places ruled by Evil, since in all this continent Praes is known as the land of horrors and destructive super magics. Take Helike, for instance. One of the strongest in the league fo free cities, more foten than not ruled by Villains, with a nice quality of life.

Also, it's been noted before that this is the "small" continent, as in, only small powers dwell here, both for Good and for Evil, so there are many greater powers.

About Procer not resorting to massacres and demons? Well, they did resort to massacres. And conquering wars. And wars amongst themselves. Even mind rape by angels. The

only reason they didn't employ demons is because they can't, unless you want to suddenly find your friends, family and everyone nearby trying to kill you... So Procer is as bad as Praes, no matter what is said. The thing is, as I noted before, there are bigger and better powers for both sides, none of those two can be considered the common, they are the lower echellons. For exemple, we know the elves of this continent are only here because they are racist assholes and the rest of the trully Good elves banished them. Do you think a culture of semi-imortals who do something like that will get in petty wars like Procer? Of course not.

Thus, I disagree with the Pilgrim, Evil rulers can be good for their nations, as much as Good rulers can be bad. Because, as ever, Good is not good and Evil is not evil.

*Dainpdf*

Wait, what? Name one such massacre. Anything we can put on the scale against Liesse.

Procer is imperialistic and expansionist, and that's bad. Their nobility is corrupt and decadent. But they are not the High Lords.

You say they don't summon demons only because of the repercussions from neighbors. I want a citation on that. Cat won't deal in demons either, and that's part of the reason she can swing heroic roles every now and then. Also, attacking people who use demons is part of it. It's the right thing to do. It's exactly what they don't do in Praes. Or Helike, FYI.

If you want proof, note how Pilgrim basically offered to clear out that demon Cat pointed out in their first meeting. Because whether you see it or not, they do care. It's just they put Good above what nations rule the land. And if some people end up sacrificed in the process, that's unfortunate, and they'll try to avoid it, but at the end of the day it's worth it.

[shieldredblog](#)

"Name one such massacre. Anything we can put on the scale against Liesse."

That time an angry Proceran hero Contritioned a city because they weren't fanatical enough? What do you thinks happens to the old, sick and young when the rest of the city becomes living attack zombies?

Humbling of the Titans. No way they fought the Gigantes up front and won. Even centuries later, they still kill any Procerans they see, even diplomats.

*Dainpdf*

The Gigantes are said to hold grudges; plus, they apparently kill almost anything that comes over their borders.

And yeah, you can keep bringing up that one example with William back up, but while that is still pretty bad it's not a demon based hell weapon, and it was not (as far as we know) secretly stimulated by Cordelia.

Also, he was Proceran? I didn't remember that.

[shieldredblog](#)

Not William's failed attempt. During an Interlude chapter William reminisces about other Angels of Contrition that have been called down. Including once when Procer was going to sell their peasants to the Dead King to prevent him from invading. A Hero was not cool with that so she mind controlled one of their cities and sent them against him as a suicide army that never even reached Keter.

*Jason Ipswitch*

What leaves me wondering with Hanno is what his ultimate role in the story will be. I mean, he's a net character (for an inflexible Good Hero), but where is he going narratively? It worries me, because it ultimately makes sense for him to challenge Cat, but for that to happen, he really needs to beat Black first. And I don't want to see Black lose to such a hidebound moron.

*nimelennar*

The existence of the Coin of Judgment McGuffin implies that at some point, it's going to return an unexpected result.

So Hanno exists to either grant legitimacy to Cat's redemption story, or to realize, Wanted-style, that the heroes "deserve" death just as much as their targets and switch sides.

*beleester*

Yeah, for a while now, I've had my bet on Hanno's coin returning "Don't kill her" when he reaches Cat.

[sengachi](#)

Hanno spent an entire day living the lives of twenty one heroes who fought Black ... and that wasn't enough to prompt him to question the "force Black to obey the narrative" step of the plan.

Well I was worried about Hanno as a threat before now I'm sure not. The man's an idiot. Who the fuck goes twenty one (+1) rounds with Black and comes out of it thinking "alrighty then, what I need to beat Black is the right set of combat skills, which I will apply to his face as he meets me in single combat before our respective armies".

Good gods. I know Akua was derisive of the intellects of Heaven's swords, but this is a new low. Hanno thinks they're playing checkers but really they're playing "the pieces are coated with contact poison and also there's a car bomb under your seat", and he doesn't realize this after watching \*twenty one\* fucking people sit down at the checkers board only to turn people and explode.

*nerferf*

There was a reason Bard was leading this guy around, it cause hes pretty much an idiot that needs someone else to do his thinking for him

*Darkening*

To be fair, Black did already go toe to toe with him twice before. With tricks and ambushes and fire support, yes, but he actually showed up and gave him a fight.

*Oshi*

That dind't clue him in to the fact that it wasn't going to go his way....really?

*stevenneiman*

I really do wonder what exactly he did to pull that off. It would be child's play to make something that looks like Black, talks like Black, and to a certain degree even fights like Black so long as he controls it, but I have no idea what he was doing to make it so that providence thought of him as basically being there when he clearly wasn't there enough to be inconvenienced much by dying there.

I also wonder whether there was any particular reason for the exploding horse, or if that was just for a cheap laugh. I suppose it might be that the more up close and personal the kill, the more it would use up the judgement rendered upon him. That would also explain the monologue, making Hanno's "victory" as classic and perfect as possible.

[shieldredblog](#)

It was a Nefarious style soul puppet, like the Empress used to talk to Cat.

I think the monologuing was either him strategically wasting time or just rolling with it.

*Dainpdf*

Increasing the relevance of the battle. Cat mentioned a couple of chapters back (I think just before Watergate) that monologuing increases narrative weight and thus the importance of every blow.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Black had pretty much worked White's whole "be dead Heroes" shtick out before the fight. Which means blowing the horse up forced Hanno to switch "faces" right off the bat, thus losing access to a big (and ultra-dangerous) one and forcing him to adapt (which he isn't that good at).

Amadeus'd also use it to work out if Hanno can repeat the ghosts he goes for. Or not.

Also – pranking is a way of life, not just for April Fool's! xD

*Morgenstern*

Remember that bit about the eyes already being dead when the killing stroke actually hit? Black was NOT there during the actual kill. He was just there to get Hanno invested so much he couldn't draw back anymore

*Morgenstern*

So, no saying how much it would do to him if he \*actually\* would have to "live through the kill" of the meat puppet.

*beleester*

"Actually a Doombot" is a fairly common Villain trope, so presumably the narrative allows it even though it makes "providence" look kind of dumb. The hero has to fall for it, for the same reason that you can never thwart a villain at Step 1 of their plan.

*nick012000*

Calling it now: the Black Knight beats Hanno by calling him out while he's deep inside the life of a Callowan Hero, and getting them to realize they're fighting on the wrong side, and \*attacking\* the Red Flower Vales.

[sengachi](#)

Ooohhhhh, I like this.



*Allafterme*

The lancer was a Caen, the family that was Dukes of Liesse & the liege lord of the Vales. I don't think it will work

*Jason Ipswitch*

Ah, but that was with a very obvious Praesi Black Knight sitting right in front of him.

Put him between, say, the Order of the Broken Bells and an obvious invading Proceran force and he may make a different choice.

*Byzantine*

It does seem to be setup for that, now that you mention it. The deeper he goes into a past Hero the more he loses himself – and he is clearly losing himself utterly to fight Black.

*CaptainSemantics*

Or perhaps Cat, as Queen of Callow, does something similar to him

---

Or, alternatively, if he gets to fight Cat and tries the same way to rifle through the souls of the heroes she killed, the only one significant enough would be the Lone Swordsman. William is a truth-teller and generally opposed to any kind of Proceran occupation, so if she catches on, she may well turn him unto the other heroes (especially if Akua does succeed in redeeming herself and gets out to join the ultimate band of heroes in Witch's stead).

[Evgeny Permyakov](#)

>"That remains a surprisingly effective trick," the monster mused. "I really should send her a thank you note."

Awww, so cute! Black actually has a heart! In a sense. I wonder, what wicked thing it would produce.

*Yotz*

Of course he has a heart! Several of them, actually. He keeps them in the padded box at the back of the broom closet.

[jordanarc](#)

The White Knight spent almost the entirety of this conflict sat in his tent going through heroic lives with the explicit intent of learning about the Black Knight and coming up with an

effective way of dealing with him. The end result is a stock-standard heroic challenge to a duel and expecting a conventional response from the Black Knight.

Our boy White is an imbecile. Truly.

[\*daegone823\*](#)

He thought the Black Knight as in previous struggles would want a duel.

He thought he had a rule of three battle sequence

1. Black retreated at their first confrontation
2. Won their second confrontation
3. The white Knight felt this was his time to shine...

What he does not know is that Black was setting up Cathrine for a revenge storyline and he planned on dying. As Warlock stated Chat gave Black a second chance in life thus a new story has surfaced. One in which Black is back to his happier days. She gave the rusted gears in his head some grease. Thus Black has no need to face Hanno again in face to face combat.

*Jonnnney*

Remember step two of a pattern of three is a draw. And step three guarantees victory to the one who lost the first step.

Hanno is under no delusions about a pattern of three, his fault was in his goal. He was focused on defeating the Black Knight when he should have been trying to kill the Black Knight.

*werafdsaew*

To be fair, Black did try hard to kill the White Knight in his previous two engagements. The White Knight does not know the reason, and so does not know that the reason no longer applies.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

The Ultimate 5 Tips to Surviving as a Villain

1. Amuse the Gods of Above and Below with wit.
2. Read 1
3. Read 2
4. Read 3
5. Read 4

[\*MurkyTruths\*](#)

Can I frame this?

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

ye bby

*Silverking*

So that's the weakness of Hanno's power: strength and experience but no context of current events. They cannot keep up with the times, and they will fall for newer tricks. It's almost funny how accepting the other Names are of their situation. "Where am I? Wait, evil to kill, never mind." To paraphrase Akua, the singlemindedness of heroes is a feature, not a bug.

*Dainpdf*

Hanno had learned all of Black's tricks, or so he thought... But, as Wekesa said, Cat hit F5 on him with that knife.

*stevenneiman*

I hadn't thought of that, but it would actually make a disturbing amount of sense if heroes could just be counted on the try and kill a villain whenever Hanno dredged them up, even if they have no clue what's going on. I wonder if his power screens for ones who would take fives seconds off to think first and finds him someone else, or if heroes are really that predictable.

*Dainpdf*

I love this. It was so weird reading the fight. I kept thinking something was off, but never guessed the actual reason. Masterful!

Also, can we have a spin-off with the Calamities once this is done? They're too great not to. Love me some Maddy. Honestly tho, Cat still lacks the experience Black has. Compare what Black did last chapter to Cat's Watergate, for example, or how he completely subverted Hanno's narrative with great elegance while she at best gave the Pilgrim pause. Granted, the Pilgrim is probably a better hand at it than Hanno. Then again, the White Knight had so much narrative momentum behind him I'm surprised he didn't snap his neck falling off his high horse like he did. Finally; dammit, Black! You're supposed to use a goat, not a horse!

*Yotz*

"Is that the Carrion Lord?"

"It seems so. Although..."

"What?"

"Is he riding a goat?..."

*MetruX*

Man, laughed too hard xD

*Darkening*

I mean, making a lot of assumptions there that the calamities will survive the story in any meaningful fashion. The previous generation counterparts to the main cast typically don't make it out of stories very well.

*Dainpdf*

I meant with their past adventures. Can't have them without Sabah.

*Darkening*

I suppose seeing them negotiating with dragons and overthrowing cities while drunk would be a fun time.

*Morgenstern*

Absolutely. Can't see why the author thinks it wouldn't.  
\*shrugs

*Morgenstern*

Maybe something about it never being as good dragged out into a full story compared to the short glimpses giving us all kinds of ideas, somehow akin to jokes? Hmm...

*Shoddi*

I think they are better as Noodle Incidents.

[superkeaton](#)

Oh Black, you clever monster. And I fucking love that he used Cat's exploding animal zombie move.

Warlock, don't die, you have a husband and son to love.

*Rook*

I thought it was already pretty nuts when the saint parried darkness

This motherfucker just parried divine providence

[Euodiachloris](#)

Nah, he didn't parry it. What he did was bait and ambush it with a sneak attack. 😊

[sengachi](#)

He didn't parry it. He danced with it, slipped it a kiss with tongue, and then slipped out the back of the club when it went to get drinks.

*Jonnnney*

More of a deflection than a parry. Hanno used divine providence to gain a victory when he should have been using it to get a kill. He didn't even do his coin shtick. He really is lost without Bard to guide him

*werafdsaew*

Who is "her"?

*RanVor*

Catherine Foundling, obviously.

*Someguy*

Black "stole" Cat's Undead Explosive Steed trick.

[crysjal](#)

Cat is known for using explosives in Nexromantic constructs, in particular exploding goats.

*Forrest*

I know you meant Necromantic, but I am now passively considering who Nex would be, and why their constructs are so romantic. I personally think it's quite the fun mental image, of some Necromancer named Nex dressing up some zombies in a swamp for some quiet tea.

*Shoddi*

Thank you, Forrest, for that mental image. Now you've got actively considering... things.

1. In her Name dreams, Catherine has a swamp in her mind/soul.
2. This swamp is filled with zombies.
3. Cat's "evil" side, whom she named "Lady Backstab", also lives in the swamp and has control over the zombies.

Therefore, Lady Backstab is "Nex", and she will have the zombies dress up and serve tea. Also, she will invite Condescension Queen over, to apologize for that one time she knocked Queenie out and buried her alive.

*stevenneiman*

Maybe, but only because she know's Queenie is gullible enough she can knock her out and bury her again.

*Novice*

"Tremble, White Knight, for my power is truly boundless within reasonable limits." Fucking hilarious. Though this is something I've come to expect from Cats mouth not Black's.

*Novice*

\*Cat's not Cats. Darn it

[Antony444](#)

Brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

The Calamities are terrifying monsters, but damn it is so much fun to listen to them compared to these boring inspid and heroes!

The White Knight is truly the hatchet's man of the Heavens. For a man who was giving plenty of knowledge about Black's methods, he was really too quick to forget about the dagger in the dark. The Black Knight will never fight fair. The Calamities have not survived for so long without developing a frightening amount of contingencies. But the worst part is ignoring the strategic picture. Hanno sent the other heroes to the other pass without an afterthought. The army of Procer was once more divided in two thanks to him and the Witch of the Woods.

The irony is painful it almostt hurt. If the heroes had chosen to attack on a single pass and let the goblinfire block the other path, they would have been five heroes against two villains. The other legions would have been there, but the numerical superiority would have been theirs.

Instead the most dangerous heroes are on the wrong battlefield, with only Wekesa and a Legion to make a fighting retreat. On the other side, the heroes are going to face the Black Knight and two more Legions than they expected. This is going to be a slaughter... the Carrion Lord is going to add to his killing list several heroes I think.

Sorry Hanno. The Black Knight is in another valley.

Your greatest mistake was to underestimate the power of explosive horses.

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

When it comes to narrative in general and Named in particular, a numerical advantage makes defeat likelier. This very chapter mentions this explicitly: most of the Named involved would just

end up with mere side-plots for the duration of a mass engagement, and that makes them much more vulnerable.

Also, it seems to me that Hanno wasn't able to use his understanding of Black's ways because he drew too deep and forgot who Black even was, being more concerned with the battles his borrowed skills' true owners expected to find themselves in. He was not Hanno at the time, and those bygone heroes weren't in on his plans beyond remembering whom to switch to.

[daegone823](#)

What happened to the Hanno who along with his band of heroes fell from a tower. He had such faith that they would survive because it was so likely they would not. I had such hope for him he seemed like a good hero who was willing to get dirty.

He had the champion hero who clearly enjoyed killing for sport collecting blood trophies. The ashen priest who healed you although it hurt like a bitch.

It seems his defeat and encountering of the black knight has caused him tunnel vision. If he was smart he would have traded places with the grey pilgrim and saint of swords. That would have pitted him against Chat his arch nemesis. Then it would have pitted Black against two old heroes making it people who understand how to weave stories. By pursuing the "Black Knight" he is missing the true enemy the abomination that is Foundling.

*Oshi*

Bard is not there but really I expect the next interlude will end with Black's defeat or Warlock's death,

*MetruX*

I don't even see how this could be possible. Are you simply assuming that because things are going nicely they need to fall down? This is Cat's thing, Black has been full on victories for most of his life.

*stevenneiman*

No, I don't think he ever could have beaten Black. The insane ideology he has adopted pretty much requires him to swear off critical thinking in order to work, and Black can choose not to be an opponent so much as the ultimate test of critical thinking. Dumping the fight on people who didn't even know who they were up against certainly didn't help, of course.

*ericwinter*

You know, I quite like this chapter for the sole reason that it comes closest to something I noticed from the very first. Black talks about the lack of agency; how Heroes are bound to always follow orders and obey the Gods Above, while Villains go off and do their own shit with only minimal interference from Below. Now remember the very, very beginning of the story, when we were told how Creation came to be. "The Gods disagreed on the nature of things: some believed their children should be guided to greater things, while others believed that they must rule over the creatures they had made.

So, we are told, were born Good and Evil." What, I wonder, is wrong with this picture?

*Jonnnney*

Remember what was quoted at the very beginning was the book of all things. A book written by mortal men to spread faith in the gods above. Very little of that book is what one would call "truth"

*stevenneiman*

Technically, it doesn't specify which was which.

[blitzxsblitzxs](#)

So Champions is wearing Captain's skin on her head right? Her head and arms? And it is basically just a corpse. And dear Catherine is a necromancer. The implications are interesting to say the least.

[sengachi](#)

Oh fuck Black is going to kill the Champion with his friend's own pseudo-raised undead skin.

*Yotz*

More poetic way would be to make that skin her own. It even falls into Heroic narratives under the Tortured Hero archetype, "One who hunts Monsters" clause.

*stevenneiman*

I think you mean black is a necromancer. Also, we know from those guys Hye killed in Keter that undead Named can retain their Aspects, and I one of Sabah's relates to taking orders.

*Metrux*

Actually it was noted as really impressive and the first time she saw a Named undead retain Aspects, though we know dead ones do. Though simply relying on the ordering could give a



boost, even though it wouldn't come as a permanent aspect in this new unlife.

*burdi*

the map for upcoming war between Cat and Malicia

1. All The Woe side with cat
2. Black side with Cat
3. Scribe side with Black
4. Matron side with Cat (maybe)
5. Most Praes army officer side with Black
6. Ranger side with Black (if she join in)
6. Wekesa side with Malicia

Malicia position seems very weak, i wonder how the war will unfold

Maybe she even join Catherine since she has story to join The Grand Alliance, instead against her and face destruction

*RanVor*

I doubt Wekesa would choose Malicia over his own son. He might be an awful person otherwise, but he loves the boy dearly. I don't think he would bear fighting against him.

That would leave Malicia with only the high lords to ally with. Sure, they hate her, but they hate Black even more. They'd probably provide their support in exchange for revoking the reforms, and she'd have no choice but to agree. That would ultimately make her just another Tyrant madly grasping at power, sealing her defeat with the power of the narrative.

*Yotz*

Of course Wekesa would never turn upon his son. Though, he might try to "save" him from that goody-two-shoes no-bad good-doer Catherine Foundling, and consequently send him to his pocket dimension without supper.

[sengachi](#)

Malicia planted commands in the minds of all Legion officers, remember? #5 is not the advantage it may appear to be.

[frolamiz](#)

She way be able to invite the dead king to the party. It's not 100% certain since we where only shown a scene with him receiving a call right after Malicia said she would have to take drastic measures, but since we know the Tower has a hotlink to him it's the logical conclusion.

But again it would not be the first red herring of the story.

*JJR*

Perhaps it's just going to turn out that his hot pocket was done microwaving. (it only took like 100 years)

*Weroxx*

I would just like to leave my future pleasure when Hanno faces Cat and discovers that the heavens can indeed be cheated. She did it twice already.

*Yotz*

>With the dark and wicked spell of wick and cheap matches.

That's a thing of a kind lying far beyond the boundaries of the slipperiest of slopes of the foulest villainy! Troubling is that Black stooped to such a degree, for if he continue to tread this despicable road, next time he may even use the forbidden art of Black Metallurgy!

*Yotz*

PS: on more serious note, it suddenly dawned on me that using Black Metallurgy may be a really, *really*, **really** bad idea. Praes already got their first two Red Letters.

*James Adam Lenox*

Did they ever get Captain's body back? Because if they haven't I think the wolf skin is a red herring to distract us from the fact that there just so happens to be a wolf about the size Captain was when she disappeared from the story.

*CaptainSemantics*

I doubt that the wolf is actually Sabah, but the parallel could definitely have narrative significance somewhere along the line

*oldschoolvillain*

They held a funeral for her in After – I think that the cloak that the Champion took was an actual cloak, rather than Sabah's skin.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Its called out explicitly as Sabah's Beast skin in the previous interlude.

*James Adam Lenox*

"She was not wearing, for once, the wolf fur cloak she'd claimed from someone that was no wolf at all."

There is a lot of wiggle room in this sentence actually. Saying it's a cloak claimed rather than made from someone, also calling it a wolf fur cloak but then say that she was no wolf at all. Then again, Good is known for sanitizing and poetic language.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Really, *\*really\** good. It's not remotely ambiguous to me. Sabah only has a wolf fur of any kind as the Beast. And you can totally say that you "claimed" a beast's hide, and have it be accurate word use.

Like, Champion has been established as a blood happy murder lady. She would *\*totally\** skin a werewolf in its wolf form. Because it's a monster instead of a person in her head.

*Aston W*

I'm still waiting for the Gnomes in their space ships to appear and drop atomic bombs on the whole continent when the balance is broken.

Literally, the only reason for stunting technological development is to develop your own.

Reminds me of a certain Webcomic.

That they only appear when a letter is given remains the silent high point of the story.

Cat can fight and struggle. But not against neutron bombs.

*CaptainSemantics*

Reading this I realized that Black emulates Cat even better than Akua did back in the last series of interludes.

Which leads me to one inevitable conclusion: when Robber gets bored of running scorpion fights he should put on a Cat impersonation contest.

*Jonnnney*

Hanno went for the win when he should have gone for the kill a poor use of providence. These folks are stronger than the children who faced Cat, but they are still children. Looks like the most important win in the last book was Hierarch's banishment of Bard. Hanno is fucking up pretty badly without her guidance. He didn't even do his coin shtick.

Gotta say I'm surprised so many people are focusing so much on the pattern of three. It was prevalent early on in the story, but

it is only one pattern and given that it requires a loss then a draw I don't think any main hero or villain on the field is gonna aim for it.

My biggest take from this chapter is, looking at the Gigantes, quite a few races of good are fucking OP but just too damn lazy to fight evil unless it is knocking on their doorstep. That is two Good races that live for hundreds of years and can wipe the floor with all but the most powerful villains, but they just can't be bothered. Looking at this combined actions of the Saint of Swords it seems that the greatest weakness of those that follow the gods above is time.

[shieldredblog](#)

He was talking about the Titan vs Triumphant fight. That fight ended so badly for the Gigantes that their ruler Name, the Titan, is still stuck in a cannibalistic time loop.

*oldschoolvillain*

Arguably worse – he and his wife were cursed – one with endless hunger, one with endless healing. Triumphant was a special sort of monster, but one that I prefer to leave in the annals of History than have return.

*MetruX*

I think he can't use the coin again on Black? I mean, you can't pass judgement twice on the same issue.

And yes, I do agree people are putting too much stock into the pattern of three, it is not the only pattern we have seen before!

About the Gigantes, weren't they almost wiped out, and that the reason why they don't leave their place?

*Edrey*

great, one question, if providence is a force then it can be stolen right? or usurper somewhat right?

*Aston W*

Red Letter gonna be the great equaliser.

Any technological development and boom.

Great way to wipe out Nations. Am I the only one who remembers that?

Bunch of flying ships wiped out a kingdom. Black said that.

JJR

Without knowing why the Gnomes do what they do trying to manipulate them would be excessively dangerous. Sure, it seems like Procer could win this war by sending some spys into the Principate to start doing physics research, "On behalf of the First Price, we swear." But, we don't know how the Gnomes even know about the state of research on the planet. They might see right though the ploy. And if they get pissed off by the attempt at deception, it may be Procer that gets the apocalypse. Hell, if even if the attempt goes perfectly, they might be in the habit of destroying whole continents, not just the country the research took place in to make sure none of the knowledge gets out.

With only one incident of attacking and a handful of red letters to go on there just isn't enough information to be able to manipulate them.

*Aston W*

It would be better than Good winning though.

Let's see if Cat becomes a hero.

I can see Black planning it for a murder-death-kill event.

Destroy the World instead.

*Dainsleif*

"You cannot cheat the heavens"

White Knight i think you and Catherine need to talk. You'll think that she loves jokes.

*werafdsaew*

If a duel is a thing that cannot be avoided without cost, why didn't the Sword Saint just duel Catherine?

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## Interlude: Lest Dawn Fail

*"The moon rose, midnight eye  
Serenaded by the owl's cry  
In Hannover the arrows fly*

*Hold the wall, lest dawn fail*

*No southern song for your ear  
No pretty lass or merry cheer  
For you only night and spear*

*Hold the wall, lest dawn fail*

*Come rats and king of dead  
Legions dark, and darkly led  
What is a grave if not a bed?*

*Hold the wall, lest dawn fail*

*Quell the tremor in your hand  
Keep to no fear of the damned  
They came ere, and yet we stand*

*So we'll hold the wall,  
Lest dawn fail."*

– Lycaonese folk song, origins unknown, dated before annexation by the Principate

"Walk me through it," Marshal Ranker of the Hungry Dog tribe said.

She still thought of herself by that name, though her tribe was decades dead. She'd slain it with her own two hands, conscripting every male of fighting fit and taking them up north to throw her lot with the rebels of the civil war that enthroned Malicia. The matron-attendants, women and children had been split among other tribes according to ties of kinship, the ancient records of the Hungry Dogs sent down into the dark beneath the Eyries to add to the ever-swelling chronicles of the fallen and the failures. The Black Knight flicked those eerie green eyes at her, unreadable.

"You were briefed on the plan before we followed it," he reminded her. "You saw it unfold."

He spoke Lower Miezian with that slight burr to his voice that was the mark of Callowans and Duni both, one of the thousand reasons Wastelands used to look down on the pale-skinned westerners.

"I know the plan as it was told us," the old goblin said. "That is the surface. Tell me the underpinnings, how it was woven together."

It was a guilty pleasure of hers, to tease out the inner workings of her old friend's mind. The cold method in it was like poppy to her kind, cunning viciousness put to murderous purpose. Had he

been born of her people, Ranker would have killed anyone with the slightest claim on him and made the man her consort. There were still matrons in the Eyries that whispered he was utterly wasted on *humans*, a species whose idea of thought was laughable at the best of times. Broad-teeth monkeys who stumbled through Creation blindly, never a moment of their lives aware of how fragile and vulnerable they were until the Gobbler swallowed them whole. Amadeus, though? Oh, he ever slept with one eye open. A frail creature surrounded by a sprawling world of hostile demigods, he was the closest that misbegotten species would ever get to whelping one of her people.

"Is there a point?" the dark-haired man mused. "Already it has ended."

"There is always a point," she said, and bared her yellow teeth at him. "I learn, you learn. All rise."

His own words, these last few, thrown back into his lap. One of their very first conversations, years before she sacrificed her reign to earn yet greater victory. The glint in his eyes turned amused. That would not have been enough to ply him, in the old days, but Captain was lost and Scribe currently set to other purpose. He would speak. The urge was there for all villains, and she was providing him a culvert that did not endanger him or his designs. The threats had passed with the coming of night, though dawn would bring them anew.

"There were three forces to reckon with, in this scheme of mine," the Black Knight said. "The first was the heroes in the northern valley."

Nine slayers sworn under the Heavens, leading the assault of the crusaders. The Legions had protocols to face these, but not in so great a number. Though far from invincible, they were a mighty force.

"Great power on the march," Ranker said.

"At the time, significant only as an accumulation of strength," the green-eyed man noted. "By gathering together without a single unifying story, they stripped themselves of Above's protection. They made themselves *fallible*."

"But remained a significant force," she probed.

"That is so," he agreed. "And they would have become truly dangerous if they were allowed to turn into the rear guard for the retreating army of Procer. Nine heroes, facing the horde? Most would have perished, but at the cost of thousands on our part. Therefore, they had to be dispersed."

"Costly to achieve through force of arms," Ranker commented.

"Ah, but this was no heroic band," the Black Knight said. "Simply an assembly of heroes. And so, in the absence of a clearly dominant Named or a unifying threat, they developed a point of failure: lack of chain of command. Without central authority giving orders, the heroes had to rely on their personal judgement when presented with a choice. Judgement that was shaped by wildly different origins and cultures. There would be no unified response. To disperse the cluster of heroes, then, we needed only present them with a decision."

"The Tenth," Ranker smiled.

—

"O Great Destroyer," Legate Obasi said, kneeling at his general's feet. "The time has come to strike."

The ancient creature known as Nekheb let out a sigh, nearly sending him tumbling down the slope. Scales like midnight and eyes of gold that stood tall as a horse, the dragon was one of the living wonders of Creation. Magic made flesh, holiest of all the children of the Gods.

"I was just getting comfortable," General Catastrophe said, wiggling in its nest of melted stone. "It can wait until tomorrow."

Obasi had learned to understand the mood of his draconic master and winced at the tone. In court such a visible betrayal of his thoughts would have been disgraceful, but Holy Nekheb had never bothered to learn to read the faces of men. It was beneath them, admittedly. The dark-skinned legate still panicked at the idea that his general might decide to slumber then and there. It might be for mere hours, but there was no guarantee. After the Conquest the ancient creature had slumbered for seven months on the Blessed Isles and eaten anyone trying to wake it. The Soninke's predecessor had been stuck in the very uncomfortable position of needing to explain that to the Tower.

"The scheme of the Carrion Lord is in need of your greatness, O Peerless Ancient," Obasi tried. "Without your grace, the might of the Empire can only fail today."

The massive dragon clicked its teeth unhappily.

"This is true," they conceded. "You are all idiot hatchlings."

Legate Obasi prostrated himself, sincerely hoping no rivulet of liquid rock would make it down to him while he did.

"Your discernment is without rival, O Mighty One," he said. "Yet have the men of Procer not defied your greatness? Only yesterday, did one of their own not attempt to slay you?"



The dragon's nostrils flared.

"An archer," it rumbled. "I *hate* archers. They're worse than sea snakes, though not nearly as clever. You speak true, minion-thing. I name you one of my heralds for the worth of your advice."

This made it the third instance this year the legate was granted this boon. Holy Nekheb had some difficulty telling apart humans, he had come to suspect. Or simply did not care enough to try. Obasi stayed prostrated as long as he could, though he had to hastily crawl away when the dragon rose to its feet and spread its wings. The master took flight without further deigning to engage in conversation and the legate hurried towards the rest of the officer cabal. The other necromancers looked as exhausted as he did, even though they'd inhaled one strengthening concoction after another during the night on the march. The Carrion Lord had sent the Tenth Legion into mountains that separated the valleys north and south, and only a mere bell ago had they reached their destination. Beneath the cliff they stood atop fortifications could be glimpsed, walls and towers and some peasant bastion. No living host could have taken the hard paths through ravines and harsh slopes the Tenth Legion had marched through in the dark, but theirs was not the strength of the living. Only a mere three hundred of their legion drew breath, and they'd been the ones to trail behind as the undead advanced silently. Obasi gestured for one of the corpses to bend and sat on its armoured back, catching his breath.

"The Great Master takes the field," he said.

"They were in a mood?" Legate Kalaman asked.

"Settling down for a nap," Obasi sighed.

They shared a grimace.

"Well, the crusaders will know we're here soon enough," Kalaman said, brushing back her dark tresses. "Best we get the dead moving before they send the rear guard after us."

The sorcerers huddled together and wove their magic, taking the reins of the army spread across the mountains. Silently, inexorably, Legion X Horribilis began to climb down the cliffs.

Towards the lightly-guarded enemy camp.

—

"Some would stay," the Black Knight said. "But few. Undead and a dragon would be by the lure of promised victory. The Procerans would shortly panic, realizing they had lost their camp and risked encirclement."

Ranker sucked at her teeth, pleased at the cunning involved. That part had unfolded exactly as he said. Of the nine heroes leading the host, only four had remained when Nekheb appeared behind the crusaders and displayed his wrath. The rest had hurried back to kill the draconic general before it could slaughter the entire rear guard. The gates of the Twin had opened when they were too far to easily return, and out had poured the Legions of Terror. The sortie had run straight into the four heroes and been stopped cold as the four Named scythed through legionaries like ripe wheat. Impressive, but ultimately doomed. It took five mage lines assembled for ritual to drive them back, but back they were driven. From there, the steel wrote the song. Veteran legions under Grem's personal command hammered through the levies at the front until they broke and fled, collapsing the lines of fantassins behind them. The actual casualties the Procerans took, by Ranker's reckoning, were fairly light for a rout. Two, maybe three thousand. It was the enemy commander that salvaged the mess, riding down with her Neustrian cavalry to put iron in southern spines. The moment the front was stable she ordered a full retreat, the Legions in close pursuit.

The rest of the morning was spent breaking a sequence of holding actions by the Procerans as the crusaders tossed away men trying to slow the Legions. Heroes swelled those ranks more often than not, but they were offered the greatest of all insults: irrelevance. They stood proud and powerful, unbroken by the steel of the Legions. Yet the men died around them as they did, and they could not hold back an army by themselves. It was unfortunate that heroic presence meant the trade of lives involved always sharply in favour of the Procerans, but it was the trade of casualties for a tactical advantage and so had remained acceptable in Ranker's eyes. More so because, all the while, the Tenth Legion had been forming at their back. Nekheb allowed itself to be chased away when the heroes arrived spoiling for a fight, but by then nearly three thousand undead were on the ground. The heroes engaged as reinforcements continued to climb down, preventing further advance but little else. They were still fighting when the first ranks of the Proceran retreat arrived shortly after Noon Bell.

"Winning the battle was not the objective," Ranker said.

"Not at that juncture," Amadeus agreed. "There was a temptation, I will not deny. With the Tenth in the camp, there was no real chance for the crusaders to man the fortifications. Which were built to face the opposite direction of our advance, regardless. If I'd taken the field myself and we'd pressed the advantage, we would have slain a great many of them."

"You didn't," Ranker said.

"Because it would have been committing too early," Black said. "The second force to reckon with had not yet been neutralized. It would have left us exposed if we'd acted without considering her."

"The Witch of the Woods," the old goblin said.

—

The tower had cracked, like wet clay left too long under the sun. Wekesa still felt dismay at the memory. It had been purely kinetic force, that much he'd ascertained, but there had been no record of such a working in the Tower's scrolls and his study of the creational cascade had failed to divine anything useful. He'd tied the tower's protective wards into the the flanking mountains after the first blow, but all that had achieved was the powdering of at least half a ton of stone when the Witch struck again. There'd been few legionaries left inside, by then, but those that remained were instantly pulped by the impact. Warlock had been wary enough he'd moved out of the tower towards the mountains, and it was the only reason he wasn't dead. The Procerans had swarmed the broken tower, afterwards, but most of the legion that'd defended it had already retreated. It was all he'd promised Amadeus, and he gave it no more thought after that. That pair of spells had heralded the escalation of the duel into a higher realm of arcana, and the failure of his defence had forced him to go on the offensive.

More than an hour had passed since then, Wekesa thought, and he idly adjusted the bubble of force around him to dampen sound as the peak to his left exploded.

Illusions were allowing him to keep one step ahead. The girl had a working that allowed her to see through them – Dion's Gaze, he recognized – but she had to abandon her offensive to find him every time she used it. She'd followed him into the mountains, and now they could fight without concern for their surroundings. A storm brewed in the sky above them, this one not of his making. He could feel it strengthening, the lightning concentrating in a killing stroke she would cast down when she found him. Her casual shattering of mountaintops was an attempt to flush him out, though an unsuccessful one so far. Wekesa had been biding his time thinning boundaries to place his own killing blow, allowing her the run of the range. There was advantage in making her act in the open, as he now intended to demonstrate. With the storm now nearing its peak, the conditions had become acceptable.

"**Imbricate**," he said.

Seven-hundredth and twenty-second Hell. A hellscape of unending sprawling tempests, bereft of all devils save those who crawled beneath the earth. His thoughts burned as he oversaw the alignment, blood thrumming with sorcery, until Hell and Creation

snapped into place. It had been wise precaution to mute sound, Warlock decided, for the howl of wind was deafening. Lightning thundered down, hundreds of strands, and flashing lights danced across the peaks. The roar of avalanches by the dozens devoured the rest of the song and he laughed, runes shining around his wrists as he wove the lightning into spears and struck at the Witch. The murderous child took it in stride, force spinning around her and making a wheel of the power he sent at her. She released it when his strikes ebbed, released a ring of pure lightning that shattered another two peaks. As he rode the storm, so did she. Discarding any notion of digging him out of his hole, she called on the Helian Sun and parted the storm with dawn's coming. Scorching light burned all in sight, but destruction was an old friend to Wekesa. He knew it better than her.

**"Reflect,"** he hissed.

His mind spun, sights in the thousands flooding it, until he found the realm he'd sought. The most beautiful of his tricks, the one truest to the essence of sorcery. A lie told Creation: that its lay was as that of the Hell he had sought, as if they were perfect reflection. No great toil of alignment here, only the barest of efforts as he matched the realms. The sky went crimson, great shapes forming in depths that did not exist within Creation, and hellfire began to rain. The Witch would learn today why men had named him Sovereign of Red Skies.

—

"The landslides cost us more than them," Ranker said.

Amadeus conceded the point with an inclination of the head. As well he should. The last word from the Ninth was that Sacker had lost over seven hundred to an avalanche. While a mile away from the duel of the mages. Her entire rear guard swallowed by rocks, along with more than a few engines. In the northern valley, the costs had been no less steep. The mage officers of the Tenth had still been in the mountains when the two Named had begun slinging their spells, and half of them had been lost making their escape even as the battle around the Proceran camp erupted. The matron had forgot quite how terrifying Warlock could be, when let loose, but for all that terror the Witch had been every bit his match. And in their struggle, they had wrecked the Vales beyond recognition. The southern Twin was buried in stone along with most the valley before it, while a stray lance of lightning had hit the peak above the northern one, making half the mountain collapse atop it. That alone would not have cut retreat entirely for the Legions, but then Warlock had begun throwing down mountains to replace those he'd broken and it had gotten much, much worse. Half a city's worth of brimstone had tumbled down the slope of the northern valley after being batted aside

contemptuously by the Witch of the Woods, and there was no going around *that*.

Even now they could not be certain of how much of the Vales had been wrecked by what was already being called the Waltz of Wroth. Both passes were now closed, that much was certain, but scrying across the broken mountain range had proved impossible and so no fresh report could be had from General Sacker. Assuming she was still alive.

"Only the third force remained in play, after that," Black noted. "It was always going to be the most difficult to predict, as its nature was bound to be reactive. In a sense, Wekesa's enthusiasm was a boon. It created an obvious opening, and the Heavens never can resist a spectacular entrance."

"Militarily speaking, the entire notion was absurd," Ranker said. "If one of my staff officers suggested such a thing, I would have them demoted back to the ranks."

"That there would be intervention was a given," Amadeus said. "We were, at that point, winning. The Tenth weakened when we lost the officers, but Nekheb was still looming and we had them bottled up."

The Princess of Neustria had exerted herself all morning in the prevention of a rout, but when the battle around the camps unfolded she'd plunged back into the deeps. It was a simple question of room. There were only two gates allowing entry into the fortifications where the Procerans had placed their camp, and limited space within. It'd been impossible for her to get a significant portion of her host through before the Legions under Grem hit her back, and from there the beginnings of a massacre had taken place. The crusaders had trampled each other trying to flee Legion blades, and though heroes had attempted to hold the back Nekheb had kept them on the backfoot by making the occasional pass. Squeezed by the Praesi shield wall, drowning in crossbow fire and munitions, the Procerans had died in droves.

"The Champion was holding the line," Amadeus mused. "Ah, the pretty bait that was. If I'd gone to kill her, before the hour was done I would have died."

The third force had been the White Knight, riding through the broken mountains with every single horseman under Prince Kaus Papenheim charge the flank of the Legions at the darkest hour.

—

Grem heard them long before he saw them. His people knew that sound better than any other on Creation, the thunder of hooves. The doom of horde and clan, the mounted killers from the West. That these had sworn oaths to the First Prince instead of the

King of Callow made little difference. The odds of there being a usable pass after Wekesa and the Witch smashed apart the mountains were infinitesimal, he knew, but the Heavens had worked with lesser numbers. He'd been warned, that there would be a hidden knife near the end. His warlord's instincts had not dimmed with age. The Marshal of Praes glanced at the signal mage that had been his shadow all day.

"All mage lines for the Third," he said, "are to send fireballs and echoes in the pass, try to collapse it. And get Mok started on contingency Misfortune."

For any cavalry not led by a hero, this would have been an imbecile's suicide. The source of the charge was a narrow break in the mountainside atop a rocky hill at an almost ninety degree angle, all of it leading straight into a dark upright crevasse. With the White Knight at the tip of the charge, all these damning details would mean was mild inconvenience. Sorcery flared and the opening was drowned in flame and booming sounds, but no avalanche took. It had been worth making sure. Grem One-Eye watched grimly as the flank of Mok's legion pivoted to meet the coming enemy. Sappers ran ahead to sow the fields with caltrops as the two cohorts of trained pikemen formed in ranks. The ogre general's men were no Ironsides, but they were a heavy infantry legion nonetheless. Regulars dragged to the fore spikes of iron or wood and hammered them in a line three deep according to the standard pattern, angling them so they would be aimed at the belly of the horses.

As a welcoming gift, a pair of sappers with munitions-loaded crossbows shot clay balls at the narrow opening and green flames took to the rock. Thin was the hope that this would stop the enemy, but all eventualities should be covered if the cost was appropriate and two spheres was cheap enough. Mages, crossbowmen and sappers formed up behind the pikemen in good order, ranks of regulars serving as shield. Ranker's Fourth and the Twelfth had the front, so he could put his entire attention into this. The battle for the Vales would be won or lost here, and as Wekesa had so kindly deigned to drop a mountain down their only path of retreat there was no room left for mistakes. *You have to let them win*, Amadeus had said. *The Heavens need their due, before we steal it, else another path will be taken.* It might be his old friend was right, but Grem would not send men to die without doing his utmost to keep them alive.

The enemy appeared in a flash of blinding Light, evaporating the goblinfire-touched stone as the White Knight charged through. Behind him followed the mounted strength of Procer, pouring out like a stream of steel-clad death. He did not need to give orders in the matter of answer. Balls of flame bloomed across the ranks of the Third and hit the charging enemy, but Light burned and dispersed them like wisps of smoke. Crossbows fired in a perfect

volley, and these drew some blood, but none touched the White Knight or the men behind him – as if the hand of some god steered away harm. The horsemen charged down the slope with unnatural grace, not a one stumbling over the harsh incline or jagged stones, and so they entered the killing field. The caltrops lasted a single heartbeat before the hero raised his blade high and a searing flame swept before him, clearing a path. The sappers fired their opening salvo, sharpeners and brightsticks. It was like throwing an egg at a wall. Explosions that should have shredded men and horses instead merely singed them, the light that should have seared eyes into blindness was laughed off.

Horns sounded, deep and promising ruing. The horsemen took three volleys, before reaching Mok's pikemen. Arrows and fire, the billowing poisonous clouds of smokers and the hard bark of sharpeners killing less than *thirty*. This, Grem thought, was the face of the enemy. Of the Heavens putting their hand to the scale, making mockery of the strivings of men. For a single moment, as the pikemen clashed against the cavalry, it seemed like the legionaries would hold. It passed, pikes glancing off armour as the entire first rank of the cohorts were brutally trampled. In that first heartbeat, Grem One-Eye lost at least two hundred men. The relentless brutality of the carnage almost awed him. Horsemen continued to pour out of the passage and slowly the Third Legion began to bend. Like a man with a knife slid into the belly, groaning in pain. *Now, Black*, he thought. *Now, damn you*.

A roar older than even the coming of knights cowed the battlefield, and the orc grinned with all teeth bared. Orcs had never quite forgot that sound, even though the dragons that had once ruled the Steppes were long gone. Above, wreathed in the noonday sun, a madman was riding a dragon. And in the claws of that great beast was a massive chunk of stone, still dripping melted rock where it had been burned out. A silver arrow punched through the dragon's wing, and as it screamed another buried into its flank, but still the glorious bastards flew and down went the stone. Dropped in front of the very opening from which horsemen poured, sealing it shut.

"First Legion," Grem One-Eye roared. "Forward!"

*Invicta* was the cognomen bestowed upon his men by the Tower. Undefeated. They would not fail that name today.

—

"They managed to retreat anyway," Ranker said.

The heroes, even after it all, had held long enough for a retreat. Only two of the nine had perished, the White Knight joining his fellows to escape. The horseman he had brought were not so lucky. Amadeus shrugged.

"There was only so much victory to be had," he replied.  
"Papenheim came to us with sixty thousand men. He should now have slightly under forty."

The Legions had bled as well, she thought. Twenty-four thousand had garrisoned the Red Flower Vales, when the Iron Prince came calling. Sixteenth thousand now camped on the western side of the passage the battle had been fought over. Sacker's legion should still have the better part of it intact, but even so the losses had not been negligible. At least, she decided, five thousand in full. Against an army of mortals, the Vales could have been held against two hundred thousand until the end of time with the numbers they'd had. How starkly heroes turned the tide, even when checked by stratagem. Ranker shook her head, the two of them standing under a moonless night as exhausted legionaries slumbered in the distance. Too tired to even make cooking fires for what few rations they had.

"Has Warlock made contact?" she asked.

The Black Knight shook his head.

"He might be dead, Amadeus," she said as gently as her people knew how.

The pale-skinned man shook his head again.

"I would know," Amadeus simply said.

She left it at that, the two of them standing in silence. Grem's tent, she saw even from so far away, was still lit. The orc did not know the meaning of rest, even in his old age.

"We have lost the Vales," Ranker finally said.

Black laughed.

"There are no more Vales to be had," he replied. "It will take months for the crusaders to dig through the collapse, even with sorcery. Not unless the Witch intervenes and if she does..."

"Warlock strikes," Ranker murmured.

If he was still alive, of which there was no proof.

"If Hasenbach could so easily employ the Stairway ritual," Black said, "she would not have stopped at a single passage through the Whitecaps. Multiple points of entry into Callow would have been a much greater strategic threat."

That was true enough. The Black Queen's army was strong and well-trained, but it also had limited numbers. She would have been forced to allow one of the invading armies free hand in Callow



while she dealt with the other, which would have been disastrous on many levels.

"True as that might be, we're still on the wrong side of the pass," Ranker reminded him. "Our supply lines are cut, the full muster of Papenheim's reunited army is less than a day away and our only paths for retreat involve months of marching through enemy territory."

If they succeeded at giving the Iron Prince the slip, she thought, smashing the Proceran border army in the south and retreating through the lands of the League of Free Cities might be feasible. The alternative was heading for the Stairway, which was much less appealing even though the march would be much shorter. An army under Princess Rozala Malanza was retreating towards the pass, as of the last reports. The old goblin was not eager at the notion of forcing a narrow passage filled with hero-led Procerans.

"Are we?" the dark-haired man asked.

Ranker's large eyes blinked.

"You see us as stranded, old friend," Amadeus said. "I see us as freed. Callow is safeguarded for some time yet. No longer in need of our vigil."

The goblin licked her lips.

"And we're at the gate of the Principate's heartlands," she murmured.

"Come, Ranker," the Black Knight grinned. "Let's have a drink with Grem, and discuss our invasion of the Principate of Procer."

---

[erraticerrata](#)

A little later than anticipated, but here it is.

*Dainpdf*

Hope you have smited that stomach bug for its audacity.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Frozen cold in its tracks.

*RoflCat*

And its soul kept buried, for the day it might be used on another who shows as much audacity it did.

[doominator10](#)

Why freeze and bury when you could condemn the souls to one of the hells? Much harder to get back then.

Yotz

To use its frozen burning soul as a sconce, of course. Comfort is paramount.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Worth it. 😊 Gang canny for the rest if the week, mind.  
[Geordie dialect]

[Barthumphries](#)

I don't get it. Geordi La Forge didn't have a dialect.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Enterprising attempt

[Euodiachloris](#)

Google is your friend. See also the Magpies vs Black Cats (NUFC vs SAFC – Tyne-Wear derby). Geordie is technically Tyneside, but it's sort of cone to mean "the dialect spoken in the North East of England that still scans shockingly well when translating Bede's poetry into it).

Jeffery Wells

Whooooosh!

JC

Great chapter. Hope you're feeling better.

*octopusfluff*

Well that is proper glorious, it is.

*Redlaw*

This showed the great difference between black and cat. She fought to death and only obtained a bitter victory while he basically didn't even fight and obtained a crushing victory + a chance to counter them. Still she by herself fought against a large group of heroes while he would have surely died if he fought the same way. Lol I really like how their power level make them think and act in such different way. And I am really happy

to see how much she grown. At least in term of mass destruction she isn't inferior to warlock. And that despite her not being willing to use all the power of winter

*jonnney*

Can't discount the importance of fortifications and having months to prepare the field of battle. They both killed about the same number of enemies and lost roughly the same number of allies. The main difference was their overarching goals. Black wanted to kill many Procerans and get a chance to strike at their nation while Catherine was trying to only kill enough to force a negotiated retreat.

In terms of individual power I'd say Catherine has Black beaten, but Black and company beat the power, strategy, and experience of Cat and company.

*Dainpdf*

That's the difference in styles. As Black told Grem, he lets the Heavens have their dues, while Cat tried to subvert them. Black's strategy let him win without fighting because not fighting *\*was\** his strategy (well, the main component).

*Someguy*

Callow is a breadbasket. If Cat goes full power with Winter, the farmlands will be decimated and everyone starves. Her problem is having too much power and keeping it in check.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Winter is dangerous that way, and if I understand things correctly the fay winter isn't just abscons of heat and the land hibernating until spring comes. Instead it suck the life out of the land so when spring comes everything is dead and not even the grass will grow.

Summer may seem more benevolent, at first glance at least. It brings the warmth of the sun. It brings growth and bountiful harvests. Problem is that it doesn't stop. A tree can grow from a seed to old age in weeks if not days or hours. The wheat will be ready for harvest faster than it can be harvested, and the cycle will be repeated over and over again. But this depleat the nourishment in the soil and what was rich fields will turn into deserts, and the summer sun will bake these mercilessly evaporating any source of water.

The fey are not of Creation and both Winter and Summer are pure incarnations of their stories. The do not compromise or use moderation. Winter is cold and hunger while Summer is the warmth of the sun and unbridled grovt.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

I think the narrative structure of the Heroes present is another factor to consider. Cat was fighting a band of heroes, whose Narrative was tied together under the unifying figures of the Grey Pilgrim and the Saint of Swords. Black was fighting a general assembly of heroes with lack of ties and hence no unified Narrative. Arguably, this made the Narrative edge of Black's Heroes weaker as a pivot as compared to Cat's. With her goals in mind (not slaughtering or conquering the enemy), the military and tactical options available and how the Heavens had stacked the deck against her, I think Cat did pretty damn good here.

Also, consider the Narrative implications of Black's true aim of conquering Procer. Today's chapter showed that instead of 'Defensive, Protecting Ruler', Black was aiming for and is currently playing the Role of a 'Conquering Evil Warlord', which not only bolsters his Aspect, but is a better Narrative for Evil. Imo, this would have given him some boosts from the Gods Below a la plot armor.

*naturalnuke*

Evil on defense gets a last laugh, Evil on the offense is a force to be feared.

*stevenneiman*

I disagree. What I would say is that Evil has a hard time getting anything done without spreading ruin. Black just decimated a huge portion of his own land in exchange for a playground where he considers devastation to be a bonus, and He's certain he did it while retaining someone who is probably in the top ten for people in Calernia able to wreak havoc if let off the leash.

I really wonder whether his actions are going to help or hinder Cat. On the plus side, he's the sword next to Cat's cheap wine, and he puts a time limit on the Procerans rather than Cat, but on the minus side he's not under her command so she might not be able to offer him standing down no matter how desperately the other side wants it. And it would complicate matters if her mentor was ravaging the Proceran countryside while she was trying to talk peace.

*Matthew*

This story is good for Cat.

She cannot make Black stand down, but she can help defeat him in Procer. This changes the victory condition for the crusaders from "Invade through Callow and topple the tower" to "Stop the Praesi invasion of Procer."

The Gods above can wrest out the second victory which allows Cat and Black to win their actual victory which is Callow free and trading with Praes.

*MetruX*

Well, in a way, the certainty that she can't make him stop makes an alliance with her even better an offer, especially if given in a time limited fashion. For you see, if they don't give up war with her, suddenly they have two fronts to fight, two in which they already lost once. Doesn't sound like a good situation, now does it?

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Actually, at least three fronts: Cat in North Callow, Black in East Procer, and Tyrant in South Procer. And then there is the Dead King ...

*JackbeThimble*

Destroying the Vales doesn't really count as devastating Land. RFV is basically the equivalent of the Korean DMZ, it isn't economically productive it's essentially a massive armed camp. It arguably serves it protective function better now than it did before.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

This is good for bitcoin! I mean good for Cat. Right now the crusaders need to withdraw from Callow and stomp all over Black's forces. That's good for Cat. Then the crusaders need to somehow march on the Empire which funny story, would much, much easier if they could bring supplies through Callow and buy supplies from Callow.

So the Crusaders are leaving and then Cat gets a really, really nice bargaining position with them.

*Mike Porter*

It's even easier if they can move through Arcadia instead of Callow...

*stevenneiman*

Remember, their objectives were radically different. Amadeus sees everything he can as a battlefield, so his goal was to stymie the enemy advance and then go for a gut-punch that would force them to break off the offensive. The only peace he seeks is the kind where all his enemies are defeated beyond any hope of recovery. Cat, on the other hand, wants to push through the Liesse Accords, whatever they are, so she needs to have an enemy frustrated and trapped enough that they can't refuse

diplomacy but also not so utterly alienated that they would fight to the last when facing destruction. As a result, Cat couldn't go for the kind of tactics Black so gleefully uses. Heck, I suspect that Operation Bonfire was a much more elegant and fancy version of exactly what Black is about to do the old fashioned way.

*Matthew*

Black has a good idea of Cat's objectives and probably shares them.

If he does Bonfire, which he is doing now, then Cat gains more strategic advantage while not having to actually kill any Procerans.

Before she was trying to do a "Good cop, Bad cop" thing but as one person with one army. Now, Black is fully the bad cop.

He is doing this on purpose.

*MetruX*

The main difference is exactly the way in which it is done, the most important part in any story. If you think of a fallen hero story, but you end the tale before the fall... Isn't he just another hero? Now, think of the battle we just glimpsed: If the deaths of procerans had come before they started winning, how do you think this would've ended? The same applies to his invasion and Bonfire, the way Bonfire was to be done would've left a mark on Cat and made destiny itself act against, so the results should differ alot. Though, in a sense, he is much more vulnerable in a common invasion, since there isn't as much mobility involved.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Nope: he fought for a highly Pyrrhic victory for the Good guys, hence a technical loss for Team Practical Evil, not a win.

In practice, though, Procer just got itself a proctal exam in its diary.

*and proud*

Damn, Black's pulling a 5 armies and 1. He was never planning to do something as foolish as \*defend\* a pass. He was invading through it!

*Allafterme*

And just like that, the Carrion Lord removes Red Flower Vales as a geographical entity & turns a holy assault into an invasion of the Principate. I feel ashamed for doubting Black...

*Dainpdf*

As you well should. Now let's see how long Hasenbach can keep this invasion going with a fire in her tail and a Cat at her side.

*Oshi*

There is also the Free Cities to consider. Black on the offensive means Hasenbach will have to continue the Crusade while pulling her people from it's borders to hunt down Blacks army. Can anyone else say Opening for an invasion?

*Dainpdf*

They'll probably have to split the crusader army and/or use the detachment retreating from Callow. Cordelia would never unman the borders. She's lycaonese, and the lycaonese hold the wall.

---

I'm kind of surprised that the Tyrant hasn't attached yet. The deterring force of twenty thousand in Tenerife is the only thing holding him back now: everyone else is either committed, too far away or both. If he waits too long, he'll have to deal with the armies of Levant marching to the Vales.

*MetruX*

For one, he couldn't care less. The Tyrant of Hellike is exactly the old kind of villains that can destroy an army by himself, and he acts the part, so if there is ten man or ten thousand is not something he considers. In second place, he is not a military leader, to begin with. Ruler? Yes. Warrior? Yes. Mage? Yes. General? No. So, coupled with the first reason, it's possible that he wouldn't even consider it... Of course, it's a different matter for the rest of the free cities, but who will tell him he is wrong and when to attack?

[Dragnor425](#)

Wonderful

[tpdbooks](#)

Thanks for the chapter Erratic, greatly appreciated as always. Although I'm sure others would agree that if your health isn't great then more rest is preferable to quicker chapter releases.

*thegreatfeed*

And Procer just fucked itself.

[taliesinskye](#)

It's not over yet. The Crusaders do still have forty five thousand troops in Black's way, outnumbering Black's forces by more than two to one. Papenheim is more than capable of mounting a solid defense with that along with his hero backup.

*Decius*

Heroes on a crusade make a poor defense.

*Dylan Tullos*

taliesinskye:

Don't forget that the armies of the Levant are already in Procer and marching towards the Vales.

*stevenneiman*

You forgot something. Black is now on terrain belonging to his enemies. Before it was a carefully calculated decision to make a mess in one limited battlefield. Now he can let Warlock off the leash on any size area for any reason, so long as enough of his own troops survive to remain an effective force, and even that much could be sacrificed if he's within reach of something worth sacrificing his threat for.

*Oshi*

Assuming Warlock survives. He has however successfully neutered the Crusades overwhelming attempt to invade Praes. Now there are in effect three fronts. The coastline with the Thallacrossy, Cat's gambit and his presence in Procur. A fourth will likely open when the Free Cities strike. It is a complex game to say the least and if the speculation about the Dead King is right there will be a 5th front.

*Someguy*

Papenheim is on the other side of the mountains. While Black is in Procer. He now has a choice, charge into Praes through a desert filled with "things" to assault the Tower without a supply line or march back to Procer through Callow and down the Stairway before Black burns it to the ground.

I hope he chooses to march back through Callow so Cat can charge his army tolls to fill up her coffers.

*Nima*



Ha! Once heaven taste a win. They abandon it.

*SpeckofStardust*

Ya, that went about as well as I expected it to, that being said he's only going to ravage 2 cities before the narrative stops him.

Hope he chooses well.

*Someguy*

Cities...peh! Cities are just useless phallic symbols.

The critical targets would be the scorching farmlands (after foraging to resupply the legions) & the mines (after looting to pay off the dragon). Destroying the lifeblood of the Proceran economy.

[Arthur Hansen](#)

I'm pretty sure the dragon is actually an officer of the army. Yeah, might have to work around it's draconic existence, but it's actually the head of its own Legion, IIRC. Think about the nightmare that would be from his second in command (that is effectively the one to get him and his legion fighting correctly).

*stevenneiman*

We already saw how unpleasant it is. I get the sense that when General Catastrophe gets in a mood it's not a guarantee that her handler can get her out of it without being eaten or incinerated.

*Yotz*

The fine and upstanding officer he may be, it seems he sees his Legion as *his* first, and Legion – as distant n-teenth, if not n-tieth; if he is regularly reminded of the “Legion” part, that is. And spoils of mines and treasuries in question would be wrote out as officer's salary for the good General. With his second in command left to explain the excessive amount of said “salary” to Marshal Grem and Imperial tax collectors...

[Euodiachloris](#)

I believe “dragons will be dragons” is explanation enough for most bean counters. 🤪

[sengachi](#)

Do \*you\* want to ask the dragon to take a pay cut? No? Yeah that's what I thought. How about you keep the gold

coming and I don't mention to my boss the dragon that we had this conversation?

[blitzxs](#)

So it will be up to Cat and her army to defeat the Tenth Crusade and all of its heroes. The Woe vs The Five.

*jonnnney*

The 10th crusade won't have a path to even enter Callow for several months. While they break through the rock slide formerly known as the Vales they will have to contend with two professional armies sacking their cities, each of which is led by a Villain.

*Dylan Tullos*

jonnnney:

The Tenth Crusade isn't going to sit around a pile of rocks while Black burns Procer. They're going to surround Black, overwhelm his Legions, and kill him.

For some reason, people seem to think that "Crusade" means "we can't stop going forward for any reason". It does not work that way.

"Free Callow from Evil" is one of the Crusade's main objectives. "Kill Black" is another main objective. Black has made it temporarily impossible to get to Callow, and very easy to get to Black. So they'll take a rain check on Callow and kill Black.

*Matthew*

What Black is probably trying to do is change the victory condition for crusade to "Kill Black and stop the invasion of Procer."

The Heavens can give this victory to the Crusaders and it will keep Callow and Praes protected.

*Oshi*

A couple of things. Black will expect this and has at every tturn made it his business never to give a fight when he doesn't have to. What do you want to bet they will spend months chasing him while he does nothing but runs around making people scared. Every month they waste on a chase for Black is a month that Malicia blunts he Thallocrosy and Cat has to recover/make her gambit. We've also been told multiple times that one fo the biggest strategies for Black is to sow a as much chaos as possible. By doing so he can

shape the narrative to force it into paths that help him instead. This is a brilliant bit of self immolation on Blacks part.

### *Metruux*

Why does people keep saying there is no path to invade Callow? The Stairway still exist. Sure, Cat has a plan, it's not a surprise anymore, and they got kind of a treaty... But that has nothing to do with the paths to enter Callow. Also, Procer is not the only one in this Crusade, I'm pretty sure more fronts will be opened as the war deepends, and the sea is a good bet of where more troops and heroes could come from.

### *Argentorum*

The stairway is no longer protected Narratively, however. Which means that it is an incredibly vulnerable choke point. Even leaving aside the possibly of dropping a mountain or (yet another) lake on it during the crossing, Cat can have an army there before the first foot steps onto Callowan soil. And then you're just feeding more men into a meat grinder.

Invading through the free cities is also out, due to Hierarch and Tyrant. If a sea invasion was feasible and sustainable, I expect the Baalites would have already launched it. Remember that they're on the other side of the continent, so without a land army to keep the legions tied up in Callow, the Empire can just slaughter the sailors as the come ashore.

### *Jane*

So, the Black Knight is attempting a poor person's Bonfire, eh? I don't know... Hearing about a raiding army striking behind enemy lines like this sounds like it's just *begging* for the White Knight to intervene when it becomes most inconvenient. Not to mention that he can replenish food and arms as he takes a couple of cities, but he has no way of replenishing the munitions that are so important to Legionary doctrine.

Well, if he can give the enemy the slip after a couple of high-profile targets, it should still inflict heavy damage to the First Prince's political base, and compel the recall of a Proceran army to oppose him, but... The army sent to Callow is already on the way back, and the army sent through the Vales is already stuck as a result of the Waltz of Wrath, so I'm uncertain as to the tactical advantage there.

Shutting down the Vales as a viable pass is of great strategic value, and doing *something* while Procer is lightly guarded is

certainly better than just slinking away, of course; I'm just not really seeing how this is a great opportunity for them unless they're, like, planning on taking the capital and compelling Procer to withdraw from the Crusade at swordpoint, or something like that. If they're not able to hold ground, and it doesn't sound like they're in a position to do so, it seems to me like any advantage they can secure while in Procer will be limited, while putting themselves at great risk.

Of course, given that they have a couple of the finest military minds of their generation with them, I quite imagine that they'll find *something* important to accomplish while in Procer.

Incidentally, it rather sounds like both Cat and Black's armies have been quite thoroughly thrashed at this point; how many Legions were left with Malicia? If they don't get a bit of time to rebuild (which they likely just accomplished here, admittedly), the Empire may have been pushed near the breaking point after losses this severe. Well, there's a reason that they were desperate to avoid a Crusade... It's not exactly easy to fight an international coalition while you have no allies. Having bought a year's breathing room from any attack from the South is a pretty big win.

I wonder who benefits most from a delay, though.... Just from a general strategic perspective, not a Narrative perspective. On the one hand, nations only loosely committed to the Crusade are more likely to drop out if progress stalls and focus on more local issues, especially since logistics are *such* a huge pain in a pre-industrial society... But on the other hand, those nations that *do* stay not only get more time to attract and arm recruits, but also improve their coordination with other nations involved in the Crusade, something that they were generally miserable at. Of course, Malicia is quite adept at the espionage and diplomacy games, and I imagine giving her a year to work on the tensions inherent to the Crusades could cause the whole thing to fall apart just from *her* efforts alone – or at least winnow off a couple of the most important nations.

I guess it's rather moot, since there's no way that anyone involved is *actually* going to get a year of relative downtime in this novel, but it's interesting to think of how this could have played out if it *wasn't* being guided by both Narrative and narrative.

*Dainpdf*

The thing is Black is already in Cordelia's territory, which he can sack, burn, pillage etc, while she's still in Callow. The White Knight could certainly double back to try to foil Black, but the latter would probably just weave around him and the Crusade would be that much weaker for it. Going by how this went, there was no holding that pass. The

best they could do was blunt the invaders' power and light a fire in their pants.

*Jane*

Yeah, like I said, it's better than doing *nothing* against Procer when the opportunity is handed to them on a silver platter like this, and I don't know that there was any other way of handling the Vales (if for no other reason than there's no realistic way to get the Witch and their Warlock to fight elsewhere, and they both seem to love collateral damage).

It's just that the Black Knight seems to see this as a great opportunity, and... Well, I *don't*, until they reveal some more significant underlying objective or a way of receiving supplies and reinforcements. It gives them some nice targets of opportunity before heading back, but if they commit too much to raiding Procer, that puts them in a horrible Narrative.

*Dainpdf*

Do remember Procer is projected to have a hard harvest this year, and they still have to deal with the Chain of Hunger and the Kingdom of the Dead (which *\*we\** know is stirring, so Black might know, too).

Burning their fields may make keeping up the war effort untenable, especially with those forty thousand dead, a portion of whom we're peasant levies.

*Jane*

True, but... "The Hero Stops the Pillaging Bandits" is a *super* classic story, and strong enough that it can allow even a farm boy to defeat seasoned warriors. If he's just aiming for general pillaging, not only is that not really an "invasion" of any sort, it raises *so many* death flags for him. I don't know that he could actually accomplish enough damage before he'd be caught.

Generally speaking, aiming for extensive destruction, even in a military context, firmly sets the Narrative against a Villain.

*Dainpdf*

But can Hanno get into that story when he's already committed to the Crusade narrative? Plus, as Black had stated (and done), there are ways to get around turning the destruction of a place into a narrative about the destruction of said place.

Jane

It wouldn't surprise me... I don't know if subplots are a "thing" in the Narrative of the setting, but rescuing peasants from marauders is a common element in a larger story. Even if they aren't, though, we know a lot of the heroes associated with the Crusade aren't really properly tuned in to the story of the Crusade, and could adopt the role. Or an entirely new hero could spring up to confront him – it's a *really* common origin story. Even if I doubt a freshly minted hero could kill him, they could slow his army down enough for the White Knight's army to catch up.

As for turning it into a story *about* destruction... I just don't think Procer's farmland has enough narrative weight to make that work. I would think it would need to be a decently sized city for that to work, or some sort of landmark – like a famous cathedral, or the building the Assembly meets in. I guess maybe razing some prized vineyards for a famous wine, but... That would be stretching it, and also wouldn't really help with the rest of the farmland they'd need to wreck.

Well, the Warlock could probably make it all *spectacular* enough to work, despite the lack of narrative weight, but he's needed to ensure that mages can't clear the pass.

*Dainpdf*

I meant he can destroy the countryside without falling into a story about him destroying the countryside and which would allow a hero to get him. If he sidesteps the story, no heroic intervention... Which is how he has operated all these decades.

Jane

Ah, my mistake. I don't know, though... It'd be difficult enough to raze the countryside while pursued by multiple armies in their home territory. To do so while tricking the Narrative on top of that... It sounds difficult, to me.

*Dainpdf*

Well, I don't think the levantines will go too far out of their way to solve Procer's problems, and I've argued the main Crusader army can't turn back without repercussions. So he'd mostly be chased by the low morale, still-crossing Malanza army, plus maybe some detachments from Papenheim

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

Will you stop saying that the Levantines are just going to look away while Black burns Procer? They joined the Crusade, and the Grey Pilgrim obviously wants them to fight Evil. Black is Evil, he's in Procer, and they're going to do their job.

I don't know where you got the idea that Levant needs to love Procer to hate Evil, or that there's some kind of rule in Crusades that you have to go straight to the Tower without pausing to, say, fight the Evil army directly in your path.

Euodiachloris:

It may not be banditry, but it's still an Evil army robbing farmers after invading a Good nation. This is not a Narrative that ends well for Villains.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Can you really call banditry when it is a military action in an official, ongoing war and performed by known enemy battalions who have been cut off from an obvious route back to base (purely as a result of collateral battle damage, guv), though? Nor is it kicking the locals specifically to nick their stuff with a for-profit motive.

Getting back Home may give plenty of excuses to get from A to a port that will allow them to get to H without getting accidentally dead along the way.

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

Pappenheim's army is right next to Black, and the armies of the Levant are moving into southern Procer.

Even if Black manages to get around Pappenheim, he'll be caught between the Prince's forces and the Levantines. With Rozala's forces returning through the Stairway, the Crusaders will have him completely outnumbered and surrounded.

When invading another country, it helps to have an advantage in numbers or mobility. The Legions are notoriously weak on cavalry, so they can't simply race through Procer and burn everything in their path. They're

already outnumbered by Pappenheim, and he can expect reinforcements, while the Praesi just wrecked the only possible path of retreat.

I can't see any way for this to work out well. "Taking the fight to the enemy" sounds good until you realize that Black was abandoning a strong defensive position to fight in the open field against an enemy that vastly outnumbers him and has more and better cavalry. That's just a bad idea, no matter how you try to explain it.

### *Bookworm*

As Cat and company discussed, the armies of Procer are SLOW. They will have to use their cavalry to harry the legions, because the Procer infantry would never be able to keep up if the Praesi are allowed to march at will. Black is going to evade the armies, bait the heroes, and generally lay waste to the countryside.

While this would be detrimental to him and his army as he will eventually be cornered, it plays right into supporting (1) Cat by making her seem more reasonable and (2) Black's ultimate goal of twisting the Story (which again goes back to (1) and supporting Cat). Don't forget that he views himself as just another tool; while he would probably like to preserve himself for utility's sake, he would not be above sacrificing everyone including himself if it helped him achieve his goal.

Of course, there is still the possibility of finding a way for him and his army to survive as long as his part in the story remains relevant. However, I have this feeling that he is going to use himself and his colleagues to clear the way for his protege.

### *Dainpdf*

Pappenheim can't really pursue Black without giving up on having the Crusade at all, which would be a PR nightmare for Cordelia. No, they're committed there. They could send detachments, but turning around and just going after Black on a merry chase would already be defeat.

As for the "strong defensive position, it's been replaced by an impassable pile of rocks. In a way, it's Creation's way of telling Cordelia she can't have two entries into Callow. Open another and the first gets closed.

### *Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:



Black IS the Crusade. They're not fighting over rocks or fields; the objective of the Tenth Crusade is to cast down the Dread Empire. Killing Black is infinitely more central to that goal than taking a mountain pass or a few fields in the north of Callow.

Everyone seems to be obsessed with the idea that the Crusade can't possibly "retreat", but they're not retreating. Black is invading the Principate, and they're going after him. In what world is pursuing your greatest enemy a "retreat"?

The Levantine Crusaders are already in southern Procer, so they can move south to attack Black while Pappenheim approaches from behind.

*Dainpdf*

They're going after the Empire because Malicia surprised them with a doomsday weapon (both Still Water and the hellgate thing), to ensure that it is destroyed and others of its kind won't be deployed. Killing Black doesn't accomplish much in that regard; hell, the Warlock is a higher priority target in this regard.

Turning back now would betray what actually brought the coalition together. Levante doesn't care that much about Black invading Procer; they care about undetectable alchemical zombification, insta hellgates on their capital, and whatever else is in the dark skies protocols.

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

Killing Black isn't vital because he's the one making superweapons; killing Black is essential because he's the one guarding the people who make superweapons.

Trying to rush at the squishy wizards doesn't do you any good if there's a big man in plate mail who keeps getting in your way. Sometimes you have to kill the tanks before you can take out the casters. Black has been very successful at keeping the Crusaders out of the Dread Empire; at some point, it's more effective to kill him and then invade rather than constantly letting him thwart your invasions.

*Dainpdf*

He got in their way \*once\*, and now he's not in the way anymore. You talk like they've been beaten back again and again and again.

By the way, "go for the wizards" is exactly what you do when you can. The tanks are built to take it and the wizards will rain fire (or worse) on you if not taken out.

Also, once again, I'm pretty sure Levante is not down with having lakes dropped in their people to chase down the tank.

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

There's a giant pile of rocks in their way now. They could sit around the rocks while Black burns Procer, or they could hunt him down and kill his army.

I agree that targeting the wizards directly is a better approach. As long as the Legions are in the way, it isn't possible. Kill the Legions, and it becomes possible to actually get at the Tower.

Black and the Calamities are the hero-killers who kept Callow from rising. Black build the Legions that conquered Callow, and he held the Vales against the Crusade. By killing him, they take away the Dread Empire's warlord, their great military reformer, and the leader of a legendary band of hero killers. He is the most dangerous Villain in Praes, and his death will seriously wound the Dread Empire.

Every Levantine we've seen views the Grey Pilgrim with reverence and adoration. He's telling them that they need to fight this Crusade, and that Evil will triumph if they do nothing. If he tells the Levantine armies to fight through hellfire, they'll do it.

*MetruX*

Well, when you come back to it, he is now a dragon rider and one of his Aspects is Conquer... Yes, I can very much see it going better than the defence, since any story about a dragon, or his rider, defeated, is when they are attacked. There is no story about a dragon rider defeated while attacking. Yes, the common sense says "Fuck, Black is gonna die" but even his allies see this as an opportunity, not a bane... Don't you think they got something in their minds? 😊

### Euodiachloris

A Crusade that keeps having to change its goals on the fly while crossing it's fingers behind its back is a Crusade that will get very dark jokes made about it by historians, thanks to its abysmal failure to meet any of them by any measure whatsoever. \*points at the Fourth Crusade as the preeminent example of a decidedly unholy, political mess on badly grilled toast\*

*Dylan Tullos*

Euodiachloris:

The Crusade's goals haven't changed. Their military plans are changing.

This is common sense. The leaders of the Crusade are not forced to advance in a straight line, ignoring the giant pile of rocks in their way. Black has come out to fight them in Procer, so they'll fight him in Procer. What kind of general doesn't amend their strategy when their enemy does something unexpected?

The Fourth Crusade was a disaster because of Proceran backstabbing. So far, Procer has been utterly dedicated to the Crusade and loyal to their allies. They've taken the lion's share of the casualties, and everyone else knows it.

"Destroying the enemy army" is definitely a strategic goal of the Crusades. That enemy army is now coming towards them. That's an advantage, not a problem.

### Euodiachloris

I don't think the Crusade was called simply "to kick Praesi arse, drink beer and be back by dinner", though. As I recall, it was "free Callow of the usurper Black Queen, destroy the Calamities and kill the Empress before she destroys us using a superweapon".

No superweapon; the Black Queen turns out to have Callowan support and is willing to join the Alliance and the Calamaties are happy playing tag in Procer and other places, while the Crusade isn't even pointing itself at the Tower at the moment...

Um...

*Dylan Tullos*

Euodiachloris:

"Destroy the Calamities" is one of their main objectives, and look! The leader of the Calamities just marched into Procer with an army behind him. Seems like that one should go to the top of the list.

Your whole idea is that the Crusade is a "failure" if it can't accomplish all of its objectives at the same time, but there's no reason they can't kill Black and then go after the Tower. If the Villains come out to meet you, there's no reason not to oblige them.

The Calamities will be less happy when the Crusade converges on Black and his army. They've already lost a third of the five legions they started with, and Papeheim is right next to them.

The problem with "playing tag" is that sooner or later, you get caught.

### *Euodiachloris*

You misread me: the goal was to defeat the Calamities in Praes as stepping stones to take the Empress down. That was the narrative.

But, chasing them all over the continent, gradually whittling them down? This isn't the glorious battlefield of intent. Because anything could happen, anywhere. It's turning into chasing the shaggy underdog on the Crusaders. In those situations, even the goal of "destroy the Calamities" is likely to change on them as the chase across Procer precedes. And, they *still* aren't taking the Empress in the Tower on, let alone destroying the keys to the supposed weapon that could kill them all... if it was in one piece (which it isn't).

### *Dylan Tullos*

Euodiachloris:

I agree that the original plan was to defeat the Calamities in Praes (or the Vales) on the way to the Empress.

But no plan survives contact with the enemy. Black changed the game, and now the Crusaders have to adapt. It isn't neat or pretty, but they have a substantial advantage now that they aren't fighting in a fortified mountain pass.

Ashur will continue to raid the Wasteland and apply political pressure to Malicia. The rest of the

Crusade will have to kill Black and his Legions before they can resume the march on the Tower. Things aren't going according to script, but wars usually don't. Fortunately, the Crusade doesn't depend on a perfect, inflexible plan; they rely on having more armies, more Heroes, and the Bard on their side.

*esryok*

Think 'Chloris meant the real-world Fourth Crusade, in which the crusader army went to war for Muslim-occupied Jerusalem but after... events... ended up sacking the Christian city of Constantinople instead.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Yup. Worst. Crusade. Ever. (Even tallying the Northern Crusades up.) ;P

*Someguy*

You forget Scribe is out on a mission. Me, I think she's been sent to Delos to go Puppeteer Parasite on their Secretariat. Her Name and capabilities would be perfect for it.

*Dainpdf*

Is there much sense in influencing any of the free cities with a Hierarch in place?

*Someguy*

Language and specific legalese is important as shown during Cat's "negotiations" for truce.

Even if Scribe doesn't Kilgrave the Secretariat's Writs in Delos, she can be sent as an Attorney for Black's interests to Hierarch to counter Kairos' Stupid Evil influence.

*Dainpdf*

He's more Chaotic Evil mixed with Beware the Silly Ones. And people have tried to influence Hierarch, if you've missed it.

*Someguy*

If anyone is familiar with Bellerophon laws it would be Scribe. Influencing Hierarch with bribes/benefits like the other idiots is just stupid. Interacting with Hierarch like Delos 'functioning' on Bellerophon laws will be the closest thing to actual communication and co-operation.

*Dainpdf*

If neither Malicia nor the Bard had any luck getting anything one him, I don't see Eudokia succeeding. Who knows, though. You may be right.

*burdi*

i think its because black never truly intent to invade the principate

in the 2 chapter before he said that he act accordingly to catherine war strategy, so i think he just want to give them (crusade+army of callow) a reason to band together, as we are know that catherine aiming to join The Grand Alliance of Procer, this attack may give procer a push to accept cat's proposal.

of course after a story about callow join with procer to fight evil warlord has a foundation, The Black Knight will retreat, thus strengthen catherine position in The Grand Alliance and after cat winning againts malicia, the empire will need to stabilize its situation and what better than join callow, became one with it, after all its already a kingdom of villain, same with praes

And who know, maybe this is The Black Knight ploy to make new empire that is not devouring its own tail

*Jane*

Yeah, that's the sort of thing that would make a more prolonged stay in Procer worth it. I don't know that it will be that, exactly, but it's the kind of deeper objective that I'm expecting from him.

[taliesinskye](#)

Black does have one flying asset that could carry a whole lotta weight and be used to resupply over the mountains, but I'm not sure if even Black could convince an ancient dragon to be a goblin munitions pack mule. For one, it's beneath his dignity, and for two, carrying a huge load of very explosive goblin munitions is the sort of thing you don't do if you're wise enough to become ancient in the first place.

*Jane*

Hmm... Resupply, no, but an ancient dragon would make for a heck of a diversionary force, properly used. I'd just be terrified of accidentally wasting such a rare and valuable asset, given how vulnerable they are to heroes...

But, well, unlike Black, I'm the sort of person who hoards her consumables and spells in video games. I imagine Black will actually be able to use the dragon without being

paranoid about the likely limited danger involved. There's no point in bringing along the Infinity +1 Sword and *not* using it.

### [taliesinskye](#)

I don't think a delay would help the Crusader military as much as Black and Catherine's. The Crusaders mostly use levies (who aren't professional troops being constantly accumulated and trained, they have to be released when they're not in use) and fantassins (who generally bum around making a mess of things when they aren't in use, which is a major pain) neither of which really grow in strength over a delay.

In contrast the professional legion armies slowly gather strength and constantly improve the training of those bodies for however much time they're given between campaigns.

### *Jane*

But announcing a Crusade *does* give more time for the faithful to answer the call, when otherwise they simply wouldn't have time to muster, and more time to better equip those levies – I have little doubt that many of them are poorly equipped, given how much larger a Crusade is compared to the wars they're used to fighting. The Crusade wasn't a hasty affair, but my understanding was that there was relatively little time between the declaration of the Crusade and sending the armies to march.

A holy war like this would seem to be a bit of a different affair from a normal levied army, insofar as it attracts considerably more volunteers than a "normal" war – but only if the volunteers can actually *reach* an army before they set off, and can be given a weapon to use.

Setting aside the other advantages that more time would give either side, of course.

### *Argentorum*

The thing is, the Crusade will always outnumber the legions. The thing that matters is if there are enough legionaries for their superiority to outlast those numbers. Having more bodies benefits the legions more, because they are better at preventing casualties. For instance, in the battle of the Camps, tribune Fae killer (forget her name) held the line with four thousand against a vastly superior force at the cost of a few lines, simply by staging a series of orderly retreats. Given enough men, the disparity in quality becomes enough to attrite the crusades vast numerical advantage because of this.

As for Blacks goal. Marching on the highest assembly is an end all to itself. If Hasenbach uses the Crusade to defend Procer, she loses credibility. Levant, for instance, will be quick to balk at being used for Procer's direct gain. That's why Papenheim had to make a play for the Vales before they could arrive. On the other hand, if Hasenbach pulls back Proceran forces, she's not clearing the pass as quickly and this Black has slowed the invasion even longer.

Black can't take the Highest Assembly, and he knows it. So his goal will something that can be accomplished in the act of taking it.

In other news, Black has been judged and his sentence has been delivered. The White Knight can't be played.

*Dylan Tullos*

Argentorum:

The whole point of the Crusade is to defend Good nations against Praes. Why would Levant object to fighting the Black Knight in Procer instead of Callow? They're doing this because Praes poses an unacceptable threat to Good, and Black only makes that threat worse by invading the Principate.

"Slowing the invasion" means nothing if the Crusading armies are free to converge on Black's Legions. The Red Flower Vales were only meaningful as a means of attacking Praes, and now the Dread Empire's armies are out in the open, where everyone can get at them easily.

*Argentorum*

The whole point of the Crusade is to pull the tower down. Yes, killing Black is an important step towards that goal, but the "how" matters just as much. And not only because this is narrative land. First, if Hasenbach can't stop Black on her own, her credibility and her Right to Rule take a hit, especially given her precarious position in the Assembly. And if Hasenbach gets undercut (remember Amadis was planning on convening the Highest Assembly in Callow and effectively turn her into a figure head) the Crusade will probably sputter out into a morass of different nations looking after themselves first, and the Good not at all.

In addition to this, remember that Levant, as a political entity, doesn't particularly want to be in the Crusade. Hasenbach had to threaten them with an invasion backed by Ashur in order to get them to table in the first place. Yes, she can use them to fight Black, but



if the Levantines step in front of the Legions and get massacred buying Papenheim time to flank(which they will, vs Black and Grem and Ranker), then the public perception is that Hasenbach is bleeding Levant for Procer's gain. Levant will not be okay with this, and may even drop out of the Crusade, especially if Black escapes, perhaps via Fae portal?

Finally, as for stalling. The Dread Empire has more legions. They have more legions on the \*other side of the Vales\*. This is not the full strength of the Empire, merely enough to be a knife pointed at Procer's heart. In addition, buying times does matter when your men are professional soldiers and you need to get through more recruitment cycles. Furthermore, the longer this Crusade drags on, the worse it is for Hasenbach. The levies aren't farming, and thus far the Crusade has been nothing but a string of defeats in the face of certain victory. If she doesn't start turning the tide soon, there is a very good chance the Crusade could stall out and die (and then Cat can step in to 'Save it'). Killing Black and his legions would be a victory, if they can do it, but that's assuming Cat won't come and bail them out at the 11th hour using a portal. Evil is, after all, supremely good at running away after an ignoble defeat. And if they win a battle but even half the strength of these legions (or hell, even the Command Structure) retreats intact, then it's just another Pyrrhic Victory to get tossed on the pile.

Tldr:

On paper, the Levantines should be fine fighting Black wherever, but remember that this Crusade isn't a unified front. Hasenbach had to browbeat several members into joining, and these early defeats could splinter this alliance before it has a chance to fully form. Each setback also buys the Empire more time to get its shit together after the \*civil wars\* it just experienced in both .

*Dylan Tullos*

Argentorum:

Procer has already suffered immense casualties during the Crusade. No one is going to accuse them of slacking.

Hassenbach threatened an invasion to get the Levantines to stop raiding one of her border princedoms. They joined the Crusade because they didn't want to see the Dread Empire with a Hellgate.

The Grey Pilgrim wholeheartedly supports the Crusade. All of the Levantine Heroes support the Crusade. Opposing the Crusade isn't normal politics; it's blasphemy against the Heavens. Levantines won't fight and die for Procer, but they will fight in a Holy Crusade led by their Grey Pilgrim, the rightful heir to the Grey Pilgrim who founded their country.

This isn't just about secular politics. These are Crusading armies, and the soldiers are inspired by the presence of Heroes who bring the Blessing of the Heavens. You say that they've been defeated, but the truth is that they can replace their losses more easily than Black and Catherine, and a war of attrition favors the larger alliance. The only way for the Crusaders to lose is to give up and lose their unity; if they persist, then they'll inevitably grind down the Praesi Legions.

*Jane*

While it is true that, person for person, a fanatic won't match a Legionnaire, enough fanatics will still overwhelm a Legion eventually – how many Legionnaires can Praes train in a year, compared to how many fanatics will have the time to arm themselves and muster in that time? And how many does the Crusade need, before numbers can overcome equipment and discipline? Four to one? Ten to one? Twenty to one? The Crusade has a deep population base to draw from, especially if they start actively recruiting instead of relying on the nobles to provide the armies – I doubt that twenty to one would be plausible, but we know that they had twice as many people pretty much just lying around already. And greater numbers also provide them with strategic flexibility, like how Rolanza was able to detach a portion of her cavalry to threaten Black's supply lines without leaving the rest of her force vulnerable – they could use a substantial army to pin legions in place strategically while shying away from open engagement, while simultaneously sending smaller armies to attack less well defended targets. Even if the soldiers themselves are pretty much trash, they can still take a lightly defended city with enough numbers – or just places of economic interest, like mines and granaries.

Of course, it's also questionable as to how many of these volunteers the Crusade would actually be able to arm – knives and pitchforks don't really make for a proper army, and I doubt that they have a ton of proper weapons just lying around unused. But that becomes considerably less of an issue with more time to prepare – even if they're just given half-decent swords, that's enough to take them from

a useless mob to a near-useless militia capable of occupying a site.

Of course, it would be difficult to feed such a force, but... Well, Callow is pretty devastated at the moment, you know, and Praes is highly reliant on trade to avoid starvation if they can't get their food from Callow. With the Crusade having decisive naval superiority, *can* Praes survive such a blockade? I don't know how many soldiers the Crusade could realistically support, but it might well be realistic for the Crusade to simply starve Praes into a collapse without needing to engage them at all.

As regard Black marching on the assembly... Eh... How many people really need to work on clearing a pass at any one time? I can't imagine more than a few hundred before they start tripping over each other. It would be easy to leave a detachment behind to continue work, while the body of the force pursues black – I don't think it would be an effective delay. Especially since I can't imagine Black leading such a diversion for more than a couple of months before he's maneuvered into an actual confrontation – he needs time to forage, while the White Knight does not. Finding and hitting farms still takes more time than a proper supply line, usually.

*MetruX*

Well, WOULD take more time, hadn't they had in their employ a dragon and a madman (AKA Warlock). Also, Warlock can probably bring them basic food and water. But that is not the point, trully, since I disagree with you on the famine problem.

You see, the Legions are only as big as they can be, they force no one on it and never have more soldiers than they can supply. That is not true for Procer, they MAKE their farmers take weapons and go to war, remember that in the civil war they almost starved, while in the Praes civil war food was never trully a problem. So, if they do try to starve Praes, they'll actually be the loosing end, especially since, as you yourself pointed out, the Crusade is supposed to bring in more people than those other wars.

*MetruX*

I actually believe that, for Procer, the Crusade is not bigger than the wars they already face. The true difference is that it isn't an all out with twenty diferent players, it's a single unified front, which makes the numbers seem bigger because they aren't counted separetely.

*Matthew*

Black is playing narratively.

Heaven guarantees victory to the Crusade.

But what does that victory mean?

When it started, it meant "Free Callow!" and "Cast down the Dread empire!"

His invasion of the Principate means it's now. "Defeat Black and stop the invasion!"

He wants Procer to cash their heavenly guaranteed victory defeating him on Proceran soil. He trusts Malicia and Cat to be able to defeat the Crusaders once the "Win a victory for free" card is played.

*Jane*

Hm... I think it would take more than a desperate, doomed advance into Proceran territory to make it work, but I *do* like the shape of the idea.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

They can still "free Callow". They can free Callow from the influence of the Evil Dread Empress. Which killing Black and slaughtering his Legions would go a long way towards doing.

*stevenneiman*

I think his plan is less for a total military victory than to turn public opinion against the Crusade. For all that she might have figured it out, Cordelia doesn't have enough evidence to convince people that Malicia used the Pravus Bank to strike against Proceran interests, so all they'll see is disappointing non-victories on both fronts while Praes goes on an expensive counterattack, and the princes are going to start asking why Procer went to war with two nations which were passive and uninterested in war until then, and they're not going to care much whether the First Prince has an answer because they'll be looking for scapegoats rather than solutions. Also, he might or might not know it but there's a good chance that he'll be playing the bad cop in a way that makes the Liesse Accords a lot more palatable, especially if those accords seem like they would protect Procer from another disaster like this seems. It's sort of like a man trying to pull a blackberry without tools or gloves. The man can do it without serious injury and the blackberry can't make him unable to, but it's going to be unpleasant, and when he feels the thorns he's going to start

caring about nebulous ideas of invasive species a whole lot less than he did at the start.

*Dylan Tullos*

stevenneiman:

This isn't about the Pravus Bank. It's about the Hellgate that opened in Callow and the entire city that died and rose as zombies.

Procer went to war with the Dread Empire because a faction within the empire used magical WMDs to zombify an entire city and summon legions of devils. That makes them a threat to the rest of Calernia, and the Good nations weren't going to sit around and wait for Praes to build another Hellgate.

*jonnney*

40,000 soldiers dead and all Procer has to show for it is two failed assaults, a prince held hostage, the inability to even enter callow for months, and another army behind their lines? The 10th crusade is being ground into a halt before it even really starts.

*Someguy*

Cat killed it politically and Black ended it strategically.

*Dainpdf*

Well, but the white knight got to do a really cool charge at Grem! And defeat an Ersatz villain! He's winning so much he might get tired of winning...

*pyrohawk21*

Once again, Amadeus proves himself an absolutely magnificent, and glorious, bastard...

He really does seem to always have at least three plans about how to deal with things. Each of those plans having separate, and often contradictory, end goals...

*Someguy*

>Crossbows fired in a perfect volley, and these drew some blood, but none touched the White Knight or the men behind him – as if the hand of some god steered away him from harm.

Godsdamn enforced Stormtrooper Marksmanship!

*Dainpdf*

I love how Black keeps handing the Heavens the wrong victories. You want to kill the Black Knight? Sure, have this cheap knock-off.

You want to win a battle? Okay. Why don't you have this one charge and force my army to retreat... Into your territory. Oh, and close the pass in the process.

You want to have a Good League? Great. Sign my number one disciple for it while you're at it.

I mean, the last one wasn't him, but that was one of the Blackest moments Cat has ever had.

*Novice*

"Sign my number one disciple for it while you're at it."

He only had one so you're technically correct. Which is the best kind.

*danh3107*

Now, I did like this chapter, but it's another in a long series of hyping an event up and then cutting straight to the aftermath. It was okay the first couple of times, but as the story has progressed you've been relying more on it Erratic.

Sure it was neat hearing about this stuff, but SEEING it would've been more interesting in my opinion.

[taliesinskye](#)

We saw it just fine, we just saw it in flashback through a framing device.

*stevenneiman*

I think it was because EE wanted to get through the battle and explain why things were the way they were afterward, but he didn't want to do a whole battle worth of interlude chapters while we're all waiting on the Cat storyline, which is the main focus of the Guide narrative. I think the clip show was his attempt to compromise between a completely unsatisfying recap and a time-consuming blow-by-blow, and the troll battle with Hanno got a whole chapter because in some ways it was more important than the tactical side. I wasn't super happy with the way the chapter turned out, but I don't see how EE could have done better without spending a lot more time on what amounts to a secondary plot thread. Besides, to my mind that conclusion and the ensuing "oh shit" moment were awesome enough to forgive a lot.

*Ca\$hMoney*

Frankly, it times like this where Black cares far more about making himself look clever and winning fights than about being "practical".

Like, he just cut off Procer from Callow entirely save for one very inconvenient entry point. He could have just *done that* and he'd be golden.

Oh... oh... you want to *invade* Procer? You want to leave your defensive position and invade a gigantic fucking country with a limited army, a far larger army right in your face, no avenue for retreat or method of resupply, while your boss is probably very seriously considering firing you like you got caught doing meth in the bathroom?

Like, Bonfire might have worked out because Catherine can portal *anywhere she wants* and minimize her casualties. You can't. You have to fight an enemy on their home turf and very likely get whittled down by attrition, assuming you don't just get beaten in a battle. Then your country will be out a couple legions, a couple named, and very possibly their *only dragon*.

I'm sure it makes sense from the perspective of Black's personal dick measuring contest with the Heavens. But this isn't exactly good for Praes, you know? Malicia was right to want to drop his ass.

[taliesinskye](#)

In any conventional analysis I absolutely agree, cutting off your own avenue of retreat is a boneheaded move.

But remember, we're in narrative land. What's the inevitable story of an army whose only avenue of retreat as just been cut off and who is up against a superior invading force?

Yeah, the Procerans won't find this an easy fight.

Ca\$hMoney

That is not what this is. They're not a desperate force grimly marching through enemy territory to survive. They're an invading force of marauders come to burn and pillage and smugly pat eachother on the backs about how cool they are while doing it. That is not a story that ends happily for the bogans doing the invading.

[taliesinskye](#)

You're forgetting that the Crusaders are the original invaders, they started the war. That makes Black's army the plucky underdogs taking the fight to the evil expansionist empire.

*Someguy*

They are the Good Empire taking the fight to the Evil Expansionist Hegemon. Remember the Battle of Amritsar Starzone and it's political consequences!

[https://gineipedia.com/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Amritsar](https://gineipedia.com/wiki/Battle_of_Amritsar)

*Sparsebeard*

Except that Black doesn't need to pander to the local populace since he's not trying to liberate proceans on the long term so he won't distribute his supplies.

Also, Procer hasn't had time to institute the scorched earth policy Lohengramm did.

And I'd be very surprised if Black splits his forces the way the FPA did.

Finally, Procer is taken by surprise while Lohengramm PLANNED to be invaded and his troops were ready to react.

Also, in the battle of Armistar it was the democratic "good guys" invading the space nazis' empire...

*Someguy*

I meant Black playing Reinhard to counter Hasenbach playing Andrew Falk.

*burdi*

But its has another story isnt, not about The Black Knight invading principate but more like he just want to retreat back but doesnt have another route.

"Our supply lines are cut, the full muster of Papenheim's reunited army is less than a day away and our only paths for retreat involve months of marching through enemy territory."

So the story maybe more about "retreat through enemy territory" than "invading the enemy" and a story is the lay of creation so its not full villain, just doesnt have another way to retreat, its fundamentally different with bonfire

*Zoolimar*

Is he going for Anabasis?

*Jane*



While I agree with the rest of your comment to a degree (it's a terrible strategy, until he reveals some undisclosed advantage or hidden aim... But we know he *must* have one, because he's not a big enough idiot to consider this otherwise), I do have to say that this would be unlikely to work.

If they collapsed the passes early, the Gods Above would just find a way to blast through the ruins anyway, and leave them without some really strong fortifications. They cheat like that. By "disguising" it as the collateral damage of a Narratively Important battle, however, it has enough "weight" that the Gods can't just handwave it away as easily – if the Crusade just happened to stumble upon a mage who was *just coincidentally* researching a new pass clearing spell, for instance, it would cheapen the earthshattering nature of the Witch/Warlock fight.

Besides, if Procer wasn't mustering an army strong enough to crack through the Vales, they'd send them after weaker targets – like supporting the army sent after the Stairway, or using their ally's fleets to start landing forces on the coast of Callow. This was one of the few places that they could hope to fight such a large army, with so many Heroes, and *not* be annihilated for it. Even then, it really wasn't a win – but it was enough to blunt the threat they represent, at least a little, and slow the Crusade's momentum. Which might not sound that significant, but once Crusades start to stall, people start pulling out.

All in all, it was a good place to make a stand, before breaking it once things started to look lost. Waste the enemy's time and manpower where and when you can, as best you can. Even if it's not exactly a *good* trade, maybe the pressure will give you an opening later.

*Dylan Tullos*

Jane:

The Crusade's momentum hasn't slowed. Black has invaded a Good nation with his Legions of Terror, and now the Crusaders get to fight him in the open field, rather than trying to grind their way through the Vales.

If he'd simply wrecked the passes and retreated into Callow, their momentum would be lost, and they'd have to struggle to make a new plan. As it is, their greatest enemy has come out to fight, and their strategy has been simplified to "everyone swarm Black".

*Jane*

I am, admittedly, assuming that Black *does* have some idea as to how to withdraw after accomplishing... Whatever it is he's trying to accomplish here. Either way, though, the Crusade went quite quickly from "Glorious unstoppable advance" to "The advance is decisively cut off, and now we're being raided" – that's a pretty big stall, in my opinion, unless they capitalize on their naval advantages.

Besides, given that they could barely stop Warlock from inadvertently crushing the Legions outright, I don't really know that they could have ensured that they were on the right side of the destruction – especially since if they had that kind of control over how things would go, they would no doubt have preferred to split the Crusader army in two in the process, and destroy the half stuck with them.

*Dylan Tullos*

Jane:

I also have no idea what Black is trying to accomplish.

However, I do know what the Crusaders are trying to accomplish. They're trying to kill the Dread Empire's leaders, destroy their armies, and ensure that Praes can't threaten to rest of Calernia.

The whole point of advancing was to attack those leaders and armies. If Black is going to march into Procer with the Legions of Terror, then there's no point in grinding their way through the Red Flower Vales; the Carrion Lord has chosen to fight on his enemy's home ground, with no method of retreat, and no access to reinforcements.

Victory isn't measured purely in terms of ground taken or lost. A third of Black's army is already dead, Pappenheim is right next to him, and the armies of the Levant are available to reinforce the Principate. By coming out into the open, Black has gambled everything, and the Crusaders aren't going to give up and go home when they finally see a chance to destroy the Carrion Lord and his Legions of Terror.

*Jane*

As I've said elsewhere in this comment section, I consider Black's proposal, as presented, patently foolish – I just think that means that we're not being shown the full picture, and that Black has something up his sleeve that the readers aren't being shown yet. For things to be otherwise would contradict Black's portrayal as a brilliant leader in a way that the

readers would find implausible without proper foreshadowing.

I mean, even if he *wasn't* a high-profile target, he's in no position to invade anything.

[taliesinskye](#)

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> I mean, even if he wasn't a high-profile target, he's in no position to invade anything.

I suppose it's possible there isn't a sufficiently clever card up Black's sleeve and what's going on here from the author is a narrative maneuver to get Black out of the way so that Cat is on her own.

*Jane*

Eh, in that case, I'd expect a grim-faced Black talking about how their strategic position is untenable after they ended up on the wrong side of the destroyed pass, and discussing how they can do as much damage as possible to the Crusade on their way out.

It'd accomplish the same result without making Black look like an idiot.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Procer has its own breadbaskets... and, even if Black doesn't have Warlock, he has a dragon.

In a way, this is actually The War of the Breadbaskets, and always has been. For him, at least. Making Procer panic over the vulnerable state of its own renewable resources, for once, *is* a valuable goal for him.

Making Callow too damned hard to fight over, yet too important to ruin to the bedrock means the power of the politics has a chance to shift the narrative from the age old tug of war between Good and Evil Empires to

something else that can ultimately benefit not just Callow, Procer and Praes, but the whole region.

At a cost.

*Matthew*

Black doesn't mind if they kill him.

What he wants is for Callow to survive as a trading partner with Praes, and for Praes under Malicia to survive.

He is more than willing to trade his own death to protect these two institutions.

This is what he's doing.

He is dragging the Crusader narrative away from attacking Callow and Praes to "defeat the Black Knight."

That's his objective. He wants the Crusaders to burn their heavenly victory card defeating him on Proceran soil.

Remember Praes isn't a threat to the rest of Calernia, even the Liesse thing was a fundamentally defensive gambit by Malicia.

[taliesinskye](#)

You might be right that this is another sacrifice play by Black. The problem is that Black is supposed to think rationally, and he's too valuable a card to Praes for him to accept sacrificing himself unless there's no other option with any hope of success.

*Matthew*

I don't think he sees his own death as a necessity.

He could be "foiled" and live and this would count as a crusader victory.

I just think he sees this attack not strategically but narratively.

The problem for Praes is that they've been winning too long so they always knew that a Crusade was going to have a lot of narrative weight behind it.

Black wants to bleed the Crusade of its narrative force. Part of that is allowing it victories, but

Black is trying to give them meaningful narrative victories that preserve his strategic goals.

He doesn't care if Callow breaks free under the Liesse accords as long as it still feeds Praes. He doesn't care if Malicia survives as long as Praes of Institutions does.

### *MetruX*

You seem to put contradictory words to your own ideas. You yourself says that victory isn't measured in terms of ground taken or lost, but fail to notice Black is NOT one of main targets. Oh, surely he is A target, but the only reason he is a target, differently from, let's say, the Tyrant of Hellike or the Dead King, is because he is defendind Callow and Praes. It may be a very strategically win to defeat him now, while he fights inside Procer, but this is not a strong narrative win, since the true targets are Cat, Malicia and the Tower itself, because they must stop them from raising and any other super weapons they may have or come to possess.

As I mentioned in other comments before, I don't think Procer will be able to trully win against Black anyway, but even a win wouldn't be that good for them, since this is a loss of time, dealing with a non-liked countries internal problems instead of going after their targets, just after two major losses that will already stall the advances. So, yes, this is considered stalling even if one minor objective is to kill Black.

### *Forrest*

and "everyone swarm Black!" is a terrible idea in this Narrative driven world. As Ranker said, their only escape has been cut off, their only way back is to fight their way through Procer, and try for one of really only two ways out. One of which is likely taking a bit of a large scale sail, which is unlikely to happen in a subtle fashion. The other is to go to Stairway, which will be a long trek fraught with lots of resistance and potentially a returning army to greet them on the way out.

Then Black pointed out they were "Free." Free how? He says from defending Callow, but what else? Free from under Malicia's thumb for a little while? Remember, he didn't want this, and she brought it on their heads, and has been extremely antagonistic towards him and Cat ever since it came to light what she had done. Being Free from that, and being stuck in a hostile land while out numbered and out powered... What sort of Story does that form? Sounds like some

new and fresh opportunities are opening up for someone who was once stuck in a static and rigid role before to me.

Narrative holds too much importance to write it off so casually.

*stevenneiman*

He's not trying to win. He's trying to make the Princes throw a tantrum and demand that Cordelia sue for peace no matter how large her tactical advantage really is. Sure, her badass uncle might understand that these setbacks are temporary, but all the Assembly sees is that not only are they not getting the quick, easy victory they expected, but one of those non-victories is turning into something that's trashing their precious cities that they aren't used to seeing trashed, and probably doing it with goblinfire because Black does not mess around. This after decades of peace aside from one thing Cordelia knows but cannot prove was a Praesi attempt to mess with them. It doesn't matter how overwhelming the Proceran tactical advantage is if Cordelia's support base backs out because they see nothing but her kicking the hornet nest and them getting stung. And considering Black's usual "disaster drumbeat" technique, I wouldn't be surprised if he's set up to give at least one more painful sting even when his forces are boxed in and hopeless, and make it look like he can keep going.

*MetruX*

1. Black didn't originally plan to have the pass blocked, it may seem like this because of his wording (exactly what he wants, to seem like it was all according to plan), but he is actually making the best of a difficult situation, and may very well be a better option than trying to retreat through to pass or making another way back, which would give the Crusade another way in.
2. Malicia didn't try to "drop his ass", he dropped her because she did something entirely stupid and STARTED THIS CRUSADE. I really can't see why you can side with her in this. I mean, both of them were wrong, but she was clearly the worst of the two.
3. He is not a Hero, a Villain doesn't get to defend his lands and get the last laugh. But, we do see many stories that begin with "And thus this land X was conquered by the Villain Y, making life hell for Z generations, until our hero was born". As such it's completely comprehensible why he has a Conquer Aspect, no?

Now, for last and most important than any of the other points: Please trust the writer. You're already judging something that didn't even happen, from a writer that continuously breaks our suspicions in inventive and delightfull ways. Have some trust and simply enjoy the story, please :3

## [Euodiachloris](#)

Thing is, Black kind of is defending his land. And, always has been. Amadeus (farmboy of the Green Folds) is trying to ease the over-farming (even with blood sacrifices, there's a limit) *while giving breadbaskets of the whole region enough power and independence to sell to those with both the coin and need* over those who simply place boot to throat in the gods' game of checkers.

Even the farmers in Procer's breadbaskets would benefit..... in the longer term.

*John Laing*

If the Legions of Terror are no longer occupying the Red Flower Vales (or what's left of them), Catherine might be able rebuild some fortifications at her end and thereby claim that key defensive choke point is now part of "the territory under the rule of the Queen in Callow" and thus covered by the truce deal.

*Alegio*

Black you magnificent bastard!

The attack on procer will either work only for a little while or work only when Cat needs him the most, whatever is most important for the plot at the moment.

Hope you get better Errati! Lots of liquids and some chicken soup work best in my experience. 😊

*Gunslinger*

Bravo this chapter was fucking brilliant. Black's going to get that conquest he's always wanted

*HardcoreHeathen*

I'm glad you're feeling well enough to update!

However, I can't help but notice that this chapter feels like part of a trend. More and more, lately, I've noticed that battles and other dramatic events are told to the readers, instead of shown. Getting the dramatic event as an after-the-fact conversation robs it of drama – I already know Black lives, I already know he wins, because if he hadn't, then the conversation wouldn't be going the way it did.

*Metrux*

It's because those are not THE important bits, I think. The books are only growing bigger, and, as an author, he has to take into consideration how much effort he can put into each part of the story. Sure, he could transform this into ten books

instead of five... But would it trully be better, because we can see very single part of it? No, it would probably get tiring, because the plot can't move forward. Actually, there already is people claiming the plot is moving too slowly. I don't mind, and by your reply, you don't aswell, but this is not a story writen for the two of us, is it? :3

So, while he shows us all of Cat's confrontations, most of what happens on the side needs to be curtly shown, if shown at all.

*HardcoreHeathen*

I agree with the comment about pacing. However, my point is this: you shouldn't hype up an event and then not show the event. We spent just as many words *\*talking\** about what happened here as would have been spent *\*showing\** what happened. And while there was some effort to do a "flashback perspective," like with the Legate bowing and scraping to the dragon, doing that is inherently not as interesting as showing the event "live."

*Dylan Tullos*

This is actually the worst idea I've ever heard of.

Pappenheim's army is still waiting for Black, and they outnumber the Legions under his command two to one. The armies of the Levant are moving through southern Procer, so they're in position to attack Black as he advances. The Crusaders will be operating in friendly territory, with full access to reinforcements and supplies, while Black will be fighting on hostile ground that his opponents know better than he does. If the Crusaders lose, they're free to retreat and regroup; if Black loses, the Crusader cavalry will run down and slaughter his entire army.

Black is supposed to be a genius, but this is incredibly, unbelievably dumb.

*Ca\$hMoney*

Black is supposed to be a genius, especially to Black and everyone around him. Even people who are legitimately smart can succumb to groupthink and the Dunning-Kruger effect and just blindly bumblefuck their way into disaster based on their self-assurance that they'll work everything out somehow.

I mean, just look at how Black is acting, him Grem and Ranker just putting eachother on the backs and smirking over how clever they are like this is just some zany scheme. I imagine the people who organized Fire Festival had this same sort of brazen, booze soaked arrogance to them.



I think this is a good time to point out that I don't recall if we've ever seen Black in a situation where he *hasn't* had a significant advantage over his opponent on a tactical or strategic level, or has had superior brute force or some "You're already dead" trick up his sleeve. Aside from the narrative being a pain in his ass, he's always been the one with the power.

I can see why someone like that might think this is a good idea. He's gotten so used to beating people that the fact that he's putting himself at an enormous disadvantage on every level occurs to him.

### *Alegio*

Now in any other world that would be true but being completely outnumbered by a force that's trying to conquer your country and have it attack you when you are at your worst is just the kind of thing that gives an easy win here.

Remember that Black is the one that taught Cat about how to use a story for your advantage.

### *Ca\$hMoney*

I don't recall him teaching her to be so monomaniacally obsessed with the story on every level that you completely ignore the actual material reality of your situation. Relying entirely on gaming the system instead of succeeding on your actual merit and competence is the exact opposite of practical.

Something has to give, the story can't be the one single all important factor that literally everything in the story hinges on. Armies and logistics and strategy need to come into play at *some point*. Or else all of those things are completely pointless anyway.

### *Someguy*

Actually, Black didn't teach Cat anything regarding the Narrative. He just threw her into the deep end and have her find her own way to minimise intellectual blindspots. Gaming the system is what Cat learned on her own against Lone Swordsman and Contrition. She then built her tactics based on that.

### *MetruX*

I think you're misunderstanding? Black is only recently a truly strong force, for most of his life he was actually the underdog. He is weak in his personal powers, he had less troops and support during the Praes civil war, and had

several disadvantages when invading Callow. That is, actually, WHY he is considered a genius. Not because he has clever ideas or he is the better commander (he himself admits Grem is smarter), but because he can win even through fire and flames, he trods through rough battlefields and pays the cost for all victories. That is also a way in which Cat is his student, even though she pays herself, he pays in man and resources.

Now, it may be true that real smart people do things like that, but this is not reality. It's very far from reality, actually. Since this is a narrative world, the more is said a person is smart, the better his plans will go, even when they don't make sense, because the narrative is on his side. Besides the simple point that in any story something clearly mental and unenthusiastic such as this would be boring. So, I'm pretty sure they aren't having this kind of problem.

*Matthew*

Black wants to be defeated.

He is forcing the Crusaders to employ their heavenly victory card defeating him on Proceran soil.

This keeps Callow and Praes proper safe.

His end goal is something like Praes being the Kingdom of the dead. Exists, acknowledged as evil, but no one tries to invade it anymore.

*Lampshade*

Black has two aspects that can be turned to strategic purpose, now that he is on the invading side. Even 100k against 16, he could run circles around them, without factoring that he might know about the Tyrant's troops and about whatever Malicia is cooking up with the Dead King or how she will play the fallout of stairway in the assembly.

Finally, I would be careful about pulling the superior mobility card against a dragon, even if he didn't just murder most of their horse.

*Antoninjohn*

Cat has portals and can give Black a lift out of Pocer after he has damaged it

*Jane*

Eh... The relationship between them is rather... Strained, though. I mean, she *did* stab him the last time she saw him.

I mean, she'd totally rescue him if it came to that? But I don't think Black would count on it, nor Cat consider it a given.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

To be fair, he stabbed her, too. Just as literally – and, she also gained for it, just as he has. They have that kind of father-daughter reciprocal relationship: no pain, no gain.

When either truly needs the other, you can practically bet on them helping out. Regardless of the cost.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

PS: The help is also likely to look really weird to outside observers.

*Someguy*

One thing no one has mentioned is poor Legate Obasi and the rest of the 10th Legion. Who the fuck did they piss off to be stuck on dragon wrangling duty?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Hey, it might well beat millennia-long doorknob duty. Or “screaming face fixture”. Don't ignore the positives, here!

*Dylan Tullos*

Euodiachloris:

I bet Legate Obasi wishes he'd chosen to be a doorknob by now.

*narcoduck*

General Catastrophe is great. Wasn't there supposed to be a legion lead by a vampire stationed at the Vales too?

*Draconius Sinister*

I found a few parts of this chapter hard to follow, but that ending line, damn.

*Rook*

I really hope this isn't what I think it is. This had better just be a Black Crusade, and not a Black Bonfire.

*stevenneiman*

I've said this in a couple of other places, but I'm pretty sure that what Black is doing is trying to scare the Highest

Assembly into demanding peace. If they do, Cordelia won't be able to force them into line without recalling her armies, so either way Procer is out of the war if he can convince them the war is going worse than it is, and I'm pretty sure that every other force is only there because Procer promised to do the heavy lifting, so if Procer surrenders the whole Crusade should fall apart.

Which is to say, I'm pretty sure this is closer to Bonfire than a counter-invasion.

*Rook*

What puts me on edge is that Black claimed no villain could survive the kind of heroic focus a plan like bonfire would bring. No exceptions made or ifs made there, not even for himself or monsters like Ranger.

The trouble with Black isn't that he isn't capable of indefinitely surviving, it's that it's not his highest priority. He treats everyone including himself like a piece on the board in his pissing contest against the Heavens, and if sacrificing his own piece let's him put out one of Heaven's eyes? He'll likely walk into certain death without hesitation.

*Argentorum*

This isn't Bonfire though. Bonfire was an "Evil Invasion of Ultimate Evilness and killing the poor defenseless farmers and avoiding Just Retribution how Evil!" level plan. What Black is doing here instead seems more like it's going to be Sherman's March to the Sea. That is, a clear attack that can be met with conventional forces that the Gods Above already have on hand. Bonfire is dangerous to Cat because it's using a trump card right from the start, and there are no tools on hand to address it, meaning that the Gods Above will make tool to end the threat of Bonfire specifically, and in doing so deprive Cat of several advantages she would need to win the fight, because they are also necessary to do Bonfire in the first place.

*stevenneiman*

I meant that it's like Bonfire in terms of causing damage enough to intimidate the Highest Assembly. The reason why the actual Bonfire plan wouldn't have worked is because it relies on a villainous keystone in the form of Cat creating the fairy gates. Here black gets the benefit of leading, conquering and destroying but he isn't personally indispensable and therefore isn't as profoundly vulnerable as Cat would be in a similar case.

*Raved Thrad*

I loved watching Black play chess with the Heavens (the Procerans are just proxies) and get them so riled up they basically tried to flip the board. And when the preceding move was played out, suddenly we see Black checking the king or, rather, in this case, the Prince.

Seeing as how Black's three Aspects are Lead, Conquer, and Destroy, and we've seen him lead and conquer here, what is his Name driving him to destroy? If not Procer itself (I doubt he has the numbers), then I can think of only two targets that make this all worthwhile: Hasenbach herself, or the one hero we know stayed behind in Procer: the Augur.

It may seem contrived, but Black might consider blinding the Proceran side, by removing the Augur, well worth whatever casualties might be inflicted on his pet Legions.

As I was reading the descriptions of the destruction of the Vales, though, I couldn't help but feel for Cat. Where's her Vale Summer wine going to come from now? The price of the stuff is going to skyrocket.

Then again, if she has enough of a stockpile, she could sell the stuff off and make a killing. That is, if she's willing to deny herself her biggest remaining vice.

*stevenneiman*

Now that you mention the Augur I'm wondering what Hasenbach is doing here. She has the Augur so I don't think the way this side of the battle would play out could actually be a surprise to her, and yet I can't imagine it not being a disaster for her politically when word gets out that not only was the Proceran army held back for months by a force half its size, the remains of that force are now free to pillage the Proceran countryside and scare her allies.

[TeK](#)

There are Red Vales (a now devastated narrow mountain pass) and Vale, home to the passing joke of a drink Callowans gulp instead of proper Okoro vintage.

*Raved Thrad*

Ok, thanks to that comment, now I want to see Catherine and Wekesa duke it out over their tastes in wine. Who would you get to referee it, though? According to Wekesa, Black is similarly pedestrian in his tastes.

*RanVor*

I'm pretty sure the wine comes from the city of Vale, not from the Red Flower Vales themselves.

*Raved Thrad*

Blargh. You have now sussed out that I am geographically challenged. Fact: I once got lost on the way to the toilet while staying over at a friend's house.

*Duke*

"Ranker shook her head, the two of them standing under a \*moonless night\* as..."

At least somebody is watching out for them!

*ALazyMonster*

Anyone else want the next interlude to be from the Tyrant of Helike's perspective and be how he is setting the southern half of Procer on fire (maybe?). I just want to see each of the fronts of the war really. The insane little shit is one of my favorite minor characters.

*Metrux*

I agree, though it seems he didn't enter the war yet, I very much want to see him in battle, with all his crazy and classic villainy xD

*stevenneiman*

I don't think we should have it from his perspective, as it would somewhat ruin the fun of trying to guess what by all the Hells is actually going on in his head. I quite like the way EE's been doing it so far, with chapters from Anaxares' perspective, trying desperately to return to something he understands when the only order he respects is that he's not allowed to be what he thinks of himself as. I like how Anaxares' chapters have that strange blend of the surreality of his own perspective coupled with being just as baffled as us readers at what Kairos is doing.

*Someguy*

I thought some of his men have been spotted sneaking in south of Callow?

*ALazyMonster*

He was reported walking through the forest that refuge is in which supposedly means it's likely that he is heading for Procer.

*KingWillisIV*

So, anyone else curious about the "madman riding a dragon"? Was that meant to be metaphorical or was someone actually riding Nekheb?

[Antony444](#)

Oh dear, the Crusade is really going to enter a new phase now...and still no sign of the Bard, thus the worst remains to be seen...

The Heavens have really a way to screw the odds and shatter reality, aren't they? But this time, they played with someone who really, really like to cheat.

Overall, it is a major defeat for the Tenth Crusade. It is now an open question which action will take more time: getting rid of these mountains who got shattered by the magical duel or the cease-fire Catherine negotiated.

It also raises a question which makes me shiver: how much powerful exactly was Dread Empress Triumphant?

The Witch of the Woods is half-trained and no Gigantes. The Dread Empress (may she never returns) went to war against their whole nation and their Named. Warlock didn't manage to get rid of the Witch for now, and he went really at full power.

Triumphant must really have been something else compared to the other Masters of the Tower...

Overall, there are going to be screams at the Highest Assembly.

Two more heroes and 8 000+ dead in a single day, the Vales utterly wrecked and no enemy General killed is really not something you can sell to your public as a victory. Especially when the largest Prasi raiding force is coming your way...

Hanno tried his great cavalry ride into the sunset. He failed and he caused the deaths of many, many men, even with all the Heaven advantages he was granted. The White Knight is definitely inferior to the Black Knight in every way which matters.

Now the Empire has stopped playing on the defensive. It is well-known, after the first turn...  
the Empire strikes back!

*me.me.here*

We know exactly where the Bard is going to show up next, actually. She's going to appear at her trial. It's a foreshadowed event in the Free Cities, and is likely to be the catalyst for what the Free Cities are going to do under Hierarchy. We know that the previous interaction between Anaxares and Bard was something that prompted some form of character development on his part, so the next step is to show us what that development is. The trial is a good stage for

that, as well as an opportunity for Bard to start talking and promoting her viewpoint to the populace at large, which is what the Heavens' best move is now that they've been sucked into the Free Cities/Bellerophon narrative of doing as the people will.

*Highwayman*

That last line right there... I applaud absolute genius when I see it.

*1queenofblades1*

Everyone talking about how Black going behind enemy lines is a mistake, no one talking about how Cat has the Observatory and can come riding in with the Hunt and Knights to the rescue when he needs it most.

*beleester*

I don't see how Black can go on the offensive here. He has 16,000 troops to Papenheim's 40,000, less than a day's march away. You can \*defend\* against superior numbers, but taking the offensive is suicidal. He might be able to raid around for a while, but the moment Papenheim forces him to give battle, he's done for.

*Argentorum*

Remember, the first step always works. If Black has a "Plan", then the first step only has to be "Steal a March on Papenheim" which fits neatly with the composition of his forces (professional soldiers vs levies and mercenaries). On top of this, Hanno road a great deal of Klaus's cavalry to death in his "victorious" counter attack.

So, he'll avoid battle long enough to make one move, maybe two. The important part is making sure the execution of those moves gives him what he needs.

*edrey*

let me see this for a second, one host in callow months away of procer, levant host is in the south with a lake between them and procer heartlands, the final and closest host just its cavaldry and they levies are slow as cat had noted the legions will invade procer and there is not true defender to stop them , on the other hand cat will have a talk with cordelia and make contact with the prince of cantal the only thing missing is the third country defeat,

*RanVor*

Ok, that's what I would do if I was Black:



An army of sixteen thousand in the middle of enemy territory without a route to retreat has an average life expectancy of a fly. But this is true only if the army is a coherent fighting force fit to fight an all-out battle. Therefore I would split the Legions into a large number of marauding parties strong enough to overwhelm patrol forces and village defences, but small enough to avoid large enemy forces, and order them to disperse over a large area.

Marauding parties are much quicker and more mobile than armies, so they'd be able to escape the initial pursuit quite easily. I'd make sure that every party has at least one mage, to ensure that coordination is maintained by the means of scrying, and a few goblins for scouting purposes. I'd order them to take as much of the supplies they come across as they can and raze everything else to the ground, and task a few larger groups with harassing the supply lines, just to troll Papenheim with scorched earth tactics *on his own home turf*. The army the size of Iron Prince's is a powerful but incredibly unwieldy tool. Before he gets his forces organized into effective hunting detachments, half of the Principate is going to be on fire, and when that happens, I'd use my superior coordination through scrying to consolidate all the parties in the region into an interception force to cripple the hunting detachment, and then disperse again.

I would continue with this plan until one of two things happens:

1. The Assembly tears Hasenbach a new one for instigating this epic fail called the Tenth Crusade, or
2. Papenheim's forces get too effective in hunting my own, at which point I'd order the full retreat of all the parties and try to sneak away through the border with Helike while concentrating all the efforts on not getting caught.

I'm not a great strategist like Black or Grem, but I think those two would come up with a way for this to work.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Cavalry would kill everyone.

Infantry can stand up to cavalry charges in large, tightly packed groups. By definition, marauding parties are small, and they're scattered too widely to support each other. Cavalry is faster than infantry, and they're operating in friendly territory.

What would actually happen is option #3:

Black splits his army into raiding companies. Pappenheim splits his cavalry into companies. Procer's cavalry slaughters the scattered legionaries.

Pappenheim's forces would be instantly effective if Black split his army into tiny pieces that the cavalry could murder piecemeal. A raiding strategy depends on superior mobility, and that belongs to the side with superior cavalry.

[taliesinskye](#)

I thought cavalry didn't actually cover more ground than foot over long distances because of all the logistical concerns associated with having that many horses?

edrey

you forgot the augur, a attack no fast enough would fail and the heroes would tear any plan down so the best is burn down salia and scape to arcadia

Vheod

Need a link in the archives to previous entry and from previous to this one.

Psychotic\_Bat

Really enjoyed watching the Helms Deep cavalry charge from the wrong side.

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## Chapter 23: Recoup

*"Take no comfort in that, hero. For though dawn ever comes, night ever does precede it."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II

"Well, this is a fine fucking mess," I frowned.

The reports had been unfortunately delayed, mostly by the fact that the Red Flower Vales were apparently now the Red Flower Mountains. Only with brimstone instead of granite, because why would Warlock just make it a little bit worse when he could make thoroughly worse? If those things cracked open and devils started pouring out, I was going to be *cross*. That the current location of Masego's father was still unknown did not improve the situation in the slightest, since it meant I had no idea whether he was still guarding the region or not.

"The passes are closed," Hakram said. "Strategically, that is a victory. The only way into Callow is the northern passage, and it will be barred for at least six months."

I flicked a glance at the tall orc, still basking in the satisfaction of having him by my side again. It never seemed quite as bad, when Adjutant was with me. He'd arrived only a few days after the peace conference, and remained with us as the Army of Callow escorted the crusaders back up north. It'd been a month since the Battle of the Camps now, since I'd snatched a peace from the butchery and put ink to what might quite possibly be my own death warrant. I shook my head and reached for the small silver thimble at my side, knocking back the brandy in a single swallow.

"I don't mean that," I said. "I mean whatever the Hells *he's* up to."

I touched the bottom of the thimble to the unfolded map occupying much of the desk we were sharing. The map itself was ours, but nothing else in this room was. This was the private solar of the Baroness of Harrow, who'd insisted we use it while we stayed in her keep. The liberation of her ancestral lands had apparently put me in her good books. That, or seeing me drop a lake on an army had made her reconsider her stance on royal taxation even though the Pilgrim had knocked me the fuck out after barely ten heartbeats. The silver thimble was touching the edge of the Principality of Bayeux, where news now a fortnight old had Black and his legions sacking towns for supplies on their march west.

"Well, at a glance," Hakram drily said, "invading Procer."

"With fifteen thousand men?" I sceptically said. "We're not even sure he has siege with him. Even if he somehow starts taking cities without engines he can't *hold* them."

While on the surface the Tenth Crusade had tried to enter Callow and twice found the door shut on its fingers, the situation was a lot less promising than it appeared at first glance. The map held a handful of figurines standing for armies and their last reported locations, and the picture they painted was not pleasant. The three Proceran hosts we knew well: one down south in Tenerife guarding the border with the League, one marching out of northern Callow according to truce terms and the last, unfortunately, still camped in front of the Vales. Digging through the wreckage to reopen the pass. That alone would be bad, since the Jacks told me Papenheim should have between forty to fifty thousand soldiers under his command.

What was making it much, much worse was the Dominion of Levant was joining the fray. Half a year ago, Thief had passed me a report estimating they'd send an army about thirty thousand men. She'd been right, in a way. There was an army of that size

marching to reinforce Papenheim. Unfortunately, there was also a second one by the shore of Lake Louvant – the massive lake in the centre of the Procer – currently preparing to embark on barges. Its destination was, allegedly, Salia. The seat of the First Prince, the capital of the Principate. And where Black would be headed if he continued to march in a straight line. At a guess, every single garrison in central Procer would be pulled together into a ramshackle army then swelled by the Levantines before they threw all of that at Black's fifteen thousand. The result seemed fairly obvious, veteran legions or not.

"It is an unusual gamble, by my understanding of the man," Adjutant conceded. "If those legions are lost, the Empire is crippled."

"That's a pretty way to put it," I grunted. "More honest is that without those men on the field, Praes is left so bare even we could feasibly invade it."

Odds weren't good for a reverse of the Conquest, I'd admit. I was pretty sure I could break Malicia's own legions on the field and seize most the countryside, but taking Praesi cities would be impossible without breaking my army. What I could do might still be enough for her reign to collapse, though, and that made it slightly tempting. Or would have, anyway, if there wasn't a decent chance that by the time Papenheim's army was done digging I'd be facing a host of eighty thousand men invading my kingdom. There was, to be blunt, no way the Army of Callow could beat them if they had heroes on their side, which they most certainly would. Not after the losses we'd taken at the Battle of the Camps.

"It may be safe to assume, then, that he does not intend to lose those men," Hakram said.

"If he'd at least gotten Papenheim to chase him I'd sleep better at night, but the man *stayed*," I sighed. "I mean, Gods, I see the strategic sense in it. The damage Black can actually do is limited, and if Callow falls the crusade is half-won. It's still a damned cold call to make, though, basically writing off the heartlands of his own country."

"We do not have a monopoly on ruthlessness," the orc reminded me.

"It'd be a simpler war if we did," I said. "But we have to face the facts, I suppose. Let's be conservative and say it takes them four months to make a passage through the wreck. By that time, the Levantines will have reinforced them. They'll invade together."

The orc leaned over and filled my thimble for the second time this evening – he'd quietly claimed control of the bottle, perhaps for the best – before tending to his own.

"The Army of Callow will have largely recovered by then," he said. "And Duchess Kegan has reinforced us."

"The Deoraithe need to hold the northern passage, otherwise there's a decent chance our truce gets shredded and the princes turn back," I bluntly said. "It's one thing to trust them with a sword in hand, another if the passage is left empty. No, down south we'll be on our own."

Hakram raised his sliver thimble.

"Dust and misfortune," he said in Mthethwa.

I clinked mine against his.

"Doom pass you twice," I replied, finishing the old Soninke toast and tossing back the brandy.

The harsh burn – Gods, this was rough stuff even by my standards – went down my throat pleasurably. I set the silver down.

"We're not winning that battle," I admitted. "Not against those numbers."

"Then we seek an alternative," Adjutant serenely said.

Not a hint of doubt there to be found. It felt like spring water for my soul. I snorted, and got to my feet.

"Not tonight," I said. "It can wait until tomorrow. Get the others, I need to spend a few hours looking at something that's not a godsdamned report in Vivienne's chickenscratch."

"By your command, Your Majesty," Hakram drily replied.

He'd mouthed off, I noted, but took the bottle without my needing to tell him. Truly a prince among men, my Adjutant.

—

"You're mad," Archer said. "I knew you'd be mad. See, Zeze, it's just like I told you."

Hierophant frowned, smoothing his robes.

"You did not," he noted. "You said, to be exact: 'Trust me, Masego, she'll love it. This will have no consequences whatsoever.'"

I eyed the dark-skinned mage with chagrin.

"And you *believed* her?" I asked.

"Trust is the foundation of a healthy friendship," he told me. "I've acquired a book on the subject. Very informative."

Hakram smothered a laugh by faking a coughing fit. Naturally, I elbowed him in the stomach. Questioningly. Considering how often I did that to him, he'd learned to tell apart the nuances.

"It's actually a religious text from one of those love cults in southern Ashur," the orc whispered, leaning towards me. "You know, the Face of Love folks? The real payoff is when he'll get to those illustrated parts in the middle. Most lurid thing I've ever seen."

"If he starts talking about sex rituals, you'll be the one to clean up that mess," I hissed back in a low voice. "I'll use a royal decree if I have to."

"It's too far from Harrow to Baroness Ainsley's personal property," Vivienne considered out loud. "A household knight's, maybe?"

"Hey, for all we know they're already dead," Indrani offered. "So no harm done, right?"

What had once been a lovely garden with stone benches and tasteful statues continued to burn down. A firepit with an entire stag roasting on a spit – another crime right there, I mused, we didn't have hunting rights in the barony – had been dug in the heart of what'd previously been an elegant bed of flowers. I raised a finger, then put it down.

"All right, before I crack the whip I have to know," I said. "I get why the pit is on fire, although Masego using hellfame seems like both horrible overkill and a good way to spoil the meat. But why are the *trees* on fire?"

"Zeze and I had a philosophical argument," Indrani explained. "He's a terribly sore loser."

My gaze turned to Hierophant, who looked vaguely embarrassed.

"She dropped a branch on me," he admitted. "And she's quite good at avoiding fireballs."

My brow rose.

"That's seven trees, Masego," I patiently said.

"I am the *best* at dodging," Archer boasted without an ounce of shame in her body.

I closed my eyes and counted to five, then opened them.

"All right," I said. "First, after we're done here the two of you are going to rebuild this."

"That's fair," Indrani said.

She had the look in her eyes of a woman fully prepared to lounge with a drink in hand while Masego did all the work.

"By hand," I added. "Not a drop of magic involved."

"Vivi, how would you like to be Queen of Callow?" Archer said without missing a beat. "I have ever been a sworn enemy of tyranny in all its forms."

"Please," Thief drawled. "Who'd be fool enough to want to rule this mess?"

*Thank you, Vivienne, I thought, for your unflinching loyalty and support. Really warms the cockles of my heart in these trying times.*

"You can't be serious," Masego said, glaring at me. "*Manual labour?*"

He spoke those words, I mused, in much the same tone other people spoke about raising the dead or your average black-hearted betrayal.

"You have hands, Zeze," I said. "What do you think they're for?"

"Oh, *that* was a mistake," Hakram muttered.

Hierophant's back straightened.

"According to the writings of Seljan Banu-" he began.

"According to the writings of Catherine Foundling, you're doing it," I interrupted flatly. "And the material costs are coming out of both your pay, split equally."

"You don't even pay us!" Archer protested.

I blinked in surprise.

"Of course I do," I said. "All of you have been gathering general's pay since Second Liesse. Indrani, you have a vault in Laure. I handed you the key myself, remember?"

"Yeah, but it was empty," Archer said. "I thought you were just yanking my chain."

"Fadila assures me I've been paid punctually," Masego contributed hesitantly.

Indrani cast him a discrete look at the mention of his assistant.

"Mine was full, last I saw," Hakram agreed.

Slowly, I turned to Thief. Who looked the very picture of maidenly innocence. *I've seen you stab people, Dartwick, I thought. Pretty incompetently, but still. Try harder.*

"Vivienne," I said very mildly. "Have you been secretly robbing one of your beloved comrades for almost a year now?"

The dark-haired woman batted her eyes in lovely confusion.

"Masego's book said that earthly possessions only distract from the holy principle of eternal love," she said. "How could I let them burden such a dear friend?"

Archer let out a delighted cackle that would likely terrified any birds around into flight if the fire had not already done so. At first I was pleased they weren't brawling in a garden they'd already set on fire, but then I frowned.

"Wait, Indrani, how have you been paying for your tavern crawls all this time?" I asked.

"I *haven't*," she cheerfully replied.

"They send the bills directly to the palace," Hakram told me. "It's under 'sundry expenses' in the treasury books."

"I thought that was, like, bribes and stuff," I faintly said.

The orc hummed.

"Well, I mean, from a certain point of view..."

I snatched the bottle out of his hands, a tithe for his perfidious treachery.

"All right, you incompetent gaggle of vandals," I said. "Someone put out those trees. And get me a skewer of that stag, I want to find out how it tastes when you use hellfire to roast it."

As it turned out, genuinely awful. By that time, though, we were too drunk to mind.

—

I found myself glaring blearily at the moon.

I'd rested my eyes for some time but never actually fallen asleep. Most the others had, though. Masego was seated on the ground, lying against a toppled stone bench. He was snoring very daintily, which brought the shadow of a smile to my face.



Indrani's feet were on his lap, occasionally kicking his legs as she moved in her sleep. She'd made a pillow out of her cloak, indifferent to the chill of the night. Vivienne was draped in actual sheets, which appeared to be *mine* and from the palace to boot by the cloth of gold bordering them and the embroidered heraldry. She was utterly still in her sleep, and unlike the others I could feel she was only a sudden movement away from waking. I'd not brought cloak of my own, since the one I usually wore did have the soul of a foe inconveniently attached to it. Besides, I hardly minded the cold these days. I'd remained close to Hakram, but instead of a comfort the warmth that emanated from him had me feeling restless.

"Awake?" Adjutant said, moving slightly aside.

Ugh, he'd been a comfortable mattress even if he was way too warm. How dare he.

"Wasn't quite asleep," I said. "Just not thinking. Closest I get to slumber, some nights."

"You should try anyway," he said. "You're always better, afterwards. More human."

"Since when do you think so well of humans?" I snorted.

"They've grown on me over the years," he gravelled.

"The opposite, for me," I admitted, more honestly than I'd meant to.

"Not them you were glaring at," Hakram pointed out.

I hummed.

"I still feel like destroying the moon, whenever I look at it too long," I said. "I know it's irrational, but it's like having a stone in my boot. The boot in this terrible metaphor being my soul, probably? Let's be honest, it's not the worse thing that tattered old mess has been compared to."

"Who knows?" he said. "It might be for the best if you do. There's an old Praesi story about Dread Emperor Sorcerous having bound his soul to it, that he's still scheming his final escape from death."

"There's a distressing amount of Tyrants with stories like that," I noted. "We're going to have to get around to cleaning up all those loose ends some day."

"Probably just a story," Hakram shrugged. "He was one of the better ones, anyway. Made a place for the shamans at his court, treated them with respect."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Didn't he also try the sentient tiger army?"

"The Tower's tried worse over the centuries," he mused. "If he'd gotten the tigers to pay taxes afterwards, it might even have counted as a gain."

That surprised a laugh out of me.

"Imagine having all that power," I said. "And using it for a godsdamned *tiger army*. The more Praesi histories I read the less I understand the Empire."

"Funny thing, power," Adjutant gravelled. "Never quite as straightforward as you'd think."

"Preaching to the choir there," I said. "Used to think that if I could blow up a fortress with a snap of my fingers it would all be so much simpler. Now I can, and so very few of my problems can be solved by that."

The orc shuffled against the bench.

"The Clans have few written histories," he said. "Oral tradition is how we pass it all down."

"Miezans did a number on your people, yeah," I said. "I remember. They had that nasty habit when conquering places."

"There was a great repository of scrolls in the lands of the Broken Antlers Horde, or so I was taught as a child," Hakram murmured. "They put it to the torch. I suppose they had reason to, from where they stood."

"The reasons of conquerors tend to be acceptable only to them," I said.

In this, I spoke as Callowan.

"Not that," Hakram said. "The scrolls, most of them were parchment. Human skin."

I blinked in surprise.

"Your ancestors were certainly a charming bunch," I said.

"They were what they were," Adjutant said. "The tragedy, I think, is that we only remember the worst of them. The excesses. We were more, in the dawn of days. And when they ripped out the heart of us they made it so that we could never be that again."

"It's getting better, though, isn't it?" I said. "I remember when I first joined the College. Seeing orcs read and write and talk, like..."

I hesitated.

"Like we were a people whole, and not the hissing shade of our heyday," Hakram finished gently. "There is something taking shape, Catherine, that is true enough. But it is not what we once were. No more than Callow under your rule is the Callow of the old Alban kings."

"That's an old refrain, Hakram," I said. "The same the Trueblood sang, and the rebels in Liesse. We only remember the golden parts of the good old days. They had their failings too. You can't look at our own failures and match them to barely remembered victories. The comparison is false."

"Oh, we were a terrible enough people in those days," the orc murmured. "Glorious too, at times, but terrible always. But I was speaking of old stories. There is one I remember, that the old raiders past their prime would tell us when the snows kept us in our tents. It is a conversation, between the Warlord Gazog and her son. One of many, though few are remembered. We call it the Riddle of Power, learned from an ancient stele."

I closed my eyes, leaning back against the stone.

"Tell me," I said.

He remained silent for a moment, gathering his memories, and when he spoke it was in Kharsum cadenced.

"After her spear had broken and she had grown fat and grey from the tributes of mankind's kings, Old Gazog took her young son to the great gathering of the thaw, where many clans assembled to trade and prepare the making of war," he said. "With cups of blood-brew they sat beneath their banner in silence until the sun had passed. Under the dark sky, Old Gazog spoke this: my son, you have witnessed the multitude of our people before you. Young and old, warrior and chieftain, lorekeeper and bronzesmith. I ask you now, where lies power among them?"

Hakram's voice lightened, as if he were a young boy of his kind.

"Honoured Mother, her son said. This is no riddle, for the answers has always been thus: it lies with chieftain and warlord, for their power is command over all. Old Gazog laughed, her teeth grown soft from many victories. Foolish son, she said. If their power comes from command, then how can their command come from power? How mighty is a chieftain, without obedience given?"

Adjutant clicked his fangs, and his were not soft at all.

"Old Gazog's son pondered this, and saw her wisdom. In this he was enlightened, and so answered once more. Honoured Mother, he said, power then lies with the lorekeepers. For they hold much wisdom and learning, cunning and law, and in teaching it does their power manifest. Foolish son, she said. What is wisdom, without hand to carry it? Was it a word, without ear to hear it? But wind, and wind is no mother of glory."

The orc's voice grew rough.

"Honoured Mother you speak true, her son said," Hakram said. "The birth of empire is bronze, and so power lies with the bronzesmiths for they alone know the secrets of fire and forge. They hold in their palm the source of war, and only in war can glory be found. Foolish son, said Old Gazog. You learn nothing. The whelping of fire is as wisdom, worthless without hand to wield it. Would a hoard of a thousand axe-blades bear the name of empire?"

He paused and I heard him lick his lips.

"Old Gazog's son grew wroth, for he did not know of his foolishness. Hateful Mother, he said. You speak many words, yet deny all save the hand. Is this your wisdom, that an empire is naught but swing of blade? All the peoples of the world know this, and there can be no further learning of it. Foolish son, she said. Be silent if you cannot be wise. There is terrible truth beneath the riddle of power, and it I will reveal it to you now."

Hakram went silent. I did not open my eyes.

"And?" I asked. "What did she say?"

The orc laughed harshly.

"No one knows," he told me. "You see, the Miezans broke the stele."

I heard him look up at the sky.

"Sometimes," Hakram Deadhand said softly, "I think that a truer answer than what was written."

---

[Idiom Idiot \(@AintItK\)](#)

Goddamnit you had to do it didn't you.

You had to make the Riddle of Stele.

*Raved Thrad*

Unfortunately, it looks like "crush your enemies, see them fly before you, and hear the lamentation of their women" doesn't seem to cut it for Catherine. Nauk, though, would probably nod his head and go, "Yes, that is what is good in life."

*Rook*

I think it's supposed to be 'see them driven before you'. Seeing them fly before you might be less Conan the barbarian and more Conan the cat scaring a flock of birds

*Raved Thrad*

I just checked IMDB and you're right. Sigh. I need to watch that movie again, it's been too damn long.

*Unorginal*

Forget the movie, that's a quote from Genghis Khan, Conan's got nothing on the man who carved out the largest continuous land empire in history and waged wars with death counts that (together) matched the world wars in an age before industrialized warfare.

*Yotz*  
*caimthehero*

CROM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

*Someguy*

Riddle of Steel or Stele?

[http://conan.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Riddle\\_of\\_Steel](http://conan.wikia.com/wiki/The_Riddle_of_Steel)

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Cat, Chat, Steel, Stele, what's the difference here? This page has the shittiest spelling. It might supposed be the fucking Riddle of Little Pee-pee for all the fucks you'll find here

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

You know, since orcs are said to have little pee-pees? You probably didn't even think about that.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Orc men HAVE to have small units. Think about if they didn't for a second: Chloe would be mentioning orc junk being up in her face ALL THE TIME. And since Chloe doesn't mention that,

it means Hakim isn't as hung as his frame would normally imply.

*Jeffery Wells*

There is no misspelling here, it's a play on words, a bit of an Easter egg if you will.

A stele is a large slab with carvings in the surface, erected as a memorial. Many cultures used them to pass stories or wisdom, either in written or pictorial form, to future generations. Chinese fantasy novels love to use them to pass secret knowledge, where a student sits and studies a stele for long periods of time to gain enlightenment.

The Miezans broke the stele, so the rest of the Orc's story is missing. There is nothing to break if it is steel and not stele.

The Easter egg, of course, is that 'the riddle of stele' is pronounced the same as 'the riddle of steel' from Conan the Barbarian. Orcs are a great parallel to barbarians, and the contents of the riddle of stele are roughly the same as the riddle of steel.

[Idiom Idiot \(@AintItK\)](#)

It's the Riddle of Steel written on a Stele. Come on, by this far in you should be better at spotting puns.

*Sylfa*

Punny reference or not, I think the answer is fairly clear. Orcs are very loyal to their families and clans, and the strength of a clan would thus be: The clan.

*helpmeimscared*

Hm. Nice riddle, especially the ending.

It's the warriors, isn't it? She said it right at the beginning. Guess Orcs might have been on the cusp of democracy before the Miezans came along.

*Rook*

I'd say the answer didn't change after the stele was broken. There is no deeper meaning or basis of what power is, power lies where you believe it is, or in another sense it doesn't innately lie within anything at all.

Between a warrior with a sword, or a scholar with a book, a rich man with a coin or a plain man with nothing with a title, who has power over the others? Simply whoever is believed to

have power. It's the exact reason why a frail and useless king can have absolute power over the strongest army to ever exist, but at the same time the greatest king that ever lived could be at the mercy of a bandit that doesn't recognize his authority or title.

Ironically enough, none of his answers were wrong; power can lie in every one of his guesses. At the same time, he was as wrong as he possibly could be, because power isn't an innate quality. It simply lies where it's placed.

*Cicero*

The answer is that flesh grows weak and steel grows brittle. Power comes from the will.

It's Nietzsche,

The will to power is makes some men more powerful than others.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will\\_to\\_power](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_to_power)

*beleester*

It's not that either, according to Gazog's son – "Is this your wisdom, that an empire is naught but swing of blade? All the peoples of the world know this." Force of arms is an obvious form of power, but it's not the whole story. If I were Gazog, I might say "Do the forgemasters only work when you put a knife to their throat? Do the warriors only obey their chieftain out of fear?"

My answer would be that no single person or group is powerful. Power lies in the force that binds the nation together, the institutions and culture that make all these disparate pieces act as one.

Since the Miezans broke the stele, perhaps the lesson is that even that has no true power – there will always be situations where your power is useless.

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

The greatest power in the world: enlightened self-interest. It can even find a way when beset by blind, short-termist stupidity (although idiots do do wonders as indiscriminate wrecking balls to their own and others' survival).

*Sylfa*

Foolish son, she said. If their power comes from their strength of armaments, then how can their armaments come from power? How mighty is a warrior, without armaments given?

Just my guess, but Orcs are very loyal to clan and family.  
Where lies the strength in a clan? The clan.

*Charles*

A charming chapter, with an ending that leaves me with a lead weight in my belly. I wish the Woe well, for the trials ahead.

*Antoninjohn*

Winter joining their former enemy is not a story that works out well for the enemy, Cat is fea however and can be bound by oath so they might let her in if she promised to stand against Callow being part the country responsible for the Hell Gate and Still Water and not give them any support and to see those part of that county brought to justice ( death), the look on their faces after she swears it and revels that instead of it being a redemption story where she gives herself to the the judgement of the White Knight to bring Callow into the Grand Good Group it turns out that it was Procer all along as excuse to expand and steal more land once more from Callow

*Gunslinger*

These slice of life chapters are always great fun but the introspective moments among them are the highlight. I love the riddle and the language used in it. Quite poetic.

As for the answer not really sure but I guess it's no one. It's the collective story that people tell, and which arises organically, that defines who holds the power and what form that is.

*Dainpdf*

That is more true of authority than of power. If you hold a lever, your power to lift things is multiplied. Power is a thing unto itself. It is more cause than caused. One might as well ask where time comes from, or thought.

*Jane*

Hm. A traditional Human answer would be that power lay in the tribe as a whole (or its people, depending on how you want to parse it); that orders only matter when people listen to them, that wisdom and tools only matter when there are people to use them, and that people can only accomplish great works when they are well-lead and given the tools to carry them out. That the young can only thrive when they have the lessons of the old, and the old can only survive when there are young to carry on the next generation. It is a mistake to speak of the power of an individual, when the contributions of everyone are necessary to



accomplish anything truly great; that is nothing more than empty vanity.

But this is a very Human way of thinking of things. An Orc? They seem quite fixated on bonds of family, and so I think would likely give a similar answer, but I am no Orc; I could not say if they would think of things differently. Of course, the author isn't either, but that's beside the point.

I *do* hope burning some nice gardens on a drunken lark doesn't diminish Ainsely's recent change of heart regarding her Queen. I mean, there's about a 0% chance of that after having seen the Battle of Camps, but still – rude. At least wait a year until her unquestioned loyalty has time to settle in!

Always nice to see the Woe get together for some quiet (?) fun together, but... Vivienne, exactly how long were you going to let this go on before revealing the punchline!? That's kind of a long time to be drawing out a prank for! ...And Indrani, I know you're not exactly in it for the money, but, uh, did you really *never* think it might be nice to have a real salary?... ...Or that that was really Cat's sense of humor? My goodness, she's almost as gullible as Masego...

*Dainpdf*

Interesting. In a way, it does make sense – power exists with the individual, on a micro level...

I'd like to think this riddle builds up to the idea of a modern state, a la Leviathan. Power lies with the State, the sum of its people, culture, possessions, as represented, in the Orcs' case, by the clan.

*Someguy*

Power is Power.

<http://www.giantitp.com/comics/oots0657.html>

Xykon already answered it. It's doesn't' matter what form power takes.

*Dainpdf*

Dammit, got ninja'd. And with a relevant quote, no less.

*Dainpdf*

I like this chapter's quote. It echoes the ideas Tarquin expresses in OOTS and which I brought up a few chapters ago. As for power... It doesn't really come from a single source. Power is a thing in itself and it has many forms. Power is the ability to choose and impose one's will upon reality.

What I find more interesting is authority, power legitimized. That one is quite a paradoxical thing.

*lennymaster*

What stands OOTS for?

*Raved Thrad*

Order of the Stick.

<http://www.giantitp.com/comics/oots0001.html>

*Dainpdf*

Order of the Stick. It's a webcomic. Someone linked it in another comment on this chapter (with another relevant moment).

*Raved Thrad*

A lot of the humor in OOTS derives from the metagame of D&D version 3.0/3.5, so if you're not familiar with that a lot of it may fall flat.

*Cicero*

Eh, I'm not a big D&D fellow but I enjoyed the humor. D&D is so influential on generic fantasy tropes that I got most of the jokes, and even the more D&D specific ones I had some insight into do to nerd knowledge osmosis.

*Raved Thrad*

Is that a feat or a class ability? 🤔

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

Skill with a circumstance check and an Int modifier. 😊

*Dainpdf*

<http://www.giantitp.com/comics/oots0763.html>

This is the specific strip I was referencing.

*Raved Thrad*

Looking at how chummy they've all become, even to passing off Vivienne robbing one of them blind as a joke, I couldn't help but wonder if Catherine and Vivienne have braided each other's hair yet. 🤔

*Dainpdf*

Don't feed the shippers!

*Raved Thrad*

How do you know I'm not one of them?

*Dainpdf*

If you are one of us, then don't feed yourself either.

*Raved Thrad*

Dammit, does this 'ship make me look fat?

*Jane*

Nope, too late, we've been fed after midnight, and now there are ten thousand fanfics about VivAndri, VivAt, and VivAm. Just be happy we didn't come up with strange Name-related puns for them all!

*Raved Thrad*

Did you purposely refrain from mentioning the other ten thousand fics that are all about the Catram friendShip? 🤔

*Jane*

...I might have had a particular character on my mind, perhaps.

Look, it was work enough mentioning that ships outside of Cat/Vivienne exist <\_<;; .

*Raved Thrad*

You mean like Masendrani? That's got "furtive confused fumbling" written all over it. 🤔

*Jane*

Oh, the Blind Shot has so much comedic potential, it practically writes itself 😊! They have great chemistry together, too, even if neither of them really have a concept of "romance".

But, well, this whole thing started out by mentioning Cat and Vivienne, so my first thoughts were around those two 🤔.

*Dainpdf*

Cat Thief.

*Jane*

My first thought was Thieving Cat, actually, but... Well, that's only *half* a name pun 😬. I can't really think of a complimentary way to phrase a thieving squire or duchess, though...

*Raved Thrad*

Queen + Thief =? Queef?

\*runs for cover\*

*Jessica Day*

Boo! Lol

*Garnet*

Add me to the Cat Thief fan club! Vivcat? Cattiene?  
Also wondering didn't Cat take a vow to like not drink?  
How did she get around that in this chapter?

*Big Brother*

Cat vowed to not drink unless Hakram was with her.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The Path forbade drinking on Campaign, until Adjutant & Cat reconnected.

Hakram is back, and he was managing Cat's intake.

*nimelennar*

Cat burglar?

*Dylan Tullos*

What is Pappenheim doing?

Don't mess around in the Vales. Follow Black as closely as possible, send your cavalry to keep track of his position and harass him constantly, and hit him from behind at the same time the Levantines attack from the front.

Right now, the forces of the Dread Empire and Callow are spread out over a huge area. The Crusading armies are mostly concentrated in southern Procer. Pappenheim can use that concentration of force to destroy one enemy utterly, then clear the Vales and turn the entire force on Callow.

If you have an opportunity to fight part of the enemy's army with your entire army, you take it.

*Dainpdf*

And give the Empress (or Cat) more time to plan and strategize? Give their allied armies more time to reconsider their commitment? Keep their levies and fantassins on the field longer, further damaging their harvest for later in the year \*and\* increasing the costs of mercenaries and the logistics of the army? Bad idea, especially since they want to invade Callow/Praes and Black does not look to be in a position to stop them. That, plus they have another army to catch him (which was outside my expectations – never thought Levante would defend Procer, but I guess that's the Good guys for you).

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

There's a limit to how much good planning and strategizing will do when you've just lost your biggest remaining army, your most experienced field commanders, and your greatest Named all at the same time.

If the cost of utterly surrounding and destroying Black's Legions is a bad harvest and a large sum of money, that's dirt cheap compared to the possible cost of fighting Black with anything less than every possible soldier available. Instead of taking chances or trying to be clever, the Crusaders should just bring everyone they have and utterly destroy Black's army.

Once he and his legions are dead, invading Callow/Praes will be a great deal easier.

You seem to have missed the part where Levante signed up for the Crusade and committed themselves to defeating the Dread Empire. Also, the Grey Pilgrim is the spiritual leader of the entire country, and he's not going to let old national hatreds stand in the way of defeating evil. Good does not have to be Dumb.

*Someguy*

I'm thinking Realpolitik and secret deals will come into play like in World War 1.

All these armies from countries wary of Proceran ambitions in Procer or moving to Procer, the bulk of the Proceran army tied down or decimated and Named heroes in the front. Smells like opportunity.

*Dylan Tullos*

Someguy:

Grey Pilgrim and his good friend the Saint of Swords would have lots of things to say to any leader who decided that their secular rivalry was more important than holy war.

Well, Grey Pilgrim would have lots of things to say. The Saint's nickname is "Regicide", and she doesn't bother using words on rulers who think they can defy the Heavens' writ.

*Someguy*

Ah but what will she do when it's Pilgrim's countrymen invading her homeland then and the shots already fired, blood spilled and villages razed?

Nationalism and national interests coming to the fore to split Story momentum? I think it's time for the heroes to find out who they are when Light shatters

*Dylan Tullos*

Someguy:

None of this has happened, we have no reason to believe it would happen, and the Grey Pilgrim would personally depose any rulers who tried to backstab a Crusade for secular ambitions.

Right now the Levante is marching in support of a Good nation against the forces of Evil. Any Levantine ruler who deviates from that script will have a talk with the Pilgrim if they're lucky and the Saint if they're not.

*MetruX*

You talk just like so many of those naive young Heroes. The Pilgrim can't depose anyone, he has no secular powers and neither want any, and the Saint has never killed nobles or important people outside the principate, as much as she travelled outside. They are powerfull and wise old Named, not super powers unto themselves. Also, Good is not good and they all hate Procer, as has been shown several times before. How could they not? Procer invaded them more than any Evil nation tried.

*Dainpdf*

You forget Malicia is in possession of Still Waters and worse and is confirmed to have agents in Procer. The cost would be greater than "a bad harvest". Speaking of which, bad harvests tend to lead to famine, and with coffers dry that can lead to the collapse of the country.

As for Levante, yes, the Pilgrim is a spiritual leader, but they still have great distrust for Procer and that they'd put it aside not just to invade Praes but also to defend Procer's heartland does them credit.

Also? The longer they take, the more time Cat guess to recruit, fortify etc... while chasing Black around accomplishes... nothing? He's already out of position, as far as they know. I mean, I guess they could chase him just due to his reputation, but then how do they know that's not his plan anyways?

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

Chasing Black around accomplishes killing Black. If Black's plan is to be surrounded and utterly destroyed by several enemy armies, I am happy to go along with that plan.

The use of Still Waters would cause immense damage to Procer and utterly destroy Praes. If Malicia uses the methods of Traditional Evil, she signs up for the inevitable fate of old-school Villains.

*Dainpdf*

First, that won't be any consolation if you're... You know, Procer. Which is who Pappenheim represents. Second, mortals don't generally think in terms of narrative and stories. Hell, Black showed us that overreliance on narratives is poison. Third, Malicia is clearly okay with using superweapons. Remember the whole Akua thing? It's been a while, but not that long.

And fourth, the Tyrant has shown us that traditional evil *\*can\** be worked into a weapon. You may recall he has succeeded so far and even outwitted the Bard. Plus, you know, Kingdom of the Dead. Unconquered evil.

*MetruX*

Okay, to start... Overcommitting can be as hazardous as undercommitting. If you need exactly twenty thousand of your soldiers to defeat one enemy with minimal casualties, and you got another front to battle, you use twenty thousand. Not more and not less. That is the true vein of commanding, even more than making strategies themselves: How much can I use? How much should I use? How much can I sacrifice?

The army going for black has defence, Named and double the numbers, besides the narrative on their sides. Really, unless a miracle happens Black won't win this battle. On the

other hand, the pass won't be opened easier or faster after they deal with the internal menace, so the truth is he made a choice of prices: lives and farmland over time and loyalty. Also, do you think the first of the ally armies will stop advancing on Callow just because he will be delayed? This will only make more of his allies die, because of harder fights, simply for fear of numerous advantages not being enough.

About making it faster, absolutely foolishness. If Black is not there, if the fullness of this armies following him, it is the same deal easier and faster to invade, no matter if he is dead or away. Just do the maths, 4-1 is 3, no matter if the one was eaten or locked away.

Defeating Black is not defeating the Dread Empire, and none of those pledgings mean full commitment. They could, very well, just delay their marches a couple of months and then clean up once Procer is broken. Would even be better for them, since they hate Procer (as has been shown in interludes books before). It is an absolutely understandable surprise for a enemy turned temporary ally to come to your help in a moment of need.

Now, for the Pilgrim. He is not there, if you trully do not remember, I'll just remind you he stayed behing, together with the prince oficially leading the army, because of the signed treaty. So even if he could comand the Levantines (which he neither can or would do, given what we saw so far) he is not in a position to do so. Also, just to make clear: heroes came for the Pilgrim and the Saint, armies came because of the First Prince's machinations. It was shown to us how hard she had to fight, on several diplomatic fronts, to make a Crusade possible, even with the doom weapon. It's not merely a fight for Good, each has their own reasons for entering the Crusade.

*Jason Ipswitch*

"And then forces of Good, with their numerical superiority and logistical advantages of operating in their home territory, dealt a crushing defeat to the Legions of Terror with no more casualties or property damage than might reasonably be expected, before turning around an engaging in some more diplomacy," went no Story ever.

I don't know if it won't happen because the Powers Above and Below won't allow it, or because the forces of Good are story-savvy enough to know that plan never works, but it was never going to go that way.

*Dylan Tullos*



Jason Ipswitch:

I know, I know, the Narrative insists that Heroes aren't allowed to just assemble overwhelming force and win a simple, straightforward victory. I just become upset when obvious, sane solutions are automatically eliminated because they aren't dramatic enough.

*Oshi*

It's the cost of living and committing to a story driven world.

*Novice*

Welcome to a world ruled by narrativium. I wonder how you managed to survive three books.

*MetruX*

And still be naive enough to think things would go smoothly if the "sane" common sense method was used. I mean, how many times have we seen people do supposedly sane and sensible things and get killed or mangled for that?

*JJR*

When you frame it like that sure, it can't work. But part of being in a narrative driven world is finagling the right narrative out what you are doing, In this case it would be the 'villain's hubris leads to their downfall' narrative. Even better if they can get the Waltz of Wroth considered Black's Phase One by the world, that way his Hells mandated victory is used up just as he managed to use Hanno's Heaven mandated one.

Of course Black will be busy finagling the Narrative too. Which brings us to who survived the duel. I think it's literally up in the air at this point. Traditionally such a massive magic duel with an ambiguous outcome would be a set up for the Hero spellslinger to show up at the last moment to save their friends at the last moment. But with all the narrative awareness going on, and Black's ability to change or sidestep narratives he might trick the world into making Warlock the person who takes the role of the last second rescuer. Hell, Warlock might have decided to not contact anyone after the duel just to be able to set up such a plot in the future. In order for this to have any chance though, Black has to put himself in a position where he is outmatched and under siege, say by invading Procer despite the fact that he is massively outnumbered and cut off from retreat.

Of course being unable to retreat is it's own sort of story that is as old as the first dawn. As Sun Tzu puts it, "Throw your soldiers into positions whence there is no escape, and they will prefer death to flight. If they will face death, there is nothing they may not achieve." (<https://suntzusaid.com/book/11/23>)

*Jane*

Perhaps he's concerned that Black is attempting to lure him into another trap, and believes that the other forces won't have to worry about such a thing?

Alternately, maybe he's concerned that Black would send a skirmishing force against those left to work on clearing the pass, and is unwilling to split his forces for fear of Black making use of a cunning plan.

Or it could just be that Papenheim's forces are in greater disarray than we were lead to believe, and simply *can't* pursue without more time to reorganize – at least not without unreasonably high casualties.

If both of the remaining two armies are large enough to defeat him and close enough to engage within a reasonable timespan, it's not an unreasonably bad move to leave the matter to them. Not what I would choose to do, but it's not necessarily the wrong call. Well, I mean, it *will* be a mistake, given what the readers know, but the logic would be sound if we hadn't been told he was up to something.

*Dylan Tullos*

Jane:

If Pappenheim is worried about a trap, he can send scouts and Heroes out to check for danger as he advances. If he's worried about enemy skirmishers, he can leave two or three thousand soldiers to build a fortified camp at the Vales to protect his engineers.

And if his forces are disorganized, he can send his cavalry to harass Black while he gets his army in order.

Black is ALWAYS up to something, and he has to know the odds are against him. If he's advancing anyway, it's because he has a plan. The solution is not bring an army that's "large enough", but an army that's so unreasonably huge that even the most cunning tactics imaginable won't make a difference.

There may be Story reasons not to do this, but I see no strategic reason to use forty-five thousand men to sit around

a pile of rocks while mages and priests slowly clear away rubble.

*Jane*

On the other hand, though... Scouts didn't help much with the traps Black has sprung so far, either being too quickly triggered to react to, or making use of premises so outlandish that nothing could be noticed; similarly, they might be concerned that too small a guard would be pointless, but too large a guard would diminish their war potential too severely.

As for just sending the cavalry... Well, this is a pre-modern army. Procer sounds like it still operates on the old style of organization, where forces are loyal to their nobles first, and a real chain of command second. After the heavy losses they've sustained, and the utter confusion that being in the middle of a mountain range blowing up must bring... Something as sophisticated as "Find me Lord xyz and have him send us his knights" might just plain be *beyond* them for the next few days, especially when he starts getting refusals from nobles who balk at losing even more valued retainers when they "*know*" Lady qrs's knights are still relatively fresh.

Factor internal political considerations into it, since all of this will be remembered long after the Crusade is over... It probably *isn't* worth the trouble, unless you expect to lose if you don't pursue him now.

As I said before, I *do* think this is a mistake on Papenheim's part, unless he's up to something as well... Just one that I consider a reasonable one. Sending a force of disorganized levies tired from a week of heavy fighting to pursue a brilliant leader known for unconventional strategies, relying on nothing but superior numbers and the presence of the Chosen to bolster them, sounds like a recipe for heavy casualties – waiting for fresh troops instead is what a cautious commander ought do.

It's just that, well, caution *isn't* always the safer option, as we'll soon find out.

*Morgenstern*

Might also add in the morale of Papenheim's troops, which has to be shockingly low after the last very few days and such heavy losses for no real gain...

*RanVor*

There is only one possible reason to use forty-five thousand men to sit around a pile of rocks while mages and priests slowly clear away rubble: to resume the invasion IMMEDIATELY when the passage is cleared, instead of wasting months on marching back to the Vales and leaving the way to Callow open for a counter-strike.

I'm not saying it's strategically sound, but it's an explanation.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

That makes sense.

*MetruX*

Who says the mages and priests will be the only ones working? They can't work 24/7, and even small excavations on their down times will grow with time. You seem to think the bigger weapon always win, and dozens of both real and fantasy tales can be shown to say that is not true. There has never been an army undefeated by sheer numbers, and there will never be. If, for nothing else, because logistics get's harder and loyalty lesser the bigger the host. You know, it's onw of the reason why there is so much hierarchy in the military...

[Walter](#)

Bad guys have a slave who can teleport armies. If you chase Black's host you will be weeks out of position when Cat or Larat swoops down and scoops him into Arcadia.

*Oshi*

I wonder if the Pilgrim is watching them now and what it means.

*Jane*

"Those crazy kids"?

I can't help but think of how similar it seems to the shenanigans we've seen from the other Hero parties we followed. Well, except the Lone Swordsman's. He was kind of too grim and gritty for fun – no doubt part of the reason Cat could swipe Thief after the fact.

*Raved Thrad*

Well, it's always possible that Vivienne was all "That's such a pretty black cloak, I wonder what it would be like to take it off her."

And then we'd see Vivienne blushing and insisting to herself  
"To steal it! I'd take it off her to steal it!"

*Jane*

Hey, hey, I was making a serious point, not adding shipping  
fuel 😊 !

I just meant that the Lone Swordsman's party never really  
came *together* in the way we saw the White Knight's or that  
one paladin guy from the prologue. As such, it was a heck of  
a lot easier for Thief to work with their killers after the  
fact, whereas if the converse were to happen... Well, it's a  
lot harder to forgive the death of a friend than that of  
(essentially) a coworker.

*Raved Thrad*

Well, if I remember right, it was Thief herself who  
pointed out that he was the Lone Swordsman, which is why  
he sucked at being in a group and, consequently, his group  
sucked at being one, too.

*pyrohawk21*

The power comes from the multitude of people, for it is by their  
will that all the others are given power over the rest.

*TheCount*

i do have my guess what's the answer, but i like this ending too.  
makes you think. 😊

*Jane*

Oh, sure, go and leave your guess unstated so that you can  
never be proven wrong, unlike the rest of us saps 😊 ...

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

The Woe: Haha! Fix the house! Haha! I shall use you as a  
footstool! besties for life!

Black: "RAPE THE CITIES AND BURN THE WOMEN!"  
\*Uncharacteristically Evil Cackling\*

*Raved Thrad*

You win an Internet for the Three Amigos reference. 😊

*Novice*

The Legions prohibit rape. On one of the earlier chapters, it is said that Black dealt with rapists harshly after the Conquest.

*RanVor*

The Legions prohibit raping \*people\*. I doubt the doctrine has anything to say about raping cities.

*Raved Thrad*

If you think about it, raping cities is a great way to beef up the Legions of Terror. Rape a couple of cities, and in a few years baby cities will spring up, allowing you to temper your new, green recruits in battle against the cities' guardians. Once all opposition is dead, rape the city, and the cycle continues.

[TeK](#)

Maybe you can even tame little cities and turn them into battle mounts.

[Euodiachloris](#)

You need to train them up from when they're still villages. It takes a while, and some of the poor, little things just don't make it due to geographical limitations and/or fading syndrome leading to them never forming a proper, self-sustaining CBD with solid trade links. It's quite sad, really.

*Yotz*

I'll just refer you to [this](#) thing.

[Antony444](#)

Situation is not looking good seen from the grand point of view. I knew the Crusade was virtually all the good nations of Calernia save the Gigantes, but damn that's a huge amount of men...

It's true I really don't see now how Cat can triumph against nine heroes (including the White Knight) and over 80 000 soldiers. The same is true for Black. Oh, the Princes of Bayeux and Aisne are going to scream bloody murder because Papenheim has abandoned their lands to Praes, but the Legions of Terror are so hideously outnumbered...

There are too many heroes for the villains to survive as the situation stands. The Army of the Stairwell began with fourteen and the Army of the Vales with eleven. Now they have respectively ten and nine, but we don't how many are waiting in the wings. It's sad to say, but Callow really need the Dead King, the Tyrant

and/or Triumphant to intervene before four months because else the Crusade is going to enter Callow and crush all opposition.

I liked very much the bantering between the Woe, they're becoming more like the Calamities in every way...

*Someguy*

Seven Heroes. Two died after the Dragon dropped burning rock on them and Grem had his men mop them up:-

>The heroes, even after it all, had held long enough for a retreat. Only two of the nine had perished, the White Knight joining his fellows to escape. The horseman he had brought were not so lucky.

[Walter](#)

The armies aren't relevant. Cat can drop mountains on them anytime she feels like it.

The lesser heroes aren't relevant. Cat kicked the crap out of a squad of them with the Saint helping out.

Hanno would be the person in that army that mattered, if Cat ended up fighting Pappenheim's army.

My biggest question is whether Cat's alliance field will work on Pilgrim. If he joins the Woe she can probably dictate the Accords directly.

*MetruX*

Commonly, you would be right. But with those numbers they can just ignore her and take her land, while she is occupied by lesser heroes and her armies die all around. Also, her power is not endless, as great as it is. You must remember Black's techings, like when he spoke of his more powerfull precedents, like his directly one, who died to a common soldier. With those numbers, they can take her down, simply by never stopping the attacks and giving no time to rest.

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

One of the earlier chapter quotes was about how, if you've got too many heroes after the same villain(s), "certain doom" becomes "mere doom," as the heroic stories dilute each other by proximity. Even for non-Named, it's well-established that overwhelming, obvious numerical superiority just makes stories which save the underdogs more likely to pop up.

Of course, a numerical advantage is still really helpful in battle, it's just that being an underdog is REALLY HELPFUL in battle.

*nick012000*

So, Sorcerous's soul is in the moon? Hey, Cat, I have an idea on how to get rid of the moon. I call it Plan: Fuck The World.

Step 1: Seize the Tower.

Step 2: Perform a giant magical ritual that sacrifices every person in Ater other than the magicians performing it, using their blood and souls to fuel the spell. Don't worry about the Due, everyone in Creation is going to die if you succeed anyway.

Step 3: Use a connection between the Tower and the soul of one of the Dread Emperors who ruled it to drag the moon out of orbit onto the Tower.

Step 4: Flee into Arcadia before the moon hits Creation and everyone there dies.

*Forrest*

I mean, unless dragging the moon down becomes one of those scales of which no one can screw with, I'm pretty sure heroic intervention would occur. Granted, we already know both Ranger and the Dead King fit on that scale, so the moon being brought down a la a certain mask like game would seem to fit... but then it would likely have to be Cat doing it, not the mages around her if she wanted it to be considered on that scale. Even then...

*JJR*

Did someone say, "massive sacrificial ritual to drag the moon out of the sky?"

(Ok, it was more to drag a God out of the sky though the moon, but the principle should be similar enough.)

*Yotz*

Speaking of >cleaning up all those loose ends some day. It suddenly dawned on me recently (yeah, second thought in less than six months; yeah, I don't believe it either), that the Liesse Machine is still mostly functional – bar the control circuits and the power source. Which can be substituted by Zeze and Winter respectively, probably with small tweakings here and there which would allow to replicate Absolute Positioning trick on the industrial scale. Or – I don't know – open an Arcadia portal inside the Greater Breach just for the hell of it...

*SpeckofStardust*

Considering that the power source went critical in the rest of the it. I think your underestimating how much of it is still there. That said the creator of it is still alive so it could just be rebuilt.



*Yotz*

Also, since the Riddle of Stele encouraged the quotemini, it seems – here's another pointless one of dubious origin.

““The distance between civilization and savagery is cake.” – Princess Celestia (apocryphal)”

It may sound absurd at first, but if the reader will bear out the line of reasoning, he or she will see beneath the frosting to a fundamental underpinning of Equestrian society.

To construct a proper cake, or indeed most any kind of frosted pastry, a civilization must be capable of milling flour, collecting eggs, harvesting and refining sugar, acquiring and storing milk, churning butter, and writing down recipes. A cake-producing civilization must also have the infrastructure necessary to bring these ingredients into one place, and an oven in which to combine and bake them. To do all this requires a certain level of agricultural capacity, livestock management skills, technological advancement, education, skilled labor, and social cohesion that hunter-gatherers and wandering monster packs lack, no matter how smart or articulate the individuals may be.

The similar approach may be applied to the concept of power, as it was many times already noted in this chapter's comment section. I mean, you don't just rip one chip from the board and call it “the root of all”...

*Jessica Day*

LMAO 😂 Masego got a book on friendship.

*Raved Thrad*

Indrani's just softening him up. “Hey, Zeze, wanna get \_real\_ friendly?” 😊

*Oshi*

God...hes going to go and get a damn kid...

*Raved Thrad*

Poor kid. Dad is trying to unravel reality so he can hack the source code, mom is a murderous amoral adrenaline junkie, one grandfather is a murderous, insanely powerful wizard, and the other grandfather is a demon. Oh, and grandma-by-courtesy is a murderous adrenaline junkie who hunts gods for sport.

Can you say pressure to perform?

*Naeddyr*

"MOM IT'S NOT A PHASE! I am a Priestess of Light and Unicorns, sent here to cuddle evil with my heart until it EXPLODES"

*Raved Thrad*

Indrani: "Our daughter has a Name."

Masego: "Yes."

Indrani: "And her Name is Unicorn Priestess."

Masego: "Yes."

Indrani: "I can't live down this... this horror!"

Masego: "Don't worry, it's a transitional Name."

Indrani: "What other name can she possibly transition to?"

Masego: "Unicorn Priestess of DEATH!!"

Indrani: "You hacked her Name?"

Masego: "I hacked her Name."

*Raved Thrad*

On reconsideration, especially considering who the kid's grandfathers are, it's probably more likely to play out like this:

Indrani: "Our son has a Name."

Masego: "Yes."

Indrani: "And his Name is Unicorn Priestess."

Masego: "Yes."

Indrani: "I can't live down this... this horror!"

Masego: "Don't worry, it's a transitional Name."

Indrani: "What other Name can he possibly transition to?"

Masego: "Unicorn Priestess of DEATH!!"

Indrani: "You hacked her Name?"

Masego: "I hacked her Name."

Indrani: "Well, at least there's some death in there."

Masego: "Not death. DEATH!! Capitalization and punctuation are important."

*Skycom*

As much as I like watching the woe family shenanigans, I think I would preferred the interlude to be longer and watched black kicks some more ass, instead of that partial summary we got in part three.

*Alivaril*

Eeh. I'm not too bothered by how that interlude turned out, especially since EE was sick; I'd rather have this sort of thing. Battles are OK, but chapters such as this one are what gives the story life and makes it worth reading.

## *Everything Narrator, Penning Gentle Lies*

Focault said that power is everywhere because power comes from everywhere. The true strength of one man is merely the reach of his blade, but when a whole people thinks one man should be king, he becomes one.

*superkeaton*

A comfortable little cooldown chapter.

---

Typo:

> "Barika assures me I've been paid punctually," Masego contributed hesitantly.

Should be Fadila, Barika was killed and buried in sanctified grounds back in Book II.

*Joshua Sills*

What an interesting comparison to the Riddle of Fault the White Knight was given and answered before his major power boost. Pretty sure Cat coming up with an answer will be the transition to her new name for symmetry sake.

*MetruX*

That... Oh well, it might very well be true o.o How perceptive, of you. I hope it isn't, but the symmetry is there, and still no bindings between Black and White...

[\*jfantasybooks\*](#)

Hi, is there a way to get in contact with you?

[\*erraticerrata\*](#)

My email's on the home page.

[\*jfantasybooks\*](#)

Ok! I sent an email. Thanks.

[\*sengachi\*](#)

<https://www.patreon.com/user/overview?u=3523924>

Hey if you can you should go support errata on Patreon. They write a \*ton\* for us, and the Guide is just an amazing story, but they don't make all that much on Patreon for all the work they do. So seriously, if you can, go donate. The Guide is an amazing,

amazing story and the least we can do is help take care of errata for gifting it to us.

*Metrux*

Humm... Why you call him they? Erraticerrata is a single person, no?

[sengachi](#)

I didn't know his gender so I just went with they, as the single-person gender-ambiguous pronoun.

[Arthur Hansen](#)

"...though the Pilgrim had knocked me the fuck out after barely ten heartbeats. "

Think you meant to have a "later" after heartbeats.

*Metalshop*

How is it that every chapter that focuses on Hakram is the best out of any of the other chapters? That math shouldn't work out, but it does.

The interplay between his absolute loyalty/ trust and Cat's doubt/uncertainty is fantastic, as good a character interaction as I've ever read, including traditionally published fiction.

I just wanted to take a moment to tell you that directly, because that's no small thing you've managed.

*Metalshop*

Since I can't edit: I just realized that this last chunk of the story, which has focused so much on Cat feeling uncertain, is the longest chunk we've seen of her operating without Hakram nearby. I'm real keen to see how his arrival changes the whole dynamic.

Further thought: Seeing the way the Woe are behaving here and recalling the sections where the Heroes comment on how Catherine is following a heroic narrative arc rather than a traditional villainous one, I have a wild-ass theory. Cat (and her followers) are an attempt by the gods Below to treat a villain a bit more like how the Heavens treat heroes. Not in the sense that their behavior is steered (since Evil is all about Free Will to Power) but in the sense of direct intervention to let a villain benefit a bit from the evil version of divine providence.

*Metrux*

Well, is there a Evil version to divine power? For all we know all Gods are equal, save for the point of view, which is why Good and Evil started existing after the Creation, not before.

*Pilgrim the White*

They are behaving almost exactly as Calamities do/did. I almost expect Cat to conquer somewhere while drunk.

*Pilgrim the White*

Dunno if this has been discussed before, why didn't the bird obsessed oracle warn the invaders of Blacks intent to invade them or his trap with the mountains etc.

Why didn't she warn them about Cat intending to drop a lake on em.

Why didn't she warn anyone that Cat was gonna raid the camp and intended to steal their supplies.

I think i don't like oracles if they work deus ex machina style though i might be missing something here.

*Mindsword*

I think it has to do with intent. They got some information past her because it was a spur of the moment thing. In this case, if Black wasn't planning on invading and is merely adapting, then she would have had no warning. As for Cat... these are Coredella's political rivals. Let them suffer.

*Pilgrim the White*

Because Black is such a spur of the moment guy amirite?  
Yea it was the plan all along for the army invading Cat to lose but i dunno, seems too farfetched.

308924810a

So I'm pretty sure the riddle was going to answer that true power lies with the warrior, because the only power you can trust is that achieved through struggle and hardship, and the practice of the warrior is the practice of learning to fight for what you want.

But the stele being broken is still a truer answer, because power achieved through martial force can always be broken by superior force.

I think that modern Orcs differ from their ancestors in that they acknowledge that power comes from institutions allowing groups to surpass the limits of individuals, instead of originating from

individual struggle, hence why the first Orc Named in centuries is meant to act as part of an organization in support of another.

[crowlute](#)

1) Adorable Woe cuddle pile 😊

2) a ruler commands because others choose to obey. When civil wars erupt, the majority in strength usually ends up controlling in the end. Might makes.

---

## Chapter 24: Invitation (Redux)

*"The enemy of my enemy is second on the list."*  
– Dread Empress Vindictive III

"Is it contained?"

I didn't bother with greetings, knowing the manners would be lost on Masego anyway. The dark-skinned mage nodded, not even noticing the abruptness of my tone.

"It did not struggle against imprisonment," Hierophant said. "Nor has it sought to escape binding since."

The two of us walked towards the sparse woods where the creature had been trapped inside wards without wasting time. Night had just fallen, which was a small mercy. It meant there'd be fewer witnesses. Already the scout line who'd found it approaching Harrow had been sworn to secrecy, but there was no telling if anyone else had come across it. As the exact path it'd taken to get here was still a mystery. More worryingly, the Observatory *hadn't seen it* and it was meant to pick up on exactly this kind of stuff. I was not great student of sorcery, but even to me the implications were visible. Whoever had sent the thing was a mage of very great skill, and there were only a few of those around. And even fewer among those who'd lower themselves to raising the dead, much less this... particular kind.

"You're sure it wasn't an attack?" I asked for the third time.

Masego's brow creased.

"Certainty of unknown intent is, by definition, impossible," he said peevishly. "My current *theory*, based on initial observation, is that this was not an attack. It is not armed, and was not

crafted with combat in mind – or at least no form of combat I can recognize.”

“It doesn’t need to swing blades to be dangerous, Masego,” I said. “It just needs to carry a magic plague and take a dip in the water reservoirs.”

“Don’t be obtuse, Catherine,” he sighed. “Plague-bearing was one of the first threats I assessed it for. There is no trace. It has, if anything, been stripped out of everything but the barest necessities for functionality. It does carry an enchanted object, but that object has no harmful properties.”

I frowned.

“Is that how it slipped the Observatory’s sight?” I asked.

“I do not believe so,” Hierophant said. “I’ve made preliminary studies, and found that its presence in Creation seems *dimmed*, somehow. Like a shadow under sorcerous sight. It was not invisible to the Observatory so much as exceedingly difficult to find if not specifically looked for.”

“We need to fix that weakness,” I flatly said. “If this could be done once, it can be done again. We’re relying on the Observatory to keep one step ahead of threats, and I’m not pleased someone already found a way to fool it. You told me it’d be years before someone found a counter.”

“I told you it would be three to five years before the Empire found a counter, barring my father’s sustained intervention,” the blind man corrected. “This is not Imperial work.”

We were going to have a longer conversation about this down the line, but I allowed silence to take hold as we finally got deep enough in the woods that the creature was in sight. Surrounded by layers on layers of translucent force with glowing runes inscribed, the undead creature was utterly still. Hakram, in full armour with his axe in hand, was keeping an eye on it. Indrani was out in the field to make sure there wasn’t another wandering the countryside, and Vivienne combing the keep for infiltration we might have missed. It wasn’t a person I was looking at, though it might once have been. The upper body and face was of a pale-skinned man’s, but that was where the normality ended. There was a pair of segment, almost insect-like arms coming out of the creature’s back, with hooks at the tip. *Made for climbing*, I thought. Had it crossed the Whitecaps without taking a pass? The body parts beneath the torso were harder to make out. The entire creature had been covered in a ragged cloak when the goblins first saw it, though it had fallen off the upper body since, and what I could glimpse through the cloth was eight spider-like legs of bone and necrotized flesh folded close to the torso. It was, I grimaced, the kind of abomination you’d expect to be dumped out

in the Wasteland after an Emperor climbed the Tower and cleared out the basement of their predecessor's experiments. There were no visible weapons save for the claws, not that it needed any.

"You're sure this isn't of your father's making?" I said.

"I could perhaps reproduce the design in two months, he in one," Masego noted. "The material parts of it anyway. What makes it truly fascinating work is the guiding intelligence, since there is barely any. Every ounce of metaphorical fat has been trimmed. It is, I will admit, one of the most magnificently efficient necromantic constructs I have ever seen."

I cursed.

"All right, so either a high-tier necromancer has just come out of the woodworks," I said. "Or we're dealing with something much, much worse."

The Dead King. Fucking Hells. It wasn't like the situation had been going so well the Heavens needed to drop another dead cat in my lap. Assuming this was their work, anyway, and not a play by the Pricks Below.

"Catherine," Hakram said suddenly, breaking me out of my thoughts before a proper rant could take hold. "It's moving."

My eyes flicked at the creature, which had risen on two bone appendages and was peering at me from the edge of the wards.

"Well," I muttered. "That's pretty lively for a dead cat."

Masego glanced at me and opened his mouth but I silenced him with a raised hand. I felt him twitch, the mutter something under his breath about there being no feline components. The undead stared at me for a solid twenty heartbeats before opening its mouth.

"I offer greetings to the Black Queen of Callow," the creature said. "Your renown has been heard far and wide, bringing the attention that is your due. I bear invitation from the King of the Dead, who offers safe passage to Keter. In the face of Above's wrath, the champions of Below must either face demise alone or overturn the wheel of fate in coming striving."

I waited just in case it had anything to add and in a manner of speaking it did. The jaws unhinged and a serpent-like black tongue came out, offering up what looked like a circular seal of pure obsidian.

"The enchanted object it was carrying," Masego said. "It holds... instructions. A sliver of knowledge accessible through touch."

I stared at the obsidian seal and decided it was too early in the year to start making decisions that blatantly terrible. I wasn't



getting anywhere near that until Masego had spent a few days checking it out, and even then I wasn't touching it if it could be at all avoided.

"I hear the King of the Dead's invitation," I said. "But seek clarification on the nature of it."

The tongue snapped back in. The undead began speaking again, but it was just repeating the exact same message. Masego's glass eyes were staring at it, his head cocked to the side.

"Hierophant?" I probed.

"The trigger for the actions was your presence," he said. "The message is not spoken consciously so much as woven into what passes for the construct's mind. It cannot reason or reply, only repeat."

"My presence," I repeated slowly.

"Winter, more specifically," he said. "I'll need a closer look to find out the decision threshold, but I suspect Larat would not have been able to fool it into speaking."

Hakram had come to stand at my side while we spoke, warily eyeing the undead.

"Cat," he gravelled. "If the Dead King knew enough to bespell for that..."

"He has a much better idea of what's going on outside his kingdom than we thought," I finished grimly. "Shit."

Masego cleared his throat.

"Why are we displeased?" he said. "My interest in diplomacy is inexistent, but this seems to me like an offer of alliance. Are we not under siege by the crusaders?"

"We are," I said.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"But there's a saying back home about Praesi bearing gifts, and I think it might just apply here," I said.

Hakram loomed tall at my side, baring his fangs at the creature.

"I'll get the others," he said. "The solar?"

I nodded and stood silently as he left, watching the creature as it began to speak the message again.

"You have an hour to study it," I finally told Masego. "Don't break it, we don't know if there'd be consequences. After the hour's done, I want you in the solar with everyone else."

An eager smile split Hierophant's face in two.

"Thank you, Catherine," he murmured. "This will be *most interesting*."

I walked away without a word, pretty sure I didn't want to see what would follow.

—

There were six of us in Baroness Ainsley's solar, enough that it felt full without being outright cramped. The piles of parchment that followed Adjutant like a curse had been dumped unceremoniously on the ground so that the only thing on the table was a detailed map of Calernia — along with a handful of goblets. Mine was still half-filled with aragh, but I'd refrained from downing it whole after Hakram sent me a quelling look. *Fine, be that way*, I thought mulishly. *It's not like I was just essentially offered an alliance by the oldest and most dangerous abomination in Calernian history. If there was ever a godsdamned reason to drink...* Masego was already looking bored and we hadn't even begun. He'd hinted his time could be better spent studying the envoy the very moment he'd walked into the solar, and had been sulking ever since I'd told him it would have to wait. It would have been kind of cute, if he wasn't essentially pouting because I'd told him he couldn't go elbows-deep in dead flesh. Archer was keeping him attentive — and twitching — by idly tearing up the pages of a book I was pretty sure she'd gotten for this very purpose. Vivienne and Juniper had pointedly sat as far as each other from possible, to my irritation. I was not unaware they were less than fond of each other, but until now they'd been a lot subtler about it. Something must have happened while I was taking my lovely Winter nap, but neither of them was talking. Hakram was, as usual, an oasis of calm competence in the middle of the mess that was our lives. He'd transcribed the Dead King's message from memory and provided it for the others to read. I cleared my throat.

"All right," I said. "Let's get this started. Before we get to unpacking anything else, Thief can provide a reminder of how fucked we're looking at the moment."

Vivienne shot me an amused look before leaning over the table.

"As most of you are aware," she said, "there is a knife at Callow's throat."

She tapped the map right at the feet of the sculpted spearman figurine on the western side of the former Red Flower Vales.

"Prince Klaus Papenheim, the First Prince's foremost general, is digging his way through the wrecked passes as we speak," Thief said. "He has between forty and fifty thousand men under his command, and we estimate that within four months he will be reinforced by an army of thirty thousand Levantines."

"With the way Cat's looking like she's sucking on a lemon that personally murdered her father, I'm guessing he's preparing an invasion," Indrani commented.

She sounded at best mildly interested, but I'd take what I could get.

"By the time the Levantines arrive, we believe they'll have dug out a usable passage," Thief said. "Which is to say, in about four months we'll be facing an offensive of at least seventy thousand soldiers led by several heroic bands."

"That's bad," Archer mused. "Zeze, doesn't that sound bad?"

"I suppose," Hierophant shrugged. "Can't we make a truce with those as well?"

"I'm not opposed to the notion," I admitted. "But we don't have the men to force another draw, and we're not dealing with Amadis Milenan here. Papenheim is the First Prince's uncle and the most decorated general in Procer, he's not going to flinch if we bloody him a bit. He'll stick it out until only one of us is left standing, and the odds aren't looking great for that being us."

"A truce in the Vales might lead to the political collapse of the Tenth Crusade," Hakram said. "And likely the end of his niece's reign with it. Negotiation is not a plausible option as things stand."

"I could kill the First Prince," Indrani suggested.

"The Tower's been trying to do that for over twenty years," I told her. "She has a future-telling Named, the Augur, watching for attempts. If Black is to be believed the Augur protects Papenheim as well, so removing him isn't on the table either."

"Ugh, seers," Archer complained. "They take all the fun out of it."

Juniper growled, cutting through the whining.

"Tactics won't get us out of this," she said. "We need strategic leverage. Either reinforcements that make holding the Vales feasible, or someone to put pressure on the Principate so it can't afford to leave those seventy thousand men at the border."

The orc marshal drummed her thick fingers against the map.

"The Army of Callow will be, barely, in fighting fit if our timeline for the invasion holds," she said. "But another major battle will take us right back out of the war, won or lost, and this time for much longer. We're bleeding veterans and irreplaceables. To be blunt, if we want fight again then we need a force to split casualties with. Much better would be not fighting at all."

"So, now we take a hard look at our options," I said. "The name of the game tonight being: is there *literally any other option* that the Dead King?"

"I could go to Refuge," Archer offered. "Most pupils will be gone, especially the heroes – last I heard Silver signed up with the White Knight – but there's bound to be one or two left I can beat into joining. Lady Ranger probably won't care enough to get involved."

I worried my lip with my teeth.

"Even by gate, it'd take most entire preparation time to get there and back," I finally said. "I wouldn't sneer at more Named, but I doubt they'll be enough to turn the tide unless some real powerhouses have been keeping quiet."

"They probably wouldn't be frontline material," Indrani admitted. "Beastmaster might qualify with the right mount, but he's not a pushover I can bully and he doesn't really give a shit about anything going on outside the Waning Woods. Also tends to disappear for months at a time, so he might not be there at all. Concocter's the only one I can be sure will be there, but her thing is potions and she uses ingredients from the woods for most her brews."

"We'll table that for now, then," I said. "Anyone else?"

"Mercenaries," Juniper said. "Diabolist hired men through Mercantis twice. I know the treasury's tight but better some debt than the kingdom lost."

"That well's run dry," Vivienne said, shaking her head. "All the larger companies are already under contract in the League, and even if we snap up all the smaller ones that'd be at most two or three thousand soldiers. Extremely unreliable ones. All the reputable mercenaries are already in someone's pay."

"Speaking of the League," I said, raising an eyebrow at Thief.

"The Hierarch's still not willing to sit at the table," Vivienne replied. "The only saving grace is that Procer is also apparently full of wicked foreign oligarchs so they're equally out of luck there. The Tyrant of Helike is willing in theory, but he also says he loves Hierarch 'like the father he had and then murdered'

so he won't cut a deal behind his leader's back. Not sure we should even if he agrees, to be honest. Aside from how astonishingly prone to backstabbing the man is, poaching a member of the League might get the rest of it coming after us in retaliation."

Masego cleared his throat, and I glanced at him in surprise. I'd not actually expected him to contribute to this part of the council.

"Is there a reason we cannot simply contact Uncle Amadeus?" he asked. "He has legions with him, as I understand it, and we could spirit them away through gates."

I felt Juniper's eyes on me. She agreed with the notion, I knew. She'd already made that very clear in private.

"I'm not willing to do that until I know what game he's playing, and he hasn't been forthcoming," I said. "For all I know the moment we come to pick him up we'll be heading into a pitched battle with half of Procer. I won't consider him an enemy right now – Hells, he pretty much scrapped a legion's worth of men to defend my borders – but it's a long walk from that to trusting him."

Masego's glass eyes turned to gaze at me, the power of Summer within burning.

"We will come to his aid if he is cornered," Hierophant said, and it wasn't a question. "I do not ask you to fight a battle for his sake, but he at least should be rescued."

I clenched my fingers under the table.

"If he's in danger of death," I said. "I didn't force him to take his army in the heartlands of Procer, Masego. And I doubt he would have done it without a plan, which we know nothing about."

There was a tense moment, then the Soninke nodded.

"He rarely does anything without one," Hierophant conceded.

Indrani tore another page from the book on her lap and he twitched in irritation. Smiling broadly, Archer looked at me.

"The Empress' supposed to be in charge, right?" she said. "Seems like we could drop this whole mess into her lap."

"We can't," Vivienne and I simultaneously said.

I snorted, then gesture for her to continue.

"It would break the terms of our truce with the northern crusaders to do so," Thief said. "Praes is already under siege by the Thalassocracy, regardless. It has no legions to spare."

"Deoraithe aren't our solution either, before anyone mentions them," I added. "Kegan's army will be holding the passage. Even if we had another way to keep that closed, she's been pretty blunt in telling me she's not taking her army into a meat grinder down in the Vales. She's willing to help, but there's limits."

There was a long moment of silence around the table, the stares of most going to the map and the last few forces unaccounted for.

"The Chain of Hunger," Juniper said, enumerating them. "The Kingdom of the Dead. The Everdark."

Well, at least they were taking this seriously enough no one had brought the elves. Not that there were even in Creation at the moment. There were still tucked away in some inaccessible corner of Arcadia according to the few Imperial reports Malicia still sent our way.

"The Grey Pilgrim is highly influential in Levant," Vivienne said. "There might be an angle there as well."

"Pilgrim's running his own game," I quietly replied. "Nothing we have to offer is better than the irons he already has in the fire."

She fixed me with a long searching look before nodding. We were, I suspected, going to have a conversation about that.

"The ratlings do not seem like a promising avenue," Hakram said. "Imperial chronicles imply they have no understanding of diplomacy."

He'd been rather quiet so far, but then he tended to be in councils like these. He'd always preferred to let others do the talking, to work behind the stage so things got done after decisions had emerged.

"It has been theorized only the youngest among them and a very small number of the truly old," Masego noted. "It is, at least, a matter of record that even after Triumphant slaughtered over nine tenths of their population they offered no surrender. She withdrew after burning everything down and salting the ashes, as I recall."

Only Hakram and Juniper pressed their knuckle to their forehead at the mention of the name, I noticed, though they both managed not to speak the words.

"Shame," Indrani said. "The Lady says their Ancient Ones are just large brutes, but the Horned Lords are supposed to be hard fuckers. We could use a few of those."

"If we assault Lycaonese territories and lay waste to border defences, it might be possible to bait an attack from the Chain even without prior negotiation," Vivienne said. "They send warbands south every spring, there should already be many on the march."

"At least half the armies of Rhenia and Hannover are still up there manning the walls," Juniper said. "It won't be a milk run, I can promise you that. Lycaonese die hard. Losses are guaranteed, and I'm not hearing any certainty they'll have to deal with worse than a few warbands after."

"We need a stronger foundation going forward," Hakram calmly agreed. "That plan would rely on too many unknowns."

"The drow?" Vivienne said, sounding less than enthusiastic.

"We don't know a lot about them," I said. "Archer?"

"Lady Ranger tried to hunt the Priestess of Night, a century back I think? They messed with the tunnels so she couldn't find a way to their cities," Indrani shrugged. "Haven't got much else on them."

"We know they have no unified central rule," Adjutant said. "That would make them difficult to treat with, much less mobilize. And there are records sixty years old that speak of a drow raiding party wielding weapons of iron instead of steel."

"I don't care if they're using bones," I grunted. "As long as there's enough of them to worry Hasenbach."

"Even assuming they can be assembled and gated within a sennight of your arrival, the Vales would be too far to return in time," Juniper said. "That means an offensive in Procer, then, and we'd need of a functional army for that to have any degree of success. Nothing we've heard leads me to believe they have one."

"Might be one of the few places susceptible to the Foundling charm though," Archer said.

I raised an eyebrow.

"The Foundling charm?" I warily asked.

The ochre-skinned woman grinned.

"You know, killing the people in charge until someone willing to listen gets promoted," she said. "The Tenets of Night are all about stabbing to get on top, you'd blend right in."

It was an effort not to sigh.

"Might take a lot of killing to get anywhere, though," Archer mused. "Better to take me to Refuge instead."

I grimaced and passed a hand through my tangled hair.

"Well," I said. "I suppose we're going to have to talk about the Dead King, then."

---

*Aeon*

Yes! An alliance between the Dead Kings and Cat? This will be glorious. Or catastrophic. Or gloriously catastrophic. Fun either way.

*Rook*

Can't spell catastrophe without Cat, after all

*RoflCat*

And a lot of factions are seeing Cat As Trophy to aim for.

Good want her dead for being basically the symbol of the new Evil.

Evil want her rolled into their side proper because she's been very successful with her schticks.

And Ranger is yandere for Black so I'm sure somewhere inside she want to stab Cat very much.

[wyaldriddler](#)

Welp. I think her plan to sign on with the Alliance just went up in smoke.

*Spinner335*

Well maybe the Good alliance, but hey, this looks like the start of The Alliance of Evil Nations, making Evil one big murderous family just like The First Prince fears.

[Euodiachloris](#)

And, it wouldn't have happened without her...

[Arthur Hansen](#)



That only had a chance if she could be a big enough threat to block their armies from walking in and annexing Callow for Procor. And with 80,000 soldiers, it would be about a pimp-slap of effort for them.

*Rook*

Do note that her wording was to *\*seek\** signatory status, not commit to receiving it.

She can apply for signatory status on behalf of Callow, abdicate in a show of 'goodwill', have the pilgrim help push it along afterwards to flip Callow back to good, and escape the narrative tether of that promise by fulfilling it as a representative of Callow rather than as the individual Catherine Foundling.

Then she can screw off to meet the dead king and figure out if that glow orb from triumphant lighting up was actually about her, or if she's about to walk into another safe, fun-filled Foundling Adventure.

[TeK](#)

She can also, ya know, seek this status?

*Rook*

She could seek it personally too but there's nothing but disadvantages to that

One it further pushes along the suicidal redemption story

Two it breaks the narrative strength of the villainous background she's built up over the years

Three if she leaves after making Callow break pact with the Tower and leaving them in hot water, she can bind the pilgrim to Callow and pit him against Malicia, rather than her.

He's already admitted that procer is flawed and he's in this for the sake of a whole nation going to ruin under a villainous ruler (see: campfire chat). If he doesn't help the now-abandoned Callow to weather the storm, it implies he's prioritizing killing one villain over an entire nation and going back on his word. Either it forces him to stay and draws him into a conflict with Malicia – taking both threats temporarily off her back – or he breaks word and becomes narratively crippled – at least taking one threat off her back.

No real reason to seek signatory status as herself rather than as a rep for the nation imo

[TeK](#)

A person can really seek signatory status in the alliance of. NATIONS, can it? Obviously she spoke as a rep for Callow, being countrys Queen and all...

*Gibborim*

That is a weak semantic argument at best. She is the entire Winter Court, something that could easily be a signatory of such an alliance. Same for her position as the Queen of the Hunt. It wouldn't even be unreasonable to admit her as a warlord without an official nation.

Even if we changed her statement to "To answer your question, I give my oath to seek signatory status with the Grand Alliance within the year.", she would not be bound by oath to seek signatory status for Callow since a major premise of the negotiations was not recognizing her as representing the nation of Callow, only herself.

*PotatoMan*

Why not both?

*Rook*

True, wouldn't be a Foundling Adventure if it doesn't irreversibly link her to a world-shatteringly dangerous monster or two.

*Raved Thrad*

Interesting epigraph. I prefer the Klingon version: "The enemy of my enemy is the enemy I'll kill last." 😊

*Someguy*

Maxim 29: The enemy of my enemy is my enemy's enemy. No more. No less. -The Seventy Maxims of Maximally Effective Mercenaries

*Yotz*

A shame he was forced to retcon "The Habits" to the, "The Maxims", though...  
Oh well – now with added annoying alliteration appeal!

*Adra*

I'm sure this will turn out just fine with no negative consequences at all! Glad you're feeling better EE.

*Gunslinger*

Welp he entered the picture a lot faster than I anticipated... And certainly not in this manner.

Also I wonder how the story of a Cat willing to reform would work when she's making deals with the bloody Dead King. That's the sort of stuff Pilgrim would love to spill.

Also vote for the guide on <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

And if you can do contribute to EE's patreon [patreon.com/user?u=3523924](https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924)

TeK

She's trying to reform him! Sith the power of stabbing/ friendship (a goblin word, as far as you concerned).

*Antoninjohn*

Cat needs to kill the Auger or at least rip out her eyes, after all without the Named Procer counts on to win their battles the Dread Empress shall smash them with political chaos from her agents. The First Prince is just matching and that is knowing every action that happens before it happens a year before hand

daegone823

The Augur has such a great amount of weight in the story while she may not be a combat oriented hero. Her close bond with creation itself puts her in a similar role as the bard or the hierarch and her very words can cause dramatic events to take place (real helpful for the heroes). Evil has too many doomsday weapons for good to not have a few and she does not depend on her power enough for them to turn on her she only uses it for the first prince and the uncle. So she does not abuse it like the White Knight. Basically she an oracle of Delphi placed here by the gods to send there messages and therefore diplomatic immunity to all except maybe the Hierarch

*Antoninjohn*

Doomsday weapons that fall apart every time you try to use them does not match knowing all your opponents move before them in intrigue battles

*Rook*

The augur is a Heroic Omniscient Spyglass though. Those never ever fail barring a Great Stroke of Luck (heroic), Clever Master Plan (villainous), or Prelude to a Great Disaster (neutral) putting up a totally bullshit blind spot

*Snowfire1224*

If she ripped her eyes out couldn't she just become a Blind Seer? Probably best to kill her when given the chance.

*Jonnnney*

Personally I think Cat should just start dropping frozen lakes in people. Maybe turn the Red Flower Mountains into the Red Flowers Cliffs overlooking the great lake of Procer

[TeK](#)

And great pond of Callow, given how gravity works.

[superkeaton](#)

I was wondering when that old horror would make a play.

It was nice to get more backstory on the Everdark and the Chain of Hunger, though. D&D Drow and Warhammer Fantasy Skaven, by the sounds of them.

*PotatoMan*

Except the Ratlings get more dangerous as they get older, don't they? Which the Skaven don't, afaik. The Ratlings are almost like some versions of demons, or the Infestation from Warframe, where they get gnarlier the older they are, and more vicious

*Yotz*

'Older is more dangerous' is *the* essence of Skaven. In their "society" you are either grow exponentially more dangerous with each passing year, or you are dead. Not to mention all the boons of the Great Horned Rat you can only get with passage of time, selective – preferably – warpstone mutations, alliances of convenience you bully someone into (which takes time), and so on.

They are completely unable to understand that "trust" thing, though – in fact, they use one word for "trust", "stupidity", and "suicide", I think. The one and only nation they was in regular diplomatic relations was Naggaroth – and their "interspecial diplomacy" boiled down to a chain of neverending betrayals and backstabbing, each one more drastic and elaborate than previous. Given that both societies deem betrayal as a holiest of virtues, it was a match made in Elysium. Or in Tartarus, since that seems more appropriate.

[TeK](#)

Say, Cat, is saving Amadeus really is worse than allying with the Dead King? Honestly?

*Matthew*

Not even saving him. Just sending him a "what up?"

*Yotz*

"I don't talk with you anymore. And now I'll explain why."

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Personally, I think she's not thinking very clearly when it comes to him, so she hasn't really thought about if interacting with him will affect either of their stories much. Black is her mentor and father figure.

She's on a 'path to redemption'.

Now we get Star Wars.

*Matthew*

The "no contact with Black" seems damn petulant right now.

Deal with the Dead King who is capital EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEvil and sure to make the story kill you?

Or..

Send a message to your mentor, who though you are still mad at him, just did you a strategic solid and has a devoted the past 3 decades to defeating the Story's Kobayahi Maru tests.

It's called the "Rational Guide to Evil." Not the "Cat picks up the idiot ball guide to Evil."

You may not trust Black... but you trust the Dead King less and you're willing to talk to him. By her own reasoning, there is no reason not to contact Black.

*werafdsaew*

As scrying breaks up over the mountains, there's currently no easy way to contact Black.

*Matthew*

Gate in a guy with an enchanted pigeon on top of Black's location. Easy.

[onedollargum](#)

I know it breaks up under the earth, but over the mountains?

Doesn't Cat have that secret scrying chamber that she used to contact First Prince (who had to cut through a mountain range to attack?)

## *Death Knight*

To be fair she never said she didn't contact him. She merely said "he wasn't forthcoming with his plan". Which actually implies she did contact him but the encounter didn't yield actionable information. But Masego having to ask the question pretty much shoots the implication in the head since I'm reasonably sure he'd be involved in any scrying attempts to high profile personnel. So yeah, at the very least hear the Knight out. Maybe he has some perspective on the situation.

## [NZPIEFACE](#)

That was because Thief gave the First Prince a trinket with Winter in it, so Cat could channel her powers through it.

## *Ca\$hMoney*

The title of the story has always been kind of a lie though.

## *Morgenstern*

It's "practical", not "rational"...

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Yes, in case you didn't know the name of the story you're reading, it's **The Rational Evil Guide** starting Chloe, Hakim, Matthew, and the other two!

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> "I'm not willing to do that until I know what game he's playing, and he hasn't been forthcoming," I said. "For all I know the moment we come to pick him up we'll be heading into a pitched battle with half of Procer. I won't consider him an enemy right now – Hells, he pretty much scrapped a legion's worth of men to defend my borders – but it's a long walk from that to trusting him."

By the looks of it, Black is the one who refuses to pick up the phone right now. Does anybody know what kind of story may require for Cat to stay ignorant of his plans?

## *warriormonk19*

He hasn't been forthcoming, but it doesn't sound like Cat is trying all too hard either.

## *JJR*

It's called The Practical Guide to Evil, not rational guide.

And absent any easy way to get in contact with Black, Cat does not want to stumble into a situation where she has no idea what's going on. Black has a plan, Cat is more likely to hinder it than help going on blind.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

So at least six people still don't know what the title of the story is. How unsurprising

*MetruX*

I think half the reason is actually not taking the idiot ball. Just think for a while: what is Black's plan? And how does this plan change if she connects or directly gates him? Last chapter some people thought his plan might be to give himself to the heavens as a way to destroy the Crusade's fate bound victory. I don't agree with them, but to do that he needs to be specifically not tied down to any of the other two sides (AKA Cat and Malicia). So if they calmly discuss what's happening it actually destroys the chance for this plan to work. There are so many things he can actually be going after, and we, Cat included, have no clues as to what it is. So, can you really fault her for not running around to help?

### [TeK](#)

As far as we concerned, his plan may include her calling him. Or not. Or to think about and then call. Or call not. Given no information, no reason to conjure possibilities, and act in the way which yields the best outcome for you. And I see no reason to prefer the unknown plan of Dead King to unknown plan of Black. Aside from personal reasons. Ya know, impractical ones.

*nimelennar*

Not only that, but, if she doesn't know what the plan is, it stands a reasonable chance of rescuing her (assuming that's the intent, which, with Black, isn't too outlandish an assumption).

As soon as she learns the plan, it hits the Unspoken Plan Guarantee, and the chance of it succeeding drops to near-zero.

*Ed*

The question to me is,  
Is the Dead King really that EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEvil he seems to be a bit of a homebody uninterested in conquest (unlike the bloodthirsty 'good' side) and only raises the heroes who attack

him unless I misread it. Sure you may not agree with an entire nation of the risen dead but that is just your living bias....

*Gunslinger*

Did

*Gunslinger*

Didn't he at one point want Procer to hand a large number of babies over to him as protection dues?

Dude's as Evil as they get

*Dylan Tullos*

Ed:

The Dead King's neighbors build a giant wall and manned it with most of their fighting age population to hold back undead incursions.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Deontology. You're evil if you are.

*limlimrevolution*

I'm fairly certain that he was the source of some pretty major invasions and conquests before he went dormant. We don't have a super clear idea of how bad people had it while he was active, but I can't imagine that opening a permanent hellgate and creating an undead nation (in what was presumably land settled with actual living people) was a very pleasant experience to live through.

That being said, he HAS been dormant and keeping to his borders for years (decades?) without any antagonistic actions towards any of his neighbors, so I would imagine most nations regard him as lowercase evil since they have capital Evil to worry about right now in the form of Praes. It's easy to forget about the big bad villain that isn't making waves and get distracted by the ones making a big mess of things. Plus, he's successfully broken multiple crusades if I remember correctly, so the good guys aren't exactly eager to tangle with him again.

[TeK](#)

Also, why exactly Archer couldn't've beat some poor weaklings into submission prior to invasion? They had like a year, which Archer, alledgedly, spent drinking and trying to get into Masego's pants.



---

They have no truce with Papenheim, who is four months away from a pass through the Red Flower Vales and a fresh batch of reinforcements.

*Dylan Tullos*

TeK:

I think you just answered your own question.

[Walter](#)

She didn't get told to. Like, Archer just does what she feels like. Planning doesn't enter into it. If Cat dies she'll just wander off.

*Draconius Sinister*

Alright, hear me out.

Marriage alliance.

Cat has shown more than aptitude for necromancy, she has an instinctive grasp of it, grown from her days as Squire to now, Duchess of Moonless Nights/(Queen? Leader?) Of Winter. She can raise thousands at a time by herself, and they begin to develop intelligence and personalities after a while. Someone like that must be interesting to someone whose whole world is Necromancy. To have a functioning society with individuals again, rather than mindless automatons must be pretty great, and that's likely what the Dead King sees in Cat.

[TeK](#)

Not happening, Triumphant will get jealous.

*Rook*

Maybe the plot twist will be that she's Triumphant's soul reborn

Followed by her turning into the most brutally vicious runaway bride ever to exist

*Mr. Nobody*

Triumphant is busy burning things and salting the ashes in the afterlife, she can't reign her husband in right now. ^^

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Whatdoes Triumphant have to do with literally anything here?

[TeK](#)

The Death King has a boner for Dead Empress Triumphant 😊

Walter

I don't think so.

I think the Dead King is canonically obsessed with Triumphant, right? It doesn't seem like he'd be willing to pursue another.

My real reason, though, is that the Arcadia -> Calernia mirroring would point to Cat marrying someone who embodied Summer, and that's pretty much the opposite of the Dead King.

*Death Knight*

I think that reflection is larger than Cat. Marrying Winter and Summer would imply that Good and Evil could conceivably reconcile their differences (or forcibly unite) if the right kind of pressure could be applied.

Now I wonder though if the red orb that glowed was not because Malica contacted the Dead King, but because Catherine was crowned. Since Catherine is an orphan what are the odds she's a direct descendent of Triumphant herself?

*RanVor*

It has already been proven to be possible. There is an empire overseas ruled by a duo of a Hero and a Villain. And it works.

Why can't it be done in Calernia? Why?

Fuck you, that's why.

*MetruX*

Because Calernia is a backwash place full of people way behind in several areas that can never seem to do anything right, if compared to the Big places :V

*Death Knight*

I imagine that's Above's response to a Evil calling a truce.

*SpeckofStardust*

If the Dead king went to Cat first out of everyone, well I like he waited until after the first stage of the Crusade was dealt with, shows that he only works with people who he respects.

We almost know nothing about him after all.

---

We know that Malicia may have contacted him before the mobilization for the Crusade started, and that he may or may not be bound to his hell unless summoned.

### *Argentorum*

Did he go to cat first though? In the epilogue of the last book we saw him getting a message from \*someone\*. The identity of that person remains unknown, but odds are Triumphant or Malecia already touched base, so to speak.

On top of that, has anyone commented on how saying "Dread Empress Triumphant, may she never return" every time anyone so much as obliquely mentions her name is all but guaranteeing her return? Like, I get it, she's the memetic greatest evil that ever lived, but, do you really have to send her an engraved invitation?

### *Metrux*

Well, she's the greatest IN CALERNIA... Also, not really an invitation. It rises her "legend", but doesn't give her power, neither a narrative that makes she returns. If that was the case she would be bound to come back exactly a thousand years after her first death, by the Hero that will put her down without a chance of return.

### *Dylan Tullos*

This is insane.

The Dead King is, in Black's words, "the original abomination". He murdered his entire nation to ascend to godhood.

The worst the Crusaders can do is conquer Callow; if the Dead King gets loose, he could murder every Callowan and raise them as part of his undead army. Cat tries to choose the "lesser evil", and the Dead King is the greatest evil on the face of Calernia.

Considering his offer is a mistake. Not killing his emissary on sight was a mistake. Catherine should send a message to the First Prince immediately, letting her know that the Dead King is trying to make alliances with Evil rulers. The living need to stand against the dead, regardless of their political or religious conflicts.

The Tenth Crusade is not an existential threat to every living Callowan. The Dead King is. It would be better to surrender now than to even consider alliance with an evil that could wipe out life on the continent.

### *Antoninjohn*

Actually the Dead King still has living subjects inside his hell with farms and everything he just doesn't have on his kingdom in creation as Good killed the ones that stayed and then destroyed the land so no life could grow

Walter

They are a zombie farm. He tolerates them because undead don't reproduce.

*Yotz*

They still need to be healthy, happy, well fed, and well bred. If only because quality materiel for your constructs is hard to come by. And happy slaves are complacent slaves, who can self-regulate themselves by some representative form of government where all the members of society are eligible for ruling. It's just that with age comes aptitude, and in truly meritocratic society overwhelming majority of the key positions would be held by the high-functioning living dead, while most of the menial work would be done by the y'm-bhi. Which leaves most of the living to life of "do whatever you want" with only debt to society being "Be fertile and have increase".

*Dylan Tullos*

Antoninjohn:

It was the Dead King who poisoned Keter's air so that nothing could live there.

Also, the Dead King murdered everyone in his kingdom to fuel the ritual that made him a god. He's essentially Akua Sahelian's role model.

---

The lich is known to keep to his borders though. The most advance he made past them was raiding the shores of Cleves and Hainaut.

I agree that they need a way to keep him in check, just by the virtue of him being a staggeringly old villain. Maybe they can use Diabolist for that, she was planning to rule all of Calernia, she may know more about him than anyone except the Tower, and his armies notably include devils and demons (not to mention he may be barred from entering Creation on his own).

*Ca\$hMoney*

It's called *"murdering the motherfucker"*.

---

How? He can just hole up in his hell and spam demons. He's inventive enough that no crusade actually reached his portal, and the only person who ever did is, to our knowledge, Ranger, who is out of pretty much anyone's league and also made him shore up the weaknesses she abused. "Leave him be" is the only strategy that ever worked against the Dead King so far, which means it's the one that Cat's gonna use as a default one.

*Ca\$hMoney*

Throw the entire continent at him until he dies.

Yes yes yes. That's an extreme measure that would cost countless lives. But the entire reason why he's such a threat in the first place is *because* of people whining that it's too hard and dangerous. The thing is that the longer you leave a threat to fester the worse it will be to deal with down the line, and if the Dead King gets his way then that is very likely it for any life on the entire continent. It's better for the people of Calernia in the long run if they get rid of him as soon as they can no matter the cost. Every time you choose to make things easier for people in the present you risk making things harder for people in the future. The Dead King is essentially a big metaphor for climate change in this regard.

Or alternatively, have everyone put all their thinking caps on and figure out an actual way they can get the better of him. That's the entire conceit of this entire work of fiction right?

And leaving him alone isn't the strategy they chose because it's the only one that works, they do it because it's the easiest to accept and most obvious path to take. Which is right up Cat's alley I guess.

*RanVor*

The problem is, his armies are literally infinite. Throwing the entire continent at him would result in the entire continent dead.

*Death Knight*

Not just dead. Every living soldier that dies comes back as one of the dead. Remember, he also has dead heroic champions in his service, two of which the Ranger herself deemed worthy to hunt. Now if the Ranger considers you worthy to be hunted you're immediately promoted to badass second class. Defeating the Dead King through conventional means is a fools errand.

RanVor

Actually, I meant the devils, but that's also true.

[TeK](#)

>throw entire continent

They tried. Like, five times. Also, I'm really confused, how to quote here? Do BB codes work?

Yotz

I used HTML tags. blockquote works, q – so-so; i, b, u, s, a – works. Haven't tried img, afair it needs tinkering with wordpress to work properly – but someone here already embedded a clip, so...

*Or you can just italicize text*

and denote it with an empty line to emphasize a quote, if nothing other.

Yotz

>implying  
works fine too, methinks.

[ahd](#)

But.

If they said to Pilgrim, "the choices are an alliance with the Crusaders or an alliance with the Dead King, because you won't leave Callow in peace as a neutral", he would instantly and with no hesitation seek out every prospect of Callow to be a neutral or an ally, and stab those prospects to death with every weapon he can reach.

The crusaders, all of them, literally cannot conceive of a world where stabbing the Black Queen is not the best and only course of action. If she abdicates, they pause briefly to burn, rape, loot and partition Callow, and then return to their obsession with stabbing Catherine Foundling.

The Callowan living are good with standing together against the dead, sure. At this point I'm not even sure Augur directly telling the First Prince to stand down the crusade because worse is incoming would get the Crusaders on board.

Ca\$hMoney

Probably because she's given them no actual reasons why they shouldn't stab her, aside from her own rhetoric that is

constantly undermined by the over the top violence of her actions.

If she goes ahead with this alliance... we'll they'll have every rational reason to want to go *"You know what? Fuck Callow too!"* and turn the country into the worlds first extra chunky blood bank.

Walter

I dunno why you think the Crusaders are unwilling to deal with Cat. I mean, they just did that two chapters ago, right? Like, there was a whole scene where everyone got together and negotiated, and they have since stuck by the treaty that got signed.

JJR

They had to be forced to the negotiating table through overwhelming force. This does not speak to an inherent willingness to negotiate. And given that the force under Papenheim is going to have the advantage in power, it's unlikely that Cat and Woe can force negotiations again.

*Ca\$hMoney*

Noooo they didn't. The moment they caved was when Cat was bumbling around avoiding getting her ass kicked by the heroes as her army was slowly but inevitably losing. Rozala decided to cut things off because she realized that to keep fighting was to both hurt her position and kill too many people to be worth it and be a mistake in the long run.

JJR

When I said overwhelming force I was thinking about the first day when Cat dropped a lake on them. Without the casualties and change in landscape that caused it's unlikely that The Army of Callow could have gone on to force a draw.

As for who was winning. That would be The Army of Callow.

"The moment the front holding back the dead collapsed the battle was good as won, barring heroic intervention, but at the current pace that might take hours."

Naturally heroic intervention at the most desperate hour would be a given, and Juniper wouldn't have anything to stop them from swinging the outcome back to victory. But then Cat sicked the Wild Hunt on the Procean lines with

specific instructions to make them collapse. And we then get a nice exchange between Cat and Saint.

““The battle is lost,” I said. “Your lines by the shore are collapsing as we speak. Even if you force me to flee, none of that changes.”

“Armies are armies,” the Saint shrugged. “Named are Named. More than one way to win a war.””

That and the crusaders were done, logistically, even if they managed to beat the army of Callow in front of them the lack of food was forcing them to the negotiating table.

*Dylan Tullos*

ahd:

Anyone who would even consider an alliance with the Dead King is an enemy of life and deserves to be utterly destroyed.

If Catherine allies with the Dead King, she will have proven that everything the Crusaders say is right.

[ahd](#)

You must be one of the Chosen.

“Lie down and die or you deserve to be killed.”

*Dylan Tullos*

ahd:

You must be one of the Damned.

“If I die, I’m taking everyone with me!”

Malevolent narcissism is not a desirable trait in leaders. If the Crusaders win, Callow will still be alive. If the Dead King wins...well, we saw what he did to his own people.

*Rook*

I don’t see where you’re getting ‘I’m taking everyone down with me’ from the character that just spent the entire arc trying to take as few people down as possible including the invading army trying to kill her.

She still won’t even touch the little entrance invitation he sent her and is considering having a chat with him out of desperation, she’s not rushing there to



swear fealty and extend his domains to the end of the earth. Lets not be dramatic here.

[ahd](#)

If the Crusaders win, Callow will be used up.

Basically the only thing holding Cat on that throne (instead of abdicating and wandering off with the Woe to do something more fun and less risky for Callow) is the certainty that the Crusade will trample straight over the top of the looted, burnt, and \*used\* remains of Callow because that feels good and yields profit to the princes of Procer.

It didn't have to be that way, but Pilgrim and his crew like it that way. They \*want\* it that way, and as soon as they find an excuse that doesn't gut their narrative strengths, they'll try for it again. They could have gone around Callow; taken the offer of a portal and gone straight for the throat of the Dread Empress, who apparently is liking these ideas of allying with things like the Dead King and building floating fortresses full of superweapons powered by stolen souls and a cityful of blood.

They. Didn't. Accept. This. Offer.

They. Wanted. Stabbing. Cat. More. Than. Winning. The. Crusade. Promptly.

That. Is. On. Them.

You are right, malevolent narcissism is a bad thing to have in your leadership.

Apart from mouthing "Evil!" a lot, you're not really making a case for \*Cat\* being the narcissist.

I \*could\* provide chapter citations for every statement I made above, but: I'm not seeing you listening to anything other than the voices inside your head. That's as much time as I want to waste on you.

Go read something that doesn't require so much nuanced thought from you, will you? You'll be happier and so will everyone else here.

*SpeckofStardust*

On the other side of the coin if she could get the dead king to agree with the accords....

Well that would be interesting.

After all when was the last time the Dead king did something

outside of his starting nation? Cause if he hasn't he might not want to. And thus could be reasonable to deal with. After all that we don't know of anything he did other than his ascension to godhood other than wiping out everyone that has tried to remove him (and that in one of his negotiations he asked for little kids every year).

*Dylan Tullos*

SpeckofStardust:

The Dead King constantly seeks to invade the northern principalities of Procer. They built a giant wall to keep out undead incursions.

He killed everyone in his country to make himself a god, and he demands children as tribute. These are not the actions of a ruler who is going to be interested in the Accords, especially since he ascended using a ritual that the Accords would specifically forbid.

*JJR*

What would he care for the fact that the accords would forbid the ritual he used to ascend? He already did it, promising to not do it again is no great sacrifice. And preventing another from usurping his place as Calernia's undead God King would probably be a plus.

[TeK](#)

>living need to stand against dead  
No that's just racist. Vitalist?

*Yotz*

Clearly an irrational prejudice of some sort or other. What happened to "venerate your elders"?! Younglings thouse days... Truly, a grim and dismal times are upon us.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

There is truly a staggering amount of prejudice against the differently alive.

*Death Knight*

As champion of the Dead Army I take grievous offence at the predjudice displayed here. Zombies have feelings too!

*Yotz*

That's "grave offence", mere "grievous" is for alternatively dead.

## *Death Knight*

I stand corrected.

### *SHARKS*

I don't think the Dead King is as simple as his reputation leads us to believe. He became an undead god, claimed a level of hell for himself and then...nothing. He just sat there, waiting. Cat's actions have opened up the chance for \*something\* that he seems to have been waiting a long, long time for.

Right now, my bet is that he's another villain that intends to fuck with the whole "Good vs Evil" narrative, like Cat and Black.

Think about it. He became something as, or more powerful than any dread emperor, but then immediately turned around, attacked another evil faction and put himself out of reach of Good Heroes. Unless there's a personal vendetta involved, it's \*really\* hard to put together a storyline of a hero defeating a mostly passive undead king in hell. Doubly so considering the other, more aggressive threats around on the continent will take priority.

Now, Cat shows up. She manipulates, defies, and eventually breaks her own Name. The Woe, though they have been fighting heroes all this time, act \*nothing\* like stereotypical villains. Thief switched sides, but she's still basically acting the same as when she was a hero. Masego is a pure academic who wants to break out of the "cage" of the world. Deadhand is an administrator and a beacon of hope to his downtrodden people as their first Named. Archer, like her mentor, is straight up a neutral-aligned ass kicker.

And then there's Cat. She's busted onto the stage as a "villain" that managed to end a war as old as time between the fae, distanced herself from the Tower, and acted in the interest of her oppressed people. And now, at her most powerful point to date, she \*doesn't have a name\*. Even her fae powers, which are supposed to be give her even stronger ties to a predefined narrative are doing \*nothing\*. And those powers are \*bound to her damn soul\*.

All of her party go against traditional narratives and upset the whole good vs evil thing in ways the Calamities never did. If his goal is to break or sidestep the good/evil thing, Cat and the Woe are something truly unique, and would explain why the Dead King chose now of all times to make a move.

[\*Fuodiachloris\*](#)

Disintegrating his business card/ invite if an accredited monster unheard would *also* be a Very Bad Move. Nothing says "politically tone deaf and unstable young pup" more clearly.

That cat was a minimalist construct for reasons beyond getting under various scrying radars. Which do you take seriously: the embossed, colourful and busily designed leaflet of a resume with the "unique" font... or the single sheet of A4 which has all the pertinent info you're looking for on it with only hints of more being available upon request at the interview, in a clearly laid out and highly legible format with, perhaps, a dab of colour in the corner?

I also know which kind of letter format is the biggest implicit threat, too... They come in simple, brown envelopes that don't look like much unless you're aware of the importance of windowed little brown envelopes. Red ink need not necessarily apply, but certainly increases the heart rate beyond "standard brown bad news".

*Metrux*

You seem to forget the Dead King never invaded another country. NEVER. He came from one of the hells, which he conquered, and used his power to kill and raise the whole of a country. Then he sat tight and only did his own things, making better undeads, getting invaded by Crusades and Ranger, studying magic... Some even think he is Dread Emperor Sorcerous from Praes, and yet he never came back for the Tower...

Yes, he is an abomination and a great Evil and evil, but he is not that much of a threat, since he never treathens anyone. Besides, he's the only known guy to have defeated a Crusade, so... Isn't he the expert she needs?

*Dylan Tullos*

Metrux:

That is incorrect. There are entire principalities dedicated to holding back incursions from the Kingdom of the Dead, as he constantly seeks to break out of his island and invade his neighbors.

*Agent J*

Killing the emissaries of a great and powerful ruler did not go particulalrly well for the Kwarezm. If you think allying with the oldest evil in Calernia is a mistake, fine. It's not like you're wrong. But do be wise and don't bait the man into war with you either. That will not be pleasant.

Also, running off to go tell Mama Cordelia about the big bag man with the scary van wouldn't be an enjoyable story to read.

*warriormonk19*

I thought the Kingdom of the Dead was an accident. The Dead King, a great mage while he was living, failed to predict the Keter's Price for opening the hellgate. His people and kingdom paid the price for his mistake.

*Allafterme*

Now that would make an excellent plot twist.

[TeK](#)

And he demand tribute consisting of live children exactly why?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Well, Dead children can't help him re-populate Keter...

*Thaumaturge*

I'm almost certain Cat isn't shooting for the 'lesser' evil at this point.

She's trying to break the perpetual cycle of Callow's misuse and exploitation, eventual reclamation, and then retaking and exploitation once more. She seems to be willing to do just about everything to ensure that Callow is detached from that cycle by the time she's dead and (potentially) rotting in the dirt.

[blitzxs](#)

I wonder if the other villains like Malicia or Tyrant received a similar message? If the invitation is for Cat alone, then that is ridiculously impressive that she and she alone out of all the great villains in Calernia was invited by the Dead King.

*Oshi*

More like horrifically terrifying...One of the great ld evils of Calernia decided Cat is worth his time. He wants something and it ain't gonna be pretty.

*Metrux*

Think of the wording in his message, he basically says that Evil must stand together. I'm pretty sure he spoke to others, though I also think Praes was not invited...

## [Euodiachloris](#)

I'm certain Malicia sat on hers for over two decades before finally replying. And Cat was the reason she did that.

It's not for nothing the construct was once... a cat.

## [TeK](#)

Say, Black is going more or less to Salia now, ain't he? Can Cat come to Salia as well, ya know, to officially seek signatory status? And bring a little entourage with her, say an Army of Callow? Oh and look, totally a coincidence, but isn't Black besieging the same exact province? Who would've thought! Of course, should her plea be declined, it can be said, that she was pushed to side with dastardly Dlack Knight out of pure desperation. Oh my!

Oh and you can also drop a hint that Necromancer666 send you a friend invite. It will also go with the letter and spirit of Cat's diplomacy: drink this cheap wine, or get stabbed with the goblet.

## *Death Knight*

Huh, why would the Dead King approach Catherine now, when she's at her weakest if he had planned for an Alliance? Why not a couple of months prior to her scuffle with Malanza? The Dead King likely knows that she's not militarily strong at the moment so recruiting her for her army wouldn't be the main reason. Is it merely a moment of opportunity? Offer Alliance when he knows Cat has few other options?

Could be. He could conceivably bolster Cat's forces with rank and file undead. Maybe even gift a couple of dead heroes. But thematically its doomed to fail. Such an alliance would undoubtedly be the catalyst for the forming of the ultimate 5 that the Pilgrim alluded to. The failure to grasp this point is probably a good indicator of the Dead King's unchanging nature and might be the reason why he's so powerful. He probably can't do anything other than what his Role demands which strengthens him greatly power wise but all but ensures his doom Story wise.

...what are you gonna do, Cat?

## *SpeckofStardust*

Well a Reason why he would approach now would be if he was waiting to see if Cat was worth allying with. After all Black lovingly pointed out Cat did amazingly well in a tight spot against the crusader army.

He's and old and powerful enough evil that he could legit be doing this for shits and giggles and that Cat has proven to be 'worthy' of his interest, after all the last time he apparently showed interest in the outside world was when Triumphant was kicking around.

Or he sent this message at the start of the war and it took this long to reach her.

*Mr. Nobody*

Cat said it's already one month since the Battle of the Camps and the undead don't tire, nor do they need rest. I guess the Dead King saw the first "wave" of the Crusade against Catherine as a test for her to prove her worth in the alliance.

I wouldn't be surprised if even the Tyrant of Helike was invited too. Just imagine how amusing it would be a gathering of the "Big Bad Villains".

[TeK](#)

If it was really the gathering of BBV, then you'd also need Malicia, Black, Hierarch. They group up to play some Dragon Poker, but Dead King starts hitting on Malicia, and then Triumphant returns from her vacation, and starts beating Dead King with a broom, while everyone laughs and Seinfeld theme plays on background.

*MetruX*

Except Black is only seem as a lapdog by the big bad, and Malicia is not seen as trustworthy to anyone. Not even to Black, anymore. For Hierarch, he is not a Villain. Cue in Bard appearing to him and trying to get him to move, which means he's neutral or maybe even a Hero. So maybe we'll see somethng like free Villains and a Drow Named appearing at the meeting, but certainly not those three...

[TeK](#)

She wanted him to take a side, not be a Hero. Black is as much a lapdog to Malicia as Tyrant is to Hierarch. And trustworthiness of a Villain is an everpressing concern.

But yeah, balls to seeing them here, albeit due to different reasons.

*MetruX*

You might want to reconsider. The Dead King already killed two Crusades into his territory, and according to Ranger's

interlude his army has only grown in power since then. Also, especially because of this high power, mundane armies mean nothing to him. It's more probable that he saw in her something interesting or that he likes in some fashion, and thus made her enough to be called. We can also see by the wording that he isn't calling her only, so this could potentially be the first time in the story of Calernia that his army marches out of his country. If you may remember, it's been noted that people gave up on attacking him, especially because he and his undead never leave the nation. Now, then, things seem to be changing, after hundreds of years...

[benthelynx](#)

It definitely has something to do with the gem from the interlude. So possibly Dread Empress Triumphant, may she never return.

*HorrorPls!*

I'd really like to see him be a real horror. Even the parts about what Akua did weren't graphic enough to really instill the horror movie levels of creepiness the actions deserved. Whether before a deal is struck with the King of the Dead or when he's fighting with Kat I'd like to see him inflict true graphic Evil. Same thing with Warlock and his experiments, or even Black in his quest for victory through civilian heartlands. Torturing civilians for shock value to force Papenheim to turn his way for example. Basically these r all of Kat's allies, who are nominally evil. We keep being told that they are monsters, but it is never shown, they're evil actions are told in a sterile macro manner, disregarding the micro effects it has on the small people that get trampled underfoot.

*JJR*

The problem with that is that such gratuitous evil tends to make Heroes crawl out of the woodwork. He needs to avoid that, now more than ever.

[doominator10](#)

Welp, time to make a deal with the closest thing Creation has to a literal devil short of one brought up from the hells.

*Cicero*

I don't get this Cat.

Dead King is a bad choice period.

Black is a better ally, hands down.



Also a better alternative, apply for alliance with the Crusade, ride that redemption story as far as you need to before jumping off. Avoiding the Dead King seems to me like a pretty good reason to try to push that option further.

I just don't get it.

*JJR*

Then again, maybe if she gets a treaty with the Dead King and then petitions to join the Grand Alliance she can foist the Redemption narrative off on the lich. Like a game of hot potato but with more fatal consequences.

Probably not though, the undead have been said to be less able to change. The accumulated years behind his evil undead lich act would be hard to overcome. Redeeming all of Praes (with promises of grain for good behavior) might be an easier challenge.

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Black doesn't have enough soldiers and isn't replying to calls, so that's way up in the air. Also, one does not simply jump off a redemption story, a refusal do become a better person is death, one way or another.

*Cicero*

First of all, Cat already successfully jumped off one redemption story already.

Second, of course she can survive jumping off a redemption story. As long as she times it right. Like say, right after the big bad enemy (The Tower) is assured of defeat, but before she has to compromise her own position.

And then she takes the slot of that dubiously immoral some-time ally of good who engages in small bouts of villainy, but can be called upon by the forces of good to unite against the greater evils (like the Dead King).

You know, basically the same position the Thief had back when she was a heroine.

There are quite a few stories like that. Especially if the villain/anti-hero is female.

Basically, Cat should try to become Catwoman to the Heroes Batman.

*JJR*

One thing Cat needs to be very aware of in regards to the Dead Kong's diplomatic envoy.

"I bear invitation from the King of the Dead, who offers safe passage to Keter."

She is only offered safe passage TO Keter, not TO AND FROM Keter. A very important distinction, one that means if she does respond to it she might have to chew through her tongue again to avoid getting on the Dead King's bad side. That or fight her way out of an entire nation of undead.

*Dantalian*

Kinda obvious seeing who she's going to negotiate with. ^^

You don't go to an evil nation like the Kingdom the Dead expecting to disagree with their ruler and coming back unscathed.

It should also be noted that the way it was phrased the invitation placed Keter in quite a vulnerable position if the Dead King is also including himself when saying "In the face of Above's wrath, the champions of Below must either face demise alone or overturn the wheel of fate in coming striving". It shows he's at least a little desperate, saying that doom is certain and all that stuff.

*Fern*

all hail the dead kong

you may invade procer

once

*MetruX*

Well, shouldn't this only be expected when visiting another Villain? I mean, think of Praes poison wine, and of the Tyrant dealing with the Calamities... You must always wait for a try on your life 😊

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

"Dead Kong"

Like this? <http://zombieportraits.com/zombie-art-donkey-kong-zombie/>

[TeK](#)

Anyway, Cat seem to have already once established parenting relationship with a big E Villain, may be Dead king would be kinda like a grandpa.

*1queenofblades1*

I have a theory. This is an extract from the very first quote of the Guide, in the Prologue, said to be from the first page of the Book of All Things:

"In their infinite wisdom they brought into existence Creation, but with Creation came discord. The Gods disagreed on the nature of things: some believed their children should be guided to greater things, while others believed that they must rule over the creatures they had made.

So, we are told, were born Good and Evil."

Now I'm sure most people will believe that the ones that think their children should be guided to greater things are the Gods Above.

But while re-reading my favorite parts of the Guide, I came to realize that it's the Gods Above that demand absolute obedience. The Choirs are all based around stripping mortals of their free will. They set down rules and demand absolute obedience and blind faith and give nothing in return. (Realized this in Cat's conversation with the sister in the House of Light). Meanwhile, the Gods Below are never seen, and while they do help, they're very hands-off and provide the tools but not the means to win, unlike the Gods Above which results in Good always winning in the long term. So, what if, what the story thinks of as 'Good' actually represent the Gods that believe they must rule over the creatures they made in Creation, while Gods Below are the ones that think their children must be guided to greater things? I don't know how this would tie in with Cat's role in the story if true, but it's an intriguing theory and I haven't seen anyone else put it forward in the comments.

*Havak*

This literally just made me stare blankly at my ceiling for a good 20 minutes.

*RanVor*

I think most people have come to this conclusion ages ago.

[TeK](#)

I don't mean no disrespect, but maybe you didn't see this theory cause it was already on everyones mind and so nobody thought to put it forward? It was my understanding as far as book 2, that the whole dispute between Above and Below, was

pretty much “give fish” vs “teach how to fish”, also, the idea of teaching how to fish to Gods Below includes dropping you in the middle of the ocean, and then throwing at you, in that exact order, a net, a spear, and a boat.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Also a heavy duty shock rod: supply own batteries, no instruction manual, implicit backlash if you use it incorrectly in salt water.

### *MetruX*

I actually have... Since the last book, though I thought of it since the beginning of the second one... I wouldn't remember in what chapter I put it down, but if you would look for a while you can probably find it. It tends to have lot's of comments each chapter, so... Maybe use ctrl+f? Also, yes, the theory is very sound, nothing seems to be against it.

### *Author Unknown*

The Dead King definitely wants him some of those blue-eyed undead that aren't vulnerable to holy magic.

### *Fern*

Oh jeez, I was not expecting this one

I think I'm going to really love the next few chapters. The Dead King and the Elves have been the two important unknowns so far in the story. The Elves are irrelevant, now that we know that whatever coming story will be too strong to handle. That it's about to involve the Dead King means that it must be big enough to threaten his position (which is fucking /fascinating/, by the way. That's canon confirmation that what we're building up to is going to be a Triumphant-scale shitshow as far as The Story is concerned).

The Dead King is nooooooot a good ally to have though. An alliance would mean a bonfire level of attention being put on Cat, though she might be powerful enough at that point to whether it. It's worth keeping in mind, however, that said situation is definitely just going to lead to a big counterattack by the heavens, and they definitely won't be pulling punches. Breaking the game means allying with Good polities, not eliminating them in the short term.

### *MetruX*

Actually, do they have more to throw her way? I mean, whatever they didn't throw with the Crusade already is probably tied down somewhere else or not really going to do a difference... She

already has a Crusade, and allying with him won't paint a heavenly target for fate to destroy her, in the same way Bonfire would've, so from the narrative it's not bad. I absolutely think the Dead King will try to betray her at some point, but that is only to be expected from Villains.

*Someguy*

I don't think the heroes will treat her as an A-level threat if she allies with the Dead King, they'd probably downgrade her threat level due to expecting a set up for "Evil turns on Evil". Dealing with potential fallout would be Hasenbach's problem while they pile on useless platitudes.

*RanVor*

The alliance with the Dead King would fundamentally fuck up everything Cat strives to achieve, but the time is running short and there aren't any other real options present (save for Black, but he has a plan and Cat knows better than to fuck it up). Well played, Pricks Below.

Although I'd be highly amused if he turned out to be into the Accords.

[Antony444](#)

Well the big bad is finally coming out of the shadows...that promises to be interesting, all right.

Even saving Black and his entire army wouldn't solve anything given the ugly situation right now. If the Legions of Terror join forces with the Army of Callow after being reinforced, they should have 40 000 soldiers. Papenheim will be able to throw the double of that, the Vales defensive position are gone and he will still have an army or two of 30 000+ to throw at them. Plus the Army of the Stairwell is still withdrawing.

It is abhorrent yes, but the Dead King is the last option left right now IF his conditions are somewhat acceptable. It is the only villain after all to routinely defeat heroes and Crusades. The air above Keter kingdom is so poisoned no non-Named can attack it with any chance of victory.

The question is who else has been 'invited'. There are not many villains in Calernia deserving the 'honour':

Dread Empress Malicia

the Black Knight Amadeus

The Tyrant of Helike

Cat

maybe the Priestess of the Night?

When you think the Heavens have launched over twenty heroes at their throats and had also the power to send 'adventurers' in Callow, they are quite massively outnumbered... The 'Grand Alliance of Evil' imagined by Hasenbach may come (or not) into existence in the enxt chapters...

### TeK

1. The Legions of Terror proved to be able to pull a win over thrice their number. 40k is nothing to sneer at.
2. While defenses of Vales are gone, it still leaves a narrow passage of Stairway (which they will fortify, and which protected by Deoraithe anyway) and whatever pass Papenheim would manage to dig up. Which won't be exactly enough to pour the whole host at once and use their advantage in numbers.
3. And whether he will manage to dig up anything is up to debate, because some Amadeus fellow is of opinion that some Wekesa fellow wouldn't let them.
4. While Crusaders dig themselves a pass, a Marchford tribe and sappers (Sacker is on the Callow side of Vales, 'member?) can fortify it pretty decently.
5. Cat can drop a lake on to the Vales.
6. Vales are not the only fortification Callow has.

### *MetruX*

You really don't know war, do you? They needed BOTH the narrow valley and the fortifications to pull what they did, while dividind the enemy in two and not fighting the whole of the army. And with all of that, they had similar losses to the enemy, with a narrative win. So no, without the advantages of before, facing bigger numbers they can't win.

1. Already explained above.
2. They won't use the stairway, and they don't need to, since the "small pass" you seem to think they'll make is not someplace Cat can just camp her army and wait to defend. It's the end of the mountains, alot more open and easier to traverse than the high pass at the Valley, so if she stays close, it's actually a open terrain battle, the worst againt bigger numbers.
3. It was explicitly noted that he shouldn't let THE WITCH help with that, he won't interfere with mortal diggers.
4. No they can't, it's not a place with natural resources already being exploited, neither places with enough resources nearby, much less something they can build in two months.

Because until the materials start trickling by and the necessary people get there, a lot of time would've passed. And we don't even know if it would really be a defensible place, since it's the end of the mountains, and not the high pass, as stated above.

5. She's been stopped by heroes while doing that before, and this time they'll have even more heroes. Not a viable plan in any measure or way.

6. Yes, they're not. And this point goes against everything else you said, except for 1 in part, so it's actually strange you pointing that out. But, we must also remember, half those fortifications have been destroyed and never rebuilt, while the others are mostly not enough to stop a true army, with the exception of the border with Praes and the Duchess that is already defending the stairway. None of those defences will make much of a difference to a true army with war engines and Named.

*Dylan Tullos*

Antony444:

The Dead King is not an option at all.

Catherine would be better off following the Redeemed Villain story, dying, and restoring the status quo that existed before Black conquered Callow. She would be better off fighting Pappenheim, dying, and having Callow overrun by Crusaders. Anything would be preferable to working with the "original abomination".

The Dead King defeated a Crusade by turning Keter's air into poison gas. Even if he sincerely intends to ally with Cat, which I don't believe for a second, he would "help" by turning Callow into a barren wasteland filled with the living dead.

A "Grand Alliance of Evil" would include Tyrant, who is absurdly enthusiastic about Classic Evil backstabbing, the Chain of Hunger, who just want to eat everyone, and the drow, who are an entire society of people who behave like Classic Villains all the time.

If they actually got together in one place, the Crusade wouldn't be necessary, because they would wipe each other out.

[Evgeny Permyakov](#)

>"You know, killing the people in charge until someone willing to listen gets promoted," she said. "The Tenets of Night are all about stabbing to get on top, you'd blend right in."

The fact that Cat only sighed to that is worrying me. Because, you know, it might be true.

*mavant*

Ask the Hierarch for help setting up Callowan instances of the institutions required for democracy. Commit to holding elections for your replacement as soon as possible, and no later than \$X years. He'd be all over it, and it meshes well with the general "build institutions that don't rely on personal charisma of their leaders" thing that Black and Malicia have been pushing for so long, as well as giving Callow a chance to pull out of the constant battle between above and below.

Also, Cat's ability to make credible precommitments – and maybe to extract them? – as the bearer of a fae mantle seems underutilized. Much of diplomacy could be radically simplified by making promises unbreakable.

*Jane*

Um. Have you seen Ballerephon's institutions before?... I don't think anyone else generally considers them a good idea...

Also, I don't think they can reasonably scale up to a country-sized government. If nothing else, there are too many lots to draw, and the psychic police will have a devil of a time keeping an eye on all the scattered farmers.

[frolamiz](#)

Thanks for the chapter!

I am surprised that no one has commented about the possibility of the Dead King being interested in Akua. Even if she is only a soul, it would not be a problem for her to come back if freed, much less with the help of the Dead King.

Her superweapon is basically an improvement of his work with the greater breach, and even Warlock was marveling at it. It would not surprise me that the Dead King would want her or be at least interested in her.

And he probably didn't approach Cat before because he knew she would not want to treat with him unless totally desperate.

Of course, I doubt he only approached for that reason, there is probably more, but it's still interesting to know, because what better chances Akua will ever have to escape Cat control?

*limlimrevolution*

I think that the Akua angle is definitely something to consider. Mass necromancy on that scale is not exactly common and impressing Warlock definitely shows that this is something



worth Akua putting on her resume. Maybe the Dead King is hiring.

He also probably realizes that Cat has every incentive to ignore his invitation and would only do so if she had no other choice. This is really perfect timing for this overture.

*Jane*

You know who this invitation *really* messes over? Amadis. Now on top of being broken and humiliated on the field, it makes it seem as though they were *tricked* into withdrawing on top of it all. "We lost a terrible number of soldiers for no good reason, but... At least we got Callow to seek admission to the Grand Alliance! ... Wait, what do you mean she announced a formal treaty with Keter yesterday? ...Wait, since when does Keter do alliances!?". In a different sort of story, this sort of accidental casual abuse leads to a previously minor figure becoming the mastermind behind some grand plan to seek revenge on the main character...

Incidentally, this also means that the only real prayer Amadis has of retaining any face is to quietly sabotage the Crusade. If it fails decisively, then his own failure was just to be expected, instead of making him look like a massive fool – it was all the First Prince's fault for putting them in a hopeless situation. Of course, if the Dead King is involved, then he *can't* sabotage the Crusade without, you know. Potentially dooming all life on the continent, worst case scenario. Aren't you glad you're not Amadis right now?

On a different note... I wonder what Cat's stance on expansion will be? She's never really fought for anything but the independence (quasi or otherwise) of Callow before, but now that she has it (more or less)... Well, let's say that Procer are *huge* jerks about this; not only do they continue the Crusade against her after this new threat is tossed in, but they view her as the weak link and throw everything they have (plus anything they can scrounge up in desperation) at her so that they can take her out of the war as quickly as possible. Miraculously, she wins, Procer lies broken, and the Crusade disbands with a bit of an embarrassed scent around it all.

Does Cat demand anything but peace (and maybe reparations) at the negotiating table? Procer will have demonstrated itself as an implacable enemy who will surely start a new war in a few years or decades, and this would be a golden opportunity to break their power once and for all – and the people of Callow certainly wouldn't mind reversing their positions for once. After a hard-fought war, they might even grumble if Cat *didn't* demand territorial concessions.

Of course, occupations are a *headache*. It would take a lot of Legions to keep the peace, periodic Hero pruning, and a heck of a

lot of organization – all things that Callow are still dealing with themselves. All to trade one ancient enemy (plus, you know, all the material gains) for a set of *new* enemies; even if most of the rest of the world were to turn a blind eye to an Evil kingdom taking Procer (not a given), at the very least she'd have to worry about the new countries on her border. Of course, complete annexation isn't the only possibility either; she could just take a few juicy Principalities that she thinks she has the resources to manage, and trust that leaves the rest of the country weakened enough that they'll be less of a danger.

And, of course, it's not as though she'll only be the only country at the table. What, if anything, would the Dead King (and any other allies he adds) demand? Surely they're not doing this out of the goodness of their heart; does their possible demands change anything in her eyes?

Throughout the course of the Guide, Cat's always been enough of an underdog that just surviving the trials before her has been an unexpected victory. Sure, she's gotten a perk or two along the way, but simple survival has generally been the aim. If she has the Dead King's backing in this war, however, that gives her the option of demanding more; does that hold any appeal for her?

Apropos of nothing, I wonder what Vivienne's opinion on working with the Dead King will be. Normally, I'd think this a "I'm breaking up with you if you even *think* about doing this" type of thing, given her possession of a moral compass, but she seems surprisingly calm about the topic so far, despite the conversation obviously going in a "We don't have any other options" direction.

I'd also wonder if the proposal might be worth calling on Akua's insight, but, well. I don't think her presence at a council meeting would be appreciated...

*Dylan Tullos*

Jane:

Expansion is impossible. Procer couldn't occupy Callow, and it's much bigger than Callow. Why would Callow have any more luck occupying a larger country?

As you point out, the Dead King is a threat to all life on the continent. If Catherine breaks Procer completely, the Kingdom of the Dead and the Chain of Hunger will be able to escape. The consequences will be apocalyptic.

*RanVor*

The Dead King has always had the resources and manpower to effortlessly steamroll the entire continent, and yet he never

tried. I doubt leaving him unchecked for a time being would be as disastrous as you believe. The Chain of Hunger would be a problem, though.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

I agree that something weird is going on with the Dead King, something that prevents him from just overrunning everyone. But there's a reason his neighbors built a giant wall and turned their nations into an armed camp; even if he's somehow prevented from bringing all of his resources, he's definitely a threat.

The only limit to the Chain of Hunger's growth appears to be food. As long as they're stuck in the far north, with little access to resources, they'll eat each other and made poorly organized attacks on heavily fortified principalities.

If they get out into rich, undefended lands, they'll finally have the food they need to increase their numbers. That would get bad fast, and it would be next to impossible to get rid of them once they get out of their current trap.

*RanVor*

Has anyone ever wondered if the reason the ratlings are so barbaric and aggressive is that they are forced to turn to cannibalism just to survive?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Something tells me that that has never been his actual goal. Though, I'm not sure how he wants to change either the board or the game Calernia has been stuck playing for millennia.



*Jane*

Callow occupying Procer would normally be impossible, but if Procer is devastated following the war, while Callow only suffers limited losses... Well, I still wouldn't give them good odds, but it wouldn't be *impossible*. It's not hard to keep rebels down, so long as you can stop them from arming and organizing – if Thief's spies are good enough, then all Catherine needs to do is maintain enough of a Legion presence to be visible, and keep domestic affairs in the “we want to rebuild after these horrors, and we're not being too oppressed” range until she can properly rebuild the military. Procer would need to be fairly well broken for it to even be conceivable, though, I agree; the sheer population disparity

is a huge problem, and historically speaking, tends to end strangely at best, terribly at worst.

That said, claiming several principalities or partitioning the country between herself and another of Procer's neighbors is another matter; integrating a couple of juicy principalities wouldn't represent nearly as much of a strain on Callow's resources, and if it can tilt the balance of power in Callow's favor, there's a good strategic argument to be made that the added short-term difficulty would end a long-term threat to Callow's independence – as well as end their dependence on the Tower for their security.

That said, I'm less interested in the viability of such a scenario than what Catherine's response would be. Let's say a wizard gave her a magic wand that made occupation effortless; would she take the opportunity, be it for Callow or herself, or would she decide that anything past Callow's traditional borders is none of her concern? I could see arguments either way.

*Jane*

Ah, and as regards the dangers that Procer keeps in check... The Chain of Hunger, certainly, though it sounds like it's mostly one principality keeping them in check – surely *something* could be done until a long-term solution could be put in place. It doesn't sound like they're much of a danger until an opening let's them start snowballing.

The Kingdom of the Dead, on the other hand... Honestly, it doesn't sound like they're doing anything to keep them in check at all. It's pretty much the Dead King slouching upon his throne, and waiting for something to happen. It's not that Procer's some terrible barrier to him, so much as he's not actually *trying* to do anything – yet.

Besides, if this alliance goes through, nobody betrays anyone, and Catherine doesn't manipulate the situation to destroy both... The Kingdom of the Dead is free *anyway*. Catherine's occupation policy doesn't matter in any scenario where Procer's army is broken enough for her to claim territory. If anything, being an "ally" of the Kingdom of the Dead might make any place taken under her protection *safer*.

*Agent J*

If Cat goes a-conquering, I'd much rather see her take the Golden Bloom. Cuz fuck racist elves and I love Kegan. The Deoarithe would be ecstatic about getting their stolen home back and Cat would have a vassal with unshakeable loyalty. The forest itself doesn't like the elves which is why their likely low fertility rate was shot to zero when they stole

it. It would be far less likely that any of the other Good nations would march out to defend the elves unlike Procer. That it's stolen land to begin with, and from Callowans no less (though they weren't Callowan when it was taken) would keep the narrative weight from stacking too heavily in Good's favour. It would be far easier to hold (and populate) the Golden Bloom than Procer.

Besides, it is also easier for Praes to hold Callow than for Callow to hold Procer, yet even still Black and Malicia had a hard time of it. Constantly keeping watch not just for heroes but for circumstances in which heroes arise, funding the continuation of a massive civil war in a neighbouring country so that said country doesn't rally to the conquered's aid (thereby created their most dangerous and difficult opponent to date). It was actually Cat that made holding Callow long term feasible. She who warred with her Good counterpart for the soul of her nation and won (much to Pilgrim's chagrin). It's the reason why the only heroes trying to kill her are foreigners instead of Callowan born. She would have to do much the same things Black did but by an order of magnitude just to hold Procer half as long, and then miraculously find a Proceran Cat to take under her wing so her gains actually stick in a world divinely ordained to maintain the status quo.

Yea... it's a monumental task under the best of circumstances. Better to solidify her gains, properly integrate both Callow and Praes into a unified neutral nation, and if the mood to conquer strikes then strike northward rather than west.

*jonnnney*

Wroth means angry or wrathful, it is an adjective not a noun. "The Above's wroth." is a sentence that makes zero sense. You can possess anger or wrath, you can't possess angry or wrathful.

*CaptainSemantics*

I've been thinking about the long term effects of Callow being ruled by the embodiment of Fae Winter. Specifically, I remembered how in Arcadia the entire population is essentially bound to narratives. I wonder if something similar could happen to Callow due to Cat ruling and shaping it.

Of course it wouldn't be exactly like Arcadia. It's still part of Creation obviously. Moreover, we've seen how Cat and Winter are integrating. Cat's becoming more Winter, but Winter is potentially also being influenced by Cat. At any rate, I imagine that this could lead to a Callow in which there's a broad increase in the power of Narrative, but that the people of Callow also learn how to USE the Narrative to their own advantage. So in

a generation or two we get a wave of Callowan Names who revolutionize how that game is played.

(Of course all that is assuming a world in which Cat is somehow able and willing to remain in charge of Callow indefinitely.)

*Agent J*

If Cat goes a-conquering, I'd much rather see her take the Golden Bloom. Cuz fuck racist elves and I love Kegan. The Deoarithe would be ecstatic about getting their stolen home back and Cat would have a vassal with unshakeable loyalty. The forest itself doesn't like the elves which is why their likely low fertility rate was shot to zero when they stole it. It would be far less likely that any of the other Good nations would march out to defend the elves unlike Procer. That it's stolen land to begin with, and from Callowans no less (though they weren't Callowan when it was taken) would keep the narrative weight from stacking too heavily in Good's favour. It would be far easier to hold (and populate) the Golden Bloom than Procer.

Besides, it is also easier for Praes to hold Callow than for Callow to hold Procer, yet even still Black and Malicia had a hard time of it. Constantly keeping watch not just for heroes but for circumstances in which heroes arise, funding the continuation of a massive civil war in a neighbouring country so that said country doesn't rally to the conquered's aid (thereby created their most dangerous and difficult opponent to date). It was actually Cat that made holding Callow long term feasible. She who warred with her Good counterpart for the soul of her nation and won (much to Pilgrim's chagrin). It's the reason why the only heroes trying to kill her are foreigners instead of Callowan born. She would have to do much the same things Black did but by an order of magnitude just to hold Procer half as long, and *then* miraculously find a Proceran Cat to take under her wing so her gains actually stick in a world divinely ordained to maintain the status quo.

Yea... it's a monumental task under the best of circumstances. Better to solidify her gains, properly integrate both Callow and Praes into a unified neutral nation, and if the mood to conquer strikes then strike northward rather than west.

*Agent J*

Oh, would you look at that. No delete button. Peachy.

[sengachi](#)

<https://www.patreon.com/user/overview?u=3523924>

Hey if you can you should go support errata on Patreon. He writes a \*ton\* for us, and the Guide is just an amazing story, but he

doesn't make all that much on Patreon for all the work he does. Voting to help get the story more exposure is a nice gesture, but seriously, if you can, go donate. The Guide is an amazing, amazing story and the least we can do is help take care of errata for gifting it to us.

*CaptainSemantics*

Hmm just had a thought. Since Cat is currently in Name-limbo, I wonder if she could potentially snatch up the Name of Dead Queen. After all, she's always been found of her necromantic tricks, and she's arguably not particularly alive anymore herself...

*Letouriste*

What about the dwarfs?

Also, an alliance with the dead king should be problematic for cat plans, no? I don't get it...

*CaptainSemantics*

Darn I keep thinking of more things to comment on. Anyway, it took me a while to realize that the chapter title is a reference to Chapter 2: Invitation, all the way back in Book 1. In which Black explains some of the complexities of ruling a conquered territory, and then invites Cat to come along to Mazus' banquet. Where she ends up on the path to becoming Squire.

I wonder if there are parallels to be drawn beyond the title. Is the Dead King acting like Black here, as a terrifying mentor figure ushering Cat into new levels of villainy/a new Role? Or is he going to end up like Mazus, the party's host that ended up summarily killed?

Come to think of it, the Arcadia story arc back in Book 3 is actually quite similar. It was all a machination on the part of the Winter King to entice Cat into Arcadia and go to that party where she had to challenge the Fae Duke to a duel and kill him. So that the King could in turn make Cat part of his Court, setting her on a new path as a Villain, transitioning away from being Squire and towards being Black Queen and embodiment of Winter.

Tldr: parties are how important to Cat's character shifts

*Cthulhu*

I am in the camp that thinks Cat is insane not to hook up with Black and go on the offensive.

She has six months of cover before her homeland can get invaded. SIX MONTHS. She can use her Arcadia connection and launch attacks on her enemy and bleed the enemy white while suffering no losses.

Begin by seizing something dear to the enemy and then he will be amenable to your will. Cat wants to forestall the invasion? Strike at the enemy's heartland and use this to stop the invasion.

*Cthulhu*

This is how Scipio ended the Punic war.

*Forrest*

That also sounds much like Bonfire, which has already been established to be a terrible idea. Gating in and attacking key strategic locations and gating out before they can retaliate repeatedly, in this setting, draws in heroes heaven designed to kill you.

*Aehriman*

I'm still rather interested in the Lance of Light. Apparently, you can get, or make your own famed nickname, a Name posthumously. That's very interesting. Both because people can become so famous as to create a new Name for themselves which is passed on, and because Queen of Blades may not be entirely off the table.

Known Callowan Names:

- \* The Good King/Queen- (well, that ain't Cat)
- \* The Wizard of the West
- \* The Rebel Princess- Callow has been occupied and reclaimed by a hidden heir before, Black killed off the latest version.
- \* The Lance of Light- a knight par excellence.

I suspect Thief and Lone Swordsman are too generic to be Callowan-specific. But these names do give a little more glimpse into the history of Callow, their old champions and the stories they told about themselves.

[mrevildoom](#)

I absolutely love this web serial, Erraticerrata, and I've been voting for it every week, along with pimping it to my circle of friends. Can I suggest that you put the previous/next chapter links at the top of the story as well as the bottom? I mostly read it on mobile, and that would help me navigatr through chapters much faster when I'm trying to find my place.

*MagicDusty*

N0000000000 I've reached the end... now i have to wait like everyone else...  
Truly, the world is cruel.

*Scholar of Time*



I read the entire series this week.

More.

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## Chapter 25: Edge

*"My dear Betrayer, I resent this accusation of selling you out to the heroes. No coin changed hands, it was really more of a bartering."*

– Dread Emperor Traitorous

"I shouldn't need to bring up the grave consequences that would of dealing with that entity in any way," Vivienne noted calmly.

Maybe a little too calmly, I thought. She wasn't angry – I'd learned to read that in her – but she was... weary, maybe. Like she was seeing the same lay of the land I did, and was horrified at what might come of it.

"Heh," Indrani said. *"Grave consequences. You know, because he's the Dead –"*

"Masego," I interrupted. "Would you please smack her?"

"Do I get to pick where?" Archer leered.

There was a pause.

"No," Hierophant replied pensively, and tried to slap the back of her head.

He ended up caught in a wristlock instead, and the two of them toppled to the floor when he called on sorcery to try to toss her away. The two of them fell wriggling as Indrani tried to get on top – no surprise *there*, I mused – and the council was forced off the road until Hakram rose to his feet, grabbed a water pitcher with a sigh and upended it on them both. Archer yelped, Masego looked peeved and I turned the droplets freezing cold out of petty spite.

"Back in your seats," I ordered.

I looked away even as Masego evaporated the water on his robes, pretending deafness when Archer asked him to to the same for her. Juniper growled, which got both their attentions. *Both of you could kill her with barely any effort*, I thought amusedly. *But*

*all she needs to do is growl a bit, and you straighten your backs.*

"Militarily speaking, cooperation with the Kingdom of the Dead would be both boon and threat," the Hellhound said. "Its armies have been strong enough to weather five crusades: there's no way the Proceran borders can hold if he comes out in force."

"Which would leave us with a fresh liability," Hakram said calmly, seated again. "Namely, that the Dead King would be out in force."

"Forget armies," Thief said flatly. "If it becomes known we struck a pact with the Hidden Horror there is not a nation on Calernia that will be willing to treat with us. The cost of that absurdly dangerous alliance would be that we are made pariahs forevermore. I cannot stress this enough: even the summoning of demons would go over better. The only person to have ever struck alliance with the Dead King was Dread Empress Triumphant at the peak of her power. That will be the precedent everyone sees us through, from that point on."

"We're already fucking pariahs, Thief," Juniper grunted. "I won't pretend working with the Horror would be pastries and flower crowns, but let's be honest: what would we actually lose?"

"Any semblance of legitimacy, for one," Vivienne hissed.

"I do not speak in endorsement," Hakram said mildly, cutting through before it could escalate. "But Juniper is not incorrect. We are in varying states of hostility with the Empire, the Principate, the Dominion and the Thalassocracy. The League has already refused to negotiate with us, twice. It may be that situation will change in the future, but it has not yet. As it stands the costs of this decision would not be a direct loss, only the denial of possible change."

"Eh, no need to trumpet it around anyway. We could just be secret allies," Archer said. "Doesn't the old guard love that kind of stuff? He'd probably go for it."

I sipped at my aragh, leaning back into my chair. Indrani wasn't wrong.

"There's more than a few steps between alignment – however temporary – and alliance," I finally said. "Ideally, we would use the King as a distraction with full deniability. I don't think anyone in this room wants him to actually *win* in any measurable manner. If he can launch a failed invasion that takes the pressure off Callow, though, that might be a notion worth entertaining."

"If the dead cross the lakes into northern Procer, it will be butchery," Vivienne said coldly. "Hannoven might be able to resist, heavily fortified as it is, but Cleves and Hainaut? They'll break, Catherine. You know this. Hundreds of thousands murdered and made into abominations. Akua's Folly, forged anew half a dozen times."

"It would be," I said slowly. "If they were taken by surprise."

There was a long moment of silence in the room.

"Are you proposing," Juniper gravelled, "that we *double-cross* the Dead King?"

"I mean," I hedged, "I wouldn't put it exactly like that."

"That means yes," Masego helpfully informed Archer in a whisper. "It's the Callowan uprising. She doesn't like to admit to betrayal."

The Hellhound opened her mouth then closed it, licking her lips. Solemnly, she reached for the bottle of aragh and poured until her cup was nearly overflowing.

"If you would elaborate, please," Thief said quietly.

"So we have a nice chat with Trismegistus," I said. "Shake hands, kiss his dead babies – let's not kid ourselves, he's bound to have a few of those – and plan an offensive. We leak the plan to Procer at least a month ahead, enough time so they can evacuate everything. We time it correctly and Malanza's army will be in a position to march north to fight a delaying action until the rest of the crusaders can reinforce her."

Juniper choked on her drink.

"Hasenbach would have to send most her armies to hold the north," Hakram said quietly. "And suddenly we gain a great deal of leverage. The Army of Callow could easily strike her back and collapse her supply lines. Or, if she makes peace with us, ferry her armies through Arcadia before either Cleves or Hainaut is entirely overrun."

"There would still be a great many deaths," Vivienne said, but she was hesitating.

"No civilians, though," I said. "Soldiers. Loss of property as well, but I'm less than sympathetic to the monetary plight of princes trying to invade my homeland. We can limit the terms of engagement for the Dead King as part of our deal."

"That will no longer hold the moment we betray him," Thief reminded me.

"We can delay that until Procer's in a position to give a good fight," I said.

"It should be remembered," Hakram said. "That if it ever comes out we were involved in the matter, we'll be discarding every scrap of goodwill we have so far accumulated through our restraint."

"We'll deny it. Not like they'll have proof, so it'll be the Hidden Horror's word against ours if he even bothers to say anything. And, to be blunt, Juniper's not wrong. Goodwill hasn't cut it so far," I admitted. "And I think we could get a lot of it back by throwing in with the crusade against the Kingdom of the Dead, even if it comes to that. If it takes leverage to get things done, Hakram, I'm willing to go that far."

"I don't like it," Vivienne said. "This... scheme is not as bad as I first thought it would be, but playing with fire doesn't do the danger of it justice."

"Neither do I," I said. "And I think we can all agree this is a last ditch plan, not the first arrow out of the quiver. I'd much rather cut a deal with Hasenbach herself or the Pilgrim if I can, and I intend to try that as soon as this council is done. But if they're not game, then I think we have to seriously consider this."

I met her eyes unflinchingly, and saw the war taking place behind them. Between the patriot and the decent woman. Better than anyone else in this room, she knew how dangerous the army standing on the other side of the Vales would be to Callow. Thief had always been lukewarm about making treaties with Procer, reminding me there was a reason *Red The Flowers* was a popular song in the country to this day. On the other hand, she was not a killer. She had killed, to be sure, and arranged the death of others. But it was not in her nature, and unlike me she'd never grown used to it. Making common cause with something like the Dead King, no matter how false the premises, ran against the grain for her. There was a reason it was to her I'd handed the means to kill me. Of all the Woe, she was the only one I could trust to pull the trigger if it came down to it. Her moral compass wasn't exactly pristine. I knew that. She was, after all, a thief. And capable of dark things to keep Callow whole. But she'd yet to lose that spark of decency that none of my other friends could truly claim to have. Not even Hakram, for all that I loved him more than any other. The moment passed, and I did not need to wait to know which part of her had won. The repugnance on her face made it clear enough.

"Before this plan is seriously entertained, there is a great deal to address," Thief said.

*Your people becoming warped by your presence,* the Grey Pilgrim had said. *Old traits grown more vicious and acute.* Was I slowly breaking down my own contingency? I shivered in a way that had nothing to do with cold.

"Agreed," Hakram said. "Namely, why the invitation at all?"

Juniper set down her cup and it rang empty against the table. She wiped her mouth.

"That's had me wondering," the Hellhound said. "It doesn't seem like he'd need us, at first glance. Out of all his possible allies the gates make us arguably the most immediately useful for an offensive in Procer, but our strategic value is limited."

I glanced at the two bickerers in the back, since this part of the conversation was exactly why they were here. Masego as our expert in all things arcane, one who'd had access to Tower archives to boot, and Archer as the pupil of one of the few people who was known to have entered the Kingdom of the Dead and returned.

"I can tell you a few things about how Keter is run, and the lay of the city," Indrani said. "But not much more than that. The Lady speaks fondly of him, but that's not surprising – he's probably one of the few entities kicking around she can't kill."

Less than useful. I glanced at Hierophant, who was frowning.

"The only precedent I can think of for the Dead King making alliance is Dread Empress Triumphant," he said. "He was not her equal, but neither was he her vassal. During none of the crusades directed at his realm did he seek Praesi assistance."

"He's launched offensives into Procer before," Juniper said. "We have records of the battles. But they always seemed more like large-scale raids to me. Cities were sacked more to grab people than to grab territory, and I can't recall an instance he went deeper south than northern Brabant."

"*Three Hundred Years Against the Dark*, Amalia Holtzen," Hakram murmured. "I have read the volumes as well, and always found the mentions of his presence with the armies to be somewhat dubious. Nowhere as powerful as a necromancer of his purported strength should be. Chronicles are the crusades are hard to get by, for us, but in those he's said to have fought heroes. There can be no comparison between the power displayed there and in Holtzen's volumes."

"He can raise Named with some of their power still attached," Archer said suddenly. "The Lady's fought a few."

I blinked at Indrani. Was she implying that Ranger took walks into a poisonous undead-infested wasteland just so she could scrap with – I forced myself not to think about that too deeply. Ranger was fucking insane, trying to figure her out would lead me nowhere.

"You're implying he hasn't led his armies in person since Triumphant," I said, eyeing the others.

"Father has long suspected he cannot easily leave the Hell he rules," Masego noted. "Though the scarcity of solid information on the entity prevents this from being proper theory. The Tower has suppressed most writings ascribed to Trismesgitus since Dread Emperor Revenant was overthrown."

His brow creased, after that, but he said nothing.

"Hierophant?" I pressed.

"It would-" he began, then stopped and sighed. "There have been always been rumours of some High Lords having records of the Secret Wars that Dread Empress Maleficent the Second never managed to erase."

"The what?" Indrani said, leaning forward.

"Bunch of Emperors tried to invade the Dead King's personal hellscape through hell," I told her. "Malicia mentioned them to me once. It went about as well as you'd expect. Maleficent the Second loosed a bunch of demons to erase the whole mess, since it was bad enough Ater itself was about to be invaded."

"That would have been..." Thief said slowly. "Well, I doubt there's a word harsh enough for it."

"Yeah, there's a reason Imperial histories aren't bedside reading," I said. "Unless you enjoy vivid nightmares, anyway. I think I get what you're trying to avoid saying, Masego. If any Praesi city has those records, it'll be Wolof."

The dark-skinned mage inclined his head in agreement.

"It has always been the heart of sorcery in the Wasteland," he said.

I thumbed the collar of my cloak. Where the soul of the former heiress to Wolof was currently kept in captivity.

"Diabolist might know more, then," I sighed.

"She doesn't deserve to get out again," Vivienne said darkly.

"It' be a simpler world," I said, "if people always got what they deserved."

I breathed out slowly.

"I grant you leash," I said. "I grant you eyes and ears, tongue and feet, at my sufferance."

Akua Sahelian made her entrance with the languid grace of a cat at play. My eyes narrowed immediately. There should have been hole in her chest where I'd ripped out her heart with my bare hands, but she stood intact before me. More than that. No dress of red and gold clung to her form: she wore instead a long gown of trailing darkness, jewels of pure frost glittering around her neck.

"Your Dread Majesty," Diabolist bowed, smiling pleasingly.

"Huh," Archer said. "Even dead she's still a looker."

I blinked, eyes turning to Indrani.

"You can see her?" I hissed.

Masego inhaled sharply.

"Anchor," he said, sounding reluctantly impressed. "You made your own prison into an *anchor*. That is impressive."

"A compliment from a practitioner of your skill is worth hearing," Akua said, inclining her head in respect.

"Yes, Cat," Archer contributed helpfully. "We can see her."

I glanced at Vivienne, whose fists had tightened so harshly the knuckles were turning white. Still and silent, she was glaring at Diabolist.

"Akua," I said flatly. "Explain."

"She devoured part of the mantle, I would say, and wove herself into its very fabric," Masego said before she could reply.

"An accurate assumption," Diabolist agreed.

"And so now you're... healed?" I guessed.

"Bandaged might be more accurate a term," she suggested.

"With Winter," I murmured. "Interesting."

I drummed my fingers against the table and exerted my will. Her hand rose, her eyes widened in surprise and she began choking herself.

"That seems unnecessary," Masego said as the sound of rough strangulation filled the room.

"I wouldn't have been able to do that before," I replied without looking at him.

My eyes were still on Akua.

"Nothing without a price, eh Diabolist?" I said calmly. "You've given me a much deeper hold, with that little trick."

"She cannot die through this," Hierophant sighed. "Only feel pain, which a caster of her calibre would have long learned to ignore."

I released my hold and her hand fell as she weakly caught her breath.

"I've not grown any fonder of surprises, Akua," I noted. "You're rapidly heading towards a place where your occasional usefulness is inferior to the risk you pose. I shouldn't need to tell you the consequences of that, should it come to pass."

Diabolist bowed deeply.

"Your chastisement has been heard," she said.

"Might want to do that again, just to be sure," Thief said, smiling viciously.

"If you want to tear out butterfly wings, do it on your own time," Juniper grunted. "Sahelian, do you have knowledge of the Dead King?"

"I have made study of him as a worthy example," Akua replied. "The horrors he has wrought are second to none."

"What does he want?" Hakram asked plainly. "As an entity, what is he after?"

The dark-skinned beauty – Archer, much as it pained me to admit it, wasn't wrong about that part – cocked her head to the side. Thief's fingers clenched even tighter.

"I am bereft of context," Diabolist said. "And so cannot make accurate assessment. A creature whose existence has covered the span of millennia cannot be summarized in a single sentence."

Eyes went to me. No one was going to release information to the shade without my say so.

"He's invited Cat to Keter to discuss an alliance or something like that," Indrani said, picking at her fingernails.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Of course she would. Archer wasn't one to keep her mouth shut around a pretty anything, much less about things she barely cared about.



"How interesting," Akua Sahelian drawled, and there was a glimmer of something wicked in her eyes. "I suspect that what Trismegistus seeks is a return of the favour. An invitation."

I exerted my will and she slapped herself across the face.

"Once more," I said, "only without the smug cryptic boasting."

"You used to have a better sense of humour," Diabolist sighed.

I raised an eyebrow and eyed her hand. She got on with it.

"This is supposition, I must warn," Akua said. "In matters Trismegistan, certainty is scarce luxury. It is known to my bloodline that the Dead King took the field to lead his armies during the Secret Wars. An event without reflection in his many petty wars with the Principate."

I studied her.

"You're implying there's conditions to him being able to leave his personal hell," I finally said.

"Indeed," Akua agreed. "When crusades laid siege to his realm he took the field to humble the Heavens, yet never when he sought to break Procer. If, indeed, he ever sought such a thing at all. This absence might have been taken a weakness of contentment with what he has already achieved, if he had not also fought the Legions across a dozen hellscape in person. I believe that asymmetry in action to be indicative of a... restraint. A leash, if you would."

There was a spark of humour in her dark eyes when she spoke that last sentence looking at me.

"He was allied with Triumphant, during her conquest of the continent," Hakram said quietly. "Histories have always seen that as Evil standing with Evil. But considering this..."

"It might have been a condition," I finished. "To let him out at all."

"That sounds," Indrani grinned, "like *leverage*."

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### *Stormblessed*

I love the conceit of back stabbing the Dead King. Because he probably also knows they want to backstab him. He is a villain after all.

I do hope we get to see Akua's reaction to Cat's plan of betrayal and just loves Cat even more for it.

*Argentorum*

Honestly, I would rip Akua out of my soul now and be done with it.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Kinda late.

[onedollargum](#)

Akua's part of Cat's Winter pseudo-aspect. Apprentice cut out an aspect before to lance the corruption in her, and the results were crippling. At this point she can't afford to lose winter or even damage it. The stakes are high and they'll keep getting higher so i think we're stuck with Akua for now.

*MetruX*

I disagree, actually. While the cut before was crippling, there was much difference: to start with, this is not part of her soul, but bound to it, which seems like only different words for the same effect, yet when dealing with sorcery anything is a difference. Masego wasn't as good as he is now, and fae powers enter into his Name powers this time. There was a invading power consuming and turning, he had to cut indiscriminately and in a timely fashion, it could hardly be considered his best work. The story and narrative itself point to Winter either (1) bending under her control, or (2) being separated from her, since she has no Name whatsoever for now, and both Named and unNamed paths need one of those to be true.

So, while it isn't something that can be done whenever they want to, it is still possible, if at a price...And we all know how Cat is about paying prices...

*Dragrath*

While Masego has grown stronger Winter is also at the core of Cat right now given she is the Queen of Winter. Severing the embodiment of Winter from itself is a whole other level from cutting out an aspect it would be far closer to severing a Angel from its aspect.

[Switch](#)

She's still the Squire, she's said multiple times that she still feels the bare bones of the Name there, but it's broken to the point she can't really claim it anymore. So you can't really say she's completely unNamed.

### *Sanityfaerie*

Also... Well, Akua has made \*herself\* a creature of Winter at this point (it fits her pretty well) and the fact is that the hosts of Winter ever scheme against their masters. Cat, too, has grown more Winter-like, and with it more in tune with the flows of such things.

If anything, I almost see this ending with Akua as the new Winter Queen, once Cat discards the mantle for better things.

### *nerferf*

Knew it

He is a controlled tool for whenever the plot gets boring and needs a big bad to spice up the story of the continent if any of the other usual villains get boring to watch or just too weak

Whats the point of keeping heroes around if there aint a big bad to throw them at after all

### *SpeckofStardust*

Not good enough leverage, If cat can enable it so can others.

### *BroadAxe*

It isn't even leverage, malicia contacted the dead king at the end of book 3. So this is only percieved leverage, he probabbly already has 1 aliance :3

### *lqueenofblades1*

No she didn't. That was Triumphant contacting him from the Hell she went to.

### *Shoddi*

\*Presses knuckle to forehead \*  
May(be) she never return.

### *stevenneiman*

We know that a magical indicator indicated something. For all we know it was that Cat had become the first suitable ally to summon him since the days of Dread Empress Triumphant (may she never return). Even if her backyard is on fire, Malicia almost certainly understands how ill-advised trying to use the Dead King is, even aside from her doing fine when the Dead King saw the indicator. Besides, if there was a red telephone from the tower to Keter some crazy Emperor would have used it since then. That leave Malicia contacting the Dead King with magic if she did at all, and her best mage

answers to Black, who would definitely not be willing to work with the Dead King.

### *Sanityfaerie*

Malicia is a pretty decent mage herself. You don't need the best for a scrying, if you know which scrying to do. Also, we know that she was planning on doing *\*something\** horrible to deal with the current situation – she outright said as much to the Black Knight when they had their confrontation over Akua's terror weapon.

### *MetruX*

I honestly believe this theory about Malicia flawed in so many ways... But even if it wasn't, we don't know how or why Cat is needed. If there is a smidgeon of truth that he is contacting on hopes of leaving, then he has no other deal yet, since there would be simply no reason to deal with Cat at all. What this implies is that, at the worse possible, he is dealing with other villains, and at best, that he is limited in who he can deal with. I'm leaning more on the second, because firstly he would've done it with others if he had the chance, and secondly because of the red light. What if that is not communications? We we're never shown it to be, but this theory has taken root into many people's head. It could very well be a magical instrument to see when someone he can deal with has appeared. He has means of seeing a whole lot more than we know of outside, and of countering Masego's "auto" tracking magic, which implies he has what is needed for such a complex magical detection.

Thus, my theory is this: Cat is the first one, or one of the few, that he can use to leave his territory after Tirumphant.

### *CaptainSemantics*

And the plot thickens. I can't wait to see this doublecross play out and (inevitably) fail horribly somehow.

Theoretically, the doublecross sounds feasible. But if Cat has to let the Dead King out of his realm... Procer is well and truly f\*\*\*ed.

### *Big Brother*

Oh, it's getting one step closer to Cat and Akua being able to fight at the same time. The Immortal Brawler and the Eternal Diabolist, two sides of a bloody coin that can determine the fate of nations from a single flip.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

That is very interesting...  
Both Akua and the Dead King, cant wait for next week.

*Havak*

I don't buy it. If leverage over The Dead King was that simple, Akua's mother should have known about it too. The fact that she didn't use it implies that there is probably more going on.

....

I would guess that not everyone has the ability to invite the dead king out. Cat as Queen can invite people into her domain in a way that a more normal person can't

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I think an important bit is that you have to be a Named sovereign governing a kingdom.

*stevenneiman*

It's like a favorite food which is so hard to cook that a good enough chef might or might not exist in any given century. Yeah, you might be able to win favor or leverage if you are or have control over that one chef, but it's not super useful information otherwise. Until we know the proper conditions required to summon him, we won't know much more. I'm guessing that the glowing stone was actually telling him that a suitable summoner (or possibly a suitable host) exists, and there's a good chance the Truebloods couldn't have deliberately created the same conditions even if they knew what they were.

*Alex*

Reminder to everyone that there's an extra chapter, Court III, this week.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

How do you get there? It's not in the TOC

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Oh fucking christ. You have to go find a line labeled Extra Chapters, down below the comments. That is literally the only way. I didn't even know such a link existed, it's so hidden. Why bother writing chapters if you're going to hide them?

*Sieral*

It was released before this chapter. You could just keep scrolling down from the main page to get to it...

*stevenneiman*

Uh, the "next chapter" button at the bottom of each page will take you through all the special chapters. I didn't even realize there were situations where they could be hard to find until I read comments related to it.

*superkeaton*

Well now. Evil reveals all around. Deadhead's "condition", Akua's wardrobe change, all very interesting.

*Someguy*

So for all his proficiency in Magic the Dead King still needs Story momentum to allow him out of the Hells... He turned himself into a plot flag?

*nerferf*

Yep, he became too powerful and victory is boring after-all  
Stories are at their best with conflict and an invincible character is just too boring to let go free  
And a boring story means no audience and that's a death sentence given the nature of creation and how the gods abandon Arcadia to boring repeats of the same stories

*Rook*

I'd bet money he fucked up his connection with greater creation and is in a similar situation to the Fae. The permanent hellgate and whatever power he stole from the Hell he took over came at the cost of being treated similarly to the natives of the hell – an outsider to creation proper.

Which brings up a very plausible reason that he'd care about a (currently minor) character like Cat, the one thing she has in common with Triumphant. She recently laid down precedent for giving outsiders a permanent foothold into greater creation – The Hunt by accepting them into her newly minted Earthly Winter Court.

Akua is probably right in that sense. What he wants from her is an invitation. An invitation into Creation through Cat's winter court

*nerferf*

Dont think he fucked up to be honest,

I think he was "encouraged" and had "help" by the bard or narrative to become a controlled big bad for the gods above to send heroes at and also provide a hold the wall scenes for

the gods to enjoy watching mortals holding the wall against undead hordes like in a tower defense game

dude should have been careful about what he wished for

*goliath1303*

When Black learned about who/what Bard truly is it was theorized that in order for the Gods Above to have been allowed such a powerful agent, the Gods Below would have been entitled to someone/thing equally as powerful and the assumption was that the Dead King was their answer to WB(or vice versa).

*Dantalian*

What a wonderful chapter.

Few authors of Web fictions are able to write a chapter composed entirely of dialogue(in a single discussion with some introspection in-between), and still make the plot progress so much.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Making deals with the dead?

What a Thriller.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Just as lon as he doesn't start dancing!

*Jane*

...You know, I bet his castle still has a ballroom. Now I kind of want to see the Dead King and his court hosting one of those eerie silent waltzs...

Eternal life with no one (who matters, at least coughRangercough) to talk to must be rather dull... He must have at least *tried* this sort of mimicry of life, no? You leave a bunch of dolls on the table, and pretty much everyone is at least going to arrange them into a proper scene, no? What's the point of having a bunch of undead just standing around if you aren't going to use them for *anything*, no?

*Cicero*

Uhh....

Let me summarize the plan so far:

Step 0: Pretend to be a loyal vassal to Praes so as to delay war with them. Despite independence from Praes being the ultimate goal.

Step 1: Promise to ally the Crusade in order to convince the northern Procer army to agree to a truce. Implies betraying Praes.

Step 2: Ally the Dead King, inviting him into creation to attack Procer. Thus betraying Procer.

Step 3: Betray the Dead King. Use his invasion as leverage to join the Crusade.

Step 3.5: Assume the Crusade can defeat the Dead King.

Step 4: Finally betray Praes for real, and break free to become independent. Using the Crusade as your muscle to make it happen. All while not actually following a redemption story, (which implies betraying the Heavens, who are the nominal backers of said Crusade).

So basically betray everyone in sequence, and rely upon Callow's position as the fulcrum of the balance of power to make everyone still try to be your ally despite all the betrayals. Callow is England parallels intensify.

Well... I have to admit that kind of plan is probably not consistent with a redemption story. But Cat... I think you might have become infected with chronic backstabbing disorder.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Do note that Malicia has contacted him since the end of the previous book so I don't think Cat is the only one to cut a deal with him.

*oldschoolvillain*

Everyone assumes it was Malicia, but another important event in that epilogue was Cat's coronation. The glowy red stone of doom might just be an indicator to let the Dead King know that someone has come onto the stage who can unleash him. If only specific people can let you off of the leash, would you not have a notification for when they appear?

*WuseMajor*

I figured it was a signal that Triumphant's Return was imminent.

[Euodiachloris](#)



Or, at least, tear up the bonds and let him go home. Technically, his slice of the Hells is his actual place of abode, not Creation. He might be suffering from being continually "summoned" in some way.

The individual he'd probably like a few words with about what she pulled on him is also in the Hells, somewhere. With her Legions. He can't have a good argument with her yoke still around his neck. 😞

*Gian*

she's actually doing what she did in the melee in vol1, but on a continental scale.

*limlimrevolution*

I do love that's she pulling her classic "flip the board and beat everyone with it while shoving the pieces down their throats" gambit.

*Thea*

We must keep in mind that her gambit in Book 1 didn't play out as planned. She salvaged it, but it was rough. Also, the "basis" for Foundling's MO was said to be the Battle of Three Armies and One, not the Melee.

*TideofKhatanga*

The battle plan at Five Armies and One: con the Deoraithe into joining your campaign, play Ranker and Kegan against each other, lie to every general on your side, lie to the Winter Host, taunt Summer for fun, use the cavalry that you betrayed an Empress for and deceive the Princess of High Noon as a closing act.

It's not as backstab-happy as the Melee but it compensates by sheer amount of lies, dishonesty and creative wording.

*Jane*

Really, if Cat hadn't been transitioning into the Black Queen, she would have transitioned into some trickster name. For as much as everyone jokes about how she deals with all of her problems by stabbing them, I can't think of many problems she hasn't dealt with through misdirection, trickery, creatively reinterpreting how her powers are "supposed" to work, and outright lies (before stabbing her problems to death, of course).

That, setting aside how manipulating fate itself is kind of her *thing*.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Right, because you *know* that Cat is transitioning to a "Name" that was made-up here in the comments. Very likely.

*Jane*

Um... I just wrote up a nice long explanation of what I meant? But then when I hit backspace, well... My hand had drifted across the touchpad without my notice, clicking on the page outside of the box, so it kind of took me to the last page instead of deleting my typo. Which "deleted" my entire post instead. So to quickly summarize what I had wrote, because I have to get to work...

Trickster archetypes are common across the mythology of nearly every culture that I can think of; almost every society has famous figures celebrated or reviled for their reliance on cleverness and deception to build their legend. Cat herself, relatedly, has mostly relied on cleverness and manipulation of the story to achieve her ends; while she's been in her fair share of scraps, the more important aspect of her victories is usually related to some dramatic turn she set up beforehand (becoming undead to rob the Lone Swordsman of his win, faking a story to kill a god, tricking two other gods out of Creation, her current plan which involves betraying darned near everyone to keep Callow free and herself alive). If we take the ruler archetype out of consideration, as she has indicated that she has no long-term interest in ruling, then in my opinion, that really only leaves warrior and trickster archetypes as possibilities for her, and I think trickster would be a more natural fit than warrior. She has more in common with Odysseus than she does Beowulf.

Of course, trickster names might not be in the Guideverse at all, but as I said – they're present in nearly all of human mythology. If they are actually outright absent from Guideverse (as opposed to my current presumption, that no holder of a trickster name has been relevant to the story yet), then I would suspect that to be some form of foreshadowing – that neither the Gods Above or Below favor human cleverness for some reason, and would prefer to discourage it by rewarding other virtues. But at this point, I see little reason to believe that they *don't* exist.

*Jane*

Ah, shoot, left out a point in my summary –

Of course, as Duchess of the Moonless Night, she's not eligible for a Name, and if she should lose that mantle, her new name is almost certainly going to be related to the dramatic circumstances under which she lost her mantle. What I've written isn't especially relevant to that, so far as I know.

*Hinkel*

I think it is not by chance that the quote at the start of the chapter is by Dread Emperor Traitorous. If you have read the chapter with Thief, there are even more parallels with Cat leading her own opposition.

*Katreu*

Reminds me of Cat's book 1 adventures in the war games in the legion academy... Wasn't that just a series of spectacular betrayals in succession?

Who knew that training would come in handy? 😊

*Letouriste*

Well, that failed spectacularly at the end. She lost to Juniper because she underestimated the bond between Juniper and Aisha. She learned from it to never do complicated plans with several critical points... so I'm a little surprised she is willing to do that now

*Novice*

To say that Cat "failed spectacularly at the end" is an exaggeration. It was a draw and she ultimately got Juniper as her general. A badass general that's currently kicking everyone's ass. I'd even call it a win, all things considered.

*Decius*

Cat WON the round that was decided by that battle, by not losing the battle but having it declared a draw.

*Someguy*

The lessons taught by Dread Emperor Traitorous are still applicable today. \*Sob!\* Brings tears to my eyes.

*nick012000*

>But Cat... I think you might have become infected with chronic backstabbing disorder.

It's basically the war games from the War College all over again...

*Jane*

When you lay it all out like that, it kind of makes the Tyrant look like a stand-up, dependable guy, doesn't it? At least his betrayals are straightforward and spectacular, after all.

*Jane*

We thought she was building up to be Triumphant Reborn, being the undefeated champion who could take on an entire continent without any hoping to match her. Instead... She's become Traitorous Reborn, selling out pawn after pawn just because she can.

*Antoninjohn*

This is only the first part of my plan, Step One would work for Cat

*Decius*

Cat has narrowly avoided dying from the Praesian Chronic Backstabbing Disorder several times.

*Anon*

Why the hell is Akua still allowed to be given form at this point?

Yes, she's 'suborned' herself under the yoke of Cat's control over the mantle of winter, but she's also been shown to clearly be able to subvert that control at the opportune moment.

The gods below', as long as Cat keeps trying to straddle the fence, will end up pushing for Akua to take the reins.

She's outlived her usefulness by FAR at this point, and Vivienne should be screaming bloody murder.

*haihappen*

That may even be used as an exit-strategy for Cat at some point: Akua takes Winter -> Cat is free of Winter, free to take on a True Name -> defeat Akua -> happiness all around...

Too bad ripping out Winter would probably kill Cathrine at this point. ... Unless someone with mighty resurrection powers is close by, convinced that Cat is one of the good guys under the influence of a bad one (Akua), ... damn, could that be one of the

irons the Pilgrim has in the fire? Can he SEE Akua? The man is not omniscient, but really perceptive. And he may not need Akua specifically, most of the rest of the Woe could be chalked up as "Bad influence" too. He jsut needs to craft a story that sticks...

Damn. So. Many. Angles.

*RanVor*

To paraphrase Cat, it'd be a simpler world if people always did the smart thing.

*Someguy*

Unfortunately with Akua, it's predictable that she would cunningly do the elaborate, expensive, wasteful stupid thing.

*Berder*

This feels like a horrible mistake. But didn't the Dead King have another message for Catherine, carried on a black seal? Seems so much planning is premature without hearing that first.

One option Catherine has failed to consider is surrendering. Which is worse: the Dead King let loose, or Procer divvying up Callow more or less peacefully? But perhaps she's sunk too deep into villainy to allow this option.

*Oshi*

The seal was instructions for the meeting. The message was the thing the undead repeated.

*Berder*

That's an unwarranted assumption. The seal contains information of an unknown character, as it has not yet been read.

*Berder*

Another point is that Akua needs to die ASAP. She's already shown, when she battled Catherine in Arcadia, that her devotion to traditional tropes grants her greater control over Winter than Catherine herself had. And now she has a shred of mantle that lets Catherine control her. I'd wager that connection goes both ways and is a question of attunement to Winter. How long until that shred of mantle combined with Akua's greater affinity for it, lets Akua control Catherine?

*burdi*

And that is what make it all more interesting  
ever changing situation, plot after plot, revelation after  
revelation  
that catherine has to keep improve, dance after dance because  
all thing fuck up and not according to the plan  
even her oath to made akua folly tremble of men for thousand  
years not much succeeded because the situation always  
changing and she has to improve

*burdi*

its in this chapter

"She doesn't deserve to get out again," Vivienne said  
darkly.

"It' be a simpler world," I said, "if people always got what  
they deserved."

that the world not so simple, compromise has to be made

*Berder*

Akua's value is extremely dubious. She hasn't given much  
if any useful advice. The best thing she did was fight the  
heroes for a while, only possible because she took over  
Catherine's body. Does Catherine view Akua's ability to  
take over her body as a positive? She shouldn't.

I wonder what the Dead King's source of intelligence on  
the Observatory and Catherine in general is. I would not  
be surprised if his communion with the dead extends to  
Akua, who is the spy feeding him information.

*Fern*

I don't think Akua's going to try for a betrayal until  
she has enough story flags to make it worthwhile. Cat  
may have survived her use of "monster betrays its Evil  
master," but that's mostly because she had a tremendous  
amount of leverage beyond that; there's no guarantee  
Akua will survive her use of the same flag. If Akua's  
going to try for a betrayal, it'll be when she'll be  
able to both survive the use of that story and not get  
beaten to death by the multiple cudgels arranged against  
her.

I think as long as Cat keeps using her competently,  
there won't be a betrayal for the rest of the book.

*Micke*

It's been heavily implied Akua wants Cat to usurp the  
Tower, and that it was never her own, only her

mother's, goal to have her become Dread Empress; Akua being far more interested in unleashing interesting horrors like a proper villain than in the boring minutiae of ruling nation.

*Antoninjohn*

Pattern of three in the stories, One: Dead King Two: Praes Three: Callow, the Dead King might need all the three groups working together to get out

*SMHF*

Cat had her fair share of terrible ideas so far, but double-crossing the Dead King is up there... just above backstabbing Traitorous and below catfishing Cthulhu! -\_-

Btw dont forget to vote for guide guys! We've been falling behind lately!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Euodiachloris](#)

So, if Cat needs credibility (with any side) and alliances of any kind can only be minefields of various kinds of disaster...

Exactly how many points would she rack up closing the Dead King's gate into creation? With everybody? (Including, maybe, him.)

*RanVor*

That would be a pretty good idea if we didn't know that closing the greater breach is impossible.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Well, it is said to be impossible. By people who think they know all the factors involved. I bet they don't, though. 😏

[Antony444](#)

I agree with the Thief the plan looks far more sane than it was implied last chapter. Unfortunately, there's still a big problem lurking around the corner.

Can Procer, who has just lost around 40 000+ men, muster enough strength to stop the Dead King from overwhelming them?

Malanza is not bad for a general, I admit. But she was defeated soundly by Juniper and Catherine, at a moment where she had absolute hero-superiority and a large advantage in numbers. Her army's morale must not be brilliant, the officers ranks have taken crippling losses. The Dead King has literally centuries of experience and emerged victorious against total crusades where he was the sole opponent.

Procer, on the other hand, has not had the time to erase all the problems their long civil war has caused. Their armies, as Klaus Papenheim put it, were brittle and weak.

There are still twenty heroes around for the Crusade and 110 000+ men available...more if they can get rid of Black sacking their cities right and left. But they have taken a lot of losses recently, and though they have fought the Black Queen and the Warlock, they really are unprepared for the 'original abomination'.

I am afraid the Dead King has already anticipated betrayal...and we still don't know if he has contacted other villains. The Tyrant for one would not be exactly shy to use evil to cause more and more massacres...the Tyrant seeks to end Procer after all.

*haihappen*

The Tyrant would invite the Dead King to tea if it meant to be able to try to betray him/it. The Tyrant is, after all, mad.

Th invitation said "the champions of Below must either face demise alone or overturn the wheel of fate in coming striving", that does NOT exclude any of the others.

Malicia could be there, and the Tyrant, or even the Hierarch (doubt that one, but telling off the Dead King would certainly be something I would like to see him do). Any capital E evil leader could be there.

In this case, it is probably someone's \*cough\* Malicia \*cough\* idea to forge an "evil" counterweight to Hasenbach's "Grand Alliance": The "Alliance of Dread", or "Unholy Congregation", or "Covenant of Lies/Betrayal" (last one would be a favorite of the Tyrant I am sure)

so much possibilities

*CaptainSemantics*

Plot Twist: the Hierarch defeats the Dead King by bringing democracy to the undead

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Double twist: the dead all waste their votes on third party candidates and accidentally elect Tyrant

*Highwayman*

You know, the opening statement made a lot more sense after I read the entire thing.

*Daemion*

Is no one going to comment on this?

"Your Dread Majesty," Diabolist bowed, smiling pleasingly.



The Woe didn't even react to Cat being addressed as if she was the Dread Empress herself.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

They all know about Akua's tendency towards overegging omelettes. 😋

### *Death Knight*

"I stared into the Abyss and found the Abyss... wanting."  
-Dead King

The betrayal plan seems sound except for one teeny tiny point of failure:

Notifying the cities a month beforehand.

The Dead King was shown to be aware of what happens outside of his borders and he managed to create a necromantic construct that eluded the eyes of the Observatory. It is extremely unlikely that they could keep such an endeavour under wraps-too many moving parts.

Given that the Dead King is also an otherworldly entity and knows the rules of the Fae, to subvert any potential betrayal, have Catherine swear on her Mantle and/or the Gods Below.

... This plan is dangerously stupid and full of holes and highly likely to blow up in the Woes face

### *jhhhu*

Damn, these last two chapters make me so sad for Vivienne. The whole of the woe is a sorry bunch, but Vivienne's relative innocence makes it more heart wrenching.

They feel like they have no other choice than to go deeper, and it feels like with every win, they lose more.

### [TeK](#)

So, Cat's now holds a leashto the biggest Big Bad on Calernia. As a deterrent, this is so much more than some fortress of doom.

### [TeK](#)

Also, on the complete side note, I have a question. EE, if you indulge me, I'd be glad. Back in the epilogue to the book 1 it has been mentioned that no nation on Calernia can muster even one tenth of what dwarves could. Procer had mustered about 130k soldiers. Does that mean that Dwarves can gather almost one and a half million soldiers?

## Tide of Khatanga

Most likely, yes. What we know of the dwarves: 1/ their underground kingdom spans about two-thirds of Calernia, 2/ the mercenary company that got hired for the Liesse Rebellion was numbering in the two thousands, which is like twenty times the size of a human mercenary company, 3/ their industrial base is solid enough that they can sell enough surplus to arm the majority of Calernian militaries and 4/ they have enough manpower to consider sinking kingdoms into the ground a reasonable plan A.

So yeah, the Kingdom Under is massive compared to the surface nations of Calernia.

## Jane

This... Really isn't a good plan, is it. But, well, what other choices do they have, really?

1) Lose. I mean, yeah, theoretically that's an option? But I'm kind of under the impression that it goes against the core of *being Named*. How many stories can you think of, outside of maybe a couple of the less popular Grimm tales, where the Hero or Villain just... Gave up. It's not generally considered a satisfying story. Unless there's a Heroic Speech on the floor, of course the Villain is going to reach for the doomsday weapon when their back is to the wall. There's too much at stake not to.

2) Hope for an eleventh hour miracle. Okay, sure, they *look* doomed on paper, but... Maybe if Archer visits home, Ranger will be willing to come back! Or maybe there will be some unexpected conjunction of the spheres, and Winter gets supercharged! Or maybe the magical duel had side effects that will boil anyone in the Vales in six months! ...Yeah, okay, literally *none* of that is plausible. If she was a Hero, yeah, *maybe* the Gods Above would pull that kind of a rabbit out of a hat for her, but she's on the wrong side to just be handed a win for no discernable reason.

3a) Ally with the Dead King. So... Being a vassal to the guy whose entire shtick appears to be making the world undead, and who has his own hell portal. How can that *possibly* go wrong? I mean, yeah, maybe he'd hold to any bargain they struck, and leave Callow alone. You're still going to watch the rest of the continent (at *best*) become rather unlivable, and go down in history as one of the bigger monsters. More likely, you'll end up having to offer regular tribute – and I don't mean in the form of gold. And worst case scenario? He just takes Callow when the whim takes him, and he has no more use for you.

3b) Ally with the Dead King. Okay, so... You have some cunning plan to put the Dead King back in his bottle, or maybe he just wasn't actually interested in staying out to begin with. But, uh,

everyone kind of knows you're the one who took him out of it. That kind of *spectacular* display of power and folly kind of gets you *noticed*. Does said cunning plan also give you the raw power of Triumphant Reborn? Because if you're not capable of taking on the entire continent alone yet, you're going to need to get it *fast*. Because I'm pretty sure the Grand Alliance is going to refocus on you as a bigger threat than the tower. And Malicia is probably going to help after a stunt like that if she doesn't think the alliance can take you on themselves.

So... "Secretly ally with the Dead King, and sell him out to as many people as you can" has *so many ways* it can go *catastrophically* wrong, especially since they don't know how *he* knows what happens on the continent, but... Well, they did just spend a chapter looking for alternatives, and the only ones they came up with somehow managed to be worse.

I mean, they didn't look at *all* the alternatives, true. They could try finding the Demon of Absence, and siccing it on the Vales – if they remembered it existed, which, well, the entire *point* of them is that they can't. Or they could revisit Bonfire – a gamble, but with less points of failure than the current plan. Or they could use Akua to steal all of Wolof's ancient abominations and treasures to defend the Vales with.

Ah, or they could embrace Winter's power to its fullest, and make the Vales a deathtrap beyond compare – the Witch and the Warlock could have destroyed either army by accident, and Cat isn't actually weaker than them; she's merely denying her power. If she were to gate in to difficult to reach places in the Vales, using the Hunt as her retinue to protect her (and possibly start handing out titles, if she were to take the plan to its logical conclusion by empowering others to assist her), and start doing things like freezing and releasing the water in the mountains to cause avalanches (if she wanted to be careful), or drop a few more pieces of Arcadia onto the army (if she didn't care about the consequences), she could do considerable damage to the army without risking anyone but herself. If nothing else, it would be disastrous for enemy morale, to take such blows without being able to make any visible progress. Of course, it'd make her a hero beacon that would kill her within a year, surely.

But, well, all of those would probably get them killed sooner rather than later. They're not good alternatives either, and also leave an axe of "We ignored an ancient abomination's request for a meeting, think he remembers?" hanging over their heads. He doesn't strike me as the sort of person you want to ignore. Not that betraying him is any better, I suppose, but at least you get the satisfaction of having beaten him once that way?

That said, I wonder how badly this will go for them. Think the rest of the world will find out that they're the ones who loosed

the Dead King on the world? It sounds like the kind of thing that would make a good book... And he *does* pretty much have to find out that Cat sold him out, right? Sealing the Dead King away again sounds like the kind of plotline that she *has* to end up personally involved.

*Jane*

Ah... I just thought of one way this could all go *hideously* wrong for Cat, though I doubt it will happen.

What if... Procer *doesn't believe her*? She tells them that the Dead King is preparing to attack, and they just think it's a trick on her part, and do nothing. And then, after the Dead King *does* strike, realize that she knew because she was in on it. She's then forced to play the entire thing straight because, well, it's not like anyone decent is ever going to work with her again after *that*, right?

She took Liesse badly, and she really had fairly little to do with that. How much worse would she take the destruction of multiple cities through her own machinations? The others could shrug that off with little problem (well, except Thief), but it seems like the kind of thing that would break Cat for a while.

*Argentorum*

That's why Cat said she's going to *\*leak\** the plan to Procer. She's not gonna stroll up to Klaus Papenheim and say "Oi, you lot best get north. The dead king is climbing into your windows and snatching yo people up."

As amusing as such a scene would be. Then, she uses the need for her fairy gates as leverage to join the alliance, not any "good will" from informing them about the attack.

*Jane*

Sure, but there's no guarantee that Procer will believe the leaked information. I mean, what's more likely – that Cat somehow knows that the Dead King is preparing to attack, or that Cat has figured out who Procer's agents are, and are feeding them misleading information in hopes of getting some breathing room?

*Jane*

Ah, though, like I said – I don't think that's where the story is going anyway. I'm just pointing out that her plan is strongly reliant on something that's not actually a given, and which would cause a disaster if it were to go wrong.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

They have the Augur. I don't see this as a risk

*Novice*

The Augur is overrated. After all, she didn't predict the Absence Demon nor Black launching a counter invasion.

*Novice*

Well this is awkward. For clarification, I didn't mean the Demon and Black invading together.

Walter

I think Cat is presuming a lot when she figures Dead King \*needs\* a month. I imagine that if she agrees he'll be like "Ok, let's do this, fae gate to Procer's capital, please."

*Thea*

Nobody commenting on how Akua is lacing Winter into her soul? Cat-laced Winter? That has some interesting options. Their souls could meld. Akua could try to come out on top with superior sorcerous skill (remember that usurpation thing). Akua might be screwed because Cat has so much more of Winter to her... soul. The Oath of Akua's Folly might trigger and hand Cat the win. They might learn to work together.

On that note: Akua is becoming to the Woe what Scribe is to the Calamities: The unofficial sixth member that few people know about, but those that do are scared. Very, very scared.

Walter

Akua's face turn would be imperiled by working with DK.

*Thea*

How so?

Speaking of Akua face-turning: It would make her a Dark Magical Girl? Requiring time and effort to be befriended and always a bit edgier? Bonus points for being dark-skinned.

Speaking of Akua's Folly: The oath ends in "when they speak of Akua's Folly and the woe that came from it". Woe for whom? In the original context, it's clear, but... you know. Also: The woe that came from it... member of the Woe? Okay, this is stretching it, but... you know.

Walter

Well, the 'face turn' I was speaking of would be her recent notion of taking up heroism. You can't do that on the Dead King's team.

*Jane*

If that were to happen... You could write an entire book about how Vivienne and Akua came to an understanding with each other. Those are the kind of character dynamics that can really drive a narrative.

Not that there isn't an interesting dynamic between Cat and Akua, but Cat can snuff Akua out any time she wishes, and is a lot less... Rigid about the implications of keeping Akua around than Thief is.

*nipi*

And Akua is copying Cat with all that my hearth has been replaced by Winter thing. Anyone else suspect that at some point she is going to be so entwined with the Winter mantel that Cat cant or cant afford to get rid of her any more?

*Someguy*

Nah. Akua gets sacrificed along with Winter (as it's eternal prisoner) packed into Zombie as a cryogenic explosive (implosive?) to bomb Saint & Pilgrim.

*Zarkloyd*

Damn. What a time to finally catch up. Excited to be following the story live now.

*Novice*

So now that Akua "wove herself into its[Winter] very fabric", and Cat's soul is practically Winter itself: does that make them *soulmates* ?

*Jane*

You know, Akua got more Cat-like when she drew upon Winter while she was let out... Does this intertwining now mean that Akua is now *permanently* slightly more Cat-like? I mean, it's just a shred, so it shouldn't have much effect either way, but the implications are... Interesting.

*CaptainSemantics*

Imagine a Winter Court in which everyone is just a little bit (or a lot, take your pick) Cat-like...

*Jane*

...This is starting to sound an awful lot like some kind of twinning thing.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

If Akua becomes a literal copy-Cat I'm leaving

*werafdsaew*

I think Cat isn't leveraging her Winter powers enough. She should be creating a lake at her side of the Vale so that the crusaders would have a hard time getting into Callow even after clearing the debris.

*Matthew*

The Grey Pilgrim and Augur would entirely undo Cat's plan to keep her plan secret.

Either one could find out instantly that she worked with the Dead King. Cat can't preserve plausible deniability. Both of their powers allow them to ask, "Did Cat work with the Dead King?" "Yes" Burn the witch!

*Jane*

Eh, the Augur doesn't seem reliable enough for that. Warning that something really dangerous is about to attack, sure – *if* she can recognize that's a warning she should pass on. "Cat was in on it", though? That sounds like the sort of detail that's beyond her. I mean, we've seen the sort of things she tells the First Prince, and they're kind of... Muddled.

The Grey Pilgrim could probably finagle the truth out of her, but only if she was willing to talk with him at length on a related topic – and since she doesn't "really" plan on working with him, just siccing him on Procer and helping stop him, she might still be able to squirm out of such a conversation altogether.

*Maginot's Wall*

And it turns out this was all an elaborate plot to tell dead baby jokes!

Great plot twist with a long and delicious wind-up.

Thank you, also, for the detour to see the Black Knight. That was much appreciated in the rich ensemble cast you've assembled and tamed. Will we see more of the Hierarch soon? We all wait with baited breath.

[erraticerrata](#)

Hierarch has a major role to play in this book, but I won't spoil exactly when it comes into the main thread.

*rewars*

Is it bad that I sort of ship Akua and Cat?

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## Chapter 26: Plunge

*"If war is to be understood as the pursuit of statecraft through violence, then the Principate is a failure as a nation: the Highest Assembly has proved chronically incapable of either agreeing on or seeing through a single ambition through the undertaking of warfare."*

– Extract from 'The Ruin of Empire, or, A Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly' by Princess Eliza of Salamans

It would have to be Cordelia Hasenbach first. The odds were not in my favour – but when had they last been, truth be told? – yet if this could be settled without the involvement of the Pilgrim it would be infinitely preferable. Now more than ever, every interaction with the Peregrine would carry dangers beyond the obvious. A single careless conversation could see me stripped of power or afflicted with opinions just *slightly* to the side of my own. For all that the Gods Below were the ones with the reputation for manipulation, I'd come to suspect the reason Above wasn't saddled with the same was just that they were better at it. Evil tended to drop the bottom of how far you were willing to compromise and allow you to dig ever deeper on your own when the consequences came calling. Even the most deluded villain, I thought, must have had one glimmer of cold clarity when they realized they'd brought it all on themselves by crossing that one line they wouldn't have before. Above, though? It dealt in the guise of conscience. A whisper urging you to be the person you could be, if you were just a little *better*. It didn't seem so terrible a thing, until you found that first choice seamlessly leading you into the next and the next and the one after that. Pilgrim had called Evil the edge of the cliff, once, but if that was true then Good was the tired metaphor of the slippery slope. Once you started going down, you had no more control over where you were headed than a cart rolling down a hill.

The revulsion that welled in me at that notion was an old friend, and not one I was willing to part from. Black had gotten to me young enough that the thought of having my choice taken away from me brought only bone-deep disgust, even for the worst of them.



The cool darkness of my domain soothed the sharpness of the emotions as it filled the room. There would be no shade whispering advice in my ear tonight. Akua already knew too much of my plans for comfort, and though Masego assured me it was possible to learn to make her invisible to the sight of others again it would take me days to properly master the trick. Days I could not afford: an entire month would go by before my opportunity to speak with the First Prince came again. Hasenbach came out of the dark glowing with the weight of miracles in the dozens, her dark blue dress touched by long golden curls. The understated circlet of pale gold on her brow found no match on my side: I wore no regalia tonight, nothing but the worn tunic and boots of a soldier on campaign. It was a truer glimpse of who I was than jewels and gold, though it did lack the expected formality. The First Prince took a moment to gather her bearings, though it was noticeably shorter than the last time. She was getting used to it, or at least getting better at faking situational awareness. I didn't bother with the usual duel of silence that tended to precede our conversations.

"Your Most Serene Highness," I greeted her.

"Your Grace," Cordelia Hasenbach replied.

I hesitated, and in that heartbeat she took the lead.

"It has been some time since we last conversed," the First Prince said.

"I saw no need to waste either our evenings by engaging before there was resolution to the battle," I replied. "There has been, and now here I am."

"It would have been courteous to notify me of this intent," Hasenbach chided me.

"War is the graveyard of courtesies," I said in Chantant, quoting one of her predecessors.

"Julienne Merovins never truly spoke those words," she noted in Lower Miezán, sounding somewhat amused. "It was a courtier under the reign of her successor, and the *bon mot* was only attributed to her fifty years after her death by a family historian."

"It always feels snappier when it comes from someone who wore a crown," I shrugged. "Harder to tell with Dread Emperors, though, since so many of them really were that insane."

"Praes does tend to straddle the line between laughable and appalling," the First Prince said. "A tragedy for us all, that these last few decades have seen it settle firmly on the latter."

"Lots of tragedies going around, these days," I smiled thinly. "One might argue we're both in the business of making those."

Cool eyes considered me in silence.

"Shall we empty the proverbial bag before speaking with purpose then, Your Grace?" Hasenbach said. "I suppose you must have recriminations to utter, if only for your personal satisfaction."

"I left personal at the door," I replied. "It has no place in this conversation. Looking backwards just means stepping blind. I'm here, First Prince, because I want to cut a deal. The rest is noise."

"You have shown fondness for that measure, of late," the blonde said mildly. "Your bargain with my subjects was a particularly vicious breed of mercy."

I frowned.

"I spared lives," I said. "Thousands of them. Your own people's lives, it is worth remembering."

"You removed from the campaign for several months a force that would have been too costly to destroy by violence," the First Prince said. "It was cleverly done, and I can respect the achievement, but let us not pretend you meant to save men you attempted to drown mere days earlier."

"That working would have been limited, and only inflicted enough casualties to force a retreat," I said.

She did not quirk a brow, though I got the impression she very much wanted to.

"An easy assurance to make, after the attempt was foiled," she said.

I forced my fingers to unclench and breathed out slowly. *Temper, Catherine, temper.*

"I have taken great pains, Your Highness, to display moderation in how I've waged this war," I said flatly. "At no small cost of my own. There is a point where doubt becomes denial."

"It has not gone unnoticed," Hasenbach conceded, to my surprise. "You must understand, however, that you are a villain. Deception is the trade of your kind. There is a chance, however slight, that you are genuine in your intentions. Yet precedent remains a stone around your neck, as it has been around mine."

"I've wrecked a third of my army to prove goodwill," I said bluntly. "Against the advice of most my generals, it should be

said. I have to ask, in your eyes what would actually prove I mean what I say?"

"Abdication," the First Prince replied without hesitation.

"That," I said flatly, "is the kind of demand you get to make if you're winning. You are not. I'm offering a treaty, not serving you Callow on a silver platter."

"Your 'offer' has made its way to Salia," Hasenbach said. "Bringing our hosts to Ater through Arcadia, if I am not mistaken. A process that assumes you will not merely strand those armies in a realm of hostile fae."

"I'm willing to swear oaths I won't," I told her.

"Which would yet leave the Tenth Crusade almost completely dependent on you for supplies, while its hosts bleed their strength against Praesi cities," the First Prince said. "Assuming the occupation of the Empire can be successful under those circumstances, the war still ends with you in a fine position to massacre the weakened armies of Procer and Levant after you spent several years raising armies in peace."

"A possibility that can be warded off," I said calmly, "if I am a signatory of the Grand Alliance. You should have received the scroll by now."

The Warden of the West studied me expressionlessly.

"A well-penned request, observing every requirement as set out by the current treaties," Hasenbach said. "My compliments to Vivienne Dartwick."

It'd actually been Black that sent us a horrifyingly thorough transcript, but I saw no need to disabuse her of the assumption.

"In case you were wondering, it's genuine," I said.

"I assumed as much," the First Prince smiled. "It would, after all, involve suspension of all military action between members and subject any matters of conflict to neutral arbitration."

"And also involve a declaration of war on the Dread Empire," I pointed out. "Which means Callow won't be preparing to backstab you, it'll be on the front with your own armies. I'm even willing to take the Blessed Isle from Malicia and hold it while your soldiers make their way east as a sign of goodwill."

"You are being deliberately obtuse," Hasenbach said. "I have already informed you that a villain ruling Callow is not an acceptable outcome for this crusade."

"I've been told more than once it's bad form in a negotiation for your starting position to be your *only* position," I said. "A bargain does tend to involve actual bargaining, Your Highness."

The other woman's eyes went cold.

"You are a warlord, Catherine Foundling," she said, pronunciation excruciatingly precise. "Your reign was built on catastrophe and butchery, and has been maintained by the same. You are not the Queen of Callow, or even the Queen *in* Callow. The only claim for rule you have is that of steel, and with every passing month that claim weakens. You believe I am being undiplomatic, evidently."

She paused and her lips thinned.

"That I must even pretend you have the right to speak for the souls under your yoke is a concession greater than any you have right to ask of me," the First Prince said. "Even a usurper would be more palatable: you have merely ridden from one field of corpses to another, waiting and swelling in might from the deaths of your own people until none were left to gainsay your crowning. Well, here we are now. Consider yourself *gainsaid*, Black Queen."

*Calm*, I thought, as Winter raged. *Calm. Insults don't matter, if you get what you want.*

"And is that the stance of every signatory of the Grand Alliance?" I asked with forced politeness.

"There is not a ruler among us who will tolerate your remaining on the throne," Hasenbach coldly said.

I breathed out. *Calm. Yelling is for children.*

"Abdication within ten years of the signature," I replied instead of screaming. "With the understanding that other nations will have no say in the succession, in exchange for which I will give assurance it won't be another villain."

I saw her visibly master her anger and that had me frowning. A diplomat that practiced, having a fit? It irked me I couldn't read her heartbeat, because I was beginning to realize I might just have been played. The scathing rant had felt genuine, but that didn't mean it hadn't been used as a way to pressure me. Pressure me into giving something I'd been willing to give, sure, but what I'd intended to use as a bargaining chip for further concessions had just been put on the table just to keep negotiations going. Fuck. Horrid as the thought was, I wished I'd had Akua along for the ride.

"Abdication immediately following the end of the crusade," Hasenbach said. "And binding oaths on both it and the matter of succession."

"Five years, regardless of the crusade ending or not," I countered. "I'll need time to settle matters so the succession is stable. Agreed on the oaths."

There was a beat of silence.

"An accommodation might be possible," the First Prince finally said.

I kept my face blank even as relief welled up. Of thank the fucking Gods. I had *not* been looking forward to trying my hand with the Dead King. Ignoring an invitation from the Hidden Horror would likely have consequences, but I was an old hand at lesser evils.

"A truce until it's reached, then," I said. "Including your uncle ending digging operations in the Vales."

"A passage there will be necessary to the prosecution of the war," Hasenbach said.

"In can gate his entire army across the Vales in less than a week, if you don't trust me to get them all the way to Praes," I replied flatly. "Keeping him pointed at my belly can't be considered anything but coercion."

"You are being coerced," the First Prince frankly replied. "That is the very reason we are having this conversation."

I watched her, the strongly-cast face and the patience painted upon it.

"There is a very real chance," I said slowly so she knew I wasn't being flippant, "that agreeing to what you just said will lead to civil war in Callow. It will be seen as annexation, or at the very least effective vassalage. You badly underestimate how hated your people are in the kingdom."

"You have asked me to consider you as the ruler of Callow," Hasenbach said. "Rule, then. Exert your authority to prevent the unrest."

Gods, she was serious.

"No," I said. "I've made *significant* concessions. You want the pass open? Give me more than your word to work with. Withdraw the army, make the truce public. I'll have Hierophant work on a ritual to clear the wreckage, to be used when the treaties have been signed. Otherwise, this is starting to look a lot like I'm baring my neck for the knife."

"I am the First Prince of Procer, not a petty tyrant," Hasenbach replied tightly. "I do not go back on my word once given."

"And I am Callowan," I snapped. "We have more than few songs about the worth of Proceran promises. You're asking me to extend a lot of trust. Do the same damned thing."

"You are overestimating the strength of your bargaining position," she warned me.

"So are you," I barked. "You sent two armies after me, and they both got *whipped out of Callow*. You have Black in your heartlands with four legions and you'd rather argue with me about not putting a knife at my throat than deal with it?"

"I have near every hero on the continent and thrice his number containing him," Hasenbach said. "His survival is a matter of months, if not weeks."

"So this is what it looks like," I said quietly. "An intelligent woman making a very grave mistake."

"Oh, spare me the heaps of praise for the murderer," she said. "He is a skilled general and an effective killer. He is not invincible."

"You are about to get mauled," I said, appalled. "I don't even know what he's up to, but I know that. Sure as day. Gods Below, what about how this crusade has been unfolding could possibly make you this *arrogant*?"

"Posturing will yield nothing," the First Prince said.

"I know what you're trying to do, Cordelia," I said. "You think than in a month we'll be speaking again and I'll have to bend my neck a little lower. Brinksmanship. I need you to believe me, because I'm *begging* here, that it's not what's going to happen. I cannot gamble this entire kingdom's fate, start a civil war, on grounds so thin. I'm already cornered. This is as low as I go."

"Six months ago," she said softly, "you might have said the same. And yet here we are."

I closed my eyes. Should I? Give her even that small assurance I was holding out for? It'd be seen as a capitulation because, to be honest, it was. There'd be riots, and at least half the Army of Callow would desert. Thief might actually kill me. She trusted Procer even less than me. Hells, she might be *right* to if it came to that. There were good reasons I had those contingencies in place. I opened my eyes.

"One last time," I said. "Don't do this. We could avoid so much death – beyond the politics and the interests and the schemes, that has to count for something."

"Appeals to emotion," she said, not unkindly, "are the last resort of one without argument."

I stared at her for a long time.

"I think," I said quietly, "that this conversation is going to haunt the both of us, in years to come."

She hesitated for a moment.

"I am not without sympathy," she said. "But there is more at stake than you know."

It wasn't an opening. Gods, I wished it was, but there was no invitation to negotiate again in the way she was looking at me.

"Woe to us both, then, Cordelia Hasenbach," I said.

I ripped away the darkness and rose to my feet. One last try, before I went into the devil's lair.

—

There were guards around the Pilgrim's tent, a full line. I dismissed them as gently as my mood allowed, which by the way the Taghreb lieutenant paled wasn't very. A few months ago, I thought, I would probably have been frosting everything around me. The old man was awake, even this late at night, and seated at a writing desk with a mage lamp atop it. He was penning something, I saw, on a scroll. That had me curious, however reluctantly. He wasn't allowed letters even as an observer, so what was he writing?

"Pilgrim," I said, lingering at the entrance of the tent. "May I?"

"Catherine," he replied with a kindly smile. "By all means."

I strode into the tent and moved a folding chair from his bedside to face him across the writing desk. He saw my glance at the scroll and chuckled.

"Your Marshal asked me to provide my recollections of the Battle of the Camps," he said. "As much as can be revealed in my position. I believe she may be penning a history of the last few years."

Juniper's 'Commentaries', inspired by the second Terribilis'. I'd known about that, and that Aisha apparently kept memoirs of her own though she was very noncommittal about ever showing them to me. I supposed someone should be keeping records, since I sure as Hells wasn't.

"I'm surprised you're willing to contribute," I admitted.

"I have always thought it a great disservice to all, that histories are so often written by the victors," the hero said. "Much could be avoided by having a broader perspective. If an old man's recollections can be of any help I am glad to provide it."

That was the trouble with the Pilgrim, I thought. He would say those wise, beautiful things and seem to genuinely believe them. But then I'd find him on the battlefield, wielding miracles like a knife for a cause that was as empty as it got. There might be a good man, somewhere in there. I wanted to believe that. But that man answered to the Heavens before anything else. And if I could hold it against Black that he could love me but still set it aside, then I could hold it against this stranger that his pretty ideals only mattered as long as the Heavens agreed they were convenient. They weren't really principles if they were always discarded at the first frown from Above, were they?

"You seem in a pensive mood, tonight," the Pilgrim said.

I weighed the risks, for a moment, then took the plunge.

"I've just had a very exhausting conversation with the First Prince," I said. "So I'd like to be blunt, if you don't mind, because I don't have a lot of coyness left in me."

He didn't seem surprised by the revelation that I had a way to talk directly with Hasenbach, but that meant less than nothing. The Peregrine wasn't someone I'd want to play cards against.

"You attempted to make peace," he said.

I smiled thinly.

"I very nearly did," I said. "But then she pushed just a little further than I can go. And I know, Gods I *know*, that maybe she wasn't out to screw me and everyone in this kingdom. That the other choices I can make are so much worse they're indefensible."

I met his eyes.

"I'm willing to take leaps of faith with people, Pilgrim," I said honestly. "I have before, and I will again. But not with the Heavens. Because you don't negotiate with Above, you *obey*. And I don't think Cordelia Hasenbach holds the reins of what she unleashed nearly as tightly as she thought she would."

"And so now you come to me," the old man said. "With a request."

"Do something," I asked quietly. "Intervene. Offer to arbitrate. Thief tells me you could be king of Levant with a snap of your fingers, if you felt like it. You have influence to wield."

"Seljun," he said calmly. "We do not have kings, in Levant. And there is a reason I do not sit the Tattered Throne, Catherine."



Your Good Kings have done well by Callow, but the Dominion... It is a different land. It would end the honour duels, the forays into the wilds, but it would be a *call*. To the kind of war best left in the past."

"I'm not saying usurp your ruler," I said. "But Gods, you're not *nobody*. If you make a truce with me Levant will fall in line. That'll force Hasenbach to reconsider."

"It would break the Tenth Crusade," he gently said.

"So do it behind closed doors," I said, frustration mounting. "You're trying to shove redemption down my throat, and don't bother denying it. Fine. I'll fucking lean in, even if it'll probably get me killed. Just *act*. I'll kiss the hem, quote the Book. All you need to speak up and thousands don't have to die."

"It would smother in the crib," the Grey Pilgrim said sadly, "what is perhaps the last chance for peace in our time."

"I'm *offering* peace," I hissed.

"Peace on your terms would unseat the First Prince," he said. "She has spent years forging an alliance with Levant, fighting her Assembly tooth and nail every step of the way. For that same ally to twist her arm into making a pact with one of the most famous villains alive would see her removed within the month. And everything she seeks to accomplish vanish with her."

A long moment passed and the only sound in the tent was his steady heartbeat.

"You can't be serious," I said. "If you'd said the Heavens were using their veto, I would have been furious. I won't pretend otherwise. But at least I wouldn't be disappointed."

He opened his mouth but Winter flared like half a world howling for blood and he closed it.

"No, disappointed is too mild a word," I said, voice barren of any speck of warmth. "This, Pilgrim, is worthy of *contempt*."

"The treaties she has made and would deepen will end wars in the west," the old man said. "Callow restored and Praes humbled will allow Calernia to finally turn towards the true face of the Enemy. The King of the Dead. The Chain of Hunger."

"It's funny," I said, smiling mirthlessly. "How it's never the lot of you that have to make the sacrifices. Us, this entire fucking kingdom since the dawn of time? Well, that's just how things have to be. Someone needs to take care of Praes so the rest of the continent can kill itself in peace. But then someone

else has to do the bleeding, for once, and suddenly there's all these considerations."

"This is not fair," the old man said. "Nor it is just. I will not pretend otherwise, child. But I will not offer you succour at the price of Cordelia Hasenbach's dream. It is too great a good to be slain in this manner."

"So we burn again, for the greater good of everyone else," I laughed harshly.

I rose to my feet.

"You know, when I make decisions like that, they call me a monster," I said, meeting his eyes without smothering a single ember of the fury I felt. "So why do *you* get a pass?"

"I will suffer the price of this, in time," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Service is no absolution."

He looked old and tired and sad. But so did a lot of people, and they didn't sign death warrants for dozens of thousands. I was out of sympathy to offer for the likes of him. I had no pithy comment to offer, no cutting parting remark. I left the tent before I could talk myself into murdering him in cold blood. I needed to talk to Hierophant.

We were, after all, going to Keter.

---

[sivarajan](#)

Happy Independence Day!

*Jane*

I thought the entire point of this conversation with Hasenbach was that Callow wouldn't be declaring independence for another six months 😊?

*PotatoMan*

Independance from Proceran occupation and freedom for America!  
Freedom all around!

[NZPIEFACE](#)

>Proceran occupation  
Uh... what about Praes?

*Agent J*

They're already independent from them in all but name.

*Jeffery Wells*

Would have been in name too if Cordelia weren't such a dick.

*Jeremy*

God damn it, Cordelia....

But so excited!! Keter awaits!

*SpeckofStardust*

"It'd actually been Black that sent us a horrifyingly thorough transcript, but I saw no need to disabuse her of the assumption." Well interesting.

"The treaties she has made and would deepen will end wars in the west," the old man said. "Callow restored and Praes humbled will allow Calernia to finally turn towards the true face of Enemy. The King of the Dead. " . No they will be facing the king of dead now all because they want total victory.

*Jane*

Actually... I think that the First Prince refused because anything but a clear-cut victory would destroy her political position, and the Grand Alliance with it.

It doesn't look like it from our perspective, but we've seen that Procer has been digging more deeply into their reserves than first expected (such as fielding levies, and not just disposing of spare fantassin); similarly, while we've seen desperate defenses that accomplish little but delay inevitable destruction, Procer's princes have seen a string of humiliating failures with unclear gains.

We already know that the First Prince has had to make some unpopular calls, and that Amadis thought that a thorough enough victory on his part could unseat her; perhaps things have gone badly enough in the eyes of the Assembly that anything less than an obvious victory over Callow on her part might be the final straw?

I might be misreading things, of course – but the final condition that she refused seems a small enough thing that it seems like the appearance of victory is more important to her than the victory itself, something that doesn't make sense

unless there are political considerations. Unless she really was planning to betray her agreement with Cat, of course.

### *SpeckofStardust*

And Procer is about to burn because of it, as the quote above has already stated the "Principate is a failure as a nation" If the first prince needed everything to go perfectly in order to pull off this crusade then she should have not done the crusade at all. A plan that "cannot possibly go wrong" is a plan that will never work in a universe ran by narrative.

### *Rook*

The First Prince didn't need the crusade to go perfectly, she just needed a Crusade, period. Her goal is not as simple as trampling over Evil, as obtuse as she may *\*act\** during negotiations. You have to keep in mind that this is a schemer that can already dance with Malicia.

She's not an idiot, she's the total opposite – she's an absolutely horrifying monster of an intellect. The same kind of prodigy of intrigue that the Hellhound is of warfare.

Honestly I think the long game that Hasenbach is playing – whether she ends up regretting it or not in the end – isn't something that's even been revealed yet.

### *Antoninjohn*

Can dance with Malicia as long as she has the Auger, and Procer says they don't rely on Named to win their battles for them, what a joke

### *werafdsaew*

If there's anything more to the First Prince, the text does not show it.

I think it's simple inexperience; she actually doesn't have any experience fighting against a Villain, except against Malicia, and Malicia fought with intrigue and statecraft, which is the same area Cordelia's strongest in.

As a result Cordelia has a habit of underestimating martial inclined Villains. She underestimates Cat and Black by overestimating the impact of the rebellion, underestimates the Tyrant of Helike by thinking that the Good members of Free Cities would be able to keep him in line, and now she's underestimating Black again. It's a pattern. Heck the first time we see her in the prologue of

Book 2, she underestimates Black by thinking that Malicia is the real danger.

She would be much more wary of backing Cat into a corner if she knew that Bonfire is a thing. Cat's ability to gate isn't a secret, and so she should be thinking about possibilities like Cat gating an army right into the middle of Salia, but doesn't because she thinks Cat is a dumb brute. Heck, she's underestimating the Dead King, in a way, by not thinking about the possibility that he'll go on the offensive while her armies are tied down by the Crusade.

*David K. Storrs*

Bonfire, as I understand it, involves Cat leading an army through Arcadia into the heart of Procer and then sacking cities, killing people, etc.

You know what would be worse? Cat and Thief, by themselves. Two Named on a flying horse can move far faster than an army, and it seems like Thief can carry as much stuff as she wants in her pocket dimension. Fine. Load her up with every scrap of goblinfire they can lay hands on. Gate to Procer, fly over each city in turn from a height where you can't be attacked. Drop enough goblinfire to burn everything to the ground, then gate to the next one. Tell the Crusade that this is happening and that taking Callow won't do a damn bit of good as to stopping it. Don't say anything about "I'll stop if you leave", just tell them the facts so that they don't feel challenged. You'll have soldiers wanting to go home to check on loved ones and help contain the fires. Given enough unrest, you could break the army's morale and eliminate them as a functional force. (For that matter, the Woe should try some fifth-column attacks now.)

People should REALLY stop backing Cat into a corner.

*Death Knight*

Congratulations that results in Cat being promoted to THE Villain as opposed to a Villain all but ensuring her head on a pike in three or four years. Maybe even sooner.

*Matthew*

This won't work more than twice. The story will make sure that a named hero with a perfect counter will arrive.

*therealgridlock*

You were on the cusp of greatness, with your two chicks vs the principate story, but what they should do instead is fly to every city in the principate, steal every sword and spear and shield and bow and arrow, half their gold, kill their leader, make a deal with the second in command, and then move to the next city.

Imagine it, a hundred cities, all without weapons, robbed of half their royal wealth, their charismatic leader dead and the second in command tied by oath to catherine.

It would take weeks to do... But by the end she could fly to the capital, and tell cordelia that their kingdom is now owned by \*cat\* instead, with every bit of land firmly sworn to her, and no weapons to fight a war with, so either swear undying allegiance with cat now, or else, instead of killing her and making a deal with her subordinate, worse she leaves her alive to witness being attacked from \*every direction\* as every other country in calernia want a piece of the now completely defenceless principate.

Oh, but if you swear undying allegiance now... I'll give you half your money and weapons back, and join you in battle against any enemy you pick.

I mean think of the masterstroke that would be.

*Rook*

Isn't it the exact same type of arrogance to assume there's nothing more to Hasenbach than a petty ignorant schemer, as it is for the Crusade to assume Catherine is a simple bloody brute? She's no Amadis, this is a character who has weight not only through heavy character exposition and foreshadowing within the story, but also by being the mastermind of the current major conflict the story arc is centered around. Note that the entire strategy of the last battle has been for the express purpose of negotiating with said big bad.

I mean, time will tell, but I'd never, ever, underestimate any character where the story almost explicitly states that they should be taken seriously via main character reactions to them. This is the same opponent that made Cat repeatedly take Akua off the leash for just to chat together, and the one that a major player like the Pilgrim is taking seriously enough that he'd willingly walk into the storm he sees coming than risk hindering her Master Plan.

*werafdsaew*

The difference is that we, as the reader, gets to see everything that happens. The author is not a shit author who does things without proper foreshadowing, so if Cordelia has a grand plan that we don't know about yet, it would already have been properly foreshadowed. The fact the it hasn't yet means that it's either a minor thing, or nothing is there at all.

*Rook*

But it has been foreshadowed. The Pilgrim straight up admitted to it in this very chapter on why he's still refusing to intervene even though he doesn't disagree with Cat about how unfair it is for Callow. He doesn't attribute the possible Greater Good to his own plan or some heavenly works, but specifically to Hasenbach's plans.

She's had several perspective side-chapters alluding to said long term plans, and was frequently mentioned even in Malanza and Malicia's POV excerpts as to the extent of her ability in that sense. If her own dedicated chapters, having mention of her schemes from every character that would plausibly have direct experience with her, and having the biggest baddest Heroic antagonist to date admit to it in no uncertain terms isn't foreshadowing, I'm not sure what is.

She's irritating without a doubt, and likability is highly debatable, but in Catherine's own words there is a point where doubt becomes denial.

*MetruX*

Actually people, just look closer. It's no secret scheme, she's been plainly stating this since her first apparition: Hasenbach wants to unite the Good nations. It's that, plain and simple. No need to complicate the objective, the ways to get there are hard enough. And also, she may very well be the reason The Dead King is coming out, because the forces balance each other, and since Good are uniting... Evil has to aswell.

*Azure*

Pilgrim thinks that somehow her plans are going to lead to a shit at the Dead King, and that's why he's going along with it. Unfortunately for him, it's going to be a case of biting of more than he can chew with the

Woe's hand being forced. And I'm sure someone will be returning triumphantly at some stage to join the party.

*Michael*

AFAIK Pilgrim doesn't know anything about that plan. And he might not find out, because Augur sees the future through birds. There are no birds in the Kingdom of the Dead, so she might just miss it!

*lennymaster*

God damn werafdsaew!

You just managed to put into words every thought about Cordelia that has been coagulating at the back of my head without my being able to put my finger on it.

Black has only on active aspect, the others are Conquer and Lead. Him stranded in Procer is like Rorschach (Watchmen) being locked up in prison.

"I'm not locked up with you, you are locked up wit ME!"

*Miles*

Or her big game is to consolidate power during the crusade and is just stalling because some pieces still need to be moved before going after praes, which will require her full attention

*Yotz*

"Pilgrim responded: "Child, you don't know Principate's internal situation. To avert a revolution, we need a small victorious war.""

*Cicero*

Yup. Basically it's the same problem Cat has. Cat can't make any more concessions. Her people won't tolerate the appearance of a Procer victory over Callow.

But Procer also can't make a concession either, as their princes will not tolerate anything other than the appearance of victory over Callow.

Often nowadays the thought is that diplomacy should always succeed, and that a failure always involves at least one of the parties being unreasonable. In truth however, often war is inevitable because the various interests of the nations involved make war preferable to both nations – even if that risks defeat in war.

*MetruX*



Well, this has been a common theme in the Guide, no? We know for a fact that Dread Emperor's couldn't stop Praes from going to war with Callow, because this would result in their deaths. So it stands to reason most wars, in this scenario, HAVE to be waged, because Heavens is bullshit and can't be argued with.

*Michael*

I am thinking Cat's story will shift again. Pilgrim put her on the redemption wagon, but right now she's acting in a way that means the redemption will be refused. She already had a shot at redemption (she was technically on that path when she spared The Lone Swordsman), but she spat in that one's face. Refusing redemption twice makes you irredeemable and what she is about to do (ally with the Dead King) will make her irredeemable in fact and not just in story. I love it!

*Highwayman*

Yes! We might finally be reading about how the whole thing about Keter's Due came about!

*Death Knight*

Keter's due is merely the most pronounced example of the second law of thermodynamics, informally stated as "You can't break even." We already know how it came to be, namely that the Dead King used a ritual to claim a hell and the bleed turned an entire kingdom into an undead mess.

This is why Akua's array in Liesse was so worthwhile. In our world its rare that we can create any kind of engine that is greater than 60% efficiency. That's 40% of the energy wasted. What Akua did was design an "engine" that approached 85% efficiency at a conservative estimate. To put it another way, she fell 15% short of being able to create a perpetual motion machine.

... Yes, Diabolist teaming up with Hierophant and Warlock with the Dead King at the lead would be a greater threat than Triumphant ever was.

*haihappen*

- 1) Akua, Demons
- 2) The Dead King, UnDead
- 3) Warlock, Sorcery
- 4) Hierophant, "Vision"/"Architect"

There is something missing. A source of wonder, of light, of Miracle

## 5) The Pilgrim, Miracles

Apart from being impossible, these two could probably create their own Creation.

### *Death Knight*

What I actually meant was that Dead King brings forth a ritual. Warlock is in charge of finding a suitable Hell to power the thing, Akua modifies the working to minimize (or directs) the bleed and Hierophant is there to look for any non-obvious weakpoints in the working.

Those four working on a ritual is a continent shattering affair.

### *Sanityfaerie*

Heirophant brings the Miracles. It's what he does.

### NZPIEFACE

Wasn't Keter's Due something along the lines of 90% efficiency? And even that destroyed a whole country permanently.

### *Death Knight*

Could be (no hard numbers were given to my knowledge so I just guessed) which is why a sorceror of Diabolist's caliber is such an asset whatever's Thief's misgivings. Too bad Diabolist overstepped. She was way more useful when nobody but Cat could see or hear her.

### NZPIEFACE

Personally, I love how Akua does shit like this. It's the side-effects of her Name, amplifying the most dramatic parts of her character.

And the thing that makes her tick? Theatrics. She sticks to ideals so closely I think she's a romantic.

### *Metrux*

Actually wasn't the BIG deal that he used the leaking instead of channeling it? I mean, he was ever a necromancer, when he came back he found the dead better than the living... So his ritual made everyone die. He was considered a genius then and there, but... Didn't he have hundreds if not thousands of years to grow, both in power, experience and knowledge? If so, I actually don't think Akua's skills can come to help with his workings. If she even has anything to teach him, it's probably so far and

between that it'd be easier to have her as an assistant than actually working together.

*Decius*

He's had thousands of years, but the dead do not grow.

*Highwayman*

I know the law, man. What I want to know is the story behind the ritual, but thank you for the reminder, anyway.

*RoflCat*

...Has Catherine EVER showed Liese Accords to anyone on Good?

Yeah it'd reveal her hand, but Pilgrim is supporting Cordelia in this because he seem to have seen her final goal and agreed with it.

I don't think he's seen Cath's.

Then again, they might just use other excuses...

*Death Knight*

This chapter proved they'd still move the goalposts. The Dead King is right, these Crusader motherfuckers need to be humbled a bit. After all, one never treats from a position of weakness.

*Snowfire1224*

But if you think of it story wise, any plan that is revealed too soon is bound to fail

*Death Knight*

Unless you're Black and is counting on the enemy to know your plan so they may change their plans to suit your REAL Plan.

*Snowfire1224*

Unrelated but what you just said reminded me of this quote from Hellsing Ultimate Abridged:

"Ahh~, Herr Doctor~, but that is the plan. Now zat zey know our plan, zey will plan around our plan, and so ve shall in turn plan around ze plan that zey are planning around our plan!"

*Death Knight*

Haha well spotted! That was a damn good series

*Rook*

I don't think it'd do any good. As much of this is on the heads of the previous dread emperors and empresses as it is on the crusade. The same way that Procer'd history makes their word worth pig shit in callow, Praes history makes any serious villain's words equally worthless. Tens of madmen throughout history have had a similar effect to tens of conquests disguised as a holy war.

There is worth in the accords and in what she has to say, don't get me wrong. But no heroic ruler in their right mind would believe Black's conquest was a war for \*food\* or that Catherine is genuinely attempting decent ends through awful means, the same way no Callowan would ever believe Proceran influence on Callow would be anything more than a leech and bleeding of their people.

The bridges have been too thoroughly burned, dissected, flayed, and disintegrated with holy light for this short timespan of interaction to end in anything else. A cooperation isn't impossible, but it'd take years and years to build even the smallest amount of trust. Catherine doesn't have the time or the patience, currently, and Cordelia doesn't have the motivation to.

*Death Knight*

True on all accounts. All that's left now is for the "victor" to stand atop a mountain of corpses.

*Oshi*

Except that is bukllshit. They have two Miracle wielding truth speaking Heros (Augur and Pilgrim) who KNOW that is why they did it. Not know in a exsentential sense but literally know thanks to heavens gits. It's bullshit to say you can't know evils motivations when you fucking do.

*Rook*

Didn't we just have an entire chapter about Black completely fooling heavenly providence?

*Decius*

How do you convince someone with divine lie detectors that you don't have a secret technique to fool their lie detectors?

*RanVor*

She actually revealed the general idea to the Pilgrim. He said no one's ever going to agree on this.

*Jane*

And this is why brinksmanship is never a good idea – both sides think they have a secret edge that will let them push further than they otherwise could, and when both of those secrets are revealed, the entire continent will bleed. If they'd both just been reasonable, so much suffering (and, you know, most of the plot of this book) could have been avoided. Of course... If either of them were willing to leave coin on the table, neither would be a ruler now. Hasenbach would have sat out the battle that ruined her rivals, and Cat would never have met Black at all.

Incidentally... It probably doesn't speak well for her contingency's moral compass that she has to worry more about being stabbed in her sleep if she makes a bad peace with *Procer* than if she treats with the Dead King.

(Joking, mostly; it was already established that Thief wasn't exactly happy about the Dead King plan, and that her loyalty is to Callow first and foremost.)

*Someguy*

Cat was never going to get what she wants by treating with Hasenbach as a Sovereign equal. The entire point of the Invasion (lets not kid ourselves calling it a crusade here) is so that Hasenbach gets to ride political rodeo to get what she wants, the welfare of Callow never entered the picture in the first place.

Cat can just gate to the Vale (it's a valley bowl now right?) have her sappers dig a goblin-sized hole and flood it, setting loose those fire-breathing lizards Hirophant wanted for his original moat later. The Stairway can be used as Callow's garbage dump to make the pollution Procer's problem. Time to revise Bonfire to create ecological and economic disasters for Procer!

*Death Knight*

I agree. We need to go scorched earth on these bitches. But the problem we have is the narrative. Now lets ask ourselves what kind of narrative could we use and/or exploit that would favour the deaths of these hypocritical invaders?

*Someguy*

Twisted Mirror. The same thing that happened to the God Emperor in WH40K. Aim to corrupt the Alliance Member's heirs by encouraging their vices with sycophants and let human nature do the rest.

*Death Knight*

Splendid idea. Corruption is already there, all it needs is a push here and there. However Malicia and Black had already tried that tactic for the last 20 or so years through the Pravus bank and that plan came back to bite them in the ass in this current Crusade. So we need to go a little further.

*Metrux*

Well, it's more that they tried keeping the war ongoing... They never trully tried full on corruption. If so, the plan can still be done, you only need to disconsider short term advantages, because on the short term it will be pure costs without gains. Though, if successfull, Procer will needs several generations to plunge the leak, so to speak, if they can at all. Though, with Heavens and Narrative it's probable a Hero will raise to occasion...

*David K. Storrs*

"If they'd both just been reasonable,"

Both? In what way was Cat not reasonable?

*Jane*

Choosing to unleash Gods-know-what on the continent by working with the Dead King, instead of surrendering Callow to an unpleasant, but within the boundaries of normal human vice, foreign occupier.

I mean, I'd have made the same call, but let's be honest – she doesn't know what the Dead King wants, but knows it's probably Capital E Evil, and that the Dead King operates on a ridiculous scale compared to everyone else. It's a horrifyingly dangerous gamble that, in the absolute worst case scenario, ends in the (un)death of the entire continent. Is such a risk *really* better than surrendering to your ancestral enemy?

Few people would have agreed to her terms, especially after Hasenbach insulted her to her face so many times. But looking at the implications of refusal... Yes, folding here still would have been more reasonable than opening Pandora's box.

[\*ahd\*](#)

It's a game theory thing.

If everybody knows that you will fold rather than choose Alternative X, then they will set things up so that

Alternative X is the only other choice to letting them eat you alive. Nom, nom, nom.

So, you should act in such a way as to ensure that people know Alternative X is on the table if things get extreme enough; and so your peers do the math, everybody backs away from pushing each other towards their own personal Alternative X, and nobody takes goblinfire baths via portal.

(It is possible to have people who aren't exploitative predators as neighbours. This is in fact the normal case; glance up from the web browser and look around you. But... Callow doesn't seem to have any of those. Black's been cloning the Idiot Ball again and sending Assassin to plant copies on the Good rulers of all the human nations. Tyrant giggled and added his to his collection.)

So, "of course Cat must fold" is not a reasonable position to expect a responsible ruler of Callow to hold. Especially not when "here, we'll join the Grand Alliance, after the victory, I will stabilise Callow and then retire to do something less painful as far out of your way as I can get" is the alternative position literally on the table, complete with hideously thorough membership application, on a scroll yet.

*Jane*

The thing is, "Ally with the Dead King" shouldn't be an alternative at all for a reasonable ruler – the dangers are such that it ought be well outside the bounds of consideration. Callow's neighbors shouldn't consider it a risk, because it *shouldn't* be a risk.

As an example, another deterrent that Cat could have prepared was to instruct Heirophant to design an elegant command implant spell that, when she gave the order, would cause every resident of Callow to salt their fields and then commit suicide. It would make any invasion of the country functionally worthless. But would that be a reasonable thing for Cat to have planned, or to seriously consider implementing if she was badly losing a war? I would think the obvious answer would be no – nobody loses more from it than her, and it fundamentally betrays her most deeply held motivation, that of protecting Callow.

Similarly, unleashing the Dead King risks Callow losing everything. Even if Callow itself is spared (not a given), they risk losing all of their trading partners, cultural imports, and pretty much all the other benefits of having living neighbors. Is that *really* better than becoming a Callowan-flavoured piece of Procer?

Countries should only consider the possibilities on the table, true. But what's on the table shouldn't do more harm to yourself than what your partners are proposing – suicide (or grievous self-harm) gambits are unreasonable unless you care more about pride than the good of your country.

(Of course, short-term sacrifices can be reasonable in pursuit of a long-term advantage, but something on this scale risks ending the game long before the long-term comes into play.)

*Vortex*

Uhhh, the Dead King wants to fuck Procer and does not share a border with Callow. Literally the alternatives are between allowing Procer to murder its way back into Callow and use her countrymen as a cannon fodder to fight Praes (which was the status quo for hundreds of years) or ally with the Dead King who is nasty business but will fuck my enemies harder than he will fuck me. I would pick nasty business pretty much every time in this situation.

*Jane*

The Dead King wants to destroy Procer *now*. Will that really be the end of his ambitions, though? Or is it just the first step of an awakened Dead King? Cat has no way of knowing before she speaks to him, but Named don't tend to dream small.

Not to mention the presumption that the Dead King will be killing the *entire* population of the regions he conquers. Is it really worth the possible *genocide* of Procer (and other nations involved in the Crusade) to ensure the *political* independence of Callow? Honestly, it sounds a monstrous trade to my ears. If Procer wins, a new set of nobles rule over the peasants, and a few laws change for the worse. If the *Dead King* wins, millions die. How is that a reasonable response?

Now, we know it won't come to that unless the book takes a dramatically darker turn. But Cat believes she is taking a gamble with massive stakes, where a mistake will make her the second greatest monster in the history of the continent. And honestly, it's also a pretty reckless one on her part; why does she think the Dead King can be put back in his bottle so readily? His earlier raids were presumably small-scale activity from his perspective, and he was hampered by his inability to be personally involved. If he's seriously unleashed, how can she be so certain the Grand Alliance will



prevail? We know that she'll win (unless, again, the book decides it wants a dramatically darker tone), but *she* appears to be making this call on some pretty thin information.

Now, in her shoes, I'd probably make the same decision. But let's be clear; it is very much the *wrong* call, made for the wrong reasons. Risking millions of deaths over the independence of Callow just isn't worth it. Heck, this alliance is worse than what most of the Dread Empresses have done.

(Incidentally, it's entirely possible that the Dead King *isn't* actually some genocidal maniac, and his designs on the continent are no more horrid than your average warmongering dictator. But again; *Cat* has no way of knowing that, and thinks she's making a deal with an appalling dangerous genocidal maniac.)

### *Metrux*

This is the call to talk to him. She isn't such a newbie anymore that she will unleash him simply by speaking without meaning it. She can always just do the same she did right now: Talk and leave. The problem being that the talk itself can be dangerous, but hey, that is why she tried every other avenue before speaking with him.

### *Jane*

The problem is, if she refuses him at this point, she has no options; she can't go back to the First Prince and accept the previous terms anymore. They can only speak once a month, and in a month's time, the situation will have changed enough that Cat can't even get *these* terms again.

And even if she could... Well, the Dead King has about as much leverage over her as the First Prince. Unless he presents something outrageous like "Release me from my prison and I shall make a bonfire of this world!" and refuses to tone it down at all, what's Cat going to do? Say "No, please don't save Callow in our hour of need"? Especially since she's planning on double-crossing him anyway, and thinks they can pull it off. True, the Dead King needs her in order to get out, but... Him *not* getting out is a death sentence for Callow.

And besides... Why does the Dead King have to be honest with her *at all*? He's an ancient abomination who is vastly more knowledgeable and powerful than

her – for all Cat knows, unless the Dead King needs her to consciously maintain a stable connection outside of Keter or something, the moment he's out, he can say, "Thanks, sucker!" and rampage across the continent if he's so inclined. It's not like he has any real need that we know of to hold to any bargains they make.

In refusing Hasenbach's terms, she's already committed herself to this path – she just doesn't know what the costs of it will be yet. It's true that they're unlikely to be too odious, but she has no way of knowing that – and *does* know that the Dead King has an appallingly horrible reputation.

*Decius*

Cat cares about Callowans. Cat does not care about Procerans.

If anyone opposing her cared about the little people at all, they would be on her side.

*Jane*

Oh, certainly, that's why I'm not calling her an idiot or anything 😊. I might feel that her choice her can be described as appalling, but it's a choice that is well supported within her framework of beliefs – Callow above all.

*MetruX*

Really, I get astounded by how much fear the Dead King has inspired in some readers. Yes, he is a monstrous abomination who could never be stopped before... Except on the only time he left to conquer. And we already saw he can send undeads made especially to be ignored by Masego's new toy, so he has alot of information on outside and alot of power not shown, so... Why hasn't he done anything with that yet? It may be that he doesn't want to. Sure, he is a Villain, but anyone who lived for so long, and fought so much Crusades, can't be a simple powerhouse, he needs to have some trope conscience, the same way the big heroes need to. As such, just think for a moment, what are the chances he NEEDS an ally (maybe Cat especificaly) to be able to leave his lands? What are the chances he WANTS to conquer the whole continent? What are the chances that he WOULD try something like that, fully knowing that this time he would be the one defeated in the end, even if he succeeds?

No, after considering it all, the risk is really minimal. The chance that he betrays her is already lower than Hasenbach's, and we don't even know what he truly wants or what are his limitations, as such, dealing with him is a lot more reasonable than you people seem to assume.

*Jane*

My issue isn't so much with what *will* happen so much as what Cat reasonably believes *might* happen, and her willingness to go along with it anyway. She fully believes the Dead King to be a complete monster, with enough power to be a continent-wide threat, and is willing to unleash him anyways... All over who gets to rule Callow. She believes she's risking, essentially, *multiple* Liesses over a matter of crowns and flags.

The Cat at the start of the story likely would have considered this a line too far to cross.

*Forrest*

Except she already tried multiple times to go with every other alternative. Also, the issue is not just a matter of crowns and flags- it would be dooming Callow to the continuation of its cannon fodder state forever more. Under the people who had also conquered it once, and refused to help free them in the twenty years of prior occupation they just got out of. (twenty-two? three? Counting the time she was working as the Squire?)

That's not even bringing up how poorly Procer treats its people, or the fact that Callow citizens would likely be treated far worse by Procer than their own.

Cat is in this to bring some measure of peace to Callow. She's trying to make the best of a bad situation, and she's used to having to choose the best of many awful and terrible choices. She feels like there is at least a chance with the Dead King she is not getting with the others. My guess is? She's going to come out of this with some measure of drive to make Creation give her better options.

*Jane*

She's tried every alternative but the one she knows will end the conflict – surrender. She doesn't *have* to continue this fight, even if it means giving up something precious. And you know what? That would *also* end Callow's status as a cannon fodder state.

The Grand Alliance can handle Praes alone if Callow stands down, and there will be no more need for Callow to stand on a constant war footing.

It's true that Callow's people will likely be treated more poorly than they are now, but if she misplays this gambit, at *best* multiple cities will have their people slaughtered and made undead. What she's unleashing goes far beyond a normal war – it's a series of atrocities of a sort that make Akua's crimes pale by comparison. Does it really make anything better that they'll be happening to Procer's civilians instead of her own?

It's not that I don't understand *why* she's chosen the course she has, or that I wish she'd chosen differently (since that would, you know, end the story, and not in a satisfying way) – but it is not a reasonable escalation of the conflict in my eyes. It is the desperate act of a Villain who has been told she is about to lose if she doesn't pull the lever on her doomsday device. The only mitigating factor is that she's telling herself that it *might* not result in massive collateral damage because they can stop him before he does any real harm.

This came out rather harsher than I feel, but I do think this is an important moment for her character that we shouldn't downplay – this wasn't a freshly minted Villain starting a rebellion so that she could win accolades in putting it down. This was on par with unleashing demons across the entire continent to destroy her foes. If this goes even slightly wrong, it will be a black mark on her record worse than most of the Dread Empresses that precede her.

And I won't *judge* her for that, to be clear – but I think it's important that we recognize how grave a crime she's willing to commit in order to get her way. This was clear Villain work on her part, not the Hero On The Wrong Side sort of thing we usually see from her.

*Agent J*

Surrendering would end the conflict, yes. It would not, however, end Callowan suffering. Firstly, Callow would erupt in civil war. All sides bleed and all sides are Callowan.

Secondly, and much more importantly, what Hasenbach wants? It's been done. Callow has been

annexed by Procer. Praes was littered with Crusader states. Hell, the Dread Empire was *founded* on the rebellion against that.

And would you look at that. Here we are again. Fighting the same old war for the umpteenth time. It's not *this* conflict alone Cat is trying to end, but the entire story. The one etched into reality itself and has designated her people as sacrificial lambs.

Hasenbach is sowing no new seeds and will reap no new crops. A Grand Alliance of Good is all well and good, but her only answer to Evil is slaughter, subjugate, and exterminate. Ignoring the fact that there are real people on both sides just trying to make it through their daily grind and in no way deserve such a fate, the more pressing matter is that, in this narrative driven world such a thing is doomed to failure. Even if it succeeds, it will be a transient victory. A new Maleficent will rise, a new Priestess of Night, a new Callowan Villain just trying to save her people from all who seek to prey on them.

Hasenbach is playing within the Gods paradigm and the Gods thrive on conflict, serve them and you perpetuate their engineered conflict.

Cat is the only player at the table trying to step outside their paradigm and put an end to all the senseless Good v. Evil bullshit. Don't slaughter the hungry Praesi, fucking feed them and eliminate their need to piss in everyone's Cheerios each morning. Step one in eliminating conflicts on the world stage is to address people's concerns. Cordelia has no intention of doing that.

In short, surrendering to the First Prince will only perpetuate the same status quo that has already condemned Callow to endless warfare.

*Abrakadabra*

Yes alternative x should never be thrown away completely. At a question by some reporter aimed At Putin (which went like in a hypothetical scenario where nuclear missiles heading for Russia would he not use his own in the hopes of mankind survival) he said that there is no need for a future where Russia does not exist. Which is really terrible and justifiable at the same time.

*MetruX*

Well, that is exactly the thing, she DOESN'T know what the Dead King wants, but she does know that Hasenbach would make Callow bleed with civil wars, and that it would probably end with her dead anyway. Really, the slight chance that the Dead King who never invaded anyone except together with THE great invader, might turn the continent to undeath... Honestly, I don't think this Villain even wants that. So I'd say her choice is much more reasonable, especially since, if things are too bad with the King, she can just table it until Black shows his (we all know it'll be) winning hand, and she can negotiate with the First Prince on better terms. Sure, those better terms will make Hasenbach and her dreams disappear, which will make lots of important people try to murder Cat, but it's a much better outcome than this negotiation right now being accepted.

*papermache7*

It's so easy to hate Good from Cath perspective, they're so certain of their victory they're completely blind to how they're bringing about their own doom.

*Death Knight*

And if you think about it, isn't that the exact same insanity that usually plagues Dread Emperors?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

She's not certain of her victory. She either has this victory, or her country is fucked. That's why she's forcing it so hard.

Too bad for her, Procer has always been fucked.

*Eduardo*

I Wonder what the dead king wants

*Death Knight*

The Heroes broken and the Heavens humbled.

*PotatoMan*

Guess we'll find out 😊

*Speare*

What exactly is Cordelia trying to/has already unleashed? Has this been covered?

*Oshi*

She has built a concerted and likely permanent end to all the wars between the kingdoms of good. Which means that all the Kingdoms of the west are aligned and sticking with each other. Politically it eliminates the biggest internal threats letting all of them focus on external ones.

Short answer she got every sword pointed somewhere else.

*Jane*

The Grand Alliance, when it's not being used as a Crusade vehicle, has terms which forbid military conflict amongst signatories, and outlines a process for disputes to be settled diplomatically under the oversight of a neutral third party. It's essentially a simplified fantasy UN, and would likely end most war on the continent – along with ending the remaining Evil powers, since they're as happy to use it as a sword as they are a shield.

Of course, that will only happen if their first venture isn't a dismal failure, so... Either Callow gets subjugated, or the continent falls back into violent bickering. Heck of a choice, isn't it?

I kind of got the impression that she also has another card up her sleeve, but looking back over things, I think I was just reading too much into things.

*Yavandir*

I think that Hasenbach unleashed Dead King he is a tool for the guys below to beat good guys when they are going to make something like permanent alliance against evil thingy.

*Aeon*

So glorious. Pilgrim's own actions are forcing Cat to ally with the Dead King that he claims to be the true enemy. I can't wait to see him realize that this was the tipping point. Also, really can't wait to see Cat put Cordelia to the sword.

*Death Knight*

Yes, her head is in dire need of removal.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Hmm what does the Augur say about the odds of Cat flipping the table to DK?

*oldschoolvillain*

It seems like she can only foresee plans when they are an immediate threat to Procer, and especially only when it's

actually a PLAN, rather than just an opportunity being taken. I don't think she can see Cat's intention to ally with the Dead King – if Cordelia had gone into that negotiation knowing that Cat would ally with The Original Abomination if she didn't reach peace . . . I suspect peace would have been reached.

*Death Knight*

Not necessarily. If Cat was forthcoming with her intention of allying with the Dead King Cordelia would take that as all the confirmation she needs to decry Cat as a true Villain, to be stomped out like Praes. Confirmation Bias all but ensures that's how Cordelia would perceive it since she and Pilgrim already view her as a Villain.

"When faced with the prospect of changing their minds or proving that's unnecessary almost everyone gets started on the proof."

*Morgenstern*

Or it gave reason to not want a peace with this person EVER. Because someone who is willing to ally with THE DEAD KING...

*Morgenstern*

Oops. ^^ That post did not get shown before. Sorry for the kind-of-double post, then 😊

*Dantalian*

Hierarch probably already knows about it.

*Yotz*

The thing with precogs – they are insultingly easy to kill, really. Well, unless they have read the script, in which case we are in Marysuetopia, with all consequences attached. The trick is to overwhelm them with so much possible dangers that they can not be able to react adequately. Don't send a singular assassin – send a team of thugs, several snipers, a keg of munition-happy maniacs, several magic users of random specializations, a rabid dog, and a herd of sabertooth gerbils trained to chomp people's toes. If precog won't go out with aneurysm, add blanket release of malaria-carrying mosquitoes to the plan.

Same reasoning can be applied to, say, clouding precogs ability to see long-time threats with constant buzz of more immediate ones. Like, say, invading the heartlands of precogs country with several rogue legions to create a



massive pattern of imminent threats that will smother and drown any possible relatively reliable precognition results under the avalanche of impossibilities...

*Death Knight*

Hahahahaha oh that's brilliant. And I believe that's exactly what Black will do: sensory overload.

*Someguy*

He would realise it and rationalize it away as the Will of the Heavens with a Villain ruling Callow, the normal set up for Evil siding with Evil. After all, the price for peace in the West is the sacrifice of Callowan blood in the East , it's not his home that's burning.

*Rook*

I don't see why the Pilgrim is getting flak for it honestly. He's making the exact same choice that Cat is, from the other side of the fence, and being received in the same way.

Cat is a natural born hero, going against her personal wishes and resorting villainous means for the practicality of saving Callow. Even so, it makes little difference because her status as a Villain affords her little trust in the eyes of the Cordelia and the Crusade.

The Pilgrim is both reasonable and even personally agrees with Cat on many points, but is going against his personal feelings and sense of right and wrong for the practicality of the Greater Good. Even so, it makes little difference because his status as a servant of the Gods Above affords him little trust in the eyes of Catherine and the Woe.

I think, at the end of it all, the conclusion between the Pilgrim and Cat is going to be a quiet and bitter one, rather than any sort of vicious satisfaction. There's too much similarity between them.

*Yotz*

There are no more bitter rivals than people striving for the *nearly* same goal. Especially, if said goal is idealistic in nature. Just lightly off. Like the word in ancient manuscript that can mean either "god" – if dot above certain letter is in the middle, "man" – if said dot is to the left of the letter, or "cinnamon roll" – if there is no dot, and all the kerfuffle was because of a piece of fly excrement that was mistaken for a diacritical mark by some ancient scribe.

*Snowfire1224*

Is that a discworld reference? I remember something about that with the Klatchians.

*Jane*

If I'm not mistaken, it's from Thud!, but... I could be wrong. It's been a very long time since I last read a Discworld book.

*Oshi*

Except from Cats view it is ALWAYS Callow that sacrifices. She is right that the continent in general has no intention of ever granting Callow peace. It exists in their minds a the whipping boy so they never have to deal with sacrificing their own. It's just another in a long line of someone has to pay its best that if its Callow and not us. He literally admitted that the Crusade and Callows fall is the fault of the West but still they do it again sacrificing Callow for their own peace. He has the gall to quote the greater good when it has systemically failed to produce anything but suffering in hundreds of years. It is always a possible peace in the west means more Callowan deaths. This is Cat's perspective in any case. It is not wrong.

*Jago*

I have no problem with Cordelia position. She is playing a political game and thinks that Cat position will be even worse in a month. So, for her, it is not a problem stalling and pushing for more.

My problem is with Pilgrim position. He is not trying to get peace, he is trying to get an absolute victory. But almost absolute victory is something that will empower Evil, while an absolute victory means the end of the world, as the question/bet that was at the basis of the world creation would be resolved and there would not be any reason for the gods to keep it running.

Essentially he is going "all in" with a bet that will almost certainly go against him. And he is a trope savvy character, so he should know it. He is suffering from Good God blindness.

*Death Knight*

Well, Tariq and Cordelia asked for it.

And so the entire Calernia will know fear once more...

*IDKWhoitis*

Someone correct me if Im wrong, but is there a distinct possibility that Cat will be able to pick up Black on her way to

Keter? Because bringing Black along for the ride, while a good idea for practical reasons, will be absolutely hilarious.

Or alternatively she can pick up on the way back, but that way lies less Dead King / Black conversations.

*Jane*

I don't think Cat is likely to go anywhere *near* Black without knowing what he's up to. After all, for all she knows, doing so could blow up his plans and get him killed.

*Amoonymous*

Definitely agree with this. She's certain that Black knows what he's doing and is going to fuck Procer's shit up, so she'll stay away to minimize introducing unforeseen variables.

And honestly I agree with her. Black is almost certainly going to take Cordelia's complacency and find some way to absolutely fuck Procer over.

Unfortunately, she doesn't have a ton of time and needs something to help her defend before whatever Black is up to pays out.

*Fella*

I think I actually have an idea about what Black's doing. He makes his plans based off of a narrative set of mind.  
Scene: The hero's friend and confidante is brutally killed, as a result of an evil empire meddling where they have no business. What's the hero's response?  
Generally, the hero goes into a full revenge arc, against all the odds in the world, to slaughter the rulers of the evil kingdom and topple its influence.

Black's flipping that to the Evil side. Captain was murdered because of direct involvement by Procer. Upon them then attempting to invade with overwhelming numbers, Black is fighting against all odds to topple the bastards who killed his friend.

How do these arcs end?

Generally, the protagonist wins with serious consequences in terms of morals/remaining friends, or wins but dies in the last brutal struggle. To Black, this is an insanely good set up to, in his mind, clear out the Old Guard for Catherine, while also butchering Procer as a nation. And the best part in his mind is probably that he'll get to kill the intended antagonist for Cat—The White Knight—right before he completes his finishing stroke on Cordelia, bleeding out all

the while. He's planning to go out in a burst of fire large enough to burn the entire Heroic army and nation to ash, because the second best part about these schemes is that the worse the odds get, the better the chance he'll actually have of completing his objective. Because a thousand to one odds is statistical improbability, but a million to one odds just might work. And there so happens to be an entire Crusade of heroes behind him.

*Decius*

All of the heroes are going to be focused on Black. How will they respond to the entrance of the Dead King?

*superkeaton*

Oh Cat, it must be frustrating to so desperately try to avoid making the Wrong Choice while everyone else does the same and seems so happy to do so.

Cordelia disappoints me, I was hoping for more from her. Pilgrim being a dead end was a given, the man's too old and tired and he's placed too much of his faith in Cordelia and her works to gainsay them.

Time to treat with a Monster, Black Queen.

*Death Knight*

If Malicia had the narrative weight to bestow the Name of Black Queen onto Cat then the Dead King most certainly has the same should he offer marriage to Cat.

*Someguy*

Nah. Black Queen isn't a Name, it's just what she's called like how Warlock is called "Sovereign of Red Skies". Her Name was stripped when Black used his Aspect on Lisse.

Her current Winter powers is a Fey Mantle based on the former Winter King's fudgery titling her Duchess of Moonless Nights (Fey Title, King still has her mortal heart). Being technically the last Noble of the Winter Court it got her title upgraded to Winter Queen.

I suspect her not being Fey or Fey-blooded is what currently keeps her Mantle a mantle, if it turns from mantle to Crown of Winter (from tapping on too much Winter power) Callow will be fucked into a frozen wasteland since Cat is Queen of both Callow & Winter and Winter Kings/Queens are Fisher Kings.

*Yotz*

But that possibility can also lead to citizens of Callow becoming new Winter fae, that would be able to live more or less comfortably in that frozen wasteland.

### *Death Knight*

True Black Queen isn't a Name at this juncture but was very near to becoming one had Black not destroyed the Gestalt. Cat says this herself in her monologue prior to riding with the wildhunt and when she was looking at the ruins of Liesse in the aftermath of Akua's folly.

That why I said that should she allign with the Dead King and he weds her, Cat being of royal fey "blood", she would transition into that Name. But story wise I don't think that's going to happen. Allying with the Dead King is one thing, marrying him is another though people in that era did have the tendency to cement alliances with marriage so who knows?

### *Metrux*

Well, I think it's more that she CAN'T have a name like that anymore. She was, at that time, transitioning from a warlike Name to a Ruler one, both in fact and in the Narrative: she was dealing with the state and learning alot, making herself her own political power. Now, though? She has gone past the Ruler, and she herself said she felt like this Name can never be hers again. So, yes, it will go to another direction, but I think even she herself couldn't force a Black Queen Name.

### *Ironbread*

Well, can't say she didn't try and warn them

### [DroughtBringer](#)

The first invitation chapter was chapter 2 of Book I, and in it Cat was set towards the area where she got her Name, or the beginnings of it.

The Invitation this time (from chapter 24) could be much the same, only for her new Name...

Go vote! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

### *Dainpdf*

Do tempting to lay all the blame for this at the Good side's feet, but the Pilgrim makes a good point. Hasenbach \*can't\* lay down arms, not without losing everything she has achieved and

more.

The game is rigged, after all.

*werafdsaew*

What Pilgrim said is that he cannot move against Cordelia without collapsing the entire alliance. Cordelia's political opponents lost their portion of the Crusade, so if she wants political cover for dealing with Cat she can just discuss the proposal openly with the other 2 members of the alliance. They're likely to agree since they're not the ones who's going to carve up Callow.

*Dainpdf*

The whole alliance rests on the Crusade. She does this and her dream dies. That's part of why Cordelia won't treat with Cat. Plus, those two are not her only opponents inside Procer.

*PotatoMan*

So between Adjutant, Archer, Hierophant, and Akua, we have four out of the five of the band that Cat would have faced if she hadn't stolen Akua's spot. Who would have been the fifth member? Surely not Thief?

*Death Knight*

It would have been assassin's analogue.

*Darkening*

I rather doubt Adjutant would have ever formed a name with Akua, she has too much disdain for greenskins to ever rely on one enough for him to acquire that much weight. Archer maybe, she'd obviously be attracted to Akua and would be interested in seeing what happened. Heirophant she could probably sway, he wouldn't fight his father, but I'm not sure how Warlock would react to the Empress getting murdered and replaced by Akua. Probably poorly since she seems to be one of the few people he likes, but then, he's not exactly fond of Cat either, so who knows if Masego would still be willing to run with her.

*Death Knight*

Hakram maybe not but one of Akua's retainers definitely. The reason Hakram became Named was because at that point in the story, Cat was living out the succession of Black and the Calamities' story and since Cat was slated to become the Black Knight at that juncture, the story needed someone to be "The Captain" in the anlogue since Masego was slated to be

"The Warlock" and Archer "The Ranger" and lastly, Thief the "Assassin".

If Akua was to be the successor of Black the story would have her recruit her own analogues to the Calamities. Might not necessarily be the Adjutant but definitely a similar Name to "The Captain".

*Yotz*

Ah, yes – the much renowned Moppet...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Could be worse. Could be Footstool's Understudy. xD

*werafdsaew*

Cat would be facing the Calamities, and Akua wouldn't be in a band of anything; she too classical Evil for that.

*Oshi*

None of them. Akua is old style villain. She has servants and monsters not friends/allies or a band of any damn kind.

*Jonnnney*

Akua wouldn't have a band of 5 at most she would have a chancellor and a knight. Evil don't normally combine to a group of 5. It's generally 5 heroes vs 1 madman. Their ability to work together is what gives so much strength to the calamities and the woe.

*WuseMajor*

I honestly want to see this chapter from Cordelia's point of view very, very badly. Knowing why she got so angry and why she rejected everything would explain much, especially given Kat's track record for metaphorically lopping off her own arm and using it to club her opponent to death.

I have to wonder if Auger has given her any advice on whether or not to agree to any of Kat's proposals or any warnings about what Kat might unleash. I also wonder if Auger's visions are provided directly by the Heavens or is they're just powered by divine energy, because, if it's the first one, then Auger might be telling Cordy that treating with Kat will cause great Woe, when there will be plenty of Woe to go around if she doesn't.

*Death Knight*

I think it was mentioned that the Augur can only foresee precommitted actions. Anything less than that likely merely

manifests as a feeling of unease. I don't think Cat has precommitted to the alliance with the Dead King yet, she's just hearing him out at this moment so its unlikely that the Augur has foreseen that precisely.

This weakness however is the reason I believe Black is the right person to kill the Augur. Sure she can foresee his intent to kill her, what she can't foresee likely is which of the myriad of methods he has at his disposal (and he definitely will have at least 60) he will use to do the job.

*Gunslinger*

It's said in the chapter that Cordelia's chapter was a diplomatic ruse. A way to apply pressure on Cat to get her to fold.

*Gunslinger*

Cordelia's anger I mean

*Thea*

Augur did tell Cordelia "fortune may come unexpected" or so just before Thief showed up in her study, carrying Cat's a Winter-domain-amulet-thing they use to communicate now. In other words, Augur told Cordelia treating with Cat can/will be good for her. I wonder if Cordelia forgot that, or why she discarded that... warning, really.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Piece of pie, piece of pizza, why don't you bastards have a peace of my mind.

*Darkening*

Honestly, while I expect there to be some kind of tragedy on the way with this path, I reeeeeeally look forward to Cat going, "Welp, I tried to give these fuckers a chance, time to let loose everything Winter can really do," And breaking out the artifacts and things she's made from all the dead heroes. Hey, maybe the Dead King would be willing to gift her a couple to make some more out of as part of their agreement! Can't wait to see what the conditions of him leaving hell are, I fully expect WB to show up the moment he's in play since she's his counter, and as much as I loathe her she's hilarious to read about.

*oldschoolvillain*

I suspect the first words out of her mouth next time she gets out of Nowhere will be "Oh Fuck."

[Antony444](#)



And I fear you're right. She will get one look at the script and promptly teleport to the greatest concentration of heroes to inform them they're going to experience first-hand what war is when you go against people on the level of Dread Empress Triumphant...

Also have a new name for Catherine: Betrayer.

### *Euodiachloris*

Or... the Betraying Betrayed. Catherine could have been the Hero Classic, but so much omnidirectional backstabbing occurred before she was born, during her formation and after she got Named that it's a minor miracle she isn't shaped like a buckler-and-foil.

Nobody is allowed to be surprised: she is what all active parties in Calerna formed her to be. And, on their own heads be it.

### *MetruX*

You know, this makes a lot of sense and partly foreshadows the ending. She IS what Calernia shaped her to be...

### *sengachi*

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Go support Erratica on Patreon if you can! He does so much amazing work for us and he absolutely deserves to make \*at least\* a living wage off of his work on this story.

Seriously, if you'd pay \$20 for one of Erratica's books, then you can chip in at least two bucks a month. He gives a book a year already, that's a fine exchange. (Holy crap you give us a book of this a year how the fuck do you manage that?)

### *Death Knight*

Par for the course for a Named writer.

### *Allafterme*

The Author

### *Lee*

Dead King, here comes the skeletons

*and proud*

Doot Doot

## *Ilphros*

I think... that Fate/Providence may have the rule, "The side that is right is more likely to win" – because the world was made by the Gods, supposedly, in order to settle a question of who was right. And they built a world capable of helping them answer that question – more than one world, perhaps, given Arcadia.

And the Gods Above have spent a long, long time trying to present themselves as Good and Right. But their presenting it is finally falling apart – they have built up too much arrogance, left Catherine too much ammunition for when she declares that they are *\*not\** right.

## *Berder*

Consider Hasenbach's comment about "there is more at stake than you know," and the Pilgrim's decision to back Hasenbach instead of peace, and the Pilgrim's mention of finally fighting the true threat, the dead king, after the crusade is done and Praes is humbled.

My guess is, Augur has predicted a massive attack from the Dead King, but Procer misread the timing of it; they think there will be time after the crusade to fight him, and Hasenbach has a plan to do so. Ironical if this prediction leads them to refuse peace with Callow, which itself causes the Dead King's attack.

## [NZPIEFACE](#)

Ironic? This is one of the most common and ancient stories linked to seers or oracles. Self-fulfilling prophecies. The more you try to avert it, the harder it comes to bite you in the ass.

## [NZPIEFACE](#)

So, one thing Cordelia fails to understand is that Catherine is a Queen.

Not Queen in Callow, not Queen of Callow.

She's the Queen of Winter. She usurped a god.

I have no idea why Cordelia is treating her as if she had a diplomatic Name, like she was the Hierach or the Dread Empress. Pretty fucking dumb when you think about it. It's not as if dropping a lake was her only trick.

## *MetruX*

Cordelia is, in a sense, in a BIG disadvantage here. Her side (not the Crusade, HER) has only a single Named, who don't understand much but can see the future. Her side has poor magical theories and small amount of magic wielders. Her side

never dealt with Fae, the way Callow has. Thus, as much as it is painfully clear for us, and for a lot of people inside the story, that Cat has a special connection never seen before with Winter, it is not something visible to Hasenbach. She has not the means to see it, which means she's blinded without even realizing it.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

Not just that. Praes has been the heart of magic on the continent for ages. Cordelia's not really prepared.

*Jago*

And Procer, with all its "we are a Good country" bluster, has delegated the war to Praes to Callow for centuries. They know what Praes army can do and what a Named can do only from tales coming from other countries. Cordelia thinks in political terms, not about tales and roles.

A reasonable stance if Good and Evil weren't there to twist the law of causality.

### [Antony444](#)

Well, the Pilgrim main argument is that the true enemies they will face once Praes and Callow are dealt with are the Chain of Hunger, the Everdark and the Dead King. I suppose it's somewhat fitting to unleash the dead legions. Let them prove them this reputation is grounded into reality...

For all their talk about being the shield of civilisation, Procer has mostly held all their existence against the rats and the Dead King was unable to enter the fray. Now everything is going to turn around...

Congratulations, Cordelia Hasenbach. You're going to see Calernia burn. I wonder how the future generations are going to see your reign...

Seriously, Black first part of the plan is already working as we speak. He told it when he was in the Free Cities. He's ravaging the heartlands of Procer, incinerating farms and everything edible while requisitioning (by force) the rest.

Amadeus is ruining the logistics of the Tenth Crusade. In several months, Procer will have gigantic armies to feed in the middle of winter and Praes armies destroyed or not, you will have to feed these soldiers. And underestimating the guy who engineered your entire civil war with Malicia is sheer folly. It's far better to overestimate him and realise all the preparing was not necessary than what she's doing...

Cordelia conditions were a mix of the Mouth of Sauron combined with Good rhetoric. She has nothing on the ground right now to

justify such harsh conditions, she doesn't realise or don't care how her people are hated on the other side of the mountains and she is an hypocrite.

Seriously, her rise to power followed the same conditions...and the only reason she didn't kill her opposition was because she couldn't. It was said clearly in the extra chapters the armies of the North had to return quickly to guard their walls before the ratlings took advantage of their southern campaign.

With so many of the big villains still in the game and the first part of the Crusade already a fiasco, I would like to say I would have been a bit prudent. Either the First Prince is not a good politician, or Catherine is right: the Crusade is already escaping her hands to become its own force, subjected only to the will of the Heavens...

Oh well. It's time for the Big Bad to appear on the battlefield...

### NZPIEFACE

Yes, Cordelia is a tyrant and a despot as much as Catherine is. Except she's like, 45% more Praes than Cat.

A knife in the back might as well be a shiv from the front.

*werafdsaew*

I think Cordelia is an excellent politician, but a shitty general, and has a habit of underestimating martial inclined Villains, due not having any experience in fighting against Villains other than Malicia. Her tendency to underestimate Villains stretches back to the first time she came on screen in the prologue of Book 2 and continues to this chapter by underestimating Black.

### NZPIEFACE

"We have him outnumbered and he has no supplies, we're going to beat him in a few months, tops."

Yeah, looks like she hasn't been paying too much attention to recent history, has she?

*Matthew*

The Gods above must be so pissed she said that.

Before,. "If she's afraid of the Black Knight, we can give Procer a plucky underdog tag and defeat him with a half formed peasant army."

Now, "Black Knight was already near invincible when he was working against the narrative. Now, it's in his favor? Fuuuuuuuuck."

*Jago*

Unrelated, but I find fun that Amadeus mean Love God. So the Black Knight "Love God". Seesh.

[Tek](#)

Have to quote Edward Alban here: "Kingdoms don't die on battlefields. They die in dark, quiet rooms where deals are made between those who should know better."

Two women just signed death warrant for hundreds thousands people. Why? Arrogance, fear, mutual distrust and ignorance, no less mutual, to name a few.

Cat won't trust Cordelia because she's Proceran, and Procer is known to be prone to warmongering. Despite the fact that Cordelia been mending bridges and genually averting Proceran ambitions for the sake of peace.

Cordelia won't trust Cat because she's (allegedly) a Villain, and Villains are known to be prone to backstabbing and lies. Despite the fact that Cat's been trying to mend the same bridges and genually shooting herself in the foot for the sake of peace.

Both want peace, both want to talk, but both don't trust each other one bit, while expecting the other one to trust you unconditionally. Here's the fucking idea for ya: don't. Be so stupid that is. Both women are (allegedly) smart, yet incapable of putting themselves in each others shoes.

You can invite trust (if you want it fast, any way) only one way, by making a leap of faith. Taking the first step, and doing, instead of talking. One may argue that Cat done a lot, but what of it is actually known to Prince? All she saw was that: a Villain slaughtered thousands of Crusaders and driven them off by the threat of starvation. Is this not how any other Villain would do? Gods, if you want to be treated differently, then act differently. Cat's staying her hand looks the same as here being simply to weak to actually wipe out the whole army.

What can she do then? Aside from abdication and all that jazz? Well, crazy thought – talk. Just tell Cordelia about, oh I don't know, a Dead King inviting you to talk, presumably about an alliance? A Liesse Accords, just a hint if you really can't do more? Tell her about Bonfire, about so many more Dark Day protocols hidden in the Tower. Remind her that a story about hubris and stubbornness bringing ruin is a story too. Explain your position, make her understand that you are cornered and desperate, that one more push and you will start making literal deals with devils.

Can it backfire? Sure. Spectacularly. But you can't make a huge gain without taking a huge risks, and mending a trust, broken from the days immemorial is a huge gain. At least that way there won't be no "conversation haunting them for years to come".

But what would I know?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Eh, you summed it up quite well.

Sadly, neither of them think they can actually afford to be stabbed in the back.

Well, they're not wrong, but how they're doing this is a definite path to doom.

*werafdsaew*

I agree that the lack of trust is the issue, but it's not really the lack of trust between Cat and Cordelia that is the problem, as that can be solved by an oath, since Cat is a fae. The problem is that the people of Callow don't trust Procer, and the rest of Calernia don't trust Praes, and thus by extension its nominal ally Cat.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Nah, even with an oath, Cordelia would barely try and take the risk of trusting Cat. Who takes a deal that's too good to be true?

Also, how many times has Cat fucked Akua over because of loopholes in oaths?

*Death Knight*

Ah, gotta love prisoner's dilemmas. They come in so many delicious flavors.

*werafdsaew*

That's why you need to lawyer the shit out the oaths.

*Forrest*

I would argue Cat was not being that distrusting, and that she came into this making concessions. The First Prince, also, has not been shown to be story savvy. Literally considering how much she relies on the Augur to save her and her plans/allies. Despite being such a 'master' negotiator, she seems to fail to do just that time and again, let alone being able to read the situation and say 'This person seems to genuinely think I'm putting myself into a bad position, huh. Why would that be?'

Meanwhile, Cat was not only offering to shorten her time to abdication but clear the pass, help in the war with Praes, spirit the Crusade to the seat of Malicia, and was willing to give way more ground than Cordellia. Let's be honest, Cordellia here was being stiff. This story has already discussed the nature of those rigid versus those more fluid in the narrative. The chapter had Cat realize that Cordellia's anger was a front to get her to concede, but that is the only bit of negotiating the other side did other than bargain her down to five years.

Cat even went to the Pilgrim and offered to let herself die for the sake of letting her country find peace. In other words, she offered him her life. And he turned her down because he didn't want to see Cordellia's position take such a huge hit, and he felt that good ending the wars with themselves was somehow better than ending the constant Good v Evil narratives that claims countless lives throughout time.

And that is exactly what was being offered, and he somehow did not realize that ending Good v Evil, at least here, in this place, should be far more important to him. You might say 'well, if she's being redeemed she wouldn't be a villain anymore.' Except it was the villain making this offer, knowing of the redemption story, for the sake of their country and people.

And honestly, the pilgrim should have been at least a little more hesitant to turn the offer of her life for peace down. You know, since he is supposed to be story savvy enough to realize what picture that's painting for her, and that it does not end well for his side.

### *Forrest*

Also, forgot to mention that telling Cordellia of the Dead King would have been a dumb move, and caused all negotiation to break down. Wasn't even negotiating in bad faith, as that was a measure she was desperately trying to avoid at all costs. The Liesse Accords would have been an issue as well as those are the agreement to get everything to work smoothly for the future, pushing them through now would cause significant problems.

### [coloursofdespair](#)

The problem here is that Callow *\*is\** going to be fucked over if she agrees with Cordelia. Civil wars would plague the country, it's already been established that the country is I'm dire needs of eldersmen (eg. Scholars and learned people) to run the country AND there is no assurance of help from Cordelia's side – mainly because Callow, as a country, won't trust her.

Also, as someone said before; if Cat explains all the things she could have done, especially the deal from the Dead King, Cordelia's confirmation bias would lead her to a faulty conclusion

*Thea*

Agreed, if Cordelia's internal position is so weak she can't make peace with Cat... She can't stop her princes from screwing Callow over in the aftermath, once the crusade is over Cat out of the picture. Letting them do it would take political pressure off her, so she can push more "worthwhile" endeavours.

*Jason Ipswitch*

But Cat isn't doing what any other narrative tied Villain would do. "Here's a tough but fair deal, now go home," is NOT supremely villainous. The traditional Evil moves would have been to laugh while they starve, and either harry their retreat turning it into an epic bloodbath, or to crush them utterly. The attempt to crush them utterly would lead either to an Evil victory (sending the Princes heads back in baskets), or an Evil loss, as the forces of Good triumph against impossible odds.

Cordelia does seem out of her depth here, on the Good vs. Evil battlefield of narrative. I don't think she, or even Pilgrim, really grasp Black's whole approach of carefully subverting the narrative. Hasenbach is practically blind to story, and the Pilgrim can see the patterns and work with them, and within them, but I don't think he has any deep grasp of how Cat has been reframing her own story ever since Book I.

*Jago*

Cat offered:

- binding oaths;
- test by truth-telling Pilgrim.

Cordelia refused both as she aims for more and doesn't want to give any guaranteed.

Hard to give trust when the other party refuse to give or accept any guaranteed beside total and immediate capitulation.

*Fern*

ugh, this really is terrible. Maybe Hasenbach really does just want to make sure the framework she's trying to build will last, but she's still overplaying her hand out of some belief that Cat is a small fish.



Cat's the underdog in this story, and while that's not an instant win it's going to give her a big push. The Procerans won't know what hit em

[shieldredblog](#)

Cordalia seems to be aiming for nothing short of perfection, she set it up so that she needs a perfect win to meet her goals and build a stable Calernia.

The ways in which that is stupid are too many too count. But il try a few.

1) Dwarves: Thee most powerful Calernian nation are probably not cool with a united surface world. It would take little effort on their part to break the Grand Alliance.

2) Conquering Callow does not magically revert it back to a Good country. After the Crusade, the citizen's of Callow might not be so inclined towards the House of Light. We've seen it from multiple perspectives now that they don't have the moral authority they used too. I imagine Heavenly Human slaughter Pens didn't help that.

3) What is even up with unified Arcadia? I doubt they are going to just chill in Arcadia forever.

4) Malicia has not even done anything yet. She may be a diplomat Villain but no Empress is going out with a whimper. In fact her Diplomatic focus just means a huge diplomatic loss for Procer is coming.

5) Where the Villains at? Like forty heroes showed up for the Crusade. Did their villainous counterparts all go on vacation? New local Villains should still be appearing and running around unopposed. That can't be great for political stability.

*Oshi*

The only one of these I had never considered i the one with Villians. Where are they? It does seem odd that there aren't more.

*Forrest*

It's likely that the ones that are already there are the ones that are getting pulled into the story. Especially since all the 'old monsters' of Good are here, well now the 'old abomination' of Evil is getting involved. Also, I'd point out that this reactionary nature is much more in line with a heroic story than a villainous one. I mean, how often does a story go: 'And once the heroes came a pillaging, the great and terrible evil overlord rose up to commit foul deeds upon their faces. But lo! They did strike down the villain for impeding their path!'

[shieldredblog](#)

Even if not part of the Crusade story, easily a few dozen Villains going unopposed across Calernia should be worth mentioning.

Usurpers, Bandit Lords, Cultists, Mad Sorcerers and the like should be burning Crusader Nations from the inside. Both their heroes and their armies are gone.

*Metrux*

Well, this brings a question about the difference of this universe and our own. In our universe, who is villain and who is hero is, most of the time, dependent on where you start and finish the story. Let us take a very simple example: There is this people living here, and they expand their cities through territories already claimed as their own. Suddenly, this other people start attacking them, and they retaliate, after a long war, they won the right for their own lands. Now, let's see the other side: We lived in those lands for uncountable generations, and now people from outside have taken to living here. They come and expand, pushing us farther and farther away... But now we won't stand for it, we fight, for our lands, for our way of being.

Now, this is how a part of the conflict between americans and indians went down, a very small part of it. One started after, and ended after. The other started before and ended before. Both show what could be seen as heroic stories... But neither trully are. In the world of the Guide people are CLEARLY Heroes and Villains, so there must be a difference here, no?

*Forrest*

Although I would point out not many people consider what happened to the native americans in a very positive light, and some even condemn those early americans for what they did. Regardless, while the world does work quite differently than real life in that people are labeled as heroes and villains before they even really get started, it does work similarly in other areas. Not including, of course, the magic and the hell portals and the fey, but all of that goes without saying.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

The thing about villains... think of it as the Heaven's are using zerg tactics.

And hey, classic villain lesson number 1. If a plan must succeed at every step, it is doomed to fail. Wait, that's a life lesson in general.

*Jane*

As an idle thought... I wonder what Cat's reaction would be if she were to hear that worship of the Gods Below was becoming more common in Callow? Would she thin her lips, thinking of how things were changing, or would she not care – it's not as though she's cared much about theology in the past? Would she idly think of how this might complicate her domestic political situation, or would she brood about how her being a Villain Queen is twisting Callow?

There hasn't been much reason for Callow to change its traditions up until this point, but, as you note... I imagine those soldiers aren't going to be as inclined to offer praise to the Gods Above in the future, after the Gods tried to kill them. And once the stories spread, I imagine their families will share in the sentiment. And if you need to ask *someone* for a little luck in a pinch... Well, the Gods Below are next in line, aren't they? And they actually *answer* their prayers, for the right price.

This Crusade was called in part because Callow was at a tipping point in its alignment, but I have to imagine a failed Crusade will hasten things along... Whether Cat abdicates or not. It'll take a generation's worth of work to make Callow Good again, most likely, instead of its current darkening grey.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

It would be a major impact if that happened. Callow is basically the knight kingdom of the continent. It's basically fantasy medieval fantasy Britain, with King Arthur and shit.

### [ahd](#)

Two epiphanies just now:

Augur has told the First Prince that staying on this path means defeat for the Dead King.

erraticerrata has the Name of Author.

Three questions:

What are his aspects?

Is this a transitional Name or has he assumed his final form?

Hero, Villain, or Ranger?

### *IDKWhoitis*

Augur might not understand, care, or get the full picture about what "defeat" entails. I think this might be a similar "End" to the Dead King like there was an "End" to Summer and Winter. Cat

may catalyze a change in the Dead King, or push through the Liesse Accords that will “End” the threat of the Dead King.

*Alivaril*

I think Cat might be underestimating the Dead King. Undead-infested gate to in the middle of Procer, anyone? I can't see the Dead King just overlooking that possibility.

Actually, for that matter, she also overestimates her own gates. IIRC, her agreement with Arcadia Unified was for safe passage for herself and those under her command, not her allies. She might've ended up “betraying” the crusade by complete accident had they accepted.

*Jane*

An easy enough loophole to abuse. “You're under my command so long as we're gating through Arcadia”.

The Fae are legalistic enough to accept that – though I wouldn't be surprised if that also gave her more control of “her” army than would normally be expected of such a ruse. Arcadia seems like the kind of place that would enforce that sort of thing.

[shieldredblog](#)

Not to mention the giant Hellgate Warlock bandaged at Liesse. All the Dead King has to do is redirect it to one of his Hells and he's out.

*N/A*

I am reminded of Cat's negotiations with Pilgrim back in Ch.8. What was it she said about summoning demons? “We can't prevent escalation if your bargaining position is that we fold but you don't.”

Can't say she didn't warn them...

*N/A*

... Actually, come to think, given that she has Pilgrim forbidden letters, one wonders if telling him wouldn't be a solution. “Right now, my last resort is to go to the table with the Dead Fucking King. I really, really, really, REALLY don't want to do that, but I am \*running out of alternatives.\*”

*N/A*

Wait, no, nevermind, that just leads to Catherine Foundling Must Die, starring Grey Pilgrim.

*Metrux*

Yeah, I think the end to that would be he attacks her then and there, and one of the two end up dead, or Plot ensues.

*Vin*

If good won't extend the olive branch, how can it complain when evil does what evil does?

[shieldredblog](#)

What are the chances that Black uses his aspects of Conquer and Lead to start a uprising in Procer? Get a city to join him. Murder the prancing princes and ask the peasants how they feel about being pawns in Cordelia's games. it's not like anyone likes the rulers of Procer. For decades now, they have been treated like replaceable animals by their rulers, forced to kill each other and now spent on foreign soil for political convenience.

*stevenneiman*

Shit, I hadn't thought of that. It would be pretty crazy, but I can see the supporting narratives.

The First Prince is a madwoman, convinced that everything wrong with her dystopian homeland is caused by the Empress' schemes (which is partly true, but whatever). She didn't so much earn the right to rule as conquer her own homeland, and now she is forcing them to take part in an unprovoked war of aggression, coupled with a smear campaign where she claims that Cat is the one who rules by force.

Queen Catherine holds off the invading Proceran hordes through both the courage of her soldiers and clever diplomatic action while the Black Knight blocks the other assault before making a desperate attempt to liberate the Proceran homeland from First Prince Hasenbach's cruel reign.

Of course, the problem is that it will conflict with Cat's own crafted narrative of the ultimate feat of statecraft. Cat's desired story is of a bargain between two of the three most powerful women in Calernia to bring peace and end the constant stream of disasters which has marked the interaction of Good and Evil since the end of the Miezian occupation.

*Termite*

The bargain never needed to be with Hasenbach rather she just needs the first prince to cooperate, if a new and more reasonable first prince is chosen due to the actions of someone she can't control, fine.

*Sanityfaerie*

So... one thing that just happened... Pilgrim's attempt to turn Cat just crashed and burned \*hard\*. Also, he's stuck as the retainer to a hostage, which means he's not going to be at any battlefields between now and the time the truce breaks down. That's... potentially a big deal. For a guy who leans into the narrative so hard, it seems almost \*odd\* that he'd be willing to say "yes, I'm willing to set your little country on fire for that other person's political ambitions/The Greater Good". That's especially after he schemed this hard to put himself into a position to play kindly advisor. Did he not see this coming?

*stevenneiman*

I'm not seeing it. He's a mentor to heroes and potential heroes, and he's telling a particularly troubled semi-redeemed villain not to return to the temptations of Evil. She'll do something drastic rather than listen to his wise advice, and he'll be there to help her control the damage when it goes wrong and help her understand her mistake. Basically, he's going to try and turn summoning the Dead King into the animated mops scene from Sorcerer's Apprentice.

It's all total bullshit of course, but it's what I expect that Fate will think is going on. I'm not seeing any mistakes on his point, and in fact it works out tidily enough that I'm not even sure he's completely ignorant of the Dead King's involvement.

[ahd](#)

He's telling a particularly troubled semi-villain who is willing to turn away from her ambitions to save her country and her people: no, I don't want you redeemed, I want you to die and your country vivisected so the First Prince can look good and self-actualise.

"This is not fair. Nor is it just."

*stevenneiman*

The behavior of Procer reminds me of Thor from the Iron Druid Chronicles. They recognize that they have a vital duty that everyone depends on them for (holding off the ratlings and defeating Loki respectively), and their response to that knowledge is to act like assholes to everyone, believing they can get away with it.

*Jessica Day*

I expected Hasenbach to be this arrogant, she's a blue blood through and through. A self righteous royal with holy cause and considered one of the most cunning rulers around. So she makes a lot of poor assumptions here which will lead her to woe in the end...

But I didn't expect the Grey Pilgrim to be that arrogant. He actually thinks that he and Cordelia are about to succeed in a crusade, already off to a bad start, where all others have failed in the past? He really thinks that the Gods Above, with his help, will win a war between deities which has been fought since literally forever? A chance to accomplish great good, save lives, redeem a villain, all on a silver platter, and he turns it down because he thinks he can do better than any hero who has gone before?

I think I see the shape of his and the First Prince's story now: Tragedy. And hubris is their tragic flaw. Just look at their antagonist, someone fighting for a noble ideal greater than herself- defense of her Homeland. Someone who continuously humbles herself, offers to GIVE UP A THRONE, offers up her very life... I can't wait for the graveyard of princes.

*Oshi*

Nope but he certainly thinks that even if they fail peace will survive in the West so what is there to lose? A few hundred thousand people and Callow?

*Cloudlight*

Herbey I reached the end.

*Max Scherer*

This chapter just shows that the Good side is the dumbest shit ever and actually in my opinion the more 'evil' side. Sure they preach of the good stuff and all that and try to stop evil, but that isn't true. Now is it? They only want to kill evil no matter what and when there is a reasonable villain, they corner her so much that this villain just doesn't hold back anymore and will unleash whatever they have hidden...

*AbraKadabra*

What Hasenbach did is basically the same thing What the US did with Japan before Pearl Harbour. Which is again the same thing that Russia did with Japan before Port Arthur. Offering unacceptable terms, and waiting for the other side to knuckle under without a fight.

*Nicholas Koenig*

I think I saw the God's Below at work in this chapter. We have seen villains complaining about the God's Above interfering but here I'm pretty sure I saw the God's Below at work.

The Gray Pilgrim has put Catherine on the path to redemption with a skilled use story. Now she comes to him and

begs him to protect her people. She asks nothing for herself and offers to lean into the redemption story knowing that it ends with her pulling the tower down and Malicia and herself. All she asks is the protection of her people. From here the story goes two ways:

1) The Gray Pilgrim welcomes her into the fold, agrees to protect her people and they go on to destroy evil and good rises behind them.

2) The Gray Pilgrim rejects her offer, says her people mean nothing to him. She turns deeper into evil and makes a bargain with something that should not be bargained with and evil rises stronger than before.

He should have seen this, he has been doing this for decades, he knows these stories, yet he rejected her. The Gods Above give power to work miracles, the Gods Below blind. I think we see their hand in the Gray Pilgrims actions here.

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## Chapter 27: Into Dusk

*"The existence of death is the first lie we are taught. There is little difference between a corpse and a man, save the journey of the soul. They who learn to slip this noose find the threshold of apotheosis, for in the denial of passing they have taken themselves beyond the yoke of fate."*

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

I'd almost expected an army to be waiting on the other side when I opened the gate into Arcadia, but it seemed my bag of unwelcome complications was full at the moment. And to think, it'd only taken war with half the continent and every hero the Heavens could put together before we'd reached that point! Sadly, I was not unaware that the moment I started believing we'd reached the bottom of the barrel some Choir would pop in, yell *surprise* in a monotone and reveal there was a false bottom below leading into another barrel entirely.

"What's the word they have in the Free Cities, for the snake that eats its own tail?" I asked Hakram.

"Ouroboros," he replied, hairless brow cocking.



There it was. In summary, my life was a veritable ouroboros of bad decisions feeding into increasingly horrible messes. I had to own up to at least that much, headed as we were towards what might just be the worst decision yet.

"You're brooding," Adjutant said.

"I don't brood," I replied without missing a beat.

He rolled his eyes.

"You are looking thoughtfully into the distance, a melancholy air on your face," he said.

"I'm a complicated woman, Hakram," I said. "You can't begin to grasp the depths of my ponderings."

Archer snorted ahead of us. Unkindly so, I decided.

"Like *you* can talk, Indrani," I sneered. "You're about as complex as a rock."

"Geology is a broad and complicated field of study, actually," Masego said.

Archer preened.

"See?" she said. "Even Zeze agrees I'm a woman of many facets. Unlike some others that won't be mentioned."

She turned to grin at me.

"Oh, things are going badly," she mocked in a high-pitched voice. "Better stab my way out of it. But stabbing is bad, for some inexplicable reason. What a difficult dilemma."

I flipped her off.

"Don't expect silver at the end of the trip, wench," I said. "Mouthy guides don't get handouts."

"That'd be very inconsiderate of you, Catherine," Vivienne mused. "She's been such a peach so far. I'll hold onto the coin for her, if you'd like."

"You've already robbed the treasury once, Thief," I replied flatly. "Try something fresh, for Below's sake."

It was pretty inevitable that a journey this, well, boring would see us turn to bickering to pass the time. Hierophant had been rather miffed that we'd kept the supplies to a bare minimum, since it meant he couldn't spell himself atop a horse and crack open a book while we guided his mount. It'd taken three days before he stopped dropping hints this was all very uncivilized.

The Woe's only tagalong was my trusty Zombie the Third, and *she* at least wasn't complaining about carrying most our supplies in her saddle-bags. It was a dark day indeed when the dead flying unicorn was the most trustworthy of my companions. I glanced up and sighed when I saw the sun was only beginning to reach afternoon height. We had hours left before making camp.

"We'll reach the outskirts of Winter by nightfall," Indrani suddenly said. "I know this place."

I followed her gaze and found a mound of earth covered in dead grass, maybe half a mile away. We hadn't seen any structures in days, not since we'd passed the demesne of the Count of False Blooming. Three weeks since we'd left Callow, and only now was the throb in the back of my mind that indicated the location of our path out beginning to feel measurably closer.

"I don't think this is really Winter anymore," I said quietly.

Hierophant, who'd been trailing behind and repeatedly weaving cooling spells around himself so he wouldn't sweat for the exercise, put a spring to his step so he could catch up.

"You perceive our surroundings as different, even though they do not appear to be," he said.

I chewed over that for a while before speaking.

"Before I could feel..." I grasped for the word. "Currents, in this place. Skade felt much different from the Summer territories we campaigned on. Archer says we're supposed to be in Winter, but it doesn't feel anything like that to me."

"The wedding of the king and queen of Arcadia might have affected the very nature of this realm, then," Masego murmured.

"Interesting. If the effect is permanent, centuries of research on the fae might become useless."

"The less anyone has to do with fae, the better," I said, not unaware of the irony involved.

"Unfortunate that we do not have the time to study the phenomenon in depth," Hierophant said. "Your word alone is not enough. You are ignorant and possibly under influence."

Archer smothered a laugh and Hakram went suspiciously still, like he was trying not to smile. I looked at Masego for a long beat. It'd been said so mildly I knew it wasn't actually an insult, but sometimes I did hope someone would eventually manage to badger some tact into him.

"That was insulting, Masego," Vivienne called out from Zombie's other side.

"Was it?" Hierophant said, glass eyes flicking to the side. "But it was all true."

I patted his shoulder gently.

"We don't call people ignorant, Masego," I told him.

"But the overwhelming majority of them are," he said, aghast.

"And I could spit in your morning tea, but I don't," I said. "Because refraining from doing that makes interacting more agreeable."

He looked less than convinced.

"If they are never informed of their ignorance, how will they be made aware of the need to remedy it?" he pointed out, evidently believing this was reasonable.

"Remember our heroic battle cry, Zeze," Indrani called out.

His expression cleared.

"Ah," he mused. "Lies and violence. I understand."

He turned to me and offered a beaming smile.

"You are well-read and conversant in magical theory, Catherine," he said. "Well done."

Hakram let out a sound that aimed to be a giggle but came out like a dozen angry cats being ground between millstones. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Thank you, Masego," I said, reaching for calm.

He nodded, pleased, and trotted ahead to speak with Archer.

"I *am* well-read," I complained at Hakram in a low voice.

"Compared to him?" the orc chuckled. "There's libraries that would feel inadequate."

Yeah, fair enough. It wasn't like there weren't gaps in Masego's knowledge, but it was hard to beat personal tutoring by an incubus that preceded the Empire and a sorcerer that cut open Creation to find out how it worked.

"I find it interesting, though," Hakram murmured. "What you said, about it feeling different."

I glanced at him, silently inviting the orc to elaborate.

"Have you noticed?" Adjutant said. "The further we stray from 'Winter' territory, the less... alive the landscape become."

"Winter's never exactly been a field of flowers," I pointed out.

He conceded that with an inclination of the head, but did not further agree.

"The mound Indrani used as a marker," he said. "There was dead grass upon it."

"And?"

"Does it look to you like it was killed by snow?" he said.

Frowning, I took a closer look. When snows in Callow melted, the grass below came out yellow or green. From what little I'd seen anyway, I didn't usually campaign in winter and I'd been raised in the city until nearly seventeen. The grass above the mound, though was... grey. I did not feel dead of natural causes. My fingers drummed against my side absent-mindedly.

"Warlock once told Malicia that Arcadia has a degree of symmetry with Creation," I said.

"So you've told me," Adjutant agreed.

"That doesn't make any sense, Hakram," I said quietly. "I mean, fitting journeys through Arcadia with a bird's eye view of Calernia is pretty much impossible but we shouldn't be anywhere close to the Kingdom of the Dead. Maybe halfway through the Proceran leg of the trip."

"There is much we do not understand about the Dead King," the orc said. "It is known he ruled a great kingdom, once but there is hardly any mention of it in the histories."

"Because it was *ancient*," I said sceptically. "And it's not that unusual. No one knows what Ater's original name was, or even the name of the kingdom centred around it. That's what happens when people fuck around with demons."

I'd been taught at the orphanage the reason for the existence of the 'Nameless Kingdom' was likely a demon of Absence, or that the Miezens had used a Censure after facing entrenched resistance. The latter theory wasn't all that popular, since they were known to have used that only a handful of times across the entire lifespan of their empire.

"There are Callowan and Praesi oral histories contemporary to what would have been the Dead King's predecessors," Hakram said. "Yet no mention of a great power in the north."

Which didn't mean all that much, since back in those days most current nations didn't even exist and those that had were pretty much unrecognizable when compared to what they now were. But he did have a point, kind of.

"So you think that he, what?" I said. "Shunted off parts of the kingdom into Arcadia?"

"The elves have done the same with the Golden Bloom twice now," Adjutant said. "It is not impossible. A sorcerer capable of conquering a hell would certainly be capable of achieving as much."

"If he was active outside his kingdom and his hell, someone would have heard of it by now," I said. "I doubt he could gain a foothold in Arcadia without going to war with the courts, anyway. And *that* would have made waves."

"It would now, certainly," Hakram said. "Sorcery has been refined for centuries, states capable of sparing attention outside their borders and immediate threats have emerged. When most the continent wielded stone axes, however? A different story."

Shit. That might actually be true. If it had all turned into myth millennia ago, whatever stories would have existed about it might have grown so different and twisted they were useless as a cornerstone.

"Lots of ifs," I finally said.

"We will find out soon enough," Hakram said. "But there are few entities in existence we should be warier of underestimating than the Hidden Horror."

And on that cheerful note, we joined the others.

—

"So," I said. "Anyone else have a bad feeling about this?"

"Yes," Hakram bluntly said.

"Haven't had a good one in years," Vivienne admitted.

The other two minions ignored me. Indrani's eyes were bright and excited, her stance coiled like she could barely keep herself from running forward. Masego, on the other hand, had gone eerily still aside from his hands and eyes. Which all moved from rune to rune traced in the air, as he let out little noises of surprise or delight whenever one of the colours or shapes changed.

I decided to leave him at it a little longer, eyes turning back to the eerie sight displayed before me. It was a kingdom. Or, at least, the shattered remnants of one. I had not chosen that word lightly: it was not a whole but a collection broken shards left wherever they fell, dropped by the hand of some unknowable god. Some shards seemed like they fit together – for half a mile a lake's shoreline could be seen, with fishermen dragging their boats out under the noon sun – but others were almost painfully

disparate. I saw a city street lead into a dark forest, a river flow out of a crowded fair and those were the least of it. In the distance I glimpsed warriors fighting in the pitch black darkness of a plain, next to the almost idyllic view of the sun rising over a peaceful farm.

"Indrani?" I said.

"No fucking idea, Catherine," she said with relish. "I don't even think the *Lady* has seen this before. She would have mentioned it for sure."

Less than reassuring. Either this place was hidden a lot better than it seemed, or even the likes of Ranger preferred to avoid it.

"I'll get the obvious out first," I said. "This looks like the Kingdom of the Dead. Before, well, the last part of that."

"It could be ancient Procer," Hakram noted. "It too has large lakes. So does Callow, for that matter."

"No it isn't," Vivienne quietly said. "Look as far as out as you can see, slightly to the left of the centre."

I squinted before seeing what she was speaking of. It was city. Much too small to be Ater, but it begged for the comparison anyway because at the heart of it jutted a tall spire of dark stone. Atop it was a smaller globe, hovering in the air, and I'd seen that illustration before in books.

"Keter," I said. "Crown of the Dead."

"Inaccurate," Hierophant said. "This is, for lack of a better term, an echo."

His lips were twitching into a delighted smile, as if he couldn't believe his luck.

"And what does that mean exactly?" I asked.

"Reverberation," he said, sounding awed. "An event touched Creation that was so great and momentous it forced reflection within Arcadia. This has fascinating implications, Catherine. There have been few rituals so powerful in Calernian history, but the Diabolist's working at Second Liesse could be considered in the same league. There might very well be an echo of that battle somewhere in this realm."

My fists clenched. So there was a repeat of one of the darkest failures to my name to be found somewhere around? Charming.

"Can it hurt us?" I asked.

"I cannot speak with certainty," Hierophant said.

"Guess," I flatly ordered him.

He looked irritated.

"I can theorize," he stressed pointedly, "that we are in such misalignment with the echo we cannot physically interact with it. With the proper spells perhaps sound could be obtained, but touch or smell are much more difficult. It would take weeks of rituals."

"Which we won't be doing," I said.

"Cat," Archer complained. "Think about it. There's bound to be heroes and villains there. We could fight people that had been dead for millennia!"

"Maybe on the way back," I lied.

She pouted.

"Masego, how is this possible at all?" Hakram asked. "I was under the impression that Arcadia spanned the whole of Creation as a mirror of sorts. Was the Dead King so powerful all the world shook from his transgression?"

Hierophant clicked his tongue.

"That is a misunderstanding," he said. "Consider Arcadia as a single object being looked upon by an infinity of perspectives. To every one, it is a different realm. Across the Tyrian Sea, it likely has completely different name and seems inhabited by completely different entities. Even the marriage of Winter and Summer is contained within the span of our gaze only, unlikely to have tremors beyond. It is so with this echo as well. Something that was momentous on our understanding of the world is not necessarily so elsewhere."

"And so Triumphant wept, for she ruled but a fraction of the world and knew it to be vast beyond her reckoning," Vivienne quoted softly. "We are not so important as we like to believe."

"We can debate the philosophical implications of this later," I said. "I'm fairly certain our gate out is in not-Keter. Masego, you're sure that if we walk through a battlefield we won't get stabbed?"

"From our perspective, all of this is akin to light painting smoke," Hierophant said. "We will pass through as if they were ghosts."

He paused.

"Some ghosts," he clarified. "There is actually a very broad spectrum of--"

"And forward we go," I interrupted cheerfully. "I'm not sure I trust my ice to get us through the water parts, so we're talking the long way around through--"

I paused, glancing to the right.

"A town burning plague victims," I finished with a sigh. "Charming. Let's get a move on, I'm not spending any more nights in this place than I have to."

That didn't turn out to be a problem, as it happened. Arcadia had a night and day, though sometimes they weren't matches everywhere, but this place obeyed different rules entirely. Every shard seemed to have a lifespan before it returned to the beginning, and most that took place during day or night remained so. There seemed to be no rule or reason to the few shards that lasted longer. We marched through an entirely empty green field for three days and nights as if it were entirely natural, then pushed through a similarly empty mountain pass where the same bird began to swoop down in the same manner every quarter hour. Hierophant found a way to allow us earshot after half a week, though the sounds came muted. Unsurprisingly, Indrani pushed for us to pass through as many battlefields as possible. We took a break to the side of a pitched battle between a few hundred soldiers decked in iron screaming as they charged down a hill and half as many soldiers wearing obsidian and copper breastplates. The howlers were winning even though the opposition had a handful of mages. Those to be seen were a joke compared to even Legion mages: it took clusters of four or five chanting for a while to toss around the kind of lightning bolts my senior mage officers sent down without breaking a sweat. I sat down and watched the killing as the other ate.

"I recognize some of what they're saying," Hakram told me, standing by my side with the remains of his jerky in hand.

"The obsidian guys?" I said.

He shook his head.

"The iron men," he replied. "Some of what they're screaming has common roots with Reitz."

The Lycaonese tongue, spoken only in the mountainous northwestern stretch of Procer.

"That's four times we run into them fighting the others," I noted. "And they win more often than not."

"An invasion?" Adjutant said.



"Maybe," I frowned. "We haven't seen them hit anything larger than a village yet, so raids are more likely."

We ran into our first real city shard two days later. Masego had been getting progressively more irritated by his inability to explain why we could pass through buildings and people but not mountains or hills, but we stumbled unto something that perked him up. Inside a towering house of bricks we found a circle of twelve men and women standing by a wide basin of granite and spilling blood inside from their arms. The oldest among them, a withered old crone, chanted incantations in a language none of us knew that were repeated by the rest. I allowed a half hour break, if only to get him in a better mood. Hierophant in a mood was pleasant for no one.

"Early scrying," he told us, kneeling by the ghostly ritual. "It is Trismegistan in nature, that much can be known by the cadence, but they use no runic stabilizers at all. It is primitive, I'll grant you, but the sheer *skill* involved... Even Father could not use so complicated a formula purely by voice."

We moved on before long. We were all getting restless, the eerie scenes beginning to take a toll, but none more so than Archer. The longer it went on, the more often she started taking walks after we set camp. It was a bad idea, in my eyes. We knew too little about the dangers of this place to wander aimlessly. But more than any of us Indrani had the wanderlust, and I could see how remaining within the dotted lines was getting her temper closer to the surface. I extracted a promise for her not to leave for too long, and left it at that. I'd expected that if any trouble found us it would be through her, but I ended up choking on my words. It was Masego that wandered away without a word, face pale. It surprised me, considering the shard we were travelling through was a battle. One with precious little sorcery involved. The iron men were fighting the soldiers of obsidian again, by far the largest engagement we'd seen. At least two thousand on each side, and the obsidian soldiers were taking a beating. In large part, I saw, because of the empty circle at the heart of the field. Two silhouettes were duelling there. A middle-aged woman with a crown of iron, wielding a heavy mace of stone. Against her fought a man in a tunic of shimmering copper, wearing a circlet of gold-linked rubies. His iron sword was broken in a parry, and then the iron-crowned queen pulped his skull on the grass.

It was there I found Masego. He wasn't looking at the fighting, at the circle of screaming soldiers from both sides surrounding the duel. No, he stood slightly beyond that. His form dispersing a soldier. He was looking at pale-skinned man in furs, chest mostly bare and his neck covered with necklaces of iron and silver. The stranger Hierophant was staring at was beautiful, I decided. One of the most striking men I'd ever seen. It was like

someone had ripped out the fantasy of a warrior consort and given it flesh.

"Masego?" I called out.

He did not answer. I hurried to his side, laying my hand on his shoulder.

"Are you in danger?" I asked.

Mutely Hierophant shook his head. After a long moment he spoke.

"That," he said, pointing at the man, "is my father."

---

[sengachi](#)

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Go support Erratica on Patreon if you can! He does so much amazing work for us and he absolutely deserves to make \*at least\* a living wage off of his work on this story.

Seriously, if you'd pay \$20 for one of Erratica's books, then you can chip in at least two bucks a month. He gives a book a year already, that's a fine exchange. (Holy crap you give us a book of this a year how the fuck do you manage that?)

*Aston W*

I'm not sure how more isn't being donated considering the quality of this story.

The Inn makes 3700 a month through Patreon.

But the ranking is not the same.

Hope this story gets more donations.

*LM*

He doesn't market as successfully as he could. There are several promotional strategies left on the table. I would also take a few days and put together a swag shop with stickers and tshirts. Oh and find a niche printer that would craft well made, physical copies of the books. Hard covers preferably.

But if he just wants to focus on his writing, well, I'm not going to complain!

*Aston W*

As long as it's financially viable and the story continues.

The Inn doesn't sell except for 1 chapter ahead preview.

You pay to see a chapter in advance.

I'll look at Practical Guides Patreon again.

*Aston W*

It makes me wonder how old his father actually is...

*Big Brother*

His Incubus father, I'm assuming. This could be interesting.

*Dainpdf*

Catherine would have recognized the man if he'd looked like the Warlock. Plus the whole "alive for millenia" thing.

*nipi*

He has 2 fathers. And an incubus looks like whatever its contractor finds most visually pleasing.

*Dainpdf*

That it was the Incubus was exactly what I was arguing for...

[shieldredblog](#)

Interesting. I was hoping we would learn some of the lost histories of the Keter.

We already have the Tyrant of Helike to fill the classic villain niche.

The Dead King had to fill a more complicated role than that. I'm guessing he was a much more sympathetic villain than official Proceran histories preach.

Which isn't to say hes not a monster.

*Dainpdf*

He could also be another sort of classical villain. Akua was also one, and there was so very little overlap between her and Kairos.

From what we've seen of him, he seems to be the mastermind type, whereas the Tyrant just likes to make messes.

*nerferf*

He may not have been a villain at all back then,

Lots of stories of a ruler of a losing side making a deal to save their kingdom from invaders but they either didnt read the fine print or were tricked about what end form there kingdom would be

usually its a warning about deals with certain things with the kingdom completely gone with some scholar talking about the history, instead the king and their kingdom didnt stay inactive/gone and kept active as a major player to current times

*nerferf*

Which now that i think about it has big implications for the current situation and exactly why the dead king may have survived to this day

If he was forced to do his ritual because there nation was losing to the forebears of the Lycaonese in that era, he may have been able to keep going as the manifestation of his people vengeance at what was done to them by the Lycaonese, and it was noted that procer had gained a tendency to make there own enemies very easy

And also cat is now being thinking of making a deal because her people are underseige and face destruction

*Rook*

Along those lines, the Arcadian projection of old Keter might be the key to it all.

Since Keter currently exists in both creation and Arcadia as a mirror of creation, I wouldn't be surprised if a caster of his caliber was able to reverse the normal effect and project himself into creation through Arcadia instead. Something that a very (comparatively) weak character like Cat definitely would be able to help with, considering her rather deep roots in both planes.

[TeK](#)

Why exactly can't he be a pure big E Evil like Sauron? God knows, for a story working on the power of narrative, there is a distinct lack of clear cut characters.

*nerferf*

Cause the world wasn't even close to being organized or developed enough for him to be a world wide big bad back then

His story would be limited to just his local area back in those days and unlike sauron he wasn't a god who was part of the creation of the world, he was just another tribal ruler

[TeK](#)

I meant the unsympathetic Evil monster, who does Evil just because it's his nature. Though yes, I'm aware that Sauron has a tragic backstory. But I am little annoyed with the whole obsession over making sympathetic Villains. Now whom do I hate? Whom do I root for? It's so complex. My brain hurts.

*nerferf*

Cause there boring and only good for a couple of seasons and we already had aku for that,

In a story about manipulating tropes and the nature of narrative no character can just be clearcut as it wrecks the whole point about a story about narratives and there meaning

I mean the dead king is the first time we get to really glimpse at how much the narrative, stories and nations have changed from when the dead king first emerged to the present day and not using that story hook would be a waste

*Thea*

But I like Akua...

That being said, clear-cut/simple Dead King would be boring and probably dead-dead, I agree.

*burguulkodar*

"You must see with eyes unclouded by hate. See that which is good in evil and that which is evil in good. Pledge yourself to neither side, but to the balance between them"

~ quote from "Princess Mononoke"

[TeK](#)

I would say that I am not a weeaboo, but, alas, I am.

*nerferf*

Which makes him even more amazing as he something survived all this time and still be actually relevant even while all the stories around him kept on changing

Staying relevant as a unchanging character while all the stories around keep changing as nations change and disappear calls into question if he was actually a unchanging char to begin with and how many roles he taken on over the thousands of years

## *MetruX*

Well, we already know his power, or at least knowledge, is growing, because Ranger saw for the first time undeads with Named power. So it isn't a stretch to think he is actually changing and growing through each generation...

## *SHARKS*

I'm betting he's another anti-narrative villain. He specifically responded to Cat and the Woe's rise. The only thing really different about them is that they don't act like traditional villains at all, and Mesago and Cat in particular have a vested interest in breaking free of the "cage" of narratives. Triumphant was the other one that caught his notice, and her thing was rule-breaking demons.

The dead King, despite all his power fought some other villains in hell (which doesn't trigger the same kind of storylines that invading a good nation would do) ward off a few crusades and has laid low for millennia. I'm guessing he has a plan here, and it's a lot more than just wanting some fae gates for a zombie attack.

## *Greywalker*

I doubt he is much of an anti-narrative villain. He only reached out to Cat and the Woe AFTER the Bard got the Hierarch off his butt. The gem in the Dead King's possession activated/lit up signifying something, and an old demon roused. He may only be reaching out because something is in play that will benefit him. One of the more enduring narratives here is that everyone, Good or Evil, are doing things either for themselves, or what they feel is "right" or "necessary". Except the Tyrant, who is doing everything for gits and shiggles and just having fun being Evil.

## *Gerionar*

I agree. My guess: The Dead Kingdom is something ancient Procer created by backing their victims into a corner. The same thing they are doing with Cat now. There is also the point that Mesago doesn't get tired to remind people that necromancy isn't per se Evil.

## *Dainpdf*

So I guess the Incubus might shed some light on the Dead King's history. One wonders why he has not. Fear of the consequences, perhaps. The man did conquer a Hell.

[sengachi](#)

Or, if the Incubus was fighting here because he was bound by the (pre)Dead King, that could imply the Dead King still has some level of control over him. That would be a pretty good reason to freak out.

*grzecho2222*

From Red Skies

"I was first called into being when the witch-queen of what you would now call the northern Principate became dissatisfied with her husbands. I was no longer young when the Miezens first came upon the shores of this continent, blown by a storm."

*nerferf*

Ah so incubus was part of the army attacking the dead king's people then, so that brings to questions just what side the gods above/below were on in this conflict back then

*spencer*

Weren't the Miezens before the dead king's greater working?

*Death Knight*

No, it is said somewhere in the Books that he predates the Miezen Occupation.

*Metrux*

And even then couldn't purge him out. What kind of powers does he trully wield?

*Death Knight*

He weilds the ultimate power "plot armor". He can only be beaten by THE hero, not a Hero since he is THE Villain, the Hidden Horror, Progenitor of Praes Sorcery, Everlasting Monarch of the Dead yadda yadda.

Hest become imminently more mortal once Cat entered the Story though.

*Someguy*

Hooray for family photo albums!

*CaptainSemantics*

I love this glimpse into both the history of Keter and the nature of Arcadia. I can't wait for more!

*grzecho2222*

So if Dead King seems to be shaping more and more like Cat (with doing Evil to protect his people) does this mean that May-She-Never-Return will also turn out to be someone who fought for their people? Both are painted as the worst of the worst, both are scowling all the time and we know who also does that

*Thea*

It wouldn't be the first time.

Even the weather-stealer had legitimate concerns. As did a number of other considered-mad emperors and empresses.

But it isn't necessarily the case as obviously there are villains like Akua as well. We'll just have to sit back, wait and enjoy where this is going, instead of clamoring "worst idea ever" or "best idea ever" before knowing... any details really.

*grzecho2222*

I ment it in "What if it doesn't have to be powerful villain to summon Dead King, but someone who is similar to him enough in story sense" way more than that

*Death Knight*

Given how the most powerful magical workings we've been shown require symmetry between its components (Warlock summoning a hell wrought with storms only when the storm the Witch of the Wilds conjured up in Creation reached its apex) that is an entirely reasonable hypothesis.

*Rebar*

Did we just get our first glimpse of Triumphant the woman in the iron crown? I thought villains didn't age though?

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Mist-tifying.

*danh3107*

Oh holy shit, we're probably seeing the Witch Queen that Tikoloshe (hope I spelled that right) mentioned who first summoned him. That's super interesting

*Metrux*

Actually he never said he was summoned by her, but in the time when she grew dissatisfied with her husbands, so... He could be on wither side, or even outside of the conflict... Though, he appears here as a soldier on the side against her.



*edrey*

so, the incubus (and probably all the ancient devils) could be a spy for the death king to the evil side  
the death king being the ancient version of cat has low chance of being true.

there are a lot of holes, in the extra chapter there was an ancient legionary, how he end there?, before triumphant procer were just a bunch of petty kingdoms, how could not be unite against that great danger, and the other borders are not that great, rats, people inside mountains and the golden bloom. a intervention of the gods below doing nothing? demons cant be the answer to that right?

well, on the other hand, there is not need to worry if liese is destroyed, you can go there and copy the ritual.

those mirages are probably the story how the death king ended like that. if cat do something similar, the ilusion would start with black and the knife

*MetruX*

You're taking this too literally, people are saying he is like her in the sense that he does "villainy" for good reasons, though I don't agree with the theory, it has it's merits, and you shouldn't simply disregard it. Think clearly, what are the many holes you see? The story is pretty complicated, but for all we know he was a betrayed ruler who resorted to dying and coming back, studying all this tiem to bring true life back to his undeads, so he can "revive" his kingdom. Yes, it's not likely, but for all we know it's possible.

*Snowfire1224*

Just something interesting that I thought I'd mention now that Tikoloshe is being mentioned again, but apparently a Tikoloshe is a water sprite in Zulu mythology. They can become invisible by drinking water and are called on by people to cause trouble for others.

*stormcaller*

Can become invisible?  
Causes trouble for others?  
around forever?

out there idea then: is there any chance Tikoloshe is the pre-Name of WB?

*Death Knight*

As a native South African I can back up this legend. Though Tokoloshes here are viewed more akin to michievous goblins as opposed to "spirits".

## [Euodiachloris](#)

Um. Yes-no. Tockoloshes (as in the water entities) are from the Cape and predate Bantu incursions, much like Mantis tales do. And, for the same reason: Khoekoe/ Griqua. Tok-tok, qwagga, gogga, eina and tokoloshe – older than you think, but all repurposed.

Tokoloshes have changed over time, though. But... trickery, shackles, water and their abiding love of children (in their own way) has always been their bag, whatever else about their tales change. 😊

Tokoloshes (as in made things/ forbidden things/ artificial things/ dire secrets/ Frankenstein monsters) – that's more Xhosa-bleeding-into-Zulu-and-beyond.

I'm from the Eastern Cape. I grew up with tokoloshe tales of all stripes and tragedies.

### *Death Knight*

Hahaha awe my bru, greetings from the Northern Cape. I can see you've done your research on this so I'll concede the points. I only know of them from tales told to me by my parents and grand parents and since cultures have differing spins on the same stories differences are bound to come up with the same entities. So yeah

## [Euodiachloris](#)

Tso, ja. I don't ever knock the Northern Cape – mainly because you guys know how to fight dirty with frozen Bar Ones and can argue Free State into the ground. XD

And, you have your own repurposed Nama and trek tales busy getting horribly warped in cities all across the region.

I will always be biased, though: give me any tokoloshe tale of horror, comedy, wits, a little questionable love, revenge and bundles of tragedy over a mawkishly shallow homesick/ lovesick/ ghost song concerned with travelling yesterday-today-tomorrow in the Platteland. 😊

grzecho2222

So Dead King took over Hell to hide his people in it from this female Conan? Also how old was he when he done that, could it be that Creepy Child Act is not an act?

### *superkeaton*

The Dead King can most likely "wear" corpses. Remember, he's been on the field before for lesser engagements without truly

entering creation, so he can probably work through or possess the dead he commands.

He probably just wanted to be a dead child to be a creepy asshole.

*Death Knight*

Ranger confirmed the "body hopping" ability in the chapter Regard. She specifically stated that the Dead King can easily assume direct command of the rank and file undead so that is likely the case.

*grzecho2222*

That doesn't mean that Kid isn't his true body, I have a feeling that this may be some plot twist, like "If you kill him, you get stuck as the New Dead King, while he is free to do something or is finally free from his kinda sad life"

[shieldredblog](#)

He's probably a classic lich.

As the greatest necromancer to exist, he simply has such a mastery of souls that bodies mean very little to him. Even Akua tried to set up a second chance with a newborn body and bound her soul to an object.

Probably a reason he can't leave the hell's easily is that he bound his soul to something there, maybe this "Crown of the Dead".

*grzecho2222*

Or he could be like Kościej (who is older than classic lich) given that Sorcerous is evil version of Twardowski and it would fit with Wizard of the West being Merlin.

*superkeaton*

Oh neat, demon dad lore.

*Death Knight*

Tikoloshe isn't a demon, rather he's a variant of a devil.

*MetruX*

Okay Masego, be nice to other kids. They can say things wrongly if it isn't a serious discussion 😊

*Nafram*

It could also be Masego's biological father, but I agree that the incubus is the more likely choice

*spencer*

I'm confused by who the copper people are. This seems like a strong victory for the Lycaonese witch-queen over the copper king, which would suggest he is not the dead king. Maybe an Alamanian king, to fit with Cat's sense of how far they've come? However, this doesn't fit with the glimpse of Keter in the distance and the supposition that the echos should be related to the greater breach that made the Kingdom of the Dead. Wouldn't we expect the echos to be limited to the battle where the breach was made?

*nerferf*

Probably the dead king's father, and these are the events that led to the dead king doing what he did

The making of the breach would not be the start of the dead king's story; it would be the highpoint in it, that means Cat is watching the prologue and is seeing how the story of the dead king began from the start

*MetruX*

I disagree, this could very well be the Dead King. There is a reason he is not called Undying King; instead, he died before. He conquered a hell FROM THE INSIDE. Maybe he died in this battle, that is how his story truly began.

*lennymaster*

He did not conquer a Hell from the INSIDE. It was repeatedly stated that he **INVADED** it.

The theory of the Copper King being the then not yet Dead King's father seems pretty substantial to me.

He could have inherited the throne from his in battle slain father and saw no other way to protect his people by conquering a new home, committing atrocities to make it possible.

Much like Cat is willing to negotiate with him to protect Callow.

[TeK](#)

Actually, what about Dead King being said Witch Queen? I mean, what if Dead King is just a front, not a Name, like the Black Queen is not a Name as well?

*Yotz*

He also might have reanimated himself through sheer power of hatred once he was slain by her – hence the “dead” part; or – as an option – it's the analogue of the “First Prince” title

situation, where female-gendered form of "King" simply had not existed yet at the time, therefore it literally was not possible to properly name the wearer of Iron Crown.

Although, as a speculation most curious – what if the Dead King is actually dead, and was preserved as a reliquiae in the Mausoleum of Keter, from which he is risen in the moments of need by the Central Committee of the Sorcerous Party of the Nameless Kingdom? It surely explains why he is not seen beyond the certain radius – apparatchiks are not very keen on leaving safety and comfort of Keter's Shadow behind...

*grzecho2222*

Pharaohs and Kings of Poland were also sometimes women, but I don't think that this is the case since he seems to be too much of a depressed overlord who is lonely

*Yotz*

Hm. So, Animated Paratemporal Necromnemonic Gravures is a thing, I guess...

*Gunslinger*

Damn they haven't reached the gates of Keter yet but they look into Arcadia and the ghost of Keter past is fascinating. We also finally get the answer to the question of how Arcadia looks in other continents

*MetruX*

Which is so completely different it gets unimaginable.

*Yotz*

Why, one can imagine Arbuda and Raurava quite clearly, I think. Or Dikte, or Svartalfheim, or Iriy – though half of those technically are hells and heavens, but. So are the Courts of Fair Folk, from a certain point of view. And after all, who knows what lies beyond the edge of dromos...

*Raved Thrad*

Wait, what?

Did Catherine just take all of The Woe with her into Arcadia on a trip with no definite duration, leaving the Pilgrim in the middle of her camp / army with no Named to oppose him?

This strikes me as just a little irresponsible.

Based on her conversation with him in the last chapter, it's clear that the Pilgrim is trying to subvert the Black Queen. He

also states clearly that thousands dying unfairly and unjustly is not a consideration for anything because, y'know, he's okay with that. After all, he's going to suffer for something at some unknown future time, so whatever suffering he causes between now and then, whether by action or inaction, is perfectly fine.

So why does she suddenly think he's going to keep his word? It's been demonstrated time and again that those on the side of Good do what is *expedient*, not what is necessarily *right*.

What's to prevent someone named *The Peregrine* from swooping to attack the way a hawk of that name would? What better way to subvert the Black Queen than to destroy her army?

This cannot possibly end well, above and beyond whatever else happens in Keter.

*MetruX*

Time shenanigans, my friend. They could very well have went only fifteen minutes inside, especially since it is known that the gates go through when most dramatic, if the Heroes decide to destroy her whole army she will probably come back at the exact right time to counter them.

---

This seems like a good time to address a question that has been bothering me for a while: how deliberate was the chain of events that led to the rise of the Dead King? See, Akua mentions in interlude Chiaroscuro that he opened his Greater Breach to spread undeath across what had been his kingdom, but even she implies that Keter turning into what it did was not a planned occurrence. What if the whole "undead" business was more of an improvisation than previously assumed?

We know from the order of magnitude of the energy wasted in the course of opening the gate that Trismegistus opened it by himself and not through a group ritual, converting the biggest possible amount of power an individual can. The scrying ritual in this chapter implies that the early Trismegistian sorcery in general relied on skill of individual casters rather than on elements like runes/devils/enchanted items. Thing is, the witch-queen is on the side of Lycaonese here, fighting in close quarters with the other Named, they have the technological advantage and the other side uses rituals to throw lightning bolts. I get that the numbers and iron weapons are on the invaders' side but is magic that ineffective in comparison? Most importantly, this is the fifth battle the Woe are coming by. How come we saw no combat diabolists yet?

Diabolism is, judging by the tidbits we saw so far, the discipline that relies on the individual casters the most. They

have practices that prevent mental bleedover from stronger devils, the binding is done by the mages themselves (even to the inanimate objects), and the bindings themselves are called contracts for a reason. We know the mages of Keter knew enough about lesser hells for Trismegistus to open a permanent portal there, and even with the cost, summoning some akalibsa through a temporary one could potentially have at least evened the numbers.

Could they have afforded the cost, though? A sole mage has only so much power in him; even if they have some primitive rituals, the defenders of Keter would need to sacrifice something to call on the devils. The iron queen is evidently a diabolist herself, and her only summon is what, a young succubus? Even for a Named, the kind of power required to summon a devil is not something that just lies around. So where did Trismegistus get it? All battles so far are part of the same campaign, and while the lesser gods like the one in Greywood, the one that Sabah killed to become the Captain and the cranes of Stygia don't necessarily interact with mortals on regular basis, they wouldn't have caused no effect whatsoever either.

We didn't see any equivalent of Watch or berserkers on either side of the conflict so far, and while the effects of Trismegistus being in the possession of a source of power massive enough to poke a hole in reality may yet show themselves, there are only three unlikely candidates for that role so far: the scrying, the lightning rituals and the plague. Skip the next part if you want, I'm making a lot of assumptions about magic there.

I included the magical rituals here because, well, the only time we saw someone invent what looked like an actual spell was Masego imitating the sun of Summer:

"Glint on glass, stolen yet earned," he murmured. "Passing jewel, foe's crown: dawn."

Now, the imitation of a miracle may be Masego's thing (especially the "glint on glass" part), but we know for a fact that there are things like the crown of Tyrant of Helike or the Stairway ritual that are modeled after miracles, so it's a legitimate way to model spells. With that in mind, let's look at the lightning spell as used by Kilian during the melee in book one:

"I am the root and the crown, the source and the flow, the storm and the calm," she murmured. "Power is purpose, purpose is will. Gods of my mother, take this offering and grant me the wrath of Heaven."

It's eerily similar to Masego's spell in the sense of how there's clearly some kind of context missing. Still, we can glean some information even from what we see. Both include a mention of usurpation of the power by the caster; the offering mentioned in the second is clearly the smudge of blood she made on her cheek,

tough it's not likely to be a sacrifice to the Gods Below: Kilian's spell straight up calls the lightning "the wrath of Heaven", but the "the storm and the calm" suggests that it may be an attribute of a storm-related lesser god, and lightning is "Divine Wrath 101". Besides, it's not like magic can be evil in and of itself: the incantation for creating fire snakes says that their origin comes from "nameless eidolons, thieves of Heaven's grace", but Hedge Wizard calls them a fancy knockout-punch used by mages in interlude Appellant, not some kind of diabolical construct.

Similarly, visions and omens are another potential gift granted by a god, and even their use as a simple spell is associated with (potentially) divine beings: fae, especially the Wild Hunt, can use them to effectively teleport, and that's before you take into the consideration those of them that are, essentially, lesser gods. Scrying easily could have originated as a prayer to a deity for a divination, and while its spell versions use workarounds such as air-based magical links and pebbles to ground them, a chant and an offering may well have been enough for the divine version.

Finally, plague is another traditional way for a god to express their displeasure. This is less straightforward than the other options, since the plague was killing Trismegistus' own subjects, but there are several possibilities here:

The deity causing the plague was hostile and/or not native to the kingdom of Keter. Remember, if Trismegistus had indeed planned the ritual from the very start, sacrificing an entire god that was benevolent to him (or at least that he could control enough to sacrifice it in the first place) would be dumb. Given that all the shards so far show the same invasion, we can guess that it happened around the same time as the gate was opened, so we may well be looking at another Akua's Folly, only the god in question wasn't artificial and so had more will to actively struggle against its bindings.

Another possibility (the one I was leading to all this time) is that the future Dead King had the god curse his own subjects. The man's endgame was turning all his subject into undead, and zombie plagues are a thing, so it's not outside the realm of the impossible. Besides, while Catherine didn't mention any zombies in the shards she saw, she didn't mention any details about the plagued city either. The deity could well have punished the invaders once they moved to occupy the city, though I'm going to explain why I don't find this possibility to be likely either.

Most of the magic- and god-related speculation ends here. Tl;dr: if there are any traces of the kind of entity that Trismegistus would have to sacrifice to open a Greater Breach, Catherine



hasn't encountered any traces of it so far. Now, back to the power issue.

My theory is that the plague is no coincidence, but very much a means to an end. The ruler of Keter had to face an invasion of a numerically superior and better armed force with only an insufficient advantage in magic without power to achieve something truly great with it, so he leaned into that advantage as far as he could. This is my first guess: that the Dead King didn't open a portal to hell to turn all his subjects into undead – he killed all his subjects to open the portal to hell.

Remember, while he's a skilled enough diabolist (enough to bind demons and to know that there are undeath-related lesser hells, at least), this chapter's epigraph and quotes from his (only?) published book in general heavily hint that his speciality during his life was undeath, which led into his current Name. Despite that, we've seen no zombie troops deployed yet, even though that would lower the casualties of his own soldiers. There's no way he would fight another practitioner Named and not rely on his speciality – the one that would later make him a legend – especially if no other weapon at his disposal could turn the tide.

Regardless, if he indeed had to use some sort of improvised human sacrifice – be it an unleashed plague or simply all the people slain over the course of the war – to power his ritual, then my second guess is that the opening of the Greater Breach and the subsequent invasion of a hell are a measure of desperation, not his preferred outcome. Akua stated that it took him ten hours to open the portal, while the invasion would take months. Given that those would have to happen in short order, and are simply to massive twists of Fate to be unrelated, I'm assuming that the hellgate was opened at the conclusion of the campaign. Like, say, when he was finally out of army, the enemy was at the gates of Keter, and he had nothing to pit against the forces that were about to stomp all over his face.

Granted, the result may have been entirely acceptable for him, but my point is that even if he planned the ending to this invasion to happen as it did, but my point is that this kind of escalation would be the only way for him to turn the tide, magically superior lich or not. The invasion of a hell also makes very little sense unless he botched its making in some way, since all the devils that would come into Creation would also be bound to his will, which leaves no functional difference between owning the gate (which he did as of moment he finished the ritual) and owning the hell (which cost him untold amounts of troops, resources, and crippled both his ability to come into Creation and his cognition).

My third guess is that the whole “trapped in hell forever” deal isn’t an accident either, nor is it an acceptable consequence which he foresaw. Normally the kind of event that took place here would see a band of heroes rushing in to prevent it. Unless it was an entirely accidental “how do i into hell” by some bumbling comic relief, which Trismegistus wasn’t, the Heavens would send a champion at least to the final confrontation. Akua’s Folly is a notable exception, since a) while Fate had provided a conflict fitting an event such as an opening of a hellgate, it was entirely between villains (like here, because a diabolst that changes husbands like gloves doesn’t look particularly Good to me), and b) because it was a Bard’s plot all along, down to stopping the Good elves from preventing the whole thing.

But here’s the rub – what if Gods Above, despite not stopping the Greater Breach from happening, got to intervene afterwards? Due to the nature of hells, a portal into one effectively means infinite armies for its owner – a disturbance in the balance like none before. Unless, of course, the villain in question is in a position that doesn’t allow for such usage of it. For example, if he himself, baited by a heroine, crossed the boundary and is now trapped inside at the cost of her life – and the Fate would help her, too! This is my theory on how Bard was created: she was reborn in her current form after tricking or banishing the Dead King, and serves as an opposite of his. She, too, cannot intervene directly by the nature of her Role, but has a form of immortality and an ability to change appearances between incarnations. That also would imply that the Dead King’s influence stretches further than seems at the first glance, but as to how I have no clue.

*grzecho2222*

We don’t a lot about Dead King motivations or plans, it is also possible that his plan was to find safe place for his people and “he got his wish granted, but not in a way he wanted” by rising all the people that died in the war as his army to Defend His Lands And People Forever and keeping Him And His People Safe From Enemies by locking them in some weak Hell (if there is endless number of them, some will be weak). We also know that he kidnaps people (children), but why? He has his own people in Hell, the safest place that we know of. It looks like he is slowly evacuating people from Creation to his Hell more that trying to conquer anything

*Metrux*

I’m sorry, when has he ever kidnaped children? I don’t remember this being ever shown or said.

*grzecho2222*

Some Hero (I think White Knight) mentioned that in past Dead King offered peace in exchange for some number of children yearly to some ruler of Procer

*Raved Thrad*

Here's a thought: what if he needs to feed off the life-forces (or maybe even the actual souls) of children to sustain his existence? From the interlude with Ranger invading Keter for fun, it's clear that he (or his servants / slaves / automatons – same thing) have the ability to cook wholesome, nutritious food. How far-fetched is it, then, that he might actually have living subjects who breed children for him to leech his lichdom off of?

*grzecho2222*

He has living people in hell already and as Villain he already is immortal, so why he needs so many children and why he has them living in villages instead of some prison camp?

*Raved Thrad*

It's the only reason I could think of why he'd want children as tribute.

*nick012000*

>Why haven't we seen any combat diabolists yet?

I think it might be because proto-Keter was on the side of Good, and was being invaded by an Evil Empire.

*Metrux*

I will admit this is the first comment in a long while I didn't read fully. Though, for a fount of energy he could very well have used devils, since it's been noted he created the Breach from inside the hell, he had plenty of tasty sacrifices to use...

---

Where was it said that he opened the Breach from the inside? I always took Akua's descriptions of the process as it needs to be done from Creation, sacrificing some (gigantic) amount of power that is already there, which the devils were not.

*lennymaster*

One, Masegos father stated that he was first summoned AT THE TIME the Witch Queen became dissatisfied with her husbands. He could have been the then not yet Dead King's spy. There is no

proof the Witch Queen was a Villian or a diabolist.

Two, it was in the last battle so far that Cat and co witnessed in wich the obvious leader of the copper people died, most likely slain by the Witch Queen. My theory is that that was the yet to be Dead Kings father and predecessor.

Three, I do agree that Wandering Bard might have originated there, I wanted to argue on the scale in wich she was involved, but the more I think about it the more likely it seems that she already played a major role.

Four, the plagues existence might be coincidental, or it could have meaning, though I doubt that it spread the undead rather than beeing the sacrifice to power the invasion of the hell.

### NZPIEFACE

Wouldn't be surprised if this trip was only 12 hours real time.

grzecho2222

Kingdom of the Dead and Deoraithe used to be next to each other and both of them are masters of necromancy? Or are they the same people? Because that could have hilarious implications, if there are living descendants of Dead King.

Lemon

Neat that we are seeing the story of Keter unfold. I am guessing Procer was winning, and had used a magical plague. The Dead King might be a Fetohep-type character. And maybe even not the original king, if that First Prince killed the real one. Would be neat if he took up dominion of Hell in order to change his people's story, like Black wants.

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## Chapter 28: Archaic

*"An offer to 'kneel or die' would be insincere, Matrons. Deny me and your corpses will be made to kneel anyway, as I have a chorus of your children scream a cheerful tune."*

– Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner, negotiating the end of the Fourth Goblin Rebellion

I had a mildly amusing comment about Warlock's unexpected longevity and lack of tan on the tip of my tongue, but I smothered it without missing a beat. Masego, looking at what most likely his second father – the incubus known to me as Tikoloshe – had cast to his face I'd never seen before. He looked *betrayed*. I

squeezed his shoulder comfortingly, even though I didn't know the reason for his grief, and did not bother to ask whether or not he was certain of the incubus' identity. Hierophant was not in the habit of make assertions unless he was certain of them.

"Why?" Masego murmured. "He knows I've been trying to piece it all together for years. Gods, what practitioner from the Wasteland hasn't? He was there. He saw it with his own eyes."

He hadn't raised his voice, and in a way that worried me more. Anger I knew well, and how to soothe it. Whatever... this was, I was poorly equipped to handle it.

"He might have been trying to protect you," I ventured.

His hand whipped out and a streak of flame tore through half a dozen soldiers, burning bright blue.

"I am not a child, Catherine," he hissed, "I do not need to be coddled. Refusal I could forgive, but to force *ignorance* upon me? As if I was some meddling hedge mage about to blow his fingers off. As if I was incapable of grasping my own limits."

I heard Hakram stepping lightly behind us, having finally caught up, but without turning I raised my hand and signalled for him to withdraw. More people would only be adding oil to an already volatile brew.

"We don't know for sure he saw whatever ritual wrecked Keter," I said. "He could have been dispersed before that."

"Don't try to appease me," he said, turning to me with a burning glare whose radiance singed the eye cloth over it. "Papa has never been dispersed. His consciousness has been uninterrupted for millennia without a single return to the original shapelessness. His contract ended or he succeeded at slipping the leash."

"Either of which could have happened before the ritual," I pointed out.

"He wouldn't have just left, even then," Masego yelled, to my honest surprise. "He's a deterministic being, Catherine. It would have gone against his nature to flee for a position of influence. Devils *like* being in Creation. It is the only place they can truly learn."

My knowledge of theology had never been all that deep and what I did remember was a little rusty, but I was fairly sure determinism was more or less another word for predestination. Which wasn't all that popular a teaching, in Callow, though it had some adherents in the southern parts of it. Mostly priests.

"You mean he wouldn't have been able to choose otherwise," I slowly said.

Normally even half an admission of ignorance would have been enough to bait him into a lecture. It was telling that he didn't even attempt one, only frowning in irritation instead.

"You don't understand," he said.

I kept my face and voice calm.

"If he didn't have a choice then," I said carefully, "he might not have had a choice in not telling you either."

"You don't understand, you fool," Masego sharply repeated. "I have desired to know the answers here for years. It is in Papa's nature to satisfy desires, and his binding should allow him to do so for our entire family within limits. That contract is one of the single most complex pieces of sorcery in existence, Catherine, Father spent *decades* crafting the closest to the ability to make choices a devil can possibly have. Which means either Father forbade him to speak to me, or..."

"He doesn't see you as family," I quietly said.

"I'm not sure which would be worse," the blind man weakly said. "That Father would bend his will against everything he taught me just to keep me in the dark, or that Papa never once thought of me as-"

His voice broke. I winced, sliding an arm around his shoulders and tugging him close. It was awkward hugging him, since he was noticeable taller than me and just stood there like a dead fish.

"Come on," I murmured. "There's a lot we still don't know, Masego. Don't come to conclusions too early."

Slowly, he came to rest his forehead on my shoulder. Gods, the angle must have been Hells on his neck.

"He might have been faking this entire time," he muttered into my tunic. "Since the moment I was adopted. My first memories. Just playing the role, for Father's pleasure."

I'd always thought that Warlock and Tikoloshe had done a decent job of raising Masego, for Praesi anyway. He'd had a golden childhood that taught him to love learning, no real difficulties to face and if he hadn't come out of it with the sharpest moral compass in the world, well – there was only so much you could expect from Wastelanders. It was hard for me to understand something like having your entire childhood put to the question. The orphanage had not encouraged sentimentality. But I could understand, just a little bit, having your trust put on the

chopping block. He wasn't the only one with a complicated relationship with a Calamity. Masego withdrew eventually, tiring of my hands rubbing his back soothingly. His face was dry, of course. The day that saw him gain Summer eyes had cauterized his tear ducts as well.

"It doesn't matter," he said through gritted teeth, smoothing his robes. "They can hide secrets from me, but they cannot prevent me from learning on my own."

"You want to continue looking at his," I guessed, eyes turning to the battle still unfolding around us.

Now that the ruby-crowned king was dead, it had turned into a rout for the obsidian soldiers I assumed were ancient Keterans.

"Yes," Masego said with forced calm. "Tell Indrani the duel here is between two Named. That should hold her interest enough she does not chomp at the bit."

I grimaced. Fair enough. I didn't really want to spend any longer here than we had to, but if it got his head in order I'd compromise. There was a part of me, that whispering voice that never really went away, that noted this was perhaps the best occasion I would ever get to turn Hierophant against Warlock. To get him firmly on my side before the day of reckoning I knew deep in my bones was over the horizon came upon us. All I had to do was ruthlessly exploit the grief of one of my closest friends in the world. It would be for his own good, too. When the dust settled at the end of the Tenth Crusade, there was a real chance that close ties to Praes and the Calamities might get Masego killed. After Akua's Folly there would be wariness about powerful sorcerer Named, but if he had a war record of fighting against the Empire... I clenched my fingers and snapped that voice's neck before burying it in a shallow grave. I was not above manipulating Masego. I would own up to that. But if I did, it would only ever be to help him. Not to rip away all his ties but those that kept him at my side.

"I'll speak to the others," I said quietly. "Don't do anything dangerous. I'll be back as soon as possible."

He did not answer, light already blooming around his fingers as his face hardened and he began tracing runes. I took that for the dismissal it was.

—

"He's been at it for at least twelve hours straight," Hakram said.

The worry in his tone was subtle enough a stranger wouldn't have caught it. It was plain as day to me. The two of us stood at the

edge of our makeshift camp – raised far enough from the main engagement that at the peak of the battle the war cries wouldn't wake us – and watched Masego's lone silhouette. He'd not eaten since he began. Indrani had tried to bring him bread and water, but she'd run into a transparent pane of power she'd not been able to break through. Her screaming had gone unnoticed as well. He'd killed the sound from outside the boundary, was my guess.

"He hasn't even sat down once," I grimaced. "And he's been using sorcery the entire time. Named or not, he should be about to collapse."

"We'll pick him up when he does," the orc sighed. "Put him in Zombie and get away from here while he's unconscious. This is unhealthy."

"He's always been prone to obsession," I admitted. "We all are, but he's further down that slope than any of us."

"This is different, Cat," Hakram said. "If he begins a trance when studying spellcraft, we can ease him out of it after a few hours. Even Thief knows how, and she's known him the shortest. But putting up wards to keep us out? He's never gone that deep before."

"Family fucks you up," I said. "So I've heard, anyway."

"We're what he has," the orc told me. "His fathers let him loose after he joined us, and you've heard the same stories I have. They were always highly permissive, even when he was a child. If we don't keep him at an even keel, there's no one else."

I passed a hand through my hair tiredly.

"You know comfort's not my strong point," I admitted.

"He doesn't need a friend," Hakram replied. "He needs someone to tell him it's enough. A figure of authority."

I glanced at the tall orc uncomfortably.

"That's not really how I've run the Woe," I said.

"And you were right to do so," Adjutant said. "A heavier hand would have alienated Archer and Thief before they joined us. But Hierophant is Praesi. He was raised by the Calamities, Catherine. He understands, instinctively, that in a band of Named there is someone who gives orders. That is you."

"It's one thing to give orders on a battlefield, Hakram," I said sharply. "It's another to pull strings off of it, in private matters. I won't pretend we're equals in all things, but I try not to tell any of you how to live your lives unless I can't avoid it."



The orc's dark eyes flicked at Masego's lonely silhouette.

"And does he look to you," he said calmly, "like he benefits from this restraint?"

I grit my teeth.

"You're not *tools*, Hakram," I said. "I won't shape all of you into something more useful to me. That's not a road I'll wander down, ever."

"There is a difference between intervening for our sakes and self-serving manipulation," he gravelled. "You pretend not to know this, because asserting the authority you were given of us makes you uncomfortable. That is one of the most selfish, disparaging things I've ever seen you do. Do you think we swore oaths and made pacts because we were swindled? That you tricked us into putting faith in you? Are you the only one of us that can extend trust?"

"That's not what I said," I replied.

"Words are nothing," the orc said. "Actions speak louder, and the decision not to act is an act of itself."

My fingers clenched and I glared at Adjutant.

"And my judgement's always worked out so well, has it?" I hissed. "I carry an entire *funeral procession* of blunders behind me, Hakram. One of the most recent got a hundred thousand people kill, and we're heading towards a place where I might just top that."

"We all sat there, in the room," the orc said. "We heard the same arguments. We know the same truths, and the plan they spawned. Yet here we all are, travelling with you. Did you somehow enslave us without my noticing? All of us chose to be one of the Woe, Catherine, knowing full well what that meant. Our hands have not been forced."

I always hated arguing with Hakram. He was so infuriatingly calm and reasonable.

"Fine," I said. "I'll tell him to cut it out."

Adjutant raised his hand to stop me.

"Do not bury this," he said. "Pretend it was the argument of a single instance and move forward as before. I care nothing for your crown, Warlord. Or whose apprentice you were. I put my trust in *you*, as did the others. You do all disservice by acting as if it was a mistake to do so."

My lips thinned and I met his eyes. He'd only ever called me by the old orc title when it was a matter of utter seriousness we spoke of. Which meant he'd been sitting on this for a while, waiting for the right moment to bring it up. Reluctantly, I nodded. His hand went down, and I strode for Masego's one-mage lightshow. I felt the wards even though I couldn't see them. My fingers trailed across their surface, transparent sorcery forming wherever my hand touched. I rapped my knuckles once, but it was like hitting a solid wall. I heard Indrani turn towards me in the distance, but did not look. Breaking the wards might hurt Masego, so I'd have to show a little moderation. I seized Winter, wove its power into a maul of ice tall as I was and grasped the handle. I squared my footing more out of habit than true need: the construct was light as a feather to me. I smashed it into the ward once, twice, thrice before Hierophant finally stopped tracing runes long enough to look at me. Dropping the maul, I gestured for him to end the ward. He shook his head.

"Now," I said flatly.

He flinched. He tapped a sequence among the runes hovering around him and a door opened before me, made visible by the transparent power that formed the cadre of it. I walked in, dismissing the maul with a flick of the wrist.

"Catherine," he said. "I'm not hungry. There's no need to--"

"You've been at this for twelve hours, Masego," I said. "It's done. You rest, you eat, and then we discuss our next move."

"Not now," Hierophant said, "Not when I'm *so close*."

"To what?" I replied, eyebrow rising.

"Walking the true span of the echo," he told me. "Not true interaction, no, but the full witnessing of it. As if I were truly there."

I glanced sceptically at the ghostly battle.

"And?" I said. "What does this gain you?"

"This isn't an illusion, Catherine," he said. "It's a reflection of the state of Creation at specific points in time. The echo of an individual includes all that individual knew then. If I can carve out that knowledge and translate it into a form I can understand--"

"You'll learn a lot," I interrupted. "That's fine. You want to work on that project? I've got no objection. But you do it right. You sleep, you eat, you talk with the people who love you. And you do it at a rate that doesn't make a wreck out of you. There'll be more interesting shards deeper in anyway."

"It would only be a few more hours," he said.

"Then it won't matter where those are spent, will it?" I patiently said. "Or is there something specific to this shard that makes it easier to work with?"

He looked away. So there wasn't. I took him by the arm and dragged him until he began walking on his own.

"Come on," I said. "And while you're at it, you're apologizing to Indrani."

He frowned at me.

"What for?" he asked.

"That, for one," I grimly said.

*Godsdamnit Hakram.* It'd be easier to be angry at him if he wasn't right so often.

—

We moved forward, to everyone but Masego's relief. The five of us had taken to talking as we passed through the landscapes, trying to piece together the story unfolding. It was made more difficult by our inability to tell the sequence the shards took place in, which even Hierophant admitted he was unable to discern. That spawned the game of 'tell me how Keter fell', which allowed us to whittle away the hours as we walked. We tried, one at a time, to piece together what we'd seen into a coherent sequence.

"All right, bear with me on this one," Indrani announced.

I sighed at the sight of the silver flask in her hand. It was barely noon – probably – but I was less appalled by the drinking than by the fact that she seemed to have an endless supply of booze. Where the Hells was she keeping it all? If Thief had been holding the liquor, she wouldn't offer it up nearly that often.

"Do we have a choice?" Vivienne drily asked.

"Don't you drag theology into this, Dartwick," Archer drawled. "Anyway, this is how Keter fell. So there was a witch queen with a nice big mace, but she was a woman with *needs*. So she hit up the King of Keter and she made the bedroom eyes, but he was weird about it. You know, have her the brush off. So then—"

"No," I said.

"No," Hakram agreed.

"Gods no," Vivienne muttered.

"Seems unlikely," Masego conceded.

"You're all joyless," Indrani complained. "Mine had everything. A lovers' spat, sex and violence and revenge. It was going to be worthy of song."

"For mouthing off after your turn was ended, you get skipped next go around," Vivienne noted.

Archer muttered something sounding pretty insulting under her breath, though I didn't recognize the language.

"Hakram?" I said.

"This is how Keter fell," Adjutant gravelled. "There was a plague in the borderlands of the kingdom that took a great toll. The queen of the iron men saw weakness and struck with raids, only to find the soldiers of Keter weak. She assembled more men and invaded the kingdom, forcing battle and slaying the king on the field."

We'd seen more and more plague shards over the last two days, so he might actually be right. Only towns and villages so far, though, we'd found no city being afflicted. The battles were becoming more frequent as well, though few were as large as the one where Masego had found his father. After a few days passed Hierophant was forced to admit that a mere few hours before his breakthrough had been an optimistic assessment. He still spent most of his downtime working on his 'witnessing', but we'd all gotten used to hearing he was going to finish it any moment now. We saw our first Keteran victories, most of them won through sorcery. The sorcerers gathered in small cabals and struck with rituals, the brutality of them increasing the farther we went in. Lightning and fire were traded for spells that boiled blood or broke minds, and once or twice we even saw the Keterans fielding devils of their own.

Small numbers, and not particularly impressive specimens. Closer to imps than the Wasteland's favoured meat shields the *akalibsa* and *walin-falme*. Hierophant dismissed those we saw as being from some of the easiest Hells to reach, and noted that diabolism as a branch of sorcery was one of the magical disciplines that benefitted the most from the passing of years. It had taken centuries for the Praesi to accumulate names to call on and to learn the secrets of the most useful Hells, the line of every High Lord building on the knowledge earned by the previous generation. His assessment was that diabolism had not been a favoured sorcery of the Keterans, but that in their desperation they were turning to cheap solutions to turn the tide – like barely sentient devils that could be bound through simple shedding of blood.

"His successor, Trismegistus, found his kingdom on the verge of breaking as the iron men pushed further in," Hakram continued. "Rather than face defeat, he unleashed devils and turned the remainder of his people into undead to bring revenge unto the invaders."

He got a vote of agreement from everyone save a pouting Indrani, which was just enough to bar him from getting a swig of the bottle of aragh Thief had pulled out. Archer was a sore loser. Adjutant's story was the most believable so far, though the rest of us moved around the mosaic tiles again and again in order to see if something else fit better. We realized the underlying mistake the day after, when we encountered the most striking shard yet. We'd assumed we had all the necessary tiles to tell the story, you see. We were disabused of that notion when we found the first landscape out of Keter itself. It was the funeral of the king we'd watch die, his body tastefully covered by a shroud so the pulped head could not be seen by those attending. Among those present in the great crypt where the entombment took place was the young man I was fairly sure became the Dead King. Not because of anything he did, but because of who was talking to him. The face I didn't recognize, I'd admit. But the shoddy lute and the flask? Those I'd recognize anywhere.

They belonged to the Wandering Bard.

---

*PingleBerry*

The plot thickens

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

like the congealed blood gripping to the King's pulped head.

Delicious and nutritious.

*stevenneiman*

This is how Keter fell: The Bard decided she wanted an antagonist for her story, and she succeeded a little too well.

*NerfContessa*

Hahaha, you're not... Entirely wrong.

*goliath1303*

This story would objectively be better if you didn't comment. I have never ever, not even once heard somebody ask

for, be happy about, or regret not having gotten spoilers. Nobody has ever even mentioned something as tenuous as their cousin's sister's boyfriend's mom's personal trainer's second grade teacher saying that their third-cousin knew a guy whose best friend dated a girl that worked for a lady whose hairdresser hired a babysitter that used to work for a family who adopted a kid that liked the occasional minor spoiler. So why do it? It's weird, but your half assed "Here's a spoiler, but not really! It's more of a vague hint that gives away juuuuuust barely enough to piss you of. Go fuck yourself. :)" replies are almost wise than just outright saying what you're referring to.

*ruduen*

I'll admit. I was wondering when the Bard would peek their head in.

I didn't expect it to be here. This is... going to take a whole lot to reconcile into a whole. We don't know enough about sentient undead to have anything more than wild theories so far, so things are going to be crazy for a bit.

*RoflCat*

No, this is basically showing that the Bard had hands in the ascension of Dead King.

Y'know, an 'Evil' being cornered by 'Good', so time to pull out the Dooms Day Button.

And...well...Akua's sudden interests in redemption was...well, sudden, after all that she said about how she accepts being Evil.

A part of me hope I'm wrong and Akua is planning to double-cross Bard when she can and return to Cath's side just to 'redeem' herself in the eyes of her Empress, because just like how Fallen Heroes can relearn to be Good, Redeemed Villains can also go back to Evil.

*Byzantine*

Uh... What are you talking about?

*Dainpdf*

Uh, I don't think Akua is working with the Bard for a start.

*RanVor*

Well, not directly.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I can see that, Akua getting the Zuko from Airbender arc. It might be a stretch, but only a small one.

*Letouriste*

...what? Akua and the Bard didn't have contact since long before her death so I don't understand where you coming from:/ there is no link at all between them now

*Yotz*

What I'd like to know, is if WB are able to maintain a conversation with someone few hundred years away from and after her current point of incarnation. Entities who can step sideways from the curve have a tendency to show nasty surprises like that – though being able to oracle through possible futures helps in being able to converse with someone from down the stream.

*nerferf*

Yep, seems this was a set up

Bard must have needed a long term villain for the gods above to throw shit at and decided to take advantage of a gullible desperate new ruler to encourage down this path

Its becoming obvious the bard isn't on any side really but to keep the games in creation running to please the entertainment needs of the gods above and below

*Death Knight*

You might be onto something. Huh, maybe we've pegged her wrong then? She's not a Hero or a Villain; she's the weaver of tales. Some might go far enough to say she's EE's avatar in the story. Her Role is not to ensure the Heroes win, but rather to ensure there is always stories to be told. Almost all stories thrive on conflict. This means she's Catherine's True Enemy. Her Role makes her opposed to any and all notions of a long term peace between Good and Evil since a story bereft of conflict is no Story at all. Though this explanation still feels.."forced".

*nerferf*

Not really forced at all, we been getting tips told to us through out the book

We seen her arrange things to make the story exciting by giving boons to name on both sides at times, such as she had willy free the slaves instead of stopping aku getting that demon just so both can have advantage against cat, heck she even led willy to doing that ritual and helped aku to achieve that ritual by stopping those elves from killing her

And when she was forcing Hierarch to choose a side it seemed she was more annoyed that he was being boring and wanted him to actually start being entertaining for her audience than anything else

And look how he started his banishment of her in that same talk

"No," Anaxares said. "I know you, old thing. You are the sound of the lash, the deal in the dark. You are the servant of stillness. I deny all you peddle."

Seems she has a big hand in keeping the status quo,

I think black was just plain wrong about the nature of the bard as he does not know what we know and was trying to make sense of her with his limited view of things

*Just This Guy, Ya Know*

*Some might go far enough to say she's EE's avatar in the story.*

Given that the term weaver of tales might be considered an author and that EE's Name is Author, you just might be on to something.

*Dainpdf*

I think this is more along the lines of her fucking up a manipulation like she did with the Free Cities, or Black's theory is true and the Dead King is the counterpart Below got when Above got her.

*Jonnnney*

That's what I'm thinking. I'd guess she either pushed him towards his evil path thinking he would fail or she tried to turn his genius to the side of The Above and ended up pushing him the other way.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Heirch called her "stillness". I think that's accurate at this point. She works all the angles to keep everything in nice, predictable patterns.

Part of my wonders if she was originally a gnome, and her defeat will trigger a full Gnomish invasion or some-such.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)



Really? I see the Bard as Above's most cheatingest agent of cheating, first among all those being abused as tools by the choirs.

*Unorginal*

Shit, suddenly I'm feeling parallels between Indrani and she with a thousand faces (the bard.) I dearly hope I'm wrong.

*Unorginal*

Mind you the timing is all wrong for her to be Indrani unless the bard can do fuckery on an as of yet unforeseen level and basically mas the win button but the point still stands.

*Matthew*

You are. Indrani has the Archer powers. Bard has powers but they are explicitly story/genre savvy powers and her ability to stay drunk.

We know the bard can disappear. We know the bard changes faces (though not at will, seems that she just reboots periodically). We know the bard has the Cliff's notes to the story, (see her pointing out that the glass was poisoned by Assassin).

She can't fake combat powers.

*Unorginal*

Its heavily hinted at that Bard replaces people who fit the bill for her name, proof enough that you don't want character traits associated with her. but I'm not saying nor have said that Bard is Indrani, rather that I was stuck with a sudden sense of dread when I realize they shared character traits.

(honestly, I'm worried about her dying as a direct result of this.)

It could very well amount to nothing but since when has Archer had any aspects of name-related ways to store alcohol in large amounts and stay smashed?

*Matthew*

All Named can drink tons of alcohol without effect if they want to. It was established early that burning off poisons is a trick that all Named have.

*Unorginal*

Where is she storing it (the alcohol)? Burning out poisons is old-hat and has been noted before. There was the bottomless bag artifact/s that was mentioned by William

the lone swordsman as a way someone could store a truly ridiculous amount of alcohol but to my knowledge, Indrani doesn't have one.

### *haihappen*

Indrani does indeed behave strangely: conjuring drink from anywhere and talking about composing songs. The Bard may or may not have Archer highjacked as a way to get into the meeting of the capital E support group. In this case she can probably be "exorcised" or will leave by herself when the damage is done. Not "If", "When".

### *Coincidence*

Have we ever seen Archer and the Wandering Bard together?  
Are we sure this is really Archer and not Wandering Bard imitating her atm?

### *Death Knight*

She likely has a bag of holding. This was alluded to in book 3 when she and Masego were trying to kidnap a titled Summer fae.

### *Morgenstern*

Or maybe she got her hands on the "Endless Flask" of WB herself after Willy's group was disbanded / somehow got it from Thief? Who knows...

And yes, I had those same vibes. Especially after she is now telling shitty style-stories, as if she weren't even trying (or trying rather slyly to be seen as "trying, but failing"); even though the theme and maybe even the shitty style do still fit Archer. There are some bad parallels. But really, that exact same thought of "oh shite, can WB hijack \*anyone's\* mind / wear \*anyone's\* guise after all?" entered my mind after that first paragraph noting how Archer seems to suddenly have an endless supply of alcohol, BEFORE I read further on. At least now I know it wasn't only me. ^^

---

"I sighed at the sight of the silver flask in her hand. It was barely noon – probably – but I was less appalled by the drinking than by the fact that she seemed to have an endless supply of booze. Where the Hells was she keeping it all? If Thief had been

holding the liquor, she wouldn't offer it up nearly that often."

### *Morgenstern*

On a more logical than emotional note, this really CAN'T be the same flask – or Cat has a majory illogical blind spot, noting she'd know that flask anywhere only a few paragraphs later, but NOT recognizing it if that were really what Indrani was taking a swig from seemingly only minutes before...

### *Death Knight*

Or more mundanely, she simply has a vat of alcohol somewhere that's always kept full by people she pays. Then she hired a mage to create a syphon at the bottom that is tied to her flask always allowing it to be filled. Warlock did something similar when he and Black were stomping down the baronesses who backed William. He placed a syphon at the bottom of Black's glass that emptied it into his own so this is definitely not impossible. The only snag might be the distance required to maintain the connection.

### *DigitalCaesar*

Description of Wandering Bard at her last appearance in he Hierarch portion of the Epilogue:

"The stranger drank loudly from a **\*\*silver flask\*\*** before turning to him, and when he saw her face he recognized her. Aoede of Nicae. The Wandering Bard."

From this chapter, Archaic:

"I sighed at the sight of the **\*\*silver flask\*** in her hand. It was barely noon – probably – but I was less appalled by the drinking than by the fact that she seemed to have an endless supply of booze. Where the Hells was she keeping it all?"

Relieved I'm not the only one worried. But it is weird that she recognized the flask from past-Bard, so if it is the same flask with Archer she should notice. Maybe just a slip up on EE's part with the description, but it's def weird.

### *Jonnnney*

They both fill roughly the same out of combat role in a 5 man Named band. The Comic relief/obnoxious lecherous drunks rarely

dies first. The main difference is the bard is doing it on purpose while Archer is just having fun.

*Matthew*

Further proof that this is a bad idea.

The proper end game is for Black, Cat, and the Heirarch to work against the story.

*Dainpdf*

Black is more the sort to sidestep the story then work actively against it, and Hierarch does not play well with foreign despots.

*MetruX*

Hierarch is a tool and Black has so many death flags that he will end up unNamed if he can survive the end of the story. Both seem unlikely as allies for her, besides, great leaders make their followers greater, so I'd rather guess Cat will bring most, if not all, of her Woe to greater lengths. I mean, Adjutant doesn't trully need to grow in power, but he should grow in technique, while Masego is already the most powerfull of the band, after the Name transition. Both Thief and Archer can be seen as intermediary Names, and thus can grow, or simply grow without changing Names, like Assassin and Captain, and probably Adjutant. Thus, although they still seem like underdogs, when compared to the big guys, if you look al the way they came... And all the potential they still have... The Woe will serve her better than uniting with big figures.

*d\_o\_l*

Oh excellent, I was hoping she'd show up in this arc.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

TOLD YOU the Bard was talking about the Dead King when she talked to the Hiearch about "not minding layabouts on the board, so long as she placed them there!"

*Aeon*

Baaaaaaaard! I want to see her get forced into an actual fight. So, did she kickstart the Dead King so all of Good would have a true enemy? How many crusades have there been aimed directly at Keter again?

[Javvies](#)

The last 4, IIRC, after 2 failed Crusades against the same Dread Emperor.

*Unorginal*

More than just that I think, with it being hinted that some crusades were eaten by demons and forgotten (or were so minor that it was natural to skip over naming them.)

---

The author has all but confirmed that about the ninth one:  
[https://old.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/8d2n8g/mysterious\\_9th\\_crusade/dyl5fyi/](https://old.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/8d2n8g/mysterious_9th_crusade/dyl5fyi/)

*Javvies*

Oh. Oh man.

The Wandering Bard had a hand in creating the Dead King?

That's huge.

I mean, I had thought that the Bard was what Good created in answer to the Dead King, but to find that the Bard is connected to his origin?

*Matthew*

Maybe its to anchor the evil pole of the continuum.... Like people are people and in shades of gray, By creating the Dead King, it means there is a true capital E evil that the rest can be measured against.

*RoflCat*

She seem be an agent of Above, sent to basically ensure this cycle of Good vs Evil (and that Good win in the end) keep going.

Basically Above want this rigged pissing match to keep on going and sent a Story Police to ensure it never ends (it'd be why Bard seem to focus so much on the Practical Evils, because they're trying to break the cycle, and why she seem shocked by Hierarch's refusal of the call)

*Cicero*

Or... it's possible that this was the very first iteration of the Wandering Bard, and she had not yet become a Name, but her interaction in the drama that created the Dead King also resulted in the Heavens deciding they needed their own Immortal Named to combat him, and who better than the poor wandering bard heroine who got tragically caught up in whole mess.

Somehow I feel the Wandering Bard did not get a vote..

*Dainpdf*

See Black theorizing that the only two things great enough that Below could have gotten in exchange for the Bard were the Dead King and Triumphant, and the latter wasn't likely. This all but confirms it was the former.

*Cicero*

Yes, but Black was assuming that the Heavens got the Bard first. Who is to say that it wasn't the other way around? I mean, it does tend to be the villains who attempt the super weapon, gain ultimate power, etc followed by the heroes getting a counter to that.

*Dainpdf*

Eh. We'll know whether the chicken or the egg came first soon.

*Metrux*

It isn't uncommon for major enemies to be active in each others "birth" of "growth". It's a much used trope in video game rpgs, for exemple, and in both Harry Potter and Eragon, in books, so... It comes as no surprise for me that she was there when he became what he is.

*Jane*

Aw, how cute, Cat pretending to have a conscience ♥ !

Joking aside (yes, I acknowledge Cat really does have a conscience, that's pretty much the entire point of the series), now we have firm confirmation that the Wandering Bard is a truly *ancient* monster who is intimately involved with the story of the Dead King. It's been a theory banded around for a long time, but now we have firm proof.

*Jane*

Oh, hm, I didn't realize that brought up an actual graphical heart. That's... A totally different tone than the textual heart offers.

*Metrux*

How did you make this heart? o.o

*Jane*

A < and a 3 shmooshed together.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

BAAARRRDDDD!!!!!! What did you mess up this time Bard?

*Someguy*

Ah, no wonder he was bound as a Plot Flag. Any Alliance with him will be an opening for Wandering Bard to come in and muck things up. That's a major reason not to ally with him.

*Metrux*

The Bard is already against her, and if they trully are equivalent it's a reason TO ALLY with him, since it's simply using a counter. When you fight against fire, you want water to your side, and vice versa.

*Barthumphries*

Typo thread

Masego, looking at what most likely his second father – the incubus known to me as Tikoloshe – had cast to his face I'd never seen before.

Add "a" before "cast"

Hierophant was not in the habit of make assertions unless he was certain of them.

Change make to making

And there was another typo but I'm just a volunteer and on mobile tonight so it was difficult to copy/paste multiple things.

*Morgenstern*

Masego, looking at what most likely his second father

This sentence also lacks a verb... e.g. " ... what WAS most likely ... "

*nimelennar*

"That should hold her interest enough she does not chomp at the bit."

Should be "champ at the bit."

*Gunslinger*

Well looks like the people on the guide reddit speculating that the dead king was the bard's play were right indeed.

Ohh and don't let Masego down again. Go vote for the guide on <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Byzantine*

Masego did miss one possibility: His father was bound from ever talking about it long before they ever met. Perhaps as a result of the backlash from Keter's due.

*John Smith*

Triumphant fucking wept, Bard, what did you do?

Did you make a Dark Lord and his Mordor just to add flagor to the setting?

That fantastically horrifying.

*edrey*

both sides use devils so both must be evil, but after that great ritual those ancient lycaonses turned good because they needed the miracles to survive  
for one the bard make a plan and backfire or is her first time, but that its odd because to manipulate both she first need to travel and shouldnt be that powerfull at the time then its the first choice, so since when she is playing? and what is the plan of the gods to taker her down?

*Yotz*

Possibly not evil per se, just desperate enough to try "for the Greater Good" approach – "end justifies the means" and all that nonsense. Which inevitably led one side to the ultimate downfall, and the other to the eternity of atonement for the transgressions past.

*Metrux*

Uhh... The side of the queen has never used Devils. Only Keter has. So this theory is simply moot.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Nope. 'Loshe was summoned by a witch queen of the people who later became Cordelia's ancestors. Probably even the very one with the impressively big mace.

Which means this was either Evil vs Evil... Or just Blue vs Orange vs a spectrum of Greys... before somebody (glances at the Bard) brought out the charcoal and whitewash.

*Metrux*

He explicitly says he was first summoned in the period in which a Witch Queen grew dissatisfied with her husbands. It was never even mentioned if he was involved in such confrontation, and as we see him in the episode he is fighting at the side of Keter.



### [Euodiachloris](#)

It's not clear which side he's on. And, I'd put money on his contract/bonds being passed amongst a specific clan of Witch Queens, even if he got memory wiped/ smashed to bits by resummon/ horrendous abuse of the shackles each time.

Mainly because I know my tokoloshe tales, and that's one of the most common of the sex slave type. 😞

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Reasons why I suspect a standard shape to the tale: 'Loshe slipped the leash and was able to grow (the standard "good", bittersweet ending for a freed, blood-bound tokoloshe – note "bittersweet", and "good" – even a happy end where the tokoloshe doesn't wind up rendered down for muti and the kids are saved will hold loss and tragedy for the tokoloshe), the love of deserts (salt is anathema to a tokoloshe; they are also often described as gluttonous if not controlled properly), lemons = bittersweet, happy daddy (tokoloshes love kids, even if they love them in a way that isn't human caring), troll (having Wekesa be a prankster is a massive plus for 'Loshe). Betcha 'Loshe has little love of heights, hates chains, avoids ochre/clay and despises being forced to stay unwashed, untidy or dirty. Probably is fine with electricity, though. Storms are an old friend and thunderbirds partners in some kinds of crime.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Another PS – 'Loshe also happens to be my guess for who Assassin actually is. Shapeshifting, nasty sense of pranking, ironic "artwork" when killing, invisibility (whether through use of the classic under-the-tongue/ stomach stone or not), preferring to hide/stay in the dark and able to get anywhere? Hello...

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Another PS: you can slice, shoot and try to burn or freeze a tokoloshe, but it won't work. They will still come at you Terminator-style. But, one way to stop them is: smash their limbs. It's how they are controlled/ made in the first place, and it's the one kind of torture they are sensitized to. Say, by using... a very big stick/ mace.

Hmmmm..... Witch + stick + tokoloshe + very large, tragic event involving a lot of death that may not be what it appears to be on the surface... We have maximum TT!

*Dainpdf*

So I guess this confirms that the Bard and the Dead King became who they are at about the same time, as counterbalance to each other. Black was right (big surprise)!

*CaptainSemantics*

I'm now envisioning this conversation with the dead king:

Cat: So what exactly DID happen to Keter?

Dead King: Well there was a witch queen with a nice big mace, but she was a woman with needs. So she hit up the King of Keter and she made the bedroom eyes, but he was weird about it –

The entire Woe: Noooooooooo

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

I really hope that's the truth. EE would certainly be up to the task of coming up with an even better canon explanation, but I truly hope that this is the foreshadowing you're saying it is.

*Nethermore*

Hmm, a number of possibilities there.

The Dead King was mentioned as Evil's counterweight to good's OP Bard, so the Bard might have known that such a thing was incoming and helped it happen in a convenient, relatively isolated location and with a central Named who wouldn't try to conquer the world. Without interference, maybe a super-Villain would have risen in a Good nation, turned it, and become a problem demanding more resources and attention than the Kingdom of the Dead.

Bard might also have just fucked up, lol. Seems likely that she's still relatively young here, because if the Dead King is her counterweight then Evil would have tried to develop it ASAP after the Bard appeared.

Also, even if Bard hadn't been aware of the need for an Evil counterweight, creating the Kingdom of the Dead might still have looked like a reasonable calculation:

- the kingdom was already evil-aligned (devil summoning), so nothing lost there
- the horror and threat would likely stabilize Good-alignment of what would later become the bordering proceran principalities.
- consider how many crusades were launched against the Kingdom of the Dead. Obviously its creation allowed for unprecedented unity of purpose in the Good-aligned nations. That none of those crusades were wins might have been Bard's miscalculation, or just part of the long con.

RanVor

It looked to me like they only started to summon devils in order to combat the iron men (presumably the Lycaonese).

WuseMajor

Honestly, what worries me most here is that Masego might actually succeed at his working and end up being "possessed" by the Bard. Possibly as a result of Cat's orders to find out what she knows.

RanVor

Does anyone else find it not surprising that almost every time a horrific atrocity happens somewhere in Calernia the Bard is somehow connected to it?

[Fuodiachloris](#)

Totally not surprised. It's like she's been playing both sides against each other, or something. 😊

I think there's a reason Karios is being \*very\* indirect in trying to evade/spike/killll her, while still being very careful to stay under her radar by looking so very much like the Classic Evil™ she can easily manipulate. It's quite easy to keep her focused on Team Practical Evil if they look like the bigger threat to her shell game, and he like the biggest chump who ever cackled while twirling a moustache.

It's a pincer manoeuvre by whatever Is in that crypt that's plugged into whichever side of the Gods or Creation.

[Antony444](#)

Well, it looks like Black's theory has been validated. The Wandering is indeed at least as old if not older than the Dread King. So Triumphant wasn't the intervention of the Gods Below.

The shape of the ancient story is fascinating, especially given the symmetry of the present. We have a Lycaoenese on Procer's throne, waging war against Evil nations. Granted Cordelia is not a witch-king or any kind of sorceress, but she is an opportunist, striking her enemies once they have been weakened.

No wonder the Dread King wouldn't hesitate much about striking the Crusaders...

Next time Tikoloshe, Wekesa and Masego are in the same room, the conversation is definitely awkward and unpleasant...

[NZPIEFACE](#)

ffs bard, you're actually evil, right?

Chaotic Evil.

*Jonnney*

There is no good and evil, just above and below.

### NZPIEFACE

Let's take a step back from this series and look at it from a DnD perspective. This shit is definitely Chaotic Evil.

>Stopping elves that want to kill someone instigating the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

>Starting the legacy of the Dead King.

*Yotz*

More like a True Neutral – an active agent of Balance. She knows exactly the measure of Good and Evil in the world and never hesitates to add more to even the scales.

Which leads to a possibility of WB being not from Above or Below, but of Creation itself – for Creation strives to be, but will inevitably cease if one of the Players will ever achieve a formal victory. Definitely explains utterly inhumane nature of WB's name – result of a blind idiot god trying to influence things it would never consciously comprehend through an agent who feels nothing but contempt towards the master.

Oh, hai there, Nyarly!

---

A couple of comments:

First, I find it strange that the attributes like the lute and the flask persist even though those objects were bound to evolve with the progress of technology on Calernia, slow as it is.

Second, there's something I missed writing my latest wall of text (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/07/06/chapter-27-into-dusk/#comment-18383>): Masego acts as if he didn't know about the very possibility of such a reflection happening, and confirms in this chapter that he wasn't told anything about it. Yet in book III, interlude Calamity I Warlock states:  
> even millennia past that man's apotheosis mages still sifted through the remains of his reign to advance their craft.  
What are the chances that this whole landscape was what he has talking about? What would push Wekesa to conceal an entire field of research from his son?

Third, if the entirety of the fallout of this conflict (the Evil kingdom of Keter turned into a Wasteland, the Dead King becoming a major enough villain to empower the Bard by symmetry but

getting trapped in his hell, the Lycaonese turning to Gods Above for protection after their Evil witch-queen was slain along with most troops loyal to her) was a plot of the Bard, what are the odds that she decided to write Keter off because it bordered three “irredeemably” Evil nations (Chain of Hunger, Everdark and the Deoraithe who used stuff like necromancy and more underhanded strategies, only turning Good similarly to the Lycaonese after being driven into territory where they bordered the Miezans (or the Empire), and so could keep them fighting each other instead of the Good nations?

### NZPIEFACE

We already know that Echos reflect Calernia at specific points in time, but what if the nature of a name is timeless? Wandering Bard could just be what they perceive her to be, from a more modern perspective of her persona. Just like how Arcadia changes based on who is viewing it, what if WB adapts like that too, and is one of the reasons why she’s never the same and is always existing in the world.

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

This isn’t consistent, I’m pretty sure the Bard’s facial features change along with her name, therefore how do they recognize her?

### NZPIEFACE

Shitty lute and sack of alcohol. Somethings stick to the name.

### *Morgenstern*

According to what the author presents as Cat’s view/“certainty”: THAT flask and lute that Cat (thinks she) would recognize anywhere.

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Ah, thanks, my brain went “haha, we got him” and I couldn’t think about anything else.

### HappyNap

Fun fact – in chapter 8, Catherine said she would regret stabbing a bard. Lols.

“I didn’t know if I had it in me to stab a Bard, honestly. The were always charmingly ineffective in the stories, it would have been like kicking a puppy.”

A vote for the Guide is a vote to stab a Bard

### HappyNap

On a more serious note, I've been thinking about how to kill the Wandering Bard, since I've started re-reading the series two days ago.

I haven't gotten to that part yet, but there is a moment where William and Vivienne talks, and they discuss how the Bumbling Conjuror died and not the Bard, where one of them points out that the Bard makes her presence more "known" to the story.

That could be the Bards weakness – being pushed out of the story, so she doesn't have any narrative presence to save her – and thus her "disappearance" aspect doesn't kick in, and Cat can finally stab her, repeatedly, through the eyes.

Or I'm just a madman who's raving. Who knows

*MetruX*

Well, isn't this kind of what happened when the Hierarch denied her? My theory is that he unwittingly banished her, in a temporary fashion, and that is why she's not present at this time in the Story. That becomes even more certain as you think on a writer's perspective: all you show must be relevant, since you have limits to time and effort to put into a book. And both Hierarch and the Tyrant of Hellike are the only two shown that have no connection to Cat, even the White Knight is the enemy of her tutor and his actions shaped Cat's fight with Black, while all that was shown of the Tyrant was specifically to make the Hierarch. I don't think this coincidence... He has a special place in the Plot.

---

Vivienne also mentioned her never taking a wound she wasn't directly responsible for. Hierarch took advantage of this, along with the fact that she was his subject at the moment, and that the Tyrant conned her into playing a Role of a mastermind (as opposed to Kairos himself on the side of the League of Free Cities and traditional Evil, and Black on the side of the Empire and practical Evil).

They need to find someone whose course of action she changed directly (like the two Emerald Swords, or maybe have Hanno Recall William in full so they can convince him to call her out on leading him, Bumbling Conjuror and Exiled Prince to their deaths), something that would allow to actually exert authority/power on her (like Hanno's judgement coin, or give Larat the crown of whatever place her new body will come from), and lock her into a Role that ends differently from "and then the narrator closed the book and wished everyone good night".

*Dakota*

Everybody wondering if the wb had a hand in creating the dead king should ask what if it's the other way around what if the same cataclysm that created the king and limits his interaction with the world also threw the bard into her current state

*chris S*

Inb4 the Bard addresses Cat and the Woe in this echo.

Either directly or through good old fashioned "I'm having a conversation with you but the words are actually for the person watching this hundreds of years from now"

*Death Knight*

Desmond.

*Booksie*

Oh gosh. I'm really hoping Archer's drinking habit doesn't mean that she's the Wandering Bard.

I've started seeing patterns that I hope aren't there. She's talking about songs, infinite booze, no one has seen the bard. Ugh.

*burguulkodar*

Very interesting, I'm thoroughly enjoying this excursion to Keter's past (and so many of the World's truth subtly besides).

I always wondered how Keter can win against crusades over and over. People like the Grey Pilgrim and the Saint of Swords seem like they would wreck the whole place by themselves. We also know if you have like 5 heroes, no amount of undead hordes can kill them off. So why isn't the Dead King gone by now?

It can be just a narrative thing, since a King of the Dead is something very strongly needed in every horror story, as a Big Bad, but there's the Everdark and Praes has been a more constant (and alive) big bad than Keter... I can only assume there's much we are not aware.

*Poetically Psychotic*

Well then. That pretty much nixes the idea that Triumphant was the Wandering Bard's counterpart, not that that was the more likely of the choices regardless.

I wonder if she was granted her heavenly immortality as a reward for her actions here, or as a punishment?

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## Chapter 29: Sixth

*"Don't be absurd, Black Knight. It would have been called treason if I'd lost – this is merely succession."*

– Dread Emperor Vile the First

It was a striking scene.

The crypt itself was the part worthiest of awe, I decided. The arched ceiling was covered in silver set with glittering jewels where stars would have been on the night sky. There was no light within save for their shine and a ring of bound sprites serving as magelights. The fallen king was being set down in a tomb with his likeness sculpted atop the lid, men and women wearing copper circlets on their brows lowering him gently. There were low whispers in a smattering of tongues I did not know, but the funeral was a hushed affair. I did not linger to watch when the orations began after the lid was shut, instead approaching the sight that had set my blood running cold. The Wandering Bard looked prettier than I'd ever seen her. Tanned and full of life, she wore red and silver robes instead of the usual stained leathers. The lute was set across her lap in the shadowed alcove where she sat, and she pulled at her flask between exchanges with the young man standing next to her. Him I took my time studying. How often did one get to have a glimpse of the Dead King before he earned that Name?

I'd expected him to be darkly handsome or strikingly ugly, but he was nothing of the sort. Pale, even compared to the other Keterans, but not near corpse-like the way Black was. More like a scholar who did not see much of the sun. He had bushy eyebrows and full lips set on an unremarkable face, the only striking part of him the light brown eyes that looked almost golden in the magelight glow. He looked like a scholar, I thought. One only an inch taller than me, though few of the Keterans were tall. No real muscle to his frame, though his hands were surprisingly calloused. The copper circle on his brow was even more slender than those I'd seen on the other royals. A mark of status? Perhaps. The others *had* looked older, they might be higher in the line of succession. Or he might have been from another branch of the royal family. Hard to tell when I knew nothing about how the kingdom was ruled. Even without understanding the words he spoke, I found his voice compelling. Calm and deep, it felt almost soothing. It was hard to tell much about intonation in a foreign language – everything spoken in Kharsum sounded like a threat, for example – but he did not seem worried or surprised by the Bard's presence.



Had he known her? Had she been involved in the fall of Keter from the beginning?

"You're sure it's her?" Hakram quietly asked.

I'd been so lost in contemplation I hadn't even heard the orc approaching. I nodded without a word.

"The lute and the flask," I said. "It's her."

"They both look different than at Summerholm," Adjutant said.

I blinked and glanced back at the Bard. He was right, I realized with a start. The flask was still of that same strange curved shape, but instead of old scuffed iron it was freshly-polished copper. The lute was not of the same wood, this one paler, and the strings looked different. Animal tendons of some sort.

"The substance changed," I murmured. "But the shape hasn't. There's something to that."

"Named tend to have symbols and artefacts associated to them," Hakram noted. "Save for the Carrion Lord, though the loss seems to have been made up in epithets. The lute and flask could be hers."

"Malicia warned me they'd moved the Bard to the Empire's official kill list, after the war in the Free Cities," I said. "I thought Black was talking her up too much because she pulled one over him but I'm starting to see his point, if she's had her fingers plucking strings this far back."

"We don't know for certain her consciousness has been uninterrupted all this time," Adjutant cautioned.

"You read the transcripts Black sent us," I grunted. "Hells, I've had you lug around the threat assessment he had delivered to the palace – half a book's worth of scrolls, in records and theories. She made references to events long before she popped out of the woodworks as Aoede of Nicae. That's at least two or three incarnations. It's an assumption to say she's been at it this whole time, sure, but it's not a *bad* one."

"Yes," Hakram agreed quietly. "And the voluntary sharing of that secret worries me, Cat. It would have been a sharp blade, if kept hidden. Why did she not keep the knife in the dark?"

Yeah, there was that. If there was a meddling face-changing immortal wandering around the continent, why had no one ever written anything about it? Names tended to grow stronger – if also more restrictive – the more stories were associated with them. She would have had thousands of years to build herself up into something pretty much untouchable. And even if *she* wanted to

keep quiet and stay behind the curtains, it struck me as dubious that every single hero she'd helped had kept quiet about. Over the years, there was bound to have at least one blabbermouth that fucked up. *Unless Above ordered them to keep quiet*, I frowned. That was... plausible. Didn't explain why no Dread Emperor had ever tried to get out the word there was an opponent on the field of that calibre, after being beaten or figuring it out. I was smelling a rat her.

"That," I slowly said, "is a very good question. If she's been underfoot this whole time and no one was onto her, why did she let that out of the bag *now*? What changed?"

The tall orc by my side considered the two legends speaking before us and clicked his teeth in discomfort.

"I suspect," Hakram said, "that knowledge of their words would bring more questions than answers."

"This is too big to walk past," I told him. "Masego will have his hours. Tell the others we're setting camp."

I stayed there a while longer, watching the Wandering Bard laugh at something Calernia's incipient greatest monster had said. I shivered at the sight. I felt like they were sharing a joke that no one else could understand.

I was really coming to hate that feeling.

—

"We cannot linger for too long, Catherine," Vivienne said. "I understand the draw of learning such a secret, but it will not help Callow withstand invasion."

I drank from the skin. Tough our supplies were beginning to run thin, at least there was no need to worry about going without water. I could fill the skin with ice with only a thought, then leave it to melt as the hours passed. Indrani had badgered me until I used the eldritch and fearsome powers of Winter to cool her wine, to no one's surprise. The indignity was somewhat alleviated by the fact that the first thing Juniper had ever told me after I claimed my mantle was that my ability to freeze things would ease strain on supplies for the Fifteenth. No one but Masego seemed to treat my usurpation of a demigod's power as anything but a source of free ice and entertainment unless I was actively killing people with it.

"We're putting all our bets on the Dead King, Vivienne," I disagreed. "An entity we know next to nothing about. We're carrying the finest offer our diplomats were able to put together, but we're still going into this *blind*."

"Whatever he might have been while living, millennia have passed," the dark-haired woman replied. "Any understanding gained would be highly dated."

"Undead can't change nearly as much as the living," I pointed out. "I'm guessing a lot will still apply."

"We trade guesswork for hours, then," Thief said flatly. "This is a gamble, let us not pretend otherwise. The decision was made on the assumption we would know little about our interlocutor. We might be able to change that, if Masego pulls through. To an extent. But we all agreed on the initial premise for a reason. Time is our most dangerous enemy, at the moment."

"I'm not saying we should spend a sennight here," I said. "But a few days? The payoff is worth the delay."

"If there is one," Vivienne sighed.

I looked at her closely. Of all the Woe she was probably the one who'd dealt with the restlessness of our journey the best. Even Hakram, island of calm that he was, happened to have a vague look of chagrin on his face now and then – like he was expecting to have work to do and was kind of irked he didn't. Thief had been quiet, so far, almost subdued. But she'd refrained from pulling my metaphorical pigtailed Archer did and kept her eye on the horizon unlike Hierophant. The irritation now coming across clear had me wondering if she'd just been hiding it better than the others. She was certainly the hardest to read of the Woe. For others that crown might have belonged to Adjutant, but I knew him like I knew my own limbs.

"You're worried," I said.

She sent me a look that implied less than complimentary things about my intellect.

"Not just the usual stuff," I dismissed. "This is about all of us leaving."

"The Grey Pilgrim is unsupervised," she said.

"The Pilgrim is under house arrest, allowed to speak only with goblins and Prince Amadis," I replied bluntly. "If he can turn *Robber* to Good, I'd argue he actually deserves to win this war."

"It feels like negligence not to keep a closer eye on them," Vivienne sighed.

Most of the time, with Thief, the trick to understand her was not to listen to what she said. It might have been because of her Name, but she tended to go obliquely at matters. The only way to get a good read on what she had cooking behind the forehead, if

she wasn't willing to outright state it, was to figuring out the reasons behind what she said. In this case, she was speaking of Callow but I suspected Callow itself wasn't the point.

"You've been cut off from the Jacks," I said suddenly.

She looked away. Ah. There it was. Possibly beyond even me, Vivienne Dartwick was the individual in the Kingdom of Callow with the most information at her fingertips. Hakram was the one piecing together the reports from her Jacks, the Dark Guilds under Ratface and Aisha's web of relatives to send up the most important reports to me, but that was more administrative than a matter of authority. I just didn't have the time to read it all and see to my other duties as well, not even now that I no longer slept. But Thief had access to all of it as well, and as the head of my net of informants she wielded the power to send agents to unearth any secrets she wanted. It must have been like an itch she couldn't scratch, being removed from the centre of the web to go traipsing around Arcadia.

"I understand the necessity of committing to this," Vivienne said. "And the risks that bringing any but Named into Keter would have carried, along the vulnerability of leaving only one of us behind. But we are blind to all the happenings in Creation until the matter is dealt with."

It'd be exceedingly difficult to scry back home from Keter, admittedly. Unlike Malicia and Black I didn't have decades' worth of mages trained in scrying to create relays all over the continent that delivered reports within hours. My limited number had to be placed very strategically, and had largely focused on Praes and Procer. Moving it all around so we could get in touch with the Observatory around the natural barriers surrounding Callow wouldn't be impossible, but it would screw up our eyes abroad for months. Months where we could hardly afford to be blind to movements within the borders of our most dangerous neighbours. Not something to use except in case of dire emergency.

"It's not a gamble if we're in control the whole time," I told her gently.

"I know," she said, passing a frustrated hand through her short hair.

I'd thought the cut a little too rough, when we first met, but it had grown on me since. Long hair on Vivienne would have felt odd now.

"We are taking so many risks, Catherine," she said quietly. "And every one of them seems reasonable when the decision is made, but I look back and wonder if what we have built is a house of cards."

"It does feel like everyone is out for our blood, doesn't it?" I chuckled bitterly. "Gods, we know we're at the end of the rope when the Hidden Horror is the best ally on the table."

"That is a too great a decision for us to really understand the scope of its consequences quite yet, I think," Vivienne said. "It is the small things that worry me."

The glanced she flicked at the collar of my cloak was all she needed to say. I did not immediately reply. The two of us sat on the granite tomb of some dead queen and watched Hierophant weave his runes in the distance. He'd been at it for half a bell, now, and the breakthrough he'd been speculating about was nowhere in sight.

"She could accelerate his work," I said, keeping my eyes on Hierophant. "Masego tells me that the doomsday fortress had similarities to the Greater Breach at Keter. There's not a lot of more knowledgeable mages to be found, either."

I did not need to speak the name of the woman in question. We both knew who I was speaking of.

"She," Vivienne said with admirable evenness, "has not been punished."

My brow rose.

"I ripped out her heart and bound her soul to the cloak," I replied. "I'll admit it hasn't exactly turned out to be eternal screaming torment, but at the very least it's imprisonment with a dab of torture."

"Yet now she plies her powers in your service," Thief said. "Safeguarded from all her former enemies. She has made herself useful, and so the leash loosens. How long, Catherine, before practicality pries open the door entirely?"

"I haven't forgotten Liesse," I said coldly.

"Peace," the other woman said, hand rising. "I helped you draft the Accords, Catherine. I've seen that look in your eyes when you think yourself alone and you remember the breadth of the massacre. I know the failure shames you still. I've seen your fury at the architect of the massacre."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," I admitted.

Aside from effectively admitting she sometimes spied on me unseen, but I'd honestly considered that to be a given. The notion of privacy was something I'd resigned myself to having lost even before an invisible sneak thief joined the Woe.

"I told you once, that Akua Sahelian treading Creation again was a line," Vivienne said. "One desperate hour after another, we have walked past it."

I grimaced. I could have made an argument that back then we'd been speaking about the soul she put in the infant as her resurgence plan, or even that all I'd ever allowed to pull at the leash was a soul, but it would have been dishonest. I *had* allowed Diabolist a foothold back in Creation, like it or not.

"You want me to destroy the soul," I guessed.

Vivienne laughed, something vicious glinting in her blue-grey eyes. It was a little fucked up, I admitted to myself, that it made her look more attractive to me. Not that I expected anything to ever come of it. Thief was so painfully straight I could have used her as a ruler.

"I have learned," she said, "the uses of pragmatism. No, let her continue to exist. Let her out, even. She has uses, and the hour has only grown more desperate. Another face will even make Indrani less of a pest for a while."

"But," I said.

"For small slights, long prices," Vivienne Dartwick said harshly. "Let Akua Sahelian see the light and taste freedom. Let her believe she has slipped the noose, so long as she remains of use."

Thief's fingers clenched.

"But there will be a day where the world we made no longer has place for her," Vivienne said. "When we have faced all the horrors before us. And on that day, when she has glimpsed victory?"

Vivienne met my eyes and there was something in them that gave even Winter pause.

"Snuff her out, Catherine," she said. "Slowly. Painfully. Excruciatingly aware of what is being taken from her."

I shivered, both out of respect at the viciousness of what she was proposing and a little bit of arousal. Gods, it was a tragedy she only rode stallion. I pushed that guilty thought aside and gave the moment the seriousness it was due. Should I hesitate at effectively letting our Akua with the intent to murder how down the line? Gods, that I even had to ask. I would have seen no nuance there to be had, when I'd been seventeen. But I hadn't had a kingdom on my shoulders, back then. And I hadn't looked Akua Sahelian in the eyes as she told me nonchalantly she was going to slaughter a hundred thousand innocents to use as fodder for her

ambition. Putting a knife in her back wasn't somehow made moral by Diabolist being a mass murderer, but it was the kind of petty evil I had made my tools of trade. Fair dealing and mercy were no longer things that applied to people willing to butcher an entire city for their purposes.

"It could be years," I warned her. "Before we're out of opponents. We could die before that, too."

"I know," Vivienne said. "Let her follow us in death, if that is our lot. Otherwise my words stand."

I spat in my palm and offered it up. Thief was not the kind of maidenly flower who balked at spit, aristocrat or not, so she did the same without hesitation.

"Bargain struck," I said, and we clasped hands.

"Bargain struck," she echoed.

We rose. I spoke the words, and Akua Sahelian walked the world again.

—

I had two of the finest mages of our generation working on a solution, and yet half a day later here I was: standing with a scowl on my face, being told nothing I wanted to hear. Hierophant at least had the decency to look as frustrated as I felt. Akua's lips were just slightly quirked, not enough for it to qualify as a smile but enough to reveal how pleased she was to be out of the box and talking magic with one of the few people in existence she'd consider a peer.

"The issue has been the same since you interrupted me," Masego said, a touch accusingly. "I have yet to succeed in accounting for the disparity in alignment."

"We can hear what they say now," I pointed out. "You managed touch for a little bit yesterday."

"The formula was a dead end," Diabolist said. "The runes involved would have disrupted further addition. Consider them an ore that spoiled the alloy."

It kind of pissed me off that my dead rival was better at explaining sorcery to me without sounding condescending than one of my closest friends.

"But you were aligned," I pressed.

"Not in the right manner," Masego irritably said.

"The difference was not unlike reading of a river on parchment while seeking to swim in one," Akua smiled. "Result was achieved, but along a different path than desired."

Yeah, still pissing me off. I suspected that was going to happen a lot.

"It might be that this is impossible to achieve within the bounds of Trismegistan sorcery," Hierophant said. "We've been speaking of different perspectives, but most of them are so glaringly fallible or unusable by humans my studies of the subject have been shallow."

"We only have so much time to spend here," I reluctantly admitted.

"You demand the miraculous on the schedule of the shoddy," Masego muttered, then paused.

His saw his glass eyes turn to peer behind him while the rest of his body remained still.

"Could it be that simple?" he said.

"You've dealt with miracles before," I encouraged.

"I've vivisected and employed parts of them," he corrected absent-mindedly. "But the gap is one of understanding, and I have a mechanism at hand to correct that failing."

I felt him gather power without ever chanting or drawing a rune. Not shaping it for a spell, I thought. Drawing it into himself. I opened my mouth to ask, but Akua discretely shook her head.

"A mystery," Hierophant muttered to himself. "In the technical sense. Foolish, foolish. I saw, when in transitioned. Quantification is anathema to higher sorceries."

His hand shot out and he clasped my wrist.

"Yes," he grinned. "They will not deny me, be they Gods or fathers. I will **Witness**."

A ripple passed across the world, and what it left behind was no longer an echo.



Oh.

Oh wow. What if they wind up interacting with more than just an echo of the past?

They are in Arcadia, where time flows differently, after all.

---

Hierophant said that extracting the knowledge from reflection's soul may be enough to convert the information into something he can understand. Depending on how "real" this is, they may be able to take something from this shard. Worst case, the Bard escapes; the most likely case, Cat uses her soul-serarching to communicate with Trismegistus while Masego rifles through Bard's mind (since I doubt the ending of the chapter means that they'll just look into their heads for some cryptic glimpses and go to the negotiations); best case, the limited interaction would allow Catherine to take some Aspects or artifacts outside the shard.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

\*blink\*

shit, dude.

[sengachi](#)

Maybe if the aspect was Interact, but this was Witness. That has different connotations to me.

*Anon*

"Thief was so painfully straight I could have used her as a ruler."

I feel as though this is a direct comment in regards to the shipping that sometimes goes on in the comments...but I can't figure out if it's teasing on Catherine not being the most observant, or just bait to keep the shippers hopelessly waiting.

Otherwise, a bit surprised it took Masego so long to use one of his Aspects to come up with a better way to study things.

Good on Thief for finally confronting Catherine about using Akua more and more, though I personally am now a little worried that since she and Cat have 'committed' to an evil fate for Akua, it gives Akua more of an opening to try and escape.

[daegone823](#)

Aspects sometimes manifest naturally due to a name other times they are a result of growth or conflict. In this case Masego had spent days trying to figure out a problem using conventional sorcery and analyzing the past events of Keter but

he realizes that he is the heirophant and therefore will not be denied knowledge. Thus this could possibly be his first aspect that he has manifested as a result of not being challenged thus far.

### NZPIEFACE

Yeah but he's had this Aspect forever now.

### NZPIEFACE

I think? Or did he has Glimpse before?

Yotz

Glimpse was an aspect of the Apprentice.  
And, since my memory is full of eels – can it be that Masego finally gained his third Aspect here, at that point of time?

### NZPIEFACE

Except he's not the Apprentice anymore, so all his Aspects reset. Uh, firsts one then.

### Euodiachloris

Technically, this was a challenge. A profoundly intellectual (cough the the data up in a format I can use, dammit!) and emotional one (when you find out Popa had a very complex life you knew nothing about which is currently directly related to your own issues, it gets emotional). 😊

Dainpdf

Yeah, I thought that was quite a jab at the shipping community, especially with her repeating it shortly after in other words. But hey, maybe Vivienne just hadn't met the right woman yet.

---

I'm kind of disappointed that Vivienne didn't tell Cat about Akea's remark about redemption, since, due to Pilgrim refusing to help Cat when she was willing to compromise, I now suspect he saw Akua possessing her and now is aiming to redeem the Diabolist into a Good mage Name (or at least to keep her as an option if Cat doesn't fold).

### Cold Cyberia

I think this is foreshadowing that Thief will become the Queen – she'll be a ruler of Callow once the whole mess is cleaned up.

## NZPIEFACE

Queen of Knives would be a great mirror to the Queen of Blades.

*Jonnnney*

Google is not conclusive, but I believe that is a brand new aspect for hierophant.

## Mental Mouse

Eh, plenty of shippers don't let mere canon get in the way. The more interesting reference is that Cat *\*has\** used her as a "straightedge", as the holder of the fae oaths "keeping her in line".

*Antoninjohn*

A Witness, someone who seeing crimes committed. Well that's a big hint to what we are going to see

## TeK

Hey, maybe this Aspect will play a role on the theorised trial Hierarch's going to put Bard through.

*haihappen*

ooooooooohhhhhh. Courtroom shows would be so much better if the people involved were fantasy characters...

"hear hear. As Hierarch of the Free Cities I call this congregation of foreign despots and malcontents to Order. I hereby open the case of Evil vs. Good. The defendant, known among a countless number of blasphemous names, is 'The Wandering Bard'. The Charges consist, among others, 'Crimes Against Humanity', manslaughter, murder, drunken misconduct, willful negligence resulting in gross bodily harm... that will do for now. The Prosecution may begin, Mr. Black, your opening statement?"

*1shot4living*

I would watch that. I would most definitely watch that.

*Yotz*

" Foul Servant Of A Foreign Tyrant mr. Black, you may proceed with your opening statement"

*ethericsentinel*

Now I want a Phoenix Wright-style game set in the Guideverse.

---

Catherine saw Masego pull workings straight out of his memory instead of recreating them. given whee we are now, this Aspect may be a culmination of that. If Akua's hellgate did indeed leave a similar set of shards around Liesse, they may even end up using them to investigate Istrid's death and/or summon expendable "reflections" of legionaries to fight the crusaders with: both Liesse and the remains of the Greater Breach can plausibly be used to bring them through.

*Gerionar*

Wait, wasn't that \*Glimpse\* before? Did he really just change his Aspect?!

Then again, why am I even surprised?

*Jabes*

I think he just found his Third Aspect, not reusing an old one ( I may be wrong in this, but I thought he only had two so far).

*Rogos*

"Glimpse" was one of Masego's Aspects back when he was the Apprentice. When he transitioned into his new Name, he lost access to his old Aspects and so now he has to build a new set. It's the same for all transitional Names : for example, Black didn't have Lead, Conquest and Destroy back when he was the Squire, he had other ones (presumably including Learn).

*MetruX*

Wasn't Glimpse Apprentice's Aspect? He changed Names, and this changes Aspects aswell.

*Aehriman*

It can also mean to observe. Or even to observe and recount to others. As Hierophant I'm thinkin this is closer to a religious than legal interpretation o the word.

*Jane*

Ooooh, Witness sounds about as much as a hax Aspect as Learn! Maybe it's more limited than first blush would imply, but if it can truly reveal the origin of events... There's a *heck* of a lot that could be used for. Though, I guess Masego wouldn't really have interest in most of the practical applications *not* related to theoretical magic...

I know how Vivienne feels. It's basically internet withdrawal – take a person away from an ocean of information once they're accustomed to swimming in it, and you suddenly feel naked from all the things you *can't* confirm with a glance at a parchment. No wonder she spends most of her time away from the Woe.

Hm. A bit odd how Cat's interest has shifted from lightly implied to explicitly confirmed, this chapter. I wonder where that's going.

So, Thief has made her peace with Akua, such as it is. Use her up as you wish, so long as you discard her – pretty much the closest the two will ever come to accord, without working together for a couple of years, I imagine. I wonder if that means we'll get to see her out of the box more often – not that Cat likes to use her, but I'd be surprised if her compass telling her that it was okay to use Akua didn't have any effect.

*Gunslinger*

Sadly that ship isn't sailing anytime soon.

[TeK](#)

Am I the only one who gets really uncomfortable at what exactly the reason to Cat's arousal is? Gods but that's unsettling.

*Jane*

Eh... She's lonely. Between being Queen, being Named, and becoming a goddess, there are very few people she can be close to. To say nothing of how she recently had to break up with her girlfriend over her rising status.

Vivienne is someone she finds attractive, has a shred of conscience, and is someone she feels comfortable talking to – both in regards to the kingdom, and in regards to her own worries. It's a pretty good ground for a relationship, honestly, if incompatible orientations weren't a problem.

And now that they're stuck in Arcadia for an indeterminate period of time with nothing to do but sit around and talk... Well, restlessness takes many forms. Cat's a young woman, it's not *that* strange that her thoughts would go in that direction.

There could be more to it than this, of course, but at first glance, nothing really strikes me as out of the ordinary.

[TeK](#)

I do no doubt your words. Yet they have little to do with mine. She could've been aroused at any number of things

Vivi did or said. The fact that it was the suggestion to coldhearted emotional torture and murder speaks volumes about Cat's current mental status.

*Jane*

...Oh, right ^^;; ...

Honestly, between being caught in the flow of the conversation before that (where Cat was mostly trying to understand Vivienne), considering the implications of Vivienne approving of Akua being allowed out more often, and this being the downtime of a party of Villains... I just, um, kind of tuned that out ^^;; ...

That probably doesn't speak well of *me*, in retrospect, being able to overlook such a thing...

*Metrux*

You're falling into Evil. Take this rope. Tie around yourself. There, now the weight will pull you down much faster 😊

*LightDawn*

Why and how do you have that kind of rope? And where can I get it?

*Agent J*

Scary badass chicks are hot and Thief was looking particularly scary today. It's simple science.

*Jane*

Well, taking off shipping goggles for a moment...

It has been previously introduced and now confirmed that Cat has a physical interest in Vivienne; this chapter also explicitly states that Cat does not believe that Vivienne reciprocates her feelings.

From a metaperspective, there must have been a reason to introduce this story element; it may be a subplot that will affect their relationship dynamics in the future (perhaps a "Vivienne tries to let Cat down gently" or "Vivienne tells Cat she was mistaken" type of things, to cite the most obvious), or it may just be a bit of detail to make their relationship dynamic feel more "real". It may also be a combination of the two, wherein it's later used to explained some action of Cat's in the future that wouldn't make sense without context like this.

It seems odd to me at the moment, because it feels like a subplot that's been building, but which doesn't yet have an obvious direction – no doubt we'll have more to go on in a few chapters.

(Of course, it could also be the author's way of saying, "I just wanted to establish that Cat thought Vivienne was attractive, but the readers took it too far; let's let them down firmly here before this gets out of hand", but... If this wasn't going to be related to a future plot point, I would think taking a moment for Cat to remember that Vivienne was straight would be enough; reinforcing Cat's attraction to Vivienne would be counterproductive.)

*Anon*

It's actually mildly interesting, as Cat's bisexuality has come up (aside from Vivienne) multiple times in this book – in flirting with Princess Mazala, to Akua and the twice-bloomed comment, and now the more explicit interest in Vivienne...yet she's had next-to-zero interest since Keegan.

If it's only meant to be a 'calm down shippers' moment, it feels like it lingers too long on Cat's feelings for that – as you say, a simple acceptance of Vivienne's preferences would have been sufficient.

This feels like something else, but it doesn't (necessarily) feel like 'Cat is getting lonely' moment either – I dunno what'll come of this in any specific way though, unless Thief somehow (either on purpose or accidentally) betrays Cat down the line, and in so doing uses Cat's feelings for her?

But that doesn't make a whole lot of sense either, given that she's got MORE than enough opportunity to break Cat with her having the fae vows to call upon if Cat ever 'lost herself in Winter'.

(idly, it's also somewhat interesting to note that Indrani, while a hedonist, appears to have actual interest (likely not really reciprocated) in Masego, and Juniper has that thing with....Aisha, I think?

But I don't recall ever having any specific insight into Thief's being explicitly into dudes that I can recall off-hand, though I do have a vague recollection of...something? Bah, it must be pretty far off)

*Jane*

Well, my first thoughts were that a darker plotline that could arise from this would be a "Cat, blinded by her

feelings for Vivienne, doesn't realize how far Vivienne has turned towards Villainy, and trusts her to stop Cat from doing something monstrous; Vivienne, believing that Cat's actions are justified for the protection Callow, fails to do so." scenario. There have been enough elements introduced to justify such a scenario, and it's a conflict that would fit well with the themes of the series.

Now, I don't think that's actually *going* to happen, as there hasn't been nearly enough foreshadowing to suggest such a thing – but if the story *does* go there in a few chapters, the outline was present, between Cat having reaffirmed her trust of Vivienne several times, and Vivienne having crossed several lines she would have once balked at while Cat frets that she's a bad influence on Thief. And of course, that's only one example of how this could be used in a more dramatic fashion.

More likely, though, I'd expect we have a lighter subplot where Indrani takes Cat aside and says that she should really stop mooning over Vivienne, and instead offers to set her up with someone who's actually interested in her. Or Cat finding out that Vivienne really *is* into women as well, but if that was where this was going, I'd expect fewer confirmations that Vivienne was straight – even if it's easy enough to say "Well, Cat was wrong," authors usually leave more wiggle room than that.

*Anon*

Maybe, but unless it's another named who has sufficient power to not be used as a pawn piece, they'd quickly get lost in the shuffle – which was a large part of why Cat dropped Killian (in addition to her distaste with the blood sacrifice to activate Killian's true magic potential)

And on that note, there's not a lot of prospects whom Cat would be kosher with – between being the Queen of the remaining Winter Fae, Queen of Callow, trying to thread the needle of 'making lasting peace while not getting trapped in a heroic-face-turn story', and the 'cementing' of the Woe as a band of named with a fixed number, I don't see another 'new' person really being able to insert themselves so easily this 'late' into the overall story progression.

The only way I see Vivienne betraying Cat at this point is if Cat somehow REALLY slips up and inadvertently is about to doom Callow – in giving Vivienne the keys to basically banish/control her, that's about as high of a trust level that Cat could ever give, unless she is separated from Winter.



....If anything, I would almost moreso expect Cat to be the one to 'ditch' Vivienne, if she ever gets 'confirmation' that by being an agent of the gods below (and being a reaper, like the grey pilgrim once mentioned) has turned thief into an agent of evil.

But she seems intent on breaking that connection over almost anything else, so we'll have to wait and see.

*Jane*

Ah, well... It's Indrani. I hadn't meant to suggest that her proposal would actually *work* – rather, that she'd suggest Cat join her on some tavern crawls to “get it out of her system” or something like that. Of course, that might sound rather superfluous, but it would allow the author to reference Cat's isolation as a theme in the story in a way that still seems fresh.

As for betrayal... Well, a twist such as the one I described would be a “betrayal” of Vivienne's role as a morality pet, but from Vivienne's perspective, she would just be furthering Cat's agenda. I think Cat would be deeply hurt by that, but would understand that Vivienne had still done what she believed was best for Cat and for Callow, and could forgive such a thing in time – after a whole lot of self-flagellating about how she was the one who led Vivienne down this path.

Of course, that also depends a lot on what, exactly, happened; I was thinking something like, “Cat overdoses on Winter to stop the Proceran army, trusting Vivienne to restrain her if she's going too far; Vivienne decides it's better that the army is slaughtered to the last soldier here, and declines to do so”. Something like a second Llesse, perpetrated (somehow) by Vivienne, would be harder to work past.

As for Cat walking away... Well, she might really *want* to, but could she really? She *needs* Thief, both as a member of the Woe, and as Callow's spymaster. There's no one else that can fill those roles, and even if it's toxic for Thief... Asking her to leave would cripple the kingdom, and the damage would already have been done anyway. Even if it's for someone she cared about, could she really risk making all of her previous crimes meaningless?

Joking suggestion to conclude this comment: You know, between establishing that Cat would like a new girlfriend, and that Vivienne is willing to forgive Akua being out of the box... Maybe this is leading into a way to make Cat/Akua possible 😊.

Yotz

Speaking of decadence and debauchery as an opium of the suffering masses – although technically not a stallion, but since body is a construct of mind, futanari is a thing...

Jane

...I, uh, don't think that's likely to be a practical solution outside of a doujin of the series.

I mean, yeah, Cat can remake her body, but I don't imagine she'd be comfortable doing so like this, or Vivienne being reminded of that fact... Plus, that's kind of a heavy thing to bring up when they're not even dating, and Vivienne hasn't shown any interest in doing so.

...Okay, okay, so I'm taking a joke too seriously, just... Channeling Masego for a moment as I think of all the ways that would be *uncomfortable* for everyone involved. Be glad I stopped here.

Yotz

>^ \_\_\_\_\_ ^<  
0 ye, of little faith...      ● ~ ●

---

Vivienne mentioned in her interlude that "she did find a few corners with boys she liked, but they sure as Hells weren't tradesmen and there were no wedding bells around the corner".

Azure

Catherine's relationship with Vivienne is almost arm's length because in Catherine's mind, she is the keeper of her keys, her last resort to stop her from going over the edge. So she has assumed an emotional distance present from Vivienne's end as her 'jailor', but still allows herself physical attraction since she thinks it's safe, since it won't go anywhere. I wonder how much of a flawed narrator she is though, thinking that Vivienne is actually capable of that distance, because to me there are signs that she isn't. Vivienne's hate of Akua is visceral and some of it was due to her wearing Catherine's smile. Now that is not a sign of someone who is just a jailer and can pull the trigger at any time with no conflict.

IDKWhoitis

Witness, in conjugation with the Observatory, Sahaleian Scrying artifacts, and unlimited access to Arcadia (Cat) will probably be on of the most productive methods of information warfare. Like if Masego can reproduce the type of watching the Augur did at the end of Book 4, Cat will never be on the back foot on the information front for the foreseeable future, regardless of which dimension she may be in.

*Jane*

Well, the problem there is... It's Masego she has to rely on, and like his father, he's interested first and foremost in his own affairs, and only loosely attached to the greater world. He'll help out when it's something big, and apparently can run the Observatory without cutting too much into his own time, but I imagine the bulk of this will go to Heiropphant unravelling the secrets of Creation.

Which will have benefits of its own, obviously, but not really of the type that would immediately leap to the minds of the more practical sort.

Of course... Even if it's only occasionally that this Aspect will be used for more worldly matters, that's still a pretty big advantage in a pinch.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat's not *particularly* interested in Viv, but the thing is, she's something of a letch. Look at her descriptions of various NPCs... she knows perfectly well she's not going to be bumping uglies with them, but she's got no problem looking, and sometimes critiquing their appearance like a high-schooler. IIRC Vivienne actually complains at some point that even when somebody attractive is *trying to kill them*, Cat takes time to ogle!

*Gunslinger*

Witness is a fantastic aspect. Karsa Orlong would approve.

By the way if you can do contribute to EE's patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/user/overview?u=3523924>). That's the reason why we can get 3 chapters of the Guide every week

[TeK](#)

I've just began reading the House of Chains, how unlikely is that?

*IDKWhoitis*

Odds on Bard and Dead King discussing something completely innocuous? Like gardening or the invasion? Because it seems like

the bastards below are being a bit too helpful. Im fully expecting fate to show a massive middle finger here, and make this whole witnessing almost a waste of time (outside of Masego gaining another Aspect).

### TeK

Or flirting. And then going into an empty room and enjoying wild sex. Nine months later, the baby is born, but subsequentalliy lost in time-warp during the Ritual of Keter, and later adopted into Imperial Orphanage and named Cat.

### Javvies

As hilarious as that would be, Cat is at least half Daoine(sp?)? Deoraithe? Don't remember which is the non derogatory term for "Wallerspawn". Her parentage is probably a question that will remain unanswered. Though, there probably aren't that many Deoraithe who would have been in the vicinity of Laure in the right time frame, so Duchess Kegan might have been able to find out eventually, with enough digging, but as of the last time she was on screen (circa Akua's Folly), Kegan didn't know, and might not have even been looking.

### Isi Arnott-Campbell

Deoraithe is the correct term. Daoine is where the Deoraithe live.

### *Jane*

Even if the contents of the conversation themselves are meaningless, what it reveals about the relationship between the Dead King and Bard will be significant; polite distance, light dueling, a bit of camaraderie... Just having a vague outline as to how they once treated each other sheds a great deal of insight on a previously unknown, but very important, relationship.

It's true that their relationship could have (and likely did) change after this conversation, or that this particular conversation might have been out of character for them, but... Just having an idea as to whether they're looking at some kind of ancient betrayal, or a rival outplayed, will give them a great deal of insight on two figures that may as well be mythical, but for the fact that Cat has to treat with them.

### *Yotz*

"So, what should we talk about?"

"Let's just tell a series of increasingly lewd anecdotes to

embarrass those foolish children who will try to eavesdrop on our conversation in a few hundred years!"

[TeK](#)

Is this his first Aspect? Gods, but it's been a while.

*Just a potato*

Is the title of this chapter referring to Akua as the sixth member of the woe or am I missing something more obvious?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Yes, that's it.

[wyaldriddler](#)

[Insert Witness Me Meme]

[TeK](#)

My eyes are glass! My blood is gasoline!

*Someguy*

I have been wondering, why haven't they wrung arcane textbooks and backup libraries out of Akua? She should have some knowledge/ownership of secret caches of magical knowledge outside of Wolof set up by herself & her predecessors to fall back on should Tyrants successfully seize their House Seat right?

With those in hand Cat can 1-up Black by establishing a Mage Academy with better mage doctrine that Black could not talk Warlock into doing.

[TeK](#)

If Tyrants manage to seize their Home Seat, chances are, they would not need those caches. Chamber pots don't have eyes and all that.

[Hakurei06](#)

Well, Hierophant forming an aspect after the betrayal of a parent is certainly not going to be significant at all.

*magasbe*

Without knowing the other side of the story, we can't be sure how much of a betrayal this actually was. I mean, Masego certainly views it as such, but it might be somewhat justified from an objective point of view. We just don't know yet.

But I suspect that's not your point.

Jane

I wonder what sort of limitations are on Witness?  
Traditionally, similar abilities (presuming it does what I assume it does) require being at the site of the event in question, or possessing a related item – but that doesn't necessarily hold in this setting.

Could Heirophant just desire to see a conversation where his fathers discussed keeping this knowledge from him, and allow it work that way? That seems overpowered, so probably not, but... How much preparation would he require, to learn the truth of why neither of his fathers told him? Assuming that there were conversations or other circumstances *to be* Witnessed.

*Quite possibly a cat*

It seems like it's making stuff show up so it can be witnessed. Best/worst case it's forcing stuff into reality.

It's probably super useful against Elves or Thief or certain demons. He might even be able to save hero 13 and 14! You could probably force Bard to show up or at least not leave.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> How much preparation would he require, to learn the truth of why neither of his fathers told him?

Or he could go ask them... nah, who does that? 😊

RoflCat

....Is nobody going to mention that the chapter's title + Thief's approval (albeit with added 'don't forget to kill the whore' for future plan of action), Akua is now the Sixth of the Woes?

[TeK](#)

You do. It was theorised as far as Book 2. Glad I've managed to guess something right about this novels turn of events.

Argentorum

I'm not gonna lie. I was a little aroused as well...

Masago was holding Cat's hand! :V

[d\\_o\\_l](#)

omg so lewd

Yotz

Indeed! He didn't even ask for consent, making it  
unconsensual hand holding! Oh, how deep they plunge into the  
abyss of Ebil!..

*Metrux*

Before I thought he had no interests, but now I see the  
Truth...

*thegreatfeed*

We have witnessed it

*d\_o\_l*

Something just occurred to me. Witness could potentially  
counteract the influence of Absence, since we all know that  
subplot's coming back at some point.

*Nafram*

Remind me of the specifics of that subplot and how Witness  
would serve as a counter? I forget

*Helirous*

There is a still Demon of Absence Egg somewhere in Callow

*Quite possibly a cat*

I think that's a rather optimistic theory. 2 heroes got  
zapped and everyone has forgotten them. I don't think it's  
an egg anymore.

[TeK](#)

Well obviously, he's talking about near theorised to be a.  
It's hinted throughout a chapters that loose and two are  
allegedly. It's unknown whether they manage to or it just,  
in process. So we wait until this particular Chekov's gun  
fires. Any questions?

[sengachi](#)

\*squints at post\* I see what you did there.

*Yotz*

Congrats to Hierophant on going analog in lieu of digital-only.

*Cimer*

He didn't go analog in lieu of digital, he went quantum in lieu  
of classical.

That sounds like quantum mechanic's measurement problems. If you try to measure something too precisely, you lose something else.

[sengachi](#)

As a quantum computation researcher, I would just like to say that is a very common misconception, but actually the polar *\*opposite\** of the truth. Quantum mechanics is entirely about how *\*everything\** can be quantized. That's where the term "quantum" comes from.

Measurement 'uncertainty' actually has very little to do with uncertainty unless you're constructing a very specific experiment and you're not sure what's going on under the hood (like Heisenberg was). The way you've probably heard of it before, it's really just more of a descriptor of ... okay I just realized I have absolutely no idea how to explain what it actually means without going into Clifford algebra territory. Fuck. Uhhhh, you know what, I think I understand why the incorrect notion of what the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle means, on a physical level, is so prevalent. Because I can't possibly imagine how to explain what's *\*actually\** going on to a layperson. Or even most physicists.

Uhhhh ... I guess the moral of the story is that quantum is complicated and that sane people shouldn't touch it with a ten foot Mach Zehnder.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Multifactors, feedback loops and all the headaches that going micro gives intellects stuck in macro... Remember when you next want to scream and bang the wall, you chose your own hell. *\*discretely hides own cognitive science and neurology textbooks\** *\*whistles "innocently"*

At least we didn't go into metabolomics. The interactions of the Krebs cycle are hell on toast with a side of torture. Or, there's always law to shudder at.

[sengachi](#)

I remind myself of that every day.

That said ... you do neurology? Hahahaha. Oh friend you've got it so much worse than me. At least quantum mechanics can be broken down into simple truths, even if those truths are hell to parse. You're stuck with the complexity of your systems and there's nothing you can do about it.



... you know what, yes. We can agree on that. At least neither of us went into microbiology. Or law. Neither of those have any respect for sanity.

*stevenneiman*

Well, I'm glad to hear that I chose the right major to avoid dealing with all those sane people. In the (early) physics classes I've taken so far, I kept on wondering why people were so confused until I realized how hard it was to try and explain some of it to them even when I'm pretty sure I do understand it, and given that that was a physics student to slightly more confused physics student I can see how much worse it would be for anyone who works with quantum mechanics to laypeople.

[sengachi](#)

Hahaha. Yeah physics requires a special kind of crazy. It has a stupid-high dropout rate, but that's not because it's capital-H Hard or because you have to be extra special smart to hack it. Most of the physics 'dropouts' go on to have perfectly successful careers in some form of engineering.

Nah physics just needs that special little dash of crazy and a deep, deep love of puzzles. The dash of crazy is so you can let go of familiar reality and accept 'weird' stuff as perfectly ordinary, and the love of puzzles is so that you don't burn out on hour 3 of trying to figure out how to *\*start\** solving a problem. (Or hour 10 or 50 or 100).

And hey, welcome to the ranks! I hope you find it a happy and fulfilling field of study!

*stevenneiman*

Physics sounds sort of like Dark Souls. The almost meditative process of beating your head against a wall for hours followed by the burning triumph when it breaks before you do.

*Letouriste*

So Akua is now the 6th member of the crew? I have mixed feelings about that^^ suit the narrative of this story though. That's still weird because that create redundancy (akua is mage and demonologist like masego, tactician like cat, skilled in politics like cat, vivienne and hakram...albeit better at that. ), I don't think that was necessary for their crew(make things easier for sure)...BUT that could be what cat need to survive pilgrim plot to redemption. The pilgrim could not predict this afterall and

having a dead mass murderer monster without real remorse in your crew is hardly heroic no matter what you do

*Yotz*

The ultimate party piece would be a possibility of Ubua proving the truthfulness of her redemption to V, so in the end V will try to break the deal with the Winter and accepting consequences of such a deed.

*werafdsaew*

Akua is good at politics, especially wasteland politics, which is a necessity if Cat were to ever take the tower, and I think she will.

*stevenneiman*

I think she actually might not be as unrepentant as you think. I'm not certain of it by any stretch, but she might be the very bizarre offspring of "Iron sharpens iron" and "good guys always win". She still thinks in terms of attaining more power, but she might very well have realized that acting like a horrible person is a path to defeat and forgetting.

*John Smith*

Well fuck.

[tloul5](#)

I come back from 5 week of holiday catch up... and land on a f\*\*\*ing cliffhanger of doom

[Euodiachloris](#)

It's not that bad. It's, like, only a little way up the Tower. We don't even need spells to breathe at this altitude. Just... ignore the screams. 😊

*stevenneiman*

This is something that's been bugging me for a while, every time it comes up. "Discrete" means in specific parts. Bricks are discrete while clay is not. "Discreet" means caring about privacy or secrecy. This isn't an alternate spelling from a different part of the world the way that legionaries vs. legionnaires is, it's a pair of similar but completely distinct and unrelated English words. Sorry if I'm going a bit Masego on you here, but it's been bugging me for a very long time.

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## Chapter 30: Witness

*"There is only one lesson to be learned from shatranj: no matter who wins the game, the pieces return to the same box."*

– Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

I'd never been in crypt before but it smelled about what I'd expected. Cool, wet stone and a little like dust. The scent was heavy and cloying, but it wasn't the reason I felt rattled. I almost withdrew my wrist from Masego's grasp before realizing that might get me expelled from... whatever this was and froze instead. Splendidly uncaring of my wariness, Hierophant let my wrist go the moment after. I looked around. Still here. I'd say that was good to know, but I understood next to nothing about what was going on. That was an unpleasantly familiar feeling, truth be told.

"Masego," I whispered. "Can they see us?"

We were on the outskirts of the crowd but there were a few attendants close by near a sculpted ramp leading upwards. If they could see us, we'd stick out like sore thumbs. Neither of us could pass Keteran by skin tone alone, much less if clothes were brought into it. Hierophant shook his head.

"We can only subtract from this, not add," he mused.

That loosened some of the tension in my shoulders, so I allowed myself to take a slower look around. We were at the beginning of the shard, by my reckoning. Most of the grieverers were still filing in, and it'd be about half an hour before they king's corpse was brought in. Less than that before the Bard walked in from a place not within the shard and sat down next to Trismegistus, though. Two of the attendants a little higher up, veiled young women, spoke in a low voice. I frowned.

"They're still speaking Keteran," I said.

Masego turned to me, lips curving in a sharp smile.

"Subtraction, Catherine," he said, "does not preclude acquisition."

My brow rose.

"You can ransack their brains," I said.

"Don't be absurd," he replied. "The actual brain matter is long gone. I can appropriate an echo of their consciousness, including working knowledge of their language."

I blinked in surprise.

"Wait, that's something you can do?" I said. "You can dig out an entire dialect from someone's head and put it in someone else's?"

That would have been damned useful to know. Wouldn't have had to spend so many evenings trying to learn Chantant if there was a shortcut like that. Without Learn to help me along, I'd come to the realization that my talent for languages was average at best and that the most widespread language in Procer was a horrid chore to learn. So many fucking exceptions and whoever had decided that plurals for masculine and feminine names – or even that there should be any of those – deserved to be drawn and quartered. If it'd been a possibility to lift that knowledge out of the heads of criminals, with consent and a reduced sentence dangled in exchange, I would have taken it.

"Theoretically speaking," Masego agreed. "Of course a living mind is much more complex to excise information from than what can be found in this imprint. Likely the extraction would break the source entirely, what would be obtained would be contaminated with connected gibberish and the bestowal itself drive the recipient mad. Human minds were not meant to process that much knowledge instantly."

I grimaced. Yeah, it figured. Should have known that if this was a feasible shortcut, Warlock would have cut open a few 'expendables' and the Calamities would be fluent in every single Calernian language.

"But you can do it here safely," I pressed.

He eyed me amusedly, which was a pretty ghastly sight considering his glass eyes.

"For myself, I can rely on my aspect to handle the worst of the backlash," he noted. "I will have severe migraines for weeks or months before it has all been processed, but I have herbs to alleviate this."

"And me?" I said, already expecting the worst.

"*Human* minds were not meant to process that much knowledge instantly," he reminded me gently. "You have regularly employed powers beyond human capacity to understand, and indicted by the principle alienation that ensued. It will be no more unpleasant than when we employed absolute alignment together."

So a bunch of spikes through the forehead. Lovely.

"I'll cope," I sighed. "Work your magic, magic man."

"Must you call me that?" he asked.

"Be grateful Indrani's not here, or she'd start hinting about magic fingers," I replied without missing a beat.

She wouldn't even be wrong, to be honest. My time with Kilian had taught me that the jokes about mages having clever fingers were well founded.

"Silver lining," he muttered. "The attendants will do for our purposes, I suppose."

I glanced at the two young women.

"A question," I said. "Can you extract from the Trismegistus and the Bard?"

He nodded slowly.

"Broader, more complex minds will be more difficult to work with," he warned. "But in principle, yes. I must caution, however, that what is taken will be removed from the echo permanently. After the extraction, the actors will be... impaired, for lack of a better term."

"We'd be fucking with the imprint," I summarized.

"Fucking is not a term that applies to this subject," he sighed.

"It's a term with surprisingly broad applications, Zeze," I said righteously. "You should expand your horizons."

Huh, so he *could* glare with glass eyes without resorting to a light show. Nice to know. The work took too long. We were only halfway through the span of the shard, but the Bard was long gone and Trismegistus remained far from the other griever for the rest of it. We used the time to get more comfortable with our sudden knowledge of Keteran. Or, as it was actually called, Ashkaran. After he broke the first attendant – a chunk of her face was now missing, like it'd been vaporized – and shoved a blue bubble into my forehead, I'd felt a rush. Like my mind was a cup being filled beyond capacity, until the cup shattered and Winter flooded my veins. It'd been... strangely pleasant. Like cracking your neck after a long day's work. Hierophant's own acquisition had seen him go still for a solid thirty heartbeats, and his face had been twitching in and out of a wince ever since. He admitted in a low voice that the aspect had not warded off backlash as much as he'd anticipated.

I would have spared him some sympathy but I was still busy wrestling with the fact that I had servant gossip a few millennia out of date rattling around the back of my mind. I was less interested in who had been sleeping with who in the royal kitchens, or the speculation that the... head household servant for halls and commoner rooms – there was no Lower Miezian word that

carried the same breadth of implications – had been getting cheaper candles and pocketing the savings.

“You know,” I said out loud, “for all those rumours about chambermaids being saucy this is surprisingly tame stuff. You hear filthier in taverns.”

“Maybe the sort *you* frequent,” Masego muttered. “There’s a reason I refuse to go drinking with you and Archer. Last time I saw a rat.”

I snorted. Yeah, maybe Dockside had been a bit much for Hierophant. He liked things clean, and that part of Laure was anything but. We split to see if there was anything interesting to dig up, and to my surprise there was. A surprising amount of information could be obtained from overhearing idle conversation, if there was enough of it. For one, I confirmed that the people with the copper circlets were royalty. Sons and daughters of the dead king, whose name had been Iakim. The oldest child was the heir to the kingship of Sephirah, which I assumed to be the name of the ancient Keteran kingdom. The title of that heir, Zekiah, wasn’t prince. Not exactly. The term was more like lesser king, and by the sound of it Zekiah had shared rule of the kingdom with his father for years now. Of Trismegistus, or whatever his true name was, I heard nothing. The nobles, or at least the man and women bearing titles I assumed to be something like nobility, among the crowd did not speak of him. Apart from the entombment, the favourite subject appeared to be the war with the ‘People of the Wolf’.

Aside from the usual accusations of savagery and wickedness that always sprouted on both sides of any war, the rumour of cannibalism was often repeated. That and transforming into giant man-eating wolves, but I had my doubts about that one. I’d seen no hint of a power like it when passing through the battle shards. No one seems particularly worried about the war, though, not even after King Iakim’s death. The People of the Wolf were apparently no match for walls of stone, and the ‘Conclave’ had finally agreed to enter the war. From context, those seemed to be mages. Had the lack of effectiveness of mages we’d seen so far come from the fact they were just amateurs? Could be. It wasn’t what I’d come here to find out, though, so when the shard began again I found Masego and headed towards the upper alcoves where I knew the Dead King and the Bard would come to talk.

“Heard anything interesting?” I asked.

“Some blame the plague for the war,” he told me, though he didn’t sound all that interested. “They say it was the deaths in the outlying villages that attracted the wolfmen.”

I cocked my head to the side. I’d chalk that one up for Hakram’s tale of the fall of Keter.

"Is wolfmen how you'd translate it?" I said. "It struck me more as-"

"Ah, capitalized," he breathed out. "I see. Formal address, which would be spoken 'People of the Wolf'. Difficult to know which of us is correct without seeing the term written, of course."

"I can't read it," I told him. "The girl was illiterate."

"I have some semblance of the knowledge," Masego frowned, then winced as his headache flared. "I cut too narrowly, it seems. I cannot quite remember it."

I patted his shoulder.

"Don't get a migraine," I ordered. "I need you sharp for the important part."

We were both standing, when Trismegistus strode up the ramp and came to rest by a pillar. He looked calm, in the magelight, and did not visibly react when the Wandering Bard slipped through the darkness and plopped herself down in the alcove to his side. She put down the lute on her lap and chuckled.

"There's nothing quite like looking down at one's work, is there?" she said.

Her Ashkaran was flawless and without accent, as if she was a native speaker. Trismegistus did not look at her.

"Intercessor," he said. "I wondered if you would come."

"Intercessor," the Bard repeated amusedly. "Not the worst thing I've been called. Heard a thing or two, have you?"

The young man glanced at her, mildly curious, before returning his gaze to the ceremony unfolding below.

"You were companion to Nasseh the Great, when he fought for the submission of the twelve cities," Trismegistus idly said. "You were at Queen Sadassa's side as well, during the worst of the Wars of the Rat. Fortune and misfortune both draw you like carrion."

"And which do you think you are, I wonder?" the Bard mused. "So few of them even remember you exist, Neshamah. How horrified they would be, to learn what the prodigal son has wrought."

*Neshamah*, I thought, fingers clenching. I finally had a name.

"You come in the service of Those Above, then," the man said, and he sounded almost bored. "Tedious."

"Below has already blessed you quite enough, my friend," the Bard shrugged. "You don't need the nudge. But I'm not here to put sticks in your wheels, if that is your worry. Too late for that. Maybe if I'd had a few years to shape your opposition, but you played it well enough I had no openings. And I already burned my fingers tossing those bones with odds like this with the giants."

Neshamah finally turned to face her.

"You have my attention," he said. "If not intervention, what is your purpose here?"

"I suppose you could call it curiosity," she said. "I'm starting to understand how little I understand, you see. So I seek knowledge. About how they make people like you. I won't solve the riddle with the tools they gave me, so it seems I must learn craftsmanship of my own. Which takes me to you. You're not impossible, my friend, but you *are* unlikely. Your father did not look Below when he earned his Blessing. But you did, at an age where most children worry about the nature of supper. Was it your mother's death? Ugly affair all around, I've been told."

The man smiled.

"You think it kindness to offer me an excuse," Neshamah said. "But it is an insult, Intercessor. There is nothing in what I have wrought that deserves excusing."

"The plague alone killed hundreds," the Bard said. "That will grow to thousands, when the cities begin to be touched."

"And?" he patiently asked.

"Your people bleed for power," the Bard said. "But only ever themselves. You would break cities in the name a plan that will not bloom for years yet."

"I destroy flesh that will destroy itself in time," he said. "There is no theft in this, Intercessor. It is mere movement of the soul as was ordained, only now given proper purpose."

The Bard hummed, then pulled at her flask.

"The drow didn't teach you this," she decided. "The Twilight Sages consider death the only sin, they would be appalled by what you speak of. Most tribes beyond the lakes can barely even use sorcery and their allegiances change with the seasons. Was it the Chitterers? I genuinely believe the Gods made them out of whatever was left after the rest of Creation was done. Shoddy craftsmanship, that lot."

"And still you believe I must have been taught," Neshamah said. "As if my actions were not the only lucid answer to the truth of



this world. There are none closer in any lands to the Gods, Intercessor, so tell me this – why must we die at all? Why were we shaped with such inherent imperfection?”

“Because the Garden was a failure,” the Bard easily replied. “Immortals always fall into closed circles. There are no answers to be had from them.”

“You grasp too little and too much,” the man said. “The Splendid are bound to repetition because they are feared, Intercessor. Because with the span of eternity before them, they might learn beyond what they were meant to learn were they not so tightly constrained. And so mortality is the answer to the deeper question: how do they loosen the bindings without birthing their own usurpers?”

Neshamah smiled, his golden brown eyes aglow.

“Why, by cursing their work with decay,” he chuckled. “By ensuring the banner can only be carried for so long by any one soul before it is recalled at their feet.”

“Below’s favour comes with the end of aging,” the Bard said.

“Blessing from it also calls the blessed to strife in all things,” the man dismissed. “It is a curse of unmaking as certain as that of age.”

“Yet you took a Blessing as well,” she said. “And you’ve birthed no small amount of strife. The People of the Wolf, the southern cities, even your father – all dancing to your tune, every death another stone for your tower.”

“Is this judgement I discern?” Neshamah drawled. “You must have been human once, Intercessor. Do you not recall the urgings of one’s blood? I forced nothing. They do as they will, by their own choosing. All the forces of this war precede me. My forbear slew that of the Witch Queen, and so enmity was birthed between our peoples. Blessings of opposite bent set her against my father to the death, leading to the night of his passing. And war? Ah, war is but the accumulation of a thousand choices. Beyond the guiding hand of any single man. All I have done, Intercessor, was hitch my chariot to a falling star.”

“Oh, I won’t ever forget my first face,” the Bard murmured. “Or the first few after that, when I evened the scales of the debt. I leave judgement to the Tribunal, my friend. To every force its purpose, and that is not mine.”

“We must seem like golems to you,” the man said wonderingly. “Our incantations written by the hands of Gods instead of men, yet not so different peering down from your perch. Eyeless things toiling for purpose we cannot understand.”

"One day, maybe," she said. "When I will have grown used to dying. Until then I still weep for what we do to ourselves, without needing a single nudge."

"I have pondered, since I first learned of you," Neshamah said. "Whether or not your service is willing."

"They make us better, when we listen," the Bard said. "Even yours. It is a terrible thing you will do, but no less great for it."

"Yet you seek to escape your purpose," the man said.

"I have," she said lightly, "always loved a good story."

"What a clever jest," Neshamah mused. "That there are none to seek intercession for the Intercessor."

The Wandering Bard laughed. Like he was her friend, and not a monster who was scheming to destroy a kingdom and a half for his ambition. I shivered at the sight of it, for the second time. For reasons darker and deeper than the first.

"Pity, from *you*?" she said. "People never do cease to surprise me. I look forward to your ending, King of Death."

"O ye of little faith," the man who would be the Dead King smiled.

The Bard pulled at the flask again, saluting him jauntily, and sashayed away without another word. I did not follow her. She'd disappear, stepping into an alcove and vanishing into thin air. I stood there in silence for a very long time, watching the man that would become the Dead King look down at his father's burial. Masego, for once, sensed there was no place for conversation.

"Take us out," I said quietly.

"I have not extracted from either of them," Hierophant said hesitatingly.

"Tomorrow," I said. "We're done for the day."

"Catherine?" he asked, but it was more worry than question.

"Take us out, Masego," I said. "It looks like I need to prepare to fight an entirely different kind of war."

This is before names were NAMES. Weeping heavens how old is this man.

*Baggy0z*

Isn't Named just the Callowan/Praes term for them? Procer uses Blessed/Damned and I think the Levant uses something similar.

*Someguy*

Chosen/Damned was the Proceran term. Levant uses blood Lineages or something.

*Argentorum*

The way they talk about blessings makes me feel like they might not be as...set in stone as names are. Specifically "you looked below for your blessing. The delineation between the two sides isn't as clear, because they're both blessings, which makes me think that the powers might also be more fluid. Or I'm reading too much into it.

*SlumberryStorm*

I think it is more that the "Storys" the "Names" come from are not as set in stone.

[Euodiachloris](#)

It looks suspiciously like something, or somebody, codified Roles and Names in Calernia into the shapes we currently know them... all for the liking of a Good Story™. Bard's been a very busy bunny for quite a long time. And, has shaped a whole continent of conflict.

I think she's wrecked a few things in the process of streamlining the tools and board the Gods' chosen actors get to play with and on. <\_<

[Euodiachloris](#)

PS – Should have said, "Bard's been a very busy bunny for quite a long time, most of it against her will."

She's borked what she could, when possible and while using plausible deniability. But, has forgotten that the pieces are people in the process.

*Tsura*

Didn't the Wandering Bard say something like "I was there when your Name was made"?

She herself may be the one who did the codeifying

*Sylfa*

Have to agree, in particular the line "Below has already blessed you quite enough, my friend. You don't need the nudge." when he complained about Those Above being boring.

That implies rather heavily that people could receive blessings from both Above and Below at the same time, at least in these early days if not in Catherine's time.

We also learned that Arcadia was the gods first attempt to solve their dispute and that Wandering Bard has: been around presumably from the very beginning of Creation, that she's actually neutral, and is supposed to Intercede to keep some balance. Amazing amount of information in an amazing chapter!

And poor Bard/Intercessor that can't even admit she's not very happy about her position, she's been at it for millennia by now, being teleported about without a say in the matter...

*Snowfire1224*

How old is bard? She implies she has already died and come back a few times already.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Probably one of the first names to ever be had.

*Yotz*

The First Moderator of /r/Creation.

[Kagedviper](#)

Moar liek: The first editor of Shakespeare

*Miles*

I guess there's a kind of implication in the name: bards wrote stories

*stevenneiman*

Weirdly the Book of All Things calls them Names, but that almost seems like a newer term from the way it's used in some places but not others.

*Snowfire1224*

Perhaps there is more than one translation for the book of all things and the version we saw was the callowan version.

*Aeon*

Fascinating. So Bard isn't necessarily a hero. I'm seeing some parallels with Black, based on some of the things Neshamah said. And she's been around for a very long time.

*ruduen*

Even back then, the Wandering Bard likes to watch.

Now, it's just a question of what Catherine can take from it all.

(Also, if she'll get to snatch any other languages on her way out.)

*Argentorum*

She's already found the most important thing. She's a piece on a very old board. The Dead King and the Intercessor have been playing for longer than Callow has been a kingdom.

I'd also be...rather upset.

*Byzantine*

But I think this conversation just showed they aren't playing. Bard wants to die, or escape from her torment of keeping the balance. But in order to do so she must learn, and the Gods keep her constrained so she cannot.

And Bard does not work for either side, exactly. She works to ensure the balance is maintained the game does not end. And that puts her in an entirely different position than Cat had assumed. And Cat just learned why the Dead King is so interested in her – she is an unconstrained being with the power of Winter in its entirety. She is exactly what he was hoping to make himself into. And she is something that can defeat the Gods themselves.

*SHARKS*

I don't think it's winter, specifically. I think it's cat & Co's ability to fuck with the "narratives" made by the gods.

The summer/winter fae thing was the prototype for the "good" and "evil" narrative. It was supposed to loop endlessly, but cat BROKE that loop. My bet is that is the part that piqued his interest. She already broke the prototype, so now he might be able to finally break the real game.

*Byzantine*

Yes, but in breaking the prototype she stole half its power. That means she both has an impossible innate

ability – to break patterns – and the unbound power required to do so. The Dead King has the power, but he is bound in such a way that he cannot accomplish his real goal.

The Bard has been trying to Create something impossible, which would allow her to break her bindings and escape her role. All while still being forced to play it.

Catherine had the ability to break patterns, previously, but not the power to go up against patterns woven directly by the gods themselves. Now she has that power and that ability. This is the real reason Bard ensured Akua was successful – she needed Catherine to reach her current state, where she is no longer mortal, and unbound by pattern.

The Dead King likely noticed what Cat has done... and if they talk freely will likely immediately see the bard's play. The question is what happens next?

*Morgenstern*

Funny thing that it wasn't exactly Cat who had the idea how to break the fae cycle, but rather Malicia. I wonder how the Dead King will take \*that\* revelation. Or that it was Black who engineered other victories.. etc.

*Byzantine*

It will make him very, very happy. Because he has the idea. He's just been lacking a tool capable of carrying it out. Catherine is that tool – where she goes the story begin to shatter.

*MetruX*

Err... None of the above. The one who made the plan was the King of Winter, but he needed Cat to do it, since he was naturally unable. And yes, Black engineered other victories, but all he does is with the same final objective, and that objective, much like the king's one, needs Cat to do it, because he is naturally unable... Do you see a pattern emerging?

*HandyCapped*

A quarter of that power. Roughly(?). There is also Spring and Autumn.

*Byzantine*

Spring and Autumn do not exist when Winter and Summer do. I believe that they are merely a reshaping of the same power.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

People are hung up on that... No. The cycle is now borked. There were ever only two sides which cycled between four seasons. While any one cycle was in play, there could only ever two seasons – the other two were part of a different skin applied to a whole setting. Only upon a reset and reshuffle could the seasons change.

So, Cat got the half of what was playing out at the time, and she won't get Autumn (assuming Autumn was the "Evil" mirror), because that skin hadn't been applied to the cycle in play.

In addition, she now has the Wild Hunt, where once that was Spring or Autumn (in mythology, there's just the Seelie –roughly associated with both Spring and Summer simultaneously– and Unseelie –roughly Autumn and Winter– and the border between both rather fluid).

Because things Arcadia is now borked, the nature of the Hunt would have been in question. One solution: shove unhappy dissidents into it, affiliate it with Cat on the premise that Creation is now her backyard and Arcadia needs her permission to play in it. The Hunt needs to play in Creation: it's part of its function. Now, its playing to bork Creation to mirror Arcadia.

### *Notsteve*

I think this is also why Bard made sure Black broke Akua's device. Cat was about to get a new Name if it had survived, which would have bound her to the same old system. As discussed here, villains are just as doomed as heroes to die before learning enough to break the system. But since Cat didn't become the Black Queen, she barely has a Name at all anymore. Which might mean she has the power to change the system but is no longer subject to its rules.

### [wyaldriddler](#)

That was interesting. Not really sure what to make of all of it but it is some interesting set up.

### *Byzantine*

So Bard was the Gods solution to something that tried to break the game. Both Above and Below cooperated to create her. That explains how she is so... absurd.

And she has wanted to die for a very, very, very long time. Then the game she is playing right now is not to balance the scales, or let heaven win. She noticed the same thing the Winter King did: that Catherine can break unbreakable patterns.

And we just learned something very special: Catherine has the power of Winter, but is not constrained to fall into a circle. She is the unmaking of the Gods themselves. Damn.

*Novice*

I completely agree especially with your last paragraph. But what would that mean with the Calernian Fae? Because they too have escaped the bindings of Summer and Winter.

*Byzantine*

I suspect they escaped one pattern for another that has yet to emerge. The Fae are too bound by stories to truly stop being part of one. The nature of the story has simply changed.

*Dainpdf*

They have probably just traded one cycle for another.

*Antoninjohn*

Just the Gods Above not both

*Dainpdf*

Doesn't Trimegistus saying she comes "for the Above" sort of imply she could have come for the other side?

*Byzantine*

He implied she works for both – "You come in the service of Those Above, then" is not something he would say if she always worked for Above, because he was far more aware of her than anyone had a right to be.

*Morgenstern*

Her title here is an indication, too. She's a go-between for the Gods Below and Above, their mediator (which would make it more clear than Intercessor, but who knows, maybe she's been trying for intercession for the humans and/or played that role in the human world, so got that title there?).



*Morgenstern*

Put that in “probably” / “most likely” speech, but yeah.



*Dainpdf*

Catherine is also not eternal and immortal, which was the issue with the Fae. She does not pose a threat in the way they would if unbound.

*Byzantine*

She is immortal.

If she is eternal... well, that really depends on just how Winter and her are linked. The Fae can die, but they always come back when the cycle repeats. If Catherine dies, the question is what would trigger Winter to reset, now that the cycle in Arcadia is broken?

I suspect that it is, ironically, Catherine's death that resets the cycle. If so, then she is very much eternal. And that's the kind of thing we only find out in the endgame.

*Dainpdf*

Pretty sure Cat doesn't get to slip the leash that easily. She's very likely still mortal, if unaging. Otherwise one would expect the Heavens would have advised either the Pilgrim or Hasenbach's oracle that trying to kill her is futile.

Also, I think Cat doesn't reset, precisely because she's not truly Fae.

*Yotz*

That's one of the base problems with digital immortality – quantum matrix on which your consciousness is imprinted may be reasonably considered eternal, but the fine structures of your consciousness are not. And since said matrix must be by definition mutable, it will degrade with the degradation of 'you'. It's just like the *Gardener in the dark* principle, only stretched from decades to millennia of \_subjective\_ time. Basically – everything rots.

This is why any depiction of deep immortal are inherently flawed – our consciousness evolved to inhabit relatively short-lived mortal coil, and so we are unable neither to fully comprehend deep time as a concept, nor any being actually *able* to comprehend it. To grok the eternity one must be eternal. Cat only recently became one – and with a

caveat the size of Vredefort Dome: the moment she succumbs to the mental entropy, her body will deform and disintegrate, solving the problem. And if she would be able to change enough to overcome degradation, she is bound to become one of the Old Monsters – completely inhumane, deeply alien, incomprehensible creature, bound to the Grand Cycle of her own creation. Which solves her as a problem for the Players in deep time.

Similar can be added to the Below Gift – beyond in-package megalomania as a form synthetic telomere – as it was shown with Black. He felt old inside, and so he aged visibly – he felt invigorated after the Knife Incident, and so he became young again. Even if you'll manage somehow to retain King of the Hill's Crown, you will crumble eventually, for the Names of godslayers are Ennui and Oversatiation.

/streamofconsciousness.end

*Dainpdf*

That is true. Even villainous Named tend to fall into patterns. Perhaps that is part of why the Dead King seldom moves. We'll see.

Oh, and Cat dodges way too much for someone who is truly immortal, so we know that she at least thinks her body being destroyed would cause her very great inconvenience.

*Novice*

I think Cat is already an immortal. When talking about handing out Winter titles, Larat has this to say: "Ah, but there are such benefits to bestowal," Larat smiled. "Freedom from the chains of entropy among them. How many of those you love are you willing to lose to age, before bending your neck?" – Chapter 10:Allegro

*Dainpdf*

She's unaging, has been since she became a villain. That is nowhere even close to being immortal.

*Novice*

Catherine's soul is practically Winter itself. So long as there's a shard of Winter somewhere, like say via handing out Winter titles, Catherine can and will return thus making her an immortal imo.

*Dainpdf*

Eh... That's a stretch. Might be Winter as a fae entity will end as soon as Cat dies. Her soul leaves/is destroyed/does whatever souls do when their owners die, and Winter goes with it. Or maybe she does endure as a metaphysical entity, but can now only be briefly summoned with interrupted consciousness, like the devils. We have no way of knowing, as of yet.

*MetruX*

You're assuming, and with the guide assuming is almost always a bad thing. For all we know the fae cicle was broken BECAUSE of her existance in separation, which means the cicle will come anew after her death. For all we know the cicle was broken UNRELATED to her existance in Winter, which means she's the last of Winter and it will disappear with her. For all we know fae powers and tendencies don't follow our common logic, and we may very well not understand what happens. I mean, maybe she is eternal as of now, but when she dies she only resets herself, now as Fae, and can't change anything forever again. Maybe she'll even reset inside the united fae kingdoms, which could be even worse...

*Antoninjohn*

Well at least Cat knows his name, she gets power from that as a fea

*Dainpdf*

It wasn't freely given, though, so she doesn't get that much. And if anyone knows how to block that sort of thing it'd be the Dead King.

[Hakurei06](#)

A name learned but not given also has a power.

*Dainpdf*

Never claimed otherwise.

*Jane*

I wonder how many more Echoes they could find... If they were to go to other great sites, and loot the knowledge therein, how much could Cat learn? The languages would be useful, but could she also learn great sorceries or famous swordplay?

I mean, the Gigantes \*have\* to have done \*something\* that echoes into Arcadia, right? Just imagine being able to lift their sorcerous secrets without decades of study or having to talk her way into a country that would prefer her dead...

Then again, I wonder if there would be side effects they're unaware of. I can't imagine that what she has become has been thoroughly studied.

The Dead King sounds like an interesting man, who plays a game far more dangerous than any had thought. I'm reminded of how Heiropant's ultimate ambition could break Creation itself, only the Dead King has presumably gone much further along his path than Masego has... If the Dead King thinks to outplay the Gods themselves, just how much danger is there in accepting his assistance?

*Dainpdf*

So the League precedes the Dead King, and so does the Bard. Interesting. And his musings about decay and strife seem to indicate Creation is something like Douglas Adams's Earth: a gigantic computer, which uses among other things life itself to derive knowledge.

*Novice*

The League does not precede the Dead King. The League of Free Cities was founded in response to Procer's aggressive expansion. And the Principate of Procer was formed after the fall of Triumphant.

*Dainpdf*

Hm. I assumed one of the things Trimegistus mentioned was the formation of the League, but I guess I was mistaken.

*Gunslinger*

The 12 cities exist but I don't think they are the league as they are now.

*Dainpdf*

Small issue:

"So many fucking exceptions and whoever had decided that plurals for masculine and feminine names (...) deserved to be drawn and quartered."

Missing a piece. "(...) that plurals for masculine and feminine names [should work differently]", perhaps?

*Yotz*

Ellipsis at least – as in, she is so frustrated with said plurals, she can't even finish

*noname*

Or replace that for the as so;  
So many fucking exceptions and whoever had decided the  
plurals for masculine and feminine names – or even that there  
should be any of those – deserved to be drawn and quartered.

*Jonnnney*

So Arcadia was indeed a creation of the gods. The garden of  
immortals who didn't change enough to settle the debate between  
above and below. Interesting, this has very significant  
implications about the power gains of the fae who escape their  
leash.

*Byzantine*

And I think makes things interesting in another way – the Bard  
intentionally set things up so that Catherine would gain her  
Mantle... and so that she would stop restricting it. At the time  
these seemed like steps to taking down Team Practical Evil, but  
I'm wondering if Bard is running a shell game: She is,  
theoretically, fighting against Team Practical Evil in her role  
of keeping the balance, but her real goal is the creation of  
something that surpasses the Dead King. Something Impossible  
that will allow her to break her own leash.

...Like, say, the unbound holder of Winter, who has an impossible  
gift for breaking stories...

*Someguy*

"There is only one lesson to be learned from shatranj: no  
matter who wins the game, the pieces return to the same box."  
– Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

Break the box and stab the shards into the eyes of the players.

[sengachi](#)

-Catherine, Queen of Callow

[Cold Cyberia](#)

"What Foundling does isn't thinking outside the box so much  
as stealing the box and hitting her opponents with it until  
they stop moving."

– Extract from "A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars", by Juniper  
of the Red Moon Clan, Book 1 Chapter 27

[Euodiachloris](#)

Be the pigeon!

*Someguy*

Neshamah is like proto-Black, only much much more experienced and powerful. Fortunately they are not playing the same game.

*TheCount*

Now, Cat has got another blade for the Bard, and seen a bit of the Death King's nature... Things will be interesting. 😊

[sengachi](#)

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Go support Erratica on Patreon if you can! He does so much amazing work for us and he absolutely deserves to make \*at least\* a living wage off of his work on this story.

Seriously, if you'd pay \$20 for one of Erratica's books, then you can chip in at least two bucks a month. He gives a book a year already, that's a fine exchange. (Holy crap you give us a book of this a year how the fuck do you manage that?)

*Novice*

Hmmm... So if immortality is such a threat to the Gods, then what about the Elves? Surely in their long lives, one of them has already amassed enough power to threaten the Gods. Or are they so into the Good side that they are effectively shackled? Or maybe it's only the Elves of the Golden Bloom.

Why even bestow power to Creation in the first place if there's a chance the Gods could be usurped? So many questions.

I'm so excited for the next set of worldbuilding chapters.

[sengachi](#)

I think that was the Dead King's comment about immortals being bound. The elves are just as bound as the fae in their own way, unable to grow beyond a heavily constrained set of mental and behavioral limitations.

[TeK](#)

It's said that elves grew a narrative weight as they get older. I imagine this boon comes with drawbacks, not unlike how all Villains want to monologue.

*MetruX*

It also comes to mind that we only know the "lesser" elves from the golden bloom, since the "greater" ones never appeared so far. We know for a fact the ones in the golden bloom are limited, since the bard could stop them with words only.

## [sengachi](#)

Catherine can bestow the power of Winter on people, and in doing so free them from senescence. She can make the Gods' nightmare scenario -a race of unbound immortals- come true. We've known up to this point that Cat was a threat to the Gods' game, but only in the context of 'Cat breaks rules, she really doesn't like the Gods' rules, she's the protagonist, the natural conclusion of her story is more directly challenging the Gods rules'. Now we have an in-universe reason to believe that she is a capital-T Threat to the Gods.

Fuck, in that context I'm frankly surprised the Gods Above \*only\* threw the Grey Pilgrim, the Saint of Swords, and fourteen (ahem, sorry, twelve) holy bludgeons at her.

Also ... this implies that the Gods Below might not like her much either. Now I'm wondering ... \*is\* she still backed by the Gods Below? Her necromancy is confirmed to no longer be of infernal origin, she doesn't truck with devils or demons, her shadow power is definitely now an extension of the whole Moonless Nights thing, and all the rest of her powers are clearly Winter in origin. Heck she doesn't even actually have a proper Name anymore, nor a clear Role. I ... oh my gods did the Gods Below actually forsake her?! Is she not actually a Villain anymore?!

... Wait a minute. The Woe are: an explicitly non-divine miracle worker (Masego), an explicitly neutral Named who just seeks conflict (Indrani), an ex-Hero Named who's definitely not a proper Villain (Vivienne), Hakram, and "I'm trying to squirrel my way into the most half-assed redemption arc ever but no really I'm not a Villain any longer" Ubua. \*None\* of them are properly Evil (except Ubua and she doesn't count, although maybe she's a ploy by the Gods to pull Catherine and her Mantle back into the fold?). I ... I think Catherine might not actually be aligned with the Gods Below. Everyone kind of assumes she is but ... maybe she's not.

Oh fuck this would even match up with the whole Grey Pilgrim's thing about "so long as you've signed on with Below your people will follow" and Catherine's worry about that. The perfect ending to that conflict would be Catherine finding out that she's not actually aligned with Below and throwing that wrench into the Pilgrim's moral compass. Force him to \*actually\* judge Catherine by her moral merits and push Catherine into actually evaluating her own actions without the default assumption that some amount of Evil comes with the territory.

## [wyaldriddler](#)

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We've known up to this point that Cat was a threat to the Gods' game, but only in the context of 'Cat breaks rules, she really doesn't like the Gods' rules, she's the protagonist, the natural conclusion of her story is more directly challenging the Gods rules'. Now we have an in-universe reason to believe that she is a capital-T Threat to the Gods."

Eh, I'd have issues with this course, mostly because a power climb is not a very complicated story and it does not engage it's readers in the same way Practical Guide has up to this point. Which has usually been through political drama, magic, high fantasy and war. Since Practical Guide's whole thing is wrapped around messing with the conventionally expected Hero Vs Villain then it'd be in poor form from a perspective looking at the writing of it if this happened.

You *\*can\** make it work(see Kill Six Billion Demons for an example), and you can get working stories out of it, but Prac Guide hasn't set itself up to do that.

*John doe*

I disagree. I think much like TTGL and Worm it could escalate in quite a satisfying way. We've had hints there's a much larger game in the works since the first book. We've seen Cat pick fights above her weight level routinely and slowly build up her strength to pick bigger and bigger fights. This is her logically endgame. The only way to have lasting peace is to break the cycle that forces conflict. It fits her motives too well for her to ignore.

[sengachi](#)

Also I feel like this wouldn't necessarily culminate in Catherine duking it out with the gods. She doesn't have to do that to fight them. She 'just' has to break their narrative in a sufficiently thorough way and divorce the world's trajectory from the Gods' question of Good vs. Evil.

[wyaldriddler](#)

TTGL was meant to escalate the way it did because that was the premise of Spiral Energy in the first place. Probably one of the better anime out there for how it did what it did and the awesome it could pack into a show. Though it's ending was a bit sadder than I think it needed to be.

Worm also escalated, but that unfortunately made it worse *\*points at S9, Tagg and Alexandria\**. It had nice fights, but post-Leviathan things get suspect.

In this case there's not too much thematic difference between Xianxia and Practical Guide if it decides to go with



the idea of Cat fighting the Gods. Aside from that it also entails discarding one of the central precepts of the books, which is that mortal non-Named can actually action change via warfare. What's a bunch of mortals going to do with the Gods? Nothing, they're mortals and thus not important in a fight against Gods. This flies in the face of what the Guide seems to be about.

Power climbs work in certain settings, as previously established in TTGL where it went with it wholesale. Other times where the setting is set up for that to be a proper thing. But rebellion against the Gods in their fortresses is a trope that's been done before in fantasy and it holds no interest for me. Fucking over the God's plan by pushing through the Accords? That would be very Guide like and I'd appreciate that ending.

*Clmineith*

It seems to me like if she was creating a Neutral side.

The catch here will be if, after years of fighting for creating a side free from both Good and Evil, she eventually realized that she has just created a new side to trap people into

*crescentsickle*

Except that neutral side doesn't have gods associated with it. Creation, or at least Calernia, is a board game for the Gods Above and Gods Below to figure out who wins. There are two distinct sides that are heavily maintained to see which one wins.

A third faction existing is one in which mortal representatives say "fuck your game" and attempt to ruin the whole point of what's going on. It is the worst possible scenario for the Gods, because the mere existence of that side breaks the game. "Good" and "Evil" no longer weigh just against each other, and so whatever portion weighs against Neutral may offer bonuses or penalties for or against the two sides that matter.

What is revealed to us is that the hearsay about Creation being a wager between the Gods is legit, and it's so legit they cooperated to make sure the wager is honest. Immortals are bound to prevent their interference, and that makes them unsuited for the wager. Mortals aren't bound in the same way, but they get expiration dates so they can't ever amass enough power to break the wager. Just in case any of that fails, they created failsafes: agents charged with policing the game board. That's Wandering Bard.

It sounds like Calernia used to be just people versus people, and those people either followed the Gods Above or Gods Below and received blessings of power, ability, etc. Since the time that the Dead King yet lived, however, Calernia has been plunged deeply into exacting lines. More and more agents for either side, with more powerful and more specific abilities. With more weight. Not pawns on the board with different colors and subtly different ways to move and act, but specific pieces in defined roles with well-defined rules. Not just "One with a Blessing from the Gods Below", but "Black Knight", or "Dread Empress".

One thing of special concern is that we already have some neutrals, and the especially important one is Ranger. I think, like Squire, there are some pieces on the board that can be played by one side or the other. Different stories, but very similar powers. Ranger as a Name sounds like one. So what happens when an Immortal, supposedly bound, happens into a Name that can be played for either side, and then plays neither?

Either Hye is the product of gaming the system by the hands of the Wandering Bard's caliber, or Hye is an agent like the Bard. Calling it now, because she doesn't fit into the new reality based on what we understand so far.

#### *Azure*

Ranger is the ultimate killer, so yeah she's definitely an agent. She threw down with the Summer Queen so that tells you she's on equal footing with pretty much the most powerful immortals in play. She's definitely a fail safe to end anyone who threatens the balance. The Bard just nudges things, Ranger is the hammer that smashes if needed. I'd say Catherine may have to face her at some stage if she really comes close to breaking the game.

#### *MetruX*

Hye is as bound as the elves, remember when she met Cat and said she practically couldn't stop herself from killing her. It's in her nature to be bound, only in a different way than we are accustomed.

Also, you may be confusing something, Cat is very much a lesser god right now. Masego has implied innumerous times she's not human anymore, she had even fewer consequences to this learning than the miracle worker with an Aspect to help that did the job itself. If she does rise a new side, she will rise with it, and finally we get another God on the game board. What this implies, we know too little to even begin imagining.

*IDKWhoitis*

Anyone else think how weirdly convenient this echo was in range? Like is this just fate throwing Cat a bone, or a higher tier manipulation?

*Novice*

Some would call it Providence.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I call it “both the Dead King and Bard knew what the fuck they were doing and made arrangements”. 🤪

*TheTime*

just so you know, Neshamah is Soul in Hebrew. Which have interesting implication, as Keter is Crown in Hebrew, as well as the source of divine power in the cosmos in Kabbalah. Is Ashkaran a Hebrew inspired language? Zekiah sounds vaguely like N X , which means “winning” or “gaining [something]”, but maybe I’m digging too much into this.

[sengachi](#)

\*gasp\* This is why Masego’s incu-dad couldn’t tell him about the Dead King’s rise. Incubus is a bound immortal. And the Dead King’s power grab is the ultimate expression of an attempt to become an unbound mortal. I’ll bet you there’s some kind of interdiction the gods laid down to prevent immortals from conveying information about how he did what he did.

*Byzantine*

The fact it remains a mystery after this long despite pieces literally being present in Arcadia means something was done to make sure no one was ever aware of what happened. I suspect it may be possible to figure it out, but impossible to convey by any means. That restrains the problem to individuals, and those are easily dealt with.

It also explains why his father said nothing – he can’t. He can’t even say he knew what happened, because even that is conveying information about it.

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Yeah, looks like he’d have conceal any possible way of disrupting the God’ wager. From interlude Liesse IV:

Wekesa had long suspected that the reason for the existence of angels and devils was that the Gods could not intervene directly in Creation or any of its adjacent realms. Not, like

the Book of All Things stated, because a wager forbade it – but because the Gods were Creation. That their power had been made into the world all mortals inhabited and could not be withdrawn without unravelling the entire edifice. Hence the establishment of catspaws defined as opposite, but ultimately serving the same purpose: advancing the experiment.

### NZPIEFACE

“O ye of little faith.”

The perfect way to describe Bard, I’d say.

### *Neuromute*

From google research Neshamah is Hebrew for “breath”, referring to the spirit or soul. So even before he was the Dead King his name was Spirit or Soul. Combined with the comments about not being remembered or even perceivable by his family I think Trismegistus is already some kind of ghost/lich or a being of pure soul. He’s already shed his mortal form.

### *Anony*

I don’t get it.

Why is “Human minds were not meant to process that much knowledge instantly.” a reason not to do this? Just do it over a couple hours, or days or w/e.

On top of that, Cat isn’t even human anyway.

A praesi caring what human minds were “meant” to be doing feels just a tad ooc lol.

### sengachi

I mean, Masego did end up doing it to himself despite serious personal agony. That’s pretty Praesi.

Also, while doing really dangerous things with magic is very Praesi, so is the dumb getting killed early because they did \*stupidly\* dangerous things with magic. Masego may have made it his life goal to eventually transgress all the bounds the gods placed on magic, but he’s also Praesi mage who’s practiced for decades and is still alive and that means he has a healthy awareness of and begrudging respect for those bounds.

### *MetruX*

It is a reason because of what was said in the chapter, and also, you don’t know how it works, why do you assume you CAN do it over time? And yes, Cat isn’t human anymore, the reason why he didn’t hesitate for a second to do it for her.

Praesi die early and consistently because they disregard this kinds of things, Masego is not really Praesi in his ways. He inherited a little from his father, but the man himself was already a little of an outcast, and this boy was born with difficulties for social, while being taught by an incubus. It feels very right to me, the way he acts, because it's consistent with what was shown of HIM, not of some stereotype.

### *SpeckofStardust*

1. Bard didn't make the dead king.
2. She predates him.
3. She was made by those below and above to deal with a problem that wasn't working by the rules, aka the first practical evil/good cause they would win the argument but not by letting either side of the argument win.
4. Which is why when bard went against black she could actively/openly work with both a hero and a villain, because he qualified for that level of getting his ass kicked.
5. Just because at one point she wanted to escape doesn't mean she still wants to do so.
6. She's definitively not dead. After all she has to be there when the Dead king kicks is :<

### *PotatoMan*

Maybe in the beginning, Bard was helping create conflict between Good and Evil. When talking to the Dead King, Bard mentions that Trismegistus "already has enough Blessings and doesn't 'need' the nudge", which implies that Bard can and has in the past, before that conversation took place, given such 'nudges'. A nudge in this metaphor being a Blessing of Above or Below. Why would the Bard give powers out to people, both Good and Bad? Trismegistus also mentioned that both "fortune and misfortune draw {The Bard} like carrion", and lists a few Kings and Queens, assumedly in times of great strife, as known associates. The Bard, in the beginning, was stirring up action to create great Stories. The Bard hints at this with her light jest: "I have," she said lightly, "always loved a good story." If the Bard (with Blessings form both Above and Below) is the Intercessor that both makes stories and also ensures that they stay on track, her OP powers and previously unclear motivations make much more sense.

I think that Bard was gifted powers by both Above and Below as an instrument that can interfere in the earthly plane to create and maintain stories for the "argument".

### *PotatoMan*

Oh drat I thought of something else. The Dead King implies that immortality in the Guideverse has built-in shackles to prevent the Gods' usurpation, and that the Fae are bound by such. He also says that mortals are allowed to learn and grow, but that they

are bound from usurpation by, ya know, dying. Initially, The Bard had to give out Blessings to foster conflict in the world, but what if there was a way to gain the power of someone else's narrative achievements if after they were gone, you took their title and declared that you would be acting in the same manner? Such a method would bypass your limited earthly time to build a narrative, allowing you (from your perspective) to gain power. However, Names are bound by the same shackles that immortals are, forcing you to increasingly fall into tropes and stifling growth. One thing we have seen in The Practical Guide is that once you take a Name, you are bound by its' precepts and begin acting in a manner according to it's nature, or suffer power loss and Name disassociation. From this perspective, names are little more than shackles, binding you to the will of the story and the fate of that Name. Villainous names are slated to lose, Heroic to win, Villainous to grasp, Heroic to defend. Such a continuity between Names, and the fact that by taking them you act in accordance with the Gods' plan, could be why the elves of the Golden Bloom only consider talking with Heroes as people, as Heroes have the narrative weight of those before them giving them, in the Elves' eyes, substance. It should be noted that the Golden Elves consider Villains people too, but that because they support the Gods Below, the Golden Elves consider it their rightful duty to murder them.

As a side note, everyone in the comment section seems to hate Hanno for being denying responsibility and being a slave of the Heavens. But Akua, had she climbed the Tower, would have embraced her villainy and been no less a slave to it than Hanno to his Choir. Names on both sides are little more than elaborate traps, enticing people to take up Names to gain power and then stopping their wielders from changing.

*Notsteve*

Which also explains why Bard sabotaged the hellgate generator by messing with Black. Names are a trap, and the sabotage kept Cat from ascending to a new Name. Instead she may not have a Name at all at this point, and be a completely free actor with the power of a Name but none of the restrictions.

[sengachi](#)

Oh jeez, do you think she might have been \*helping\* Cat by doing that? On purpose?

*Gunslinger*

It's cool to see The dead king was always a piece of shit. Fascinating but evil proper. I'd have been disappointed if he was good but forced to do this to save his kingdom or something like that.

We also get confirmation that the Bard's role is keep the story running and not something altruistic. Though I'm curious why only heroes know about her role and not villains in the current age.

Could be Triumphant was such a strong play from Below that she's been working from the heroes side since to balance the scales?

Also for all his attempts to break the cycle his undead nature means that he doesn't grow or learn. He's still yet to achieve his goal but he's given himself plenty of time for someone to help him so we have an inclination of what the dead king wants from Cat. Scary that.

*MetruX*

I don't think it could be Triumphant, unless she is like Cat in nature, because the whole idea is that one side has to win the argument, and if triumphant was a play by Below that worked, there is nothing for the mediator to interfere.

[frolamiz](#)

Thanks for the chapter, here are some nice theories:

The Dead King indeed managed to attain immortality, but still got shackled by being an undead that has difficulties to learn. If his objective is to get rid of these shackles, it is probably the best opportunity he has ever had. Catherine, as an unbound Fae, is (probably) free of the shackles. Since undeath is one of Winter's aspects, and more importantly we already know that the undeads raised with its power can learn, it make The Dead King very compatible with it and should appear extremely enticing to him. We also know that Catherine can bestow Fae titles, so she could easily (with the right pivot, of course) make him a Winter Fae and free him from his shackles.

But it seem unlikely for him to become her de facto servant (even if with Winter, treacherous subordinates are a given), so I can see him try to either usurp her title (which would probably be difficult without the right tools) or... Marry her.

Arranged marriages are a great way to make political ties and alliances between nations, something she is in dire need (even if she would prefer that no one ever hear of this alliance, but who believe that is going to happen?), and whatever help he would provide her is probably expandable. It also place them as equal instead of subject and sovereign, is a perfect pivot for him to free himself and irrevocably tie him to her narratively (not taking into account that it is a goldmine for the story).

It would also explain why he didn't reach out to her before, since he knew she would never treat with him unless cornered, and he needed her sufficiently cornered to agree to this kind of offer.

And maybe the glowing orb from book three's epilogue wasn't Malicia contacting The Dead King like we all assumed, but some sort of artefact made to detect the existence of an unbound immortal, since it happen just after Second Liesse, when Catherine embraced her Mantle. And maybe it didn't glow since Triumphant's days because she was the last one to qualify.

[sengachi](#)

Ohhhhhhh, yeah there's a thought, Cat's undead's ability to learn being coveted by the Dead King. I like it!

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread

No one seems particularly worried about the war  
Change seems to seemed

She'd disappear  
Change disappear to disappeared

[Barthumphries](#)

Multiple people are saying, "Cat has the power of Winter and she breaks stories..." and "She's totally free from influence..."

No, no she's not.

We've seen that the more she uses Winter, the more it binds her. She has to specifically stop using it to "clear her mind of its influence", etc. She is not a free Winter-user, she's a "I'm only using a bit here and there and not even coming close to using the full might of Winter because I don't want to be bound like that" Winter-user.

And she explicitly won that Winter power by finding a story (with a little forgery) that supported her Story.

We've clearly seen that the more power people like her get, the more they're bound into their Roles.

[Barthumphries](#)

It occurs to me that Juniper might be the only truly free person in Cat's inner circle. And maybe Robber, although he seems pretty one-dimensional.

[Barthumphries](#)

This is why Ranger is so neutral. Ranger gets to exist, and gets to continue amassing power, as long as she remains neutral and doesn't get involved. She's either trapped in her role and now



can't escape, or she's hoping to quietly gain enough experience to make it matter.

### *Byzantine*

Range is bound by her Nature, rather than her name, or any story.

### *Azure*

No Ranger is the Gods (both above and below) Enforcer. She's there to keep everyone in line by force, if they are attempting to break the story. Look at the whole taking the Winter King's eye. We know that Winter was discontent with the repeating story, and wow look at that Ranger takes his eye. He was clearly plotting shenanigans and had to be pulled back in line. You can't kill an immortal, but you can diminish them, and that's what Ranger did. And the Summer Queen was likely very close to breaking out of Arcadia, when Ranger stepped in and stopped her, inadvertently saving Catherine in the process. And we know Ranger prowls the lands of the Dead King, hoping for a shot at him. He's clearly broken the rules of the story and she needs to take him out, but he's obviously planned for this and has made it difficult for her. Ranger is Enforcer Supreme and is tasked with keeping all the pieces in line. If anything I'd say she's going to be the biggest problem for Catherine at some stage, and also sets up an angsty confrontation with Black and Ranger, if he steps in to save his protege.

### *Metrux*

She's ver much bound, like I said previously in the comments of this chapter, think of her reaction when she first met Cat. She said she was almost unable to control herself and stop from killing Cat.

### *Luis*

I think people are making a misunderstanding about cats body and think winter has granted her some kind of fae "immortality". That is not the case. She is as mortal as any Named on the side of Below, the most striking difference is that she earned a boat load of power and doesn't have a fixed physical form anymore. Her form changing while she was unconscious kinda backs my point up.

She's like clay in a sense. She can mold her shape when she is conscious about it, but it isn't something she is aware of now or desires to do.

Her current form is a psychological representation of how she sees herself.

Kind of what being named does to people, but only more so.

The reason why she she hasn't changed much appearance wise is that she was totally human until just recently and still thinks like a full Normie, and she does not think about herself physically all that much.

The immortality thing is off I think too. She usurped a title, and some power. Which changed her physical form and has influenced her, but I don't think it has granted her fae "immortality".

Fae are creatures stuck in a kind of temporal loop. They have always and will forever cycle through the same shape of stories. It seems like something had changed from our perspective with the unification of winter and summer, but that is a blink of an eye change of events in an immortal view point and only seen through one lens out of I don't know how many.. few chapters ago it was explained that the winter and summer we see is not all the winters and summers that exists in what I assume is a proto reality created by the gods before creation was formed.

*MetruX*

Well, I agree with Cat's part but not with the fae part. This is a change big enough to be the main plan of one of those incomparably ancient immortals, so it has to be something new and at least make a pronounced change in the big eternity that he knows. Which, in the end, means that for at least the fae involved, things have TRULLY changed.

[Euodiachloris](#)

She didn't usurp. She was legitimately bestowed with Winter as a reward/blessing/curse by the one entity who could hand Winter titles out at the time – before Winter ceased to function normally in Acadia, even. The Winter King had played things so that a chunk of Winter was tied to Cat, come what may, the second he took her heart and shoved a construct in its place.

Cat didn't ask for that boon/bane. She got given.

[sengachi](#)

Hey, uh, I couldn't help but notice that neither the Bard nor the to-be Dead King mentioned undead or necromancy in this chapter. And that the Dead King seems suspiciously unconcerned by the fact that undead are limited and have diminished capacity to grow, something I'd really, really think he'd be concerned about or at least thinking about.

... how sure are we that necromancy existed before the Dead King?

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I wonder if she did the same thing she'd done for Exiled Prince and Lone Swordsman, reframing the narrative to set up a pivot she can't intervene with by presenting the Named in question with the information that has an implied choice in it. See, she calls him King of Death, and while it may be a side effect of the translation from Ashkaran not fully settling in Cat's head, I wonder whether "Dead King" sounds the same in that language. That would allow her to get the last laugh, since if Keter's Due warping the city and killing him was unforeseen, then she just framed this situation in a way that would turn one of her most cunning opponents stagnant. All because of a single conversation where, after realizing he didn't see death as anything significant she turned that against him, by destroying his seat of power through a backlash he knew nothing about, trapping him in a hell and crippling his ability to learn.

*aw3*

What is going to be interesting is why the Dead King is bound to his kingdom and why he is essentially powerless to interfere with the world outside specific criteria. Intercessor is a little more clear in her purpose, although the question of whether she, as a person, aims to maintain or destroy the cycle she is forced to maintain is in question. The reason that the Dead King is bound as he is and why both he and Intercessor are in conflict is perhaps the most insightful answer to the many questions this whole situation raises. The conflict between the two implies different goals. It seems possible that Intercessor would fight against the balance she maintains, but how does one reconcile a goal irreconcilable with one's role whilst maintaining that role? Both She and the Dead King must be then bound to their nature and are unable to separate their Id from their role.

Can we assume the role of Intercessor/Wandering Bard/whatever is neutral? Her whole role is to maintain balance, or perhaps more correctly to maintain the patterns of repetition (which the Gods use to ensure the entropy of creation and to prevent their own usurpation. Which in turn, also begs the question of why the need to create names/roles/blessed. Supposedly, this allows them more agency from their own nature, but why do they want/need agency?). The name Intercessor itself implies she acts as a mediator between above and below and that is neutral with and of itself. Is it possible to obtain a neutral role, given that doing so would break with the patterns of repetition? One would suppose that her role must be especially created for her, perhaps being the first role? Is she even mortal in origin?

*MetruX*

She said herself she is mortal in original, so we shouldn't put that in doubt, she never lied, only made you see things differently from her words. But you seem to think the objective

here is this world's existence. It is not. The objective is to learn or prove something, which needs the mortals changeable ways to do, thus she is not someone who works "for the balance", she is someone who works "for the rules", much like a judge in a football game, he won't press for both teams to be equal, but for both to follow the rules.

*Banananon*

Just noting the likely connection between Captain/Cursed/Sabah and the People of the Wolf

*ericwinter*

So how bad would it be if I mentioned that I literally saw all of this coming from at least halfway through book two, if not earlier? Because honestly, it was the only way the story could have gone. In a world where every great tale has already been told time and again by a never-ending cycle, the only story worth telling is escaping that cycle. The only question is whether Cat allies with Bard to do so, or makes her own way entirely. On the subject of Winter and Cat's immortality, the way I read it is this: As the only titled member of Winter, since all the others kind of fucked off into Arcadia generic, she ascended to Queen and became tied to its existence, and it to hers. At the moment, that means if she dies, it dies. Giving out another title, however, would turn Winter into a fully present concept again, possibly start Summer as well to match, and begin a whole new cycle of birth and rebirth with her as Queen of Winter, thereby making her immortal. So at the moment, yes, she is mortal, but at any point that could change if she started handing out titles. Then again, this is all just my understanding, which could be utterly wrong. Take it as you will.

*caoimhinh*

This was an awesome chapter with very interesting references and points worth of analysis.

1) The ancient kingdom (Sephirah) is based on the Jewish people, in the Kabbalah Sephiroth are the 10 emanations of God, from which the first is Keter (the crown).

2) The name of the Dead King, Neshamah, means "soul" in Hebrew.

3) "The Garden was a failure" references the Garden of Eden.

4) The Splendid, immortals bound to repetition, the Fae, who remained bound to the stories until just recently when the Winter King managed to use Catherine to break the pattern and cycle of the war between the 2 sides of Arcadia.

5) there is one thing most people have been saying in the comments, that the Wandering Bard wants to die, but I actually think it's the opposite, she wants to live. Remember that she goes to "nowhere" when she is not influencing the stories, it was shown in that the reason she drinks so much is to feel alive. But that doesn't mean she is necessarily plotting to make

Catherine into the want to break her free of it, keep in mind that she is a prisoner of her duty as Intercessor of the Gods into Creation, ensuring the Game continues, that's why she is actively trying to kill Black, Malicia and Catherine, because that legacy of Practical Evil is a game changer, even a game breaker in Catherine's case.

I personally believe that the Bard is trapped between those 2 urges: the desire to witness a great story developing as it's always been in the cycle created by the Gods, and the desire to once again be free to live as a human. She is a complex character, let's see what we will find out later on.

*DeliciousLemonyFate*

Holy shit. I ...

I just realized the character over read about who's most similar to the Wandering Bard.

It's the Cthaeh

The fucking CTHAEH

The creature at least as old as existence, who knows the shape of creation better than anyone else could ever dream of. Who USES that knowledge, to shape stories until they can subtly weave events closer towards the greatest destruction.

The only difference is that the Cthaeh's stated goal is explicitly destruction and misfortune. The Wandering Bard's goals are less clear, but they seem to involve perpetuating/BUILDING stories. And we've seen how utterly destructive typical stories are, how they grind people to destruction and remove choice.

I've just got to admire how cleverly this all was written. How Wandering Bard has gone from funny nuisance, to threat, to creation(/continent?) level FATE MONSTER

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## Chapter 31: Spectation

*"You're a masterful schemer, it's true. Let's see if that helps any in the alligator pit.."*

– Dread Empress Malignant I, holding court

They all knew me well enough to leave me alone with my thoughts as I tried to get a handle on what I'd learned. Well, maybe not Diabolist, but she was better at picking up on those things than any of the others. I occupied my hands with mindless work, taking a whetstone to my sword even though it was quite sharp enough already. *In the grander scheme of things, Catherine, I'm the petty warlord of a backwater kingdom.* Black had told me that

once, a long time ago. We'd been speaking about the gnomes, and he'd been putting in perspective the truth that a second-rate power in Calernia would be considered less than dust in the greater world beyond this continent. I was learning now that we were all pieces in a greater game even here. There was no other real way to understand the conversation between the two abominations, one still learning and the other emergent. The Bard had been considered old even in the days of Sephirah's fall. Gods, how long had she been around?

I did not consider myself all that inclined to fear my enemies, admittedly sometimes even when I should have. But as the whetstone slid against the edge, I admitted to myself that for the first time in ages I was genuinely afraid of an opponent. Heroes, even those who could tread all over me, I could cope with. There were ways around power, around the laws of the Heavens. They could be tricked and twisted. But something like the Wandering Bard? She might have set in motion the sequence of events that would lead to my death decades before I was even born. If Black was to be believed, she could not be killed and even if she somehow was anyway she'd only return with a different face. There was no telling what she knew or how she knew it. There was no telling where she was and what she was up to. How could an entity like that be beaten? The sharp song of stone on steel held no answers, soothing as it was.

I'd believed that I understood the game unfolding across Calernia. That I could guess, if not know, the motives and intents of the other players. The Tenth Crusade, the Empire and the League: the three powers on the board, as far as the nations of mankind went. My attempts at seeing through the Dead King were now revealed to have been little more than presumption, but light had been shed on more than that mistake alone. There was more going on behind the crusade than faith and ambition. Hasenbach might have refused my terms because of political considerations, as I'd previously believed, or she might have been moved by a whisper in her ear years ago that only now clicked into place. I could no longer trust any of the actors to act according to the rules I'd believed they obeyed, because I'd been blind to half the war even as I fought it. Which now took me to the very place I'd been struggling to avoid since I took the crown: I had to take measures to insure the survival of Callow while in the dark about the objectives of all the other forces in play.

Fuck, for all I knew the Bard was interceding in my favour. I'd had strokes of bad luck, sure, but exceedingly good one as well. I wasn't unaware that Black had been arranging things quietly in the background so that opportunities would land in my lap ever since I became his apprentice, but there were things beyond his ability to arrange. The Bard had been in the thick of it, at Liesse, when I gained back the aspect I lost and snatched a resurrection out of angelic hands. Had she been beaten there, or

had that restoration been the purpose all along? Hells, had she pulled strings for me to win just so I'd fuck up with Akua the following year and Second Liesse got the Tenth Crusade going? I could go mad, trying to find the hand of the Wandering Bard behind every turning point of the last few years. But then could I really afford *not* to look for it? If I kept my eyes closed, I'd lose. Or whatever else she had in mind for me.

She'd admitted to the Dead King that he'd been too clever in his scheme for her to be able to crush him, but that'd been centuries and centuries ago. When she was still learning her Role. I had to face the possibility that even if I made all the right choices I might still end up broken because the Bard had shaped the choices I'd be able to make so she couldn't possibly lose. I felt shards of stone pass through my fingers, and noticed with a sigh that I'd crushed the whetstone without even meaning to. That was my only one, too, I'd have to borrow Hakram's from now on. I picked up my scabbard with a sigh and sheathed the longsword. So much for any of this calming me. There were no easy answers to be had. No plan to form out of thin air. Should we even finish the journey to Keter? I had a better notion of what I'd be letting out, now, and it was so much worse than I'd expected.

I would not have flinched at making a deal with a cunning undead Dread Emperor with a little more foresight, but Neshamah was something else. He'd been arranging the death of realms at a time where most the continent could barely use sorcery – and he'd had millennia to plot his next moves. I very much doubted that the man I'd seen would call it quits after breaking the Kingdom of Sephirah and conquering his hell. There would be more. And I had been sent an envoy, I thought, because he had deemed I could be useful for that purpose. My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched. I'd get nowhere, stewing in my own thoughts like this. The pot had been freshly steered, and I was too close to the matter regardless. I'd speak with the others after my head was cleared. Besides, for once under the restlessness I felt the call of exhaustion. Not physical, though. The boon of knowledge from Masego seemed to have tired me out mentally.

I dragged myself back to camp, waved away the concern of the others and crawled under the covers by the fireside. I'd still be just as fucked tomorrow, so forcing myself to go through the song and dance now did not appeal.

Sleep found me swiftly.

—

I woke to the sound of soft voice, after too short a rest. The orations and murmurs of the shard could not be heard, which meant our 'night' was in full swing. My mind still felt sluggish but at least I was no longer wandering from one idle thought to the next, treading the same hopeless circle. I kept my eyes closed

and my breathing even, at first out of laziness but the reason was swift to change: the people speaking were Thief and Diabolist. Neither seemed aware I was now awake.

"- no longer need to sleep," Akua said. "You need not burden yourself, I can keep watch alone."

Thief chuckled.

"And you believe you're trusted enough for that, Sahelian?" she said. "I never took you for such a hopeful soul."

"To keep quiet in the face of danger would be utterly mindless treachery," Diabolist said. "I am, after all, dependent on Catherine to walk the world."

"Unless someone else takes the cloak," Vivienne said.

"I have use to the Woe," Akua said. "Use enough I was allowed this larger cage. There is no guarantee another bearer would have such purpose for me. A poor gamble to make."

"You seem to think you can talk your way into a semblance of trust, Wastelander," Thief snorted. "Best you discard that notion early. It will be less irritating for all involved."

"Fascinating," Diabolist murmured. "Your distaste of me has not ebbed in the slightest, and still here I am. Yet you've been charged with the duty of being Catherine's conscience, which means she would not have eased the leash without your permission."

"Her Majesty, to you," Thief bit out. "Sweet nothings and Praesi titles won't get you anywhere with us, Sahelian. We all remember what you are."

"Liesse," Akua mused. "The sum of all I am, in your eyes. You might not be wrong to think so. It was the pivot to who I am today."

"The greatest butcher of our time," Vivienne said.

"From a highborn, that would have been a compliment," Akua said, a smile in her voice. "Not so here, of course. I imagine that is how you've made peace with the nature of the demand I be brutally snuffed out when my usefulness ends."

It was an effort not to stiffen. Named senses would have given me away to Vivienne for sure, though I wasn't sure how Diabolist functioned in that way.

"Not my call to make, that," Thief shrugged. "I'm the spymistress, not the queen."



"A poor parry," Diabolist chided. "You already know I suspect the inner workings of the Woe and your role within them. It would have been more effective to feign conflict between you and Catherine over the matter, allowing her to position herself as my salvation while you bayed for blood."

There was a long moment of silence.

"You're so caught up in your Praesi games you don't even see your blinders," Vivienne sighed, and she sounded fairly convincing to me. "Must be the old madness. You certainly don't sound like a woman who thinks she has a sword hanging over her head."

Akua laughed softly.

"My dear Thief," she said. "If I cannot carve a path to survival with such early forewarning, I *deserve* to be destroyed. That is the measure by which I am to be weighed. I've always found it amusing to hear your people speak of the Wasteland's ways as 'blinders', truth be told. As if bereft of them we would then see Creation as you do. Do you truly believe Callowans to be the only lucid people in the world?"

"My tutors taught me that's called a false equivalence," Vivienne said conversationally. "The pretence that the obvious failings in the customs of a people that slaughter each other and their neighbours for sport every other decade are somehow the same as the flaws in the customs of Callow. We're not perfect, of course. But I'd rather deal with the fucking elves than you and your fellows, Sahelian. The long-ears might be murderous assholes, but at least they stay in their forest. Your people make your problems everyone else's problems too."

"So they *did* teach you rhetoric," Akua said. "Good, this would have been quite boring otherwise. You would have served as poor moral compass, were you unable to argue."

"There's that most sacred of villainous traditions at work," Thief said cuttingly. "Cutting one's losses and bailing from the fight."

"You speak as if you were not a villain yourself," Diabolist said.

"I am what I am," Vivienne shrugged. "Do you expect anguish and conflict out of me? I believe in the decisions that led me here. I would make them again. If all it takes to be estranged from the Heavens is refusing annihilation and submission, then I have no use for the Gods Above."

"You would be surprised," Akua said, "at the number of Empresses that spoke those very same words."

"You're trying to draw parallels," Thief said, growing irritated. "I don't know why, and frankly I don't care. Might be some old eastern monster was just like me, though I very much doubt it. So what? There's no angle there for you to get mercy from me, Sahelian. Your little talk about redemption is absurd: there is nothing *redeemable* about what you did and what you are. Your execution has been stayed. That is as much of a victory as you will ever win, Diabolist. Look that truth in the eyes. Wallow in it. That fear is the least of what you are owed."

"The true nature of a woman," Akua said amusedly, "is only ever revealed after she has been prodded. It is an interesting circle, the Woe. Your role in it has been the hardest to grasp."

"Has it?" Vivienne said. "And to think they said you were clever. Lost a few feathers up there along with your heart, I see."

"Oh, you are the spymistress of the Kingdom of Callow," Diabolist dismissed. "It is no secret. But that is a function, not a role."

"Am I in for a story about how Praesi understand *namelore* so well?" Thief drawled. "Clearly, we should all take advice from the people who have been one stabbing away from brutal civil war from the moment their empire was first spawned. Please, magical wise spirit, share the secrets about continent-burning instability with me. I have so much to learn from you."

"Since you insist," Diabolist agreed with pleasure so perfect-sounding it just *had* to be fake. "The Deadhand is the least complicated. His people have been carefully pruned by the Tower into being a soldier caste for the Empire over a hundred reigns, and as the culmination of that edifice he serves as the right hand of a powerful warlord."

"Hakram is the least complicated of us," Vivienne said slowly. "Hakram. Your insights are truly far-reaching, Diabolist. Reaching in the wrong direction, sure, but that can't *possibly* be a first for you."

"I cast no aspersions on the man himself," Akua noted. "I merely state that his Name and Role are no deep secret. Hierophant, however, was an unexpected variable. Apprentices have transitioned into Names other than Warlock before, but usually when both are living simultaneously a succession through murder is the outcome."

"An awkward but kind and sweet man with no interest in power did not end up murdering his relatively loving father for said power," Thief said. "However will we solve this confounding mystery, Sahelian? I just don't know."

"There is no known precedent to his Name," Akua continued without missing a beat, and I was reluctantly impressed by her ability to

just plow through that level of scathing sarcasm. "Consequently the core tenet of it had to be understood from the man himself. Fascinating as his upbringing was to study, the pivot seems to have occurred after he met Catherine. It was the calibre of the opposition that forged him, you see. Choirs and demigods. There was need for one who could understand and oppose those entities, and so the *Hierophant* came to be."

"You're forgetting demons and a highborn murderous witch with delusions of grandeur," Thief helpfully provided. "Admittedly the witch only ever seemed good at killing innocents and spending her subordinates like copper at a fair, so she might not qualify as true *opposition*."

"The Archer did seem like an odd fit, at first," Diabolist mused. "No real fetters to Catherine's ideals or expectation of comradeship as shared inheritors to the legacy of the Calamities. Ranger, infamously, left the Calamities on the eve of the Conquest. And pupils of the Lady of Lake have a reputation for being incapable of playing nice with others, be they heroes or villains. It could not merely be the fighting that drew her – there is no lack of foes near Refuge."

"It's almost entertaining how much thought you're giving to the actions of a woman whose notion of a plan is dumping all her rations in a well and filling her bag with identical cheap booze flasks so she won't run dry," Vivienne said. "But by all means, tell me everything about the intricate considerations that are behind Indrani joining a band of people that allow her to drink, fight and sleep around as much as she wants. It ought to be enlightening."

Wait, was that why Archer never seemed to run out? Fucking Hells, I'd been wondering why she was being such a magpie about taking food from Masego's plate recently.

"Peers not in direct competition," Akua said. "That was what the Archer found. A luxury previously beyond her reach. And from her addition the Woe gained both an executioner and a field Named capable of independent action for long stretches, which they sorely needed. Hers is the thinnest bond by far, and I do not expect it to keep her bound past the end of the crusade."

"And that leaves me," Vivienne lightly said, though there was an edge beneath. "Don't disappoint now, sagely collar genie. What has your profound discernment taught you of my hidden nature? I'll go first: deep down, I always wanted to be a shoemaker. Shoes are the foundation on which rests civilization, Diabolist. We are literally barefoot without them. You ever think about that, in between ruminations about how you tried to conquer the world and got your heart ripped out instead? Food for thought."

"You were a late addition," the shade said. "And in some ways the most interesting. You were, after all, previously a heroine. I should have realized which the wind was blowing when she succeeding at turning one of Above's own, in retrospective. The weight on the scales had grown too uneven, for all my labours. But we were speaking of you, Vivienne Dartwick."

"Thief," the Callowan hissed. "There's only a few people that get to use that name. Don't ever count on being one of them."

"Thief indeed," Akua said. "Not, for all your skills, an assassin. That was what first drew my interest. Archer filled that purpose, to some extent, but you seemed a more apt candidate. Yet your knives did not grow bloody after your turning, nor your Name change to reflect it."

I heard Vivienne go still as stone. Diabolist had touched something there, though I didn't know what.

"Looking back, the void you filled seems more obvious," the shade mused. "You are Callowan. The only one of the Woe who shares Catherine's ideals to any deep extent, as Adjutant would likely adapt without true challenge to a change in her priorities. After she seized Winter's mantle in full, you became the measuring stick. It was simplification to call you a moral compass, I will confess. You are not a particularly moral woman, Thief. But you do love your homeland, and have kept some of the qualms you were taught as a child. You are a restraint, and through your function as spymistress a provider of choices. In some ways, one might argue your perspective is the crucible through which Catherine remakes herself every time she is confronted with greater strife."

"You know," Vivienne said, "I used to wonder why you were playing the tamed hound nowadays. Oh, you're bound. That's part of it. But you have to know that all the playacting and sweet whispers you've been up to are not strictly necessary. Being useful and not actively offensive to everything we stand for would have gotten you this far anyway. But that last tirade of yours? It says a lot more about you than me. Because it's about Catherine more than me or the Woe. And it has to be, doesn't it Akua? Because you ended up in the box, and there has to be a reason for that. She has to be special in some way to have beaten you, otherwise you just *couldn't stand it*."

"I lost, my dear Thief, because I prepared for a battle against my rival and faced instead her power wielded by the Black Knight," Akua said softly. "The mistake in this was mine, and I do not deny it. And still, at the height of my wrath, I fought to a standstill a coalition of all Callowan arms of note and every Imperial army west of the Blessed Isle. Led by three Calamities and the full muster of the Woe. My fall was just, for every fall is just. But it would be a mistake to think *Liesse* is the origin

of the laurels on her brow. That victory was hers alone in that she was the last woman standing."

"So you're trying to make her the Empress," Vivienne mused. "Because it's fine to have lost, if she was fated to climb the Tower all along. You were a necessary part of the story. You *mattered*. And who knows, maybe you'll manage to be Chancellor if you play the game well enough."

"She will climb the Tower, Thief," Diabolist said with iron certainty. "She cannot stomach any of the remaining claimants and will not suffer to leave Praes to its own devices. You speak of fate as some invisible force, but it is a simpler thing: fate is character. And it is in hers to cut deep into her bones for her ambitions."

Thief laughed.

"She's not in charge because she's been chosen, Sahelian," Vivienne said. "Gods, certainly not because she's chosen either. Or even because she has power, for that matter."

"Is it the power of love, then?" Akua said, a touch drily.

"There's plenty of people who care about Callow," Thief said. "And if I learned anything from the Woe, it's that caring doesn't fill granaries or run a court. She's certainly in the right place at the right time with the right amount of power to get things moving, but that's not really what matters. See, the thing is that she *acts*. Sometimes those actions are mistake, like going after the fae and leaving you to plot under your rock in Liesse. But, most of the time, she improves things. Just by a little bit. And she draws other people who act with her. You think that's some unearthly trait, like she's some force of nature, but that's Wasteland talk. The Tower's the centre of the world for you, and the most important person in the world is the one that climbs it."

The other Callowan paused.

"Except she's not," Vivienne said. "The exemplar of whatever fucked up Praesi virtues you want to sing about, that is. She's kind of petty, her temper's foul and if Hakram hadn't stepped in she'd probably be a drunk. She ogles every pretty face that shows up even if they're our enemies, and she cannot for the life of her shut the Hells up even when she *really* needs to. She's not unique or irreplaceable, but even if you think otherwise that doesn't really matter – because she's part of something greater than her. She's just the rock that started the avalanche, Sahelian, and she did that by doing the most Callowan thing there is: after the invasion is done, you get up and get back to work. Others will come to help you, because a kingdom's people and not *banners*."

None of this was exactly singing my praises, but then that wasn't Vivienne's wheelhouse. She'd gotten the part that mattered, anyway. That we weren't supposed to stay in charge forever, that we were just a stopgap until Callow could handle itself on its own. The purpose wasn't to rule, it was to hammer away at Calernia until it was in a place where there was no need for someone like me.

"You think that'll make her Empress," she laughed. "You're thinking of her like some sort of tormented saint that'll take up the burden of keeping the lot of you in line for the greater good. You want to know what Praes is, for us? Another mess to clean up. Like the Tenth Crusade and the Dead King and the heroes. You're not owed anything. You're not different or unique, just another line on a long list. And that's your fate, Diabolist. That's your fucking *character*."

Akua stayed silent for a long time.

"It is a pretty world you speak of," she finally said. "We will see, in time, which one of us is right."

The silence spread again, and though I could not hear the shade move I suspected she was looking away.

"Good performance," Thief suddenly said. "But, Diabolist, if this is all of it I'm honestly disappointed. Was that really the whole ploy? I mean, Merciful Gods, you've used this one before. If this were a fairgrounds play I'd catcall and ask for my coppers back."

"Pardon me?" Akua said, voice painted with genuine surprise.

"Trust," Vivienne mused. "That's what fucks you every time. Like, for example, believing I'd be so ashamed about ordering you to rip your eye out repeatedly I'd never mention it to anyone. I did, Sahelian. And you know what she told me? That it makes no difference, if the same thing reforms repeatedly. Pain doesn't increase in the slightest."

"I don't follow," Diabolist said.

"You panted and you screamed," Thief said. "You pretended it hurt, because it made me feel like I'd accomplished something while you were actually getting your way. You 'lost' so I'd lower my guard. Like you did just now. Getting into an argument then throwing it, just so you'd be less of a threat in my eyes. Chastened little Akua, reconsidering her choices. Gods, you really are a snake."

"If I had done such a thing," Diabolist said, tone even. "What purpose would telling me you are aware serve?"

"I'm surprised you don't know," Vivienne Dartwick lightly said. "I get to see you pretend you're not furious. Sweet dreams, Sahelian. Our little chat's over until the next time you need your chain yanked."

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*SpeckofStardust*

And thief is the personal representation of Callow in the group.

The truest example of "you stole an apple from a Callowion so three generations later a Callowen punches you in the face to and take 3 back".

*RoflCat*

Punch your great grandson (3 generations)\*

*Dainpdf*

Could still be you if you're a villain.

*Jane*

Ah, so *that's* how Callow ended up on the side of Good. Easier to take revenge on people who are still alive than trying to track down their descendants!

*letouriste*

you sire, deserve a cookie

*kelioez*

That's a big award, u really think the comment's that good?

*IDKWhoitis*

So what are the current odds about either Thief or Akua dying by this Book's end?

If they both represent the paths that Cat can advance, one will probably be closed off forcefully.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

\*Author Rolls a D20\*

"Cat climbs the tower!"

Yotz

\*Author rolls a single D20\*

\*Author gets 21\*

"..."

"Cat builds the tower!"

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

\*rolls D20 to attack Hakram\*

\*gently caresses his deadhand\*

*Forrest*

"What's that? You're oh so proud of your tower of authority and power Malicia? Well I raise you my own, even taller tower! Beat that."

*grzecho2222*

Tower measuring contest

*JJR*

"I'll build my own tower, with blackjack and hookers!"

*therealgridlock*

With Black, Jacks, and hookers.

*Jessica Day*

If either dies now, I expect it to be at the climax when her choice is made. Until then I suspect Thief and Diabolist will be wearing plot armor.

*Jessica Day*

PS, I use the word "dies" loosely in Akua's case of course.

[daegone823](#)

I feel like Akua is attempting to take thief's place in the woe.

Similar to how the bard was able to survive the Warlock's rampage in Book 1. The character with the greater weight usually ends up surviving the death of the "minor" characters. Akua facing off against seven heroes and having a redemption story. Her constant arguing with thief could set up a rule of three stand off between them.

She might somehow use a loophole to slay here jailer to save Chat in some weird manner allowing her to take the place of a fallen "friend". Her new name could be something like the Chained, Bound



Chancellor, or Mad Servant. Hinting at her subservience that the old form of evil will serve the new. a new order for Praes.

I do not think any of the woe are even close to Vivienne and each I believe is willing to accept Akua if Chat approves. Chat the villain who rides with her enemies if they share the same goal.

So far Akua and thief have had two battles of wits  
They eye gouging tent where she is let out  
I don't know if this one counts?  
The third might come when Chat must trust Vivienne judgement or Akua's to lift the restraints, wherein Vivienne tries to kill Vivienne.

### *Stormblessed*

I liked what you said, although I think Jane said it better farther down. The main issue with how you present Akua's positioning of herself in the story is that I don't think "rule of three" is ever going to appear in this story again. There are so many tropes and cliches and story telling devices that reusing another one here is impossible by how the world is set up. In addition, rule of three seems like a main character's story arc and not for someone with the name of Thief.

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Ninety-nine hells that sounds awesome. So far Thief has been a bit boring, besides being a moral compass and representing Callow's interests, there's not much to her. Akua's history with Cat goes deeper than Viv's.

### *Dainpdf*

Did you miss the part where she yanked the Summer sun? And the one where she stole the treasury?

### *Yotz*

Eternal fate of characters of more moderate appearances. People, for some inscrutable reason, seem to sing praises to the Image of Lion as symbolic representation of Nobility – despite an unseemly eating habits, demonstrable inability to defend the food from hyenas due to cowardness, and revolting penchant for rolling in fresh elephant feces while moaning in delight. ...Or, maybe, because of that – which certainly explains common disposition towards aristocracy, come to think of it...

Regardless, Lion as a symbol of inherent Nobility is just as stupid as a Dove as symbol of high moral standards and/or peace. No one, literally no one who studied doves with more surface glance would draw parallels between insufferably stupid mindlessly aggressive flying – ...calling them 'rats'

would be a grave insult to rats – *things* and moral standards of any kind, much less peace, give a fresh canvas. And don't get me started on swan """"Loyalty"""" and """"purity of spirit"""". Feel free to add quotation marks as you please.

What they all have in common, however, is inherently skewed human perception. They all are flashy, in one way or another. Demonstrative in their projection. Unlike some other creatures of which I can not name a great deal on the fly – for they usually are modest in their style, unimposing, and generally mind their own business. No one sings praises to spiders and snakes – not anymore. Though Anansi still holds sway in some lands. We'll see how it holds.

... and I'm ranting again.  
Well, off to sleep I go, then.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Swans: murder feather dusters with very stabby, pointed parts. Also, evil glares. And, gluttonous thugs.

grzecho2222

In old slavic tales snakes are often good guys, but then came christianity

*Dainpdf*

Uh... That was something. As for symbols, they're generally divorced from the real thing precisely because real things often aren't that pure in meaning.

*Metrux*

I think his meaning is that actually they have no degree of purity in the meaning. Quite the opposite, most of those symbols, all he named for reference, have gotten nothing to do with what they represent. For the lion, the only "noble" thing about him is having an harem that serves him, hunts for him, and fighting other males for territory. Thus you get to think: why do people think of lions as symbols for noblesse? So, what I myself mean is that he wasn't talking about how symbols are not like they should, but how people take symbols out of nowhere, simply because they are more flashy, the same drawing a parallel with Akua, whose actions are not trully greater than Thief, but certainly flashier, thus it appears as a more "important" symbol.

*Dainpdf*

That's because symbols are distilled meaning, while real things are not. Especially when we use animals as symbols for human characteristics. The lion is intimidating, noisy, and dangerous.

*SpaceDorf*

And this is the most fitting description of nobility that has ever graced these pages.

*grzecho2222*

Cloakbound Prankster?

*Danus*

I can't wait to see the Dead King and Akua interact. Excellent chapter; thank you!

*Novice*

Getting both an inside AND outside perspective of the Woe and Catherine specifically? Feels like Christmas. Another great chapter.

*Raved Thrad*

I just love how ultimately unforgiving Callowans really are. It's like they should all be wearing shirts that read "I hate everyone and you're next." They're almost as vindictive as the Fremen from Dune, and that almost is only because, for some strange reason, they've historically been on the side of Good. And yet, despite all this simmering hatred, they're hardly a bunch of surly curmudgeons, as one might expect. As the introductory chapter to this book showed, they're generally chatty and good-natured. Except they're all also ticking hate-filled time bombs, and given the right justification can see the death of heroes as a good thing.

And now, if the Pilgrim is right, under Catherine's leadership they're all slowly turning evil. What does that mean in the long run? Is that hatred going to erupt in a war of subjugation (as with the Fremen) that will set Calernia on fire?

I need to stock up on popcorn.

*Dainpdf*

They're not necessarily full of hate, just empty of forgiveness and possessed of long memories.

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

Something tells me Pilgrim is not as right as he thinks. Cat may not, actually, be Evil. She's certainly "definitely not happy with the Heavens", but there's no evidence whatsoever that she's pleasing the Hells much, either. She kicks their tools in the teeth just as much.

And, it's not like the Heavens are helping themselves with the average Callowan. Sending waves of murderhobos to kill them by the dozen as incidental collateral is... unlikely to win hearts and minds. Especially for a group of people who have "Fuck You and the Horse You Rode In On" running through them as a cultural theme.

In short – it's not having a Villain on the throne that's insidiously corrupting the nation. It's being constantly harassed for having a Villain on the throne that is. 😏

*grzecho2222*

I would say that this may be more because of the fact that Callow has been "Bulwark against Terror" for ages and not only they don't get anything for it, but they are mocked and attacked by their "Good" neighbours. Just look at Lone Swordsman with his "Kill all Legions, kill all Wastelanders, and if Procer attacks, kill them all too" and how Exiled Prince acted. Cat is not a cause, she is symptom of bigger problem. She is just next logical step "If your side treats you like shit, is it really your side?" born from the fact that Black's Faction is treating them far better than Good ever did. Callow is already changing its pattern with Broken Bell turning into dark knightly order and the fact that cat is out of bag with Daoine using necromancy to empower their soldiers and nobody seems to care about it (funny that they and Keter used to be very close). It is hard to tell what they will become in end, but change is already in motion. Funny enough I think is the fact that the biggest problem for Good that Cat could make is to have a heir (biological or adopted or some long lost second cousin), because then the moment she dies Callow is basically forced to go Revenge Rampage under leadership of child (bonus point for irony, if kid would get the Name of Heir/Heirness).

*Raved Thrad*

Cat is definitely not evil, at least not by modern standards. Ruthless, yes, and cynical, and even iconoclastic, but someone whose overriding goal and motivation is to "leave the world a better place than it was when I found it" is definitely not evil. Not necessarily heroic, either – she's more of an antihero. Good and Evil, however, aren't good and evil. Good and Evil as set down by the powers above and below are a specific checklist of allegiances and behaviors that

identify you as siding with one or the other. It's why Pilgrim can be Good and still be unrepentant about the evil he causes by letting thousands of people die unjustly through his inaction.

*MetruX*

You must remember good != Good. For teh Heavens there is no "good for you", there is only "obey and be Good". From their perspective, those people aren't obeying, no matter the circumstances.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Well, duh... At no point did I say that Good = bestest morality evvar and Evil = seriously horrible bad-bad peoples and never shall the twain mix it up.

In fact, I was outright saying that Pilgrim is as wrong about what is going on as the High Lords of Praes are.

I meant "not right" as in "has made a big mistake", not as in "oops, did a morally wrong thing which a Good person isn't meant do".

In short: yeah, I know, already – don't need telling that I must remember. 😊

*Jane*

Hm... I think Vivienne might be underestimating Akua here.

Even if this ploy didn't work, by interacting with Akua, it still reinforces her presence in the party, and creates a relationship between the two of them – if there was a stony silence between them, there would never be an opportunity for a relationship to change or grow, but by engaging with her, it creates openings for things between them to improve. It's like how Hakram helped solidify Thief's presence in their group by first threatening her – it wasn't a *good* way to get the ball rolling, but it was necessary, and helped draw her into interacting with others. It also mirrors in a less murderous way how the Wandering Bard pushed the Bumbling Conjuror out of the party by shoving him into the narrative background – being out there and interacting with others creates narrative *weight* that makes her a real person and not just a fashion accessory, and thus harder to snuff out afterwards.

And as for the two of them specifically... Well, "Two party members who fight like cats and dogs but have each other's backs in the end" is a *really* classic narrative, you know? If they keep having "friendly but important conversations that everyone else thinks will end with a blade drawn by the end" talks like this, it'd be

really easy for her to fall into that pattern without realizing it.

In short... I think Vivienne might have seen one angle Akua was aiming for, while overlooking her real aim with this talk.

Not that I know that she *should* be concerned by this. I mean, it makes it harder for her to murder Akua at the end, but would it be the worst thing in the world for them to be friends? I mean, setting aside the hundreds of thousands of dead that she's privately sworn to avenge? It's not like she has a lot of people she's close to, and Akua can be a really good friend.

*Someguy*

...Akua can be a really good friend.

What have you been smoking and can I have some?

*Jane*

Well... The "Hey, why not make friends with the woman who mass murdered a city full of the countrymen you value above almost everything else?" thing was somewhat tongue in cheek, but...

Truthfully, Akua *is* a pretty good friend if you can trust her. She's charming, well-read, and was pretty much raised to make high society revolve around her. She's Praesi to the core, but if she could ever learn to turn it down a bit... Well, manipulating someone and knowing what to say to make a conversation go smoothly aren't *that* different. Especially for someone like Thief, who closes herself off to everyone around her, I think she'd be a good friend if she wasn't scheming something.

And from a more practical perspective, she's one of the finest mages of her generation, can't be killed though normal means (probably) and has a touch of Winter to her. Most of us don't choose our friends based on their combat capabilities, but for someone who routinely gets into life and death conflicts... Well, it'd be nice to know that that kind of power has your back, you know?

*Dainpdf*

Any affirmation that includes "if you can trust Akua" is vacuous, because that included a single man and Black got rid of him.

*Jane*

Well, she won't just betray her allies capriciously – only if it's to her long-term benefit, and crippling a member of the Woe is not to her long-term benefit. At the moment,

I believe her devotion to Cat is sincere, and that makes her close allies safe by extension, until such a time as Cat *really* goes crashing down.

At the very least, though, I expect we're going to get a couple of "Akua as Cat's Loyal Pet" arcs, if for no other reason than Akua causing problems every book will start making people ask why Cat doesn't just leave her dead.

*Dainpdf*

Oh, no, I don't think she'll be a Starscream. That would be way too stupid. She's just certain to backstab Cat \*eventually\*.

*MetruX*

Not only do I agree she will stab Cat sometime, the only doubt being when, but also that she is exactly the type of ally you never want to have. You see, if the situation is such that her help can make a win, she will never act to help you, because without her you've lost and she stands with the winning faction. And if the situation is good enough you don't need her, so... Why have someone you don't like and can't trust as ally? They have her now as a bound slave, and that is why she can never grow to be part of the team, because she wouldn't be able to be part of ANY team.

*Death Knight*

The practicalities of it prevents that from happening.

She's bound to the Cloak of Woe, which means in order for her to betray Cat in that manner she would need:

- a) An enemy faction with the capabilities of unbounding her from the cloak (I do not think she would agree to switch sides but STILL be bounded to an object)
- b) Trust that this faction would not betray her and kill her after they have won
- c) The means to actually communicate with said enemy faction covertly in order to set up this betrayal.

If it takes at least three things for a plan to succeed then that is no plan at all; it's wishful thinking.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Lul all the shipping bells just got tripped here, by all accounts our Cat is not exactly a beauty queen yet how many people are interested in her now?

*Jane*

And to think, I had just been joking the other day about how Vivienne/Akua could become a thing...

/joking

*Raved Thrad*

Well, seeing as how Kilian seems to have been excised from the story... Vivicat! Vivicat forever!! 😊

---

You know, I don't think that Akua is trying to establish herself as a part of the Woe. After Pilgrim's refusal to help Catherine in chapter 26, I suspect he saw Akua in Catherine's body and was aiming for her to join the party from the very start. If she's bound by the same oaths as Cat when she's possessing her, then the story may be applied to her while she, say, is let out to fight against the crusaders in Callow's hour of need again.

I mean, this was before the negotiations where Catherine turned the tables (though, given how Grey Pilgrim didn't need to signal the intermediary or prince Amadis, the redemption narrative might not have been an improvisation), but all four sentences said by the Pilgrim to Diabolist on her throne in Kaleidoscope VI can be viewed both as ones said to Cat and to Akua:

> "Child," he said, tone appalled. "What have you done to yourself?"

> "Surrender," the Great Elder said. "Abdicate. It is not too late."

> "You would argue this, after slaying thousands?" the Pilgrim asked.

> "And you think your reign a better alternative?" the Grey Pilgrim asked calmly.

The first one is obvious reference to removing her soul and making it a tool, since "Catherine" hadn't done anything during this round of the battle he hadn't seen her do before. Note that the second one is a response to "I see you've been tossing around resurrections like they're godsdamned solstice treats, too. Charming. Not going to have any long-term ramifications at all." The third one is a bit of hypocritical nonsequitur if applied to Catherine's actions during the Battle of Camps, but we've been past that. As a reaction to finding out that Diabolist is still out and about, however, it sounds far more reasonable (especially as a response to "This doesn't need to turn into a Named pissing contest."). The double-layered dialogue is followed



by Akua musing about becoming a hero and throwing around seemingly powerful punches that fail to leave a lasting wound on any of the heroes.

In that context, refusing to help Catherine was raising the pressure that made her either fold (in which case the redemption is applied straightforwardly, since she now has to fight everyone that previously backed her to "amend her sins"), or resort to the drastic measures he no doubt saw her considering, which gives the next batch of heroes narrative advantage and makes her let Akua out more frequently, who either backstabs her (which brings us back to Evil turns on Evil) or behaves like a decent person until she has a chance to contact the Pilgrim again (which, aside from story of an artifact backfiring on its owner, would allow him more control over her "character development", or at least trick the villains to their doom).

I really hope for Catherine figuring out a way of this trap, now that she heard the word "redemption" and can think about how exactly Akua is planning to get out.

*JJR*

And now I'm hoping one of the chapter headers is going to be something like. "For your aid in keeping the others in line while I planned our escape. For holding off the royal guards as I murdered my predecessor. You have earned your place as my Chancellor."

-Dread Emperor Schemer, speaking to the largest alligator

*grzecho2222*

Horse Incitatus was real life Roman Consul so...

*ruduen*

Out of the Woe, I think Thief is the most cautious of Akua, potentially tying with Catherine. She knows what Akua can do with a bit of information, and given her spymistress position, she knows the danger of leaking unnecessary information. After learning about Akua's little scheme, she'd likely be more on guard for the same, and she likely knows it's better to keep that close to her chest.

While it's gratifying to make Akua squirm, I don't think that'd be enough of a reason for Thief to leak that valuable information – it would be better to keep it hidden and be on guard, so you could catch Akua with it later.

So, is there another reason for bringing it up? Is she just attempting to make her own position against Akua look weaker than it is? Or is there something we're not seeing yet?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Like, knowing Cat is there and listening? 😊

*Azure*

No she's actually strengthening her position with Akua, letting her know she's on to her. Akua is Praesi and Vivienne just played her at her own game and then pulled the rug out from under her. Everything they discussed was incredibly obvious and superficial in terms of the Woe and their characteristics. Vivienne seems to be trying to make Akua jump focus to someone more powerful or unique like oh say the Dead King. Aka did rattle her when she mentioned her Name not changing. Perhaps it has been and Thief hasn't revealed that yet. So does this mean Thief can transition to another name? Chancellor?

*werafdsaew*

So why is Thief having this talk? Just to rub it in?

*George Maddux*

Sadism and knowing her enemy

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

The Character is Fate goes back to Heraclitus... It's fairly ominous considering Cat has a fairly obvious fatal flaw. My guess would be that Akua is trying to spin this into a tragedy.

### [Antony444](#)

Good chapter, the more we see on this travel, the more I can't wait about the big meeting with the Dead King...

*Someguy*

Cat really needs to find ex-Winter King and get her Mortal Heart back. The longer it stays with him in Arcadia the more likely it becomes a Macguffin for Heroes to retrieve-destroy in a Death of Koschei the Deathless Plot.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

Very likely it won't mean shit to her anymore.

Probably will only work to empower her.

---

He did put it back, it's discussed in chapter 46 of the previous book:

"Neither your soul nor your body could support the title without the metaphysical stabilizer the king replaced your heart by," the blind man said. "Your power began destroying your body the moment he removed it, and the edges of your soul were fracturing."

*Someguy*

Ah. Shit. She's going to be stuck in a Snow Queen plot and be defeated by useless nonsense like "The Power of Love" & Prayer isn't she?

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Snow\\_Queen](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Snow_Queen)

*Forrest*

Yeah, She had gotten her heart back already. That was the entire reason she became what she was.

*Legit*

Is it wrong that I like the backstabbing mass murdering hot looking shade more than I like Viv?

*MetruX*

Wrong? No. Worried? Totally. There is nothing wrong with feeling attraction to anyone or anything... Acting on that is another issue altogether. But her only qualities as a person are her calmness and manipulation, so... Yes, you should worry :B

*crescentsickle*

Yep, called Akua's plot. Cat as Empress, her as Chancellor. It's been a few chapters, but I've been talking about it since at least Kaleidoscope IV.

I think the fact that Akua has come out and said it, though, may in fact ruin her chances of success. Then again, there's always the reveal later that Akua knew Cat was awake and was telegraphing her intentions for some future purpose.

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

It occurs to me that Cat actual has something that might well get Akua really on board for something more than "be the Chancellor behind the Dread Empress".

Everything Akua has ever done was to bash the gilded cage she found herself in. The problem was, the cage she thought she was in was just *one* of them, and the tools she thought so appropriate to break herself out of it... only could ever result in finding the cage the first cage was in.

Cat has evidence of the shell game all those cages are merely cups for. Nobody Akua has ever met has more tools to wreck the game that imprisoned her her whole life and undeath than Cat and the Woe.

Climbing the Tower? It's a trap. And, Cat has proof.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

I guess what I'm saying is: Akua is going to have to face the fact that the world is a lot bigger than Praes, or even Calernia. And, that Praesi customs may well have been designed to confine anybody trying to break out of the cage. Just as Procer seems to have confining customs of its own.

The culture shock has yet to hit. 😞

### [Márton Koltai](#)

I hope Catherine makes a deal with the Dead King. He is the most reasonable ruler on this continent.

### *Joshua Sills*

Honestly? Ever since Masego told Cat that he permanently damaged her name after the demon of corruption, I fully expected the arc to turn towards an elimination of names from the world by butchering the current bearer of that names soul. Hate the gods influence like Black? They can't act without names. Want peace between radically different people? Remove the corrupting influence of Names from society.

Seems like the only solution that can get Cat what she wants, she has the tools to do it, but it just hasn't ever occurred to anyone. Hell, the story would be incredible. A final show off between Cat and Bard where Cat is trying to outplay the storyteller to remove her name, and Bard who wants her name removed so she can finally end it, but has to play the role of the Gods servant.

Doesnt seem like this will ever come up though.

### *JJR*

The plan is an interesting one in theory, but corrupting names like that requires the use of a demon of corruption. It just seems like a really bad idea in practice. The crippling wasn;t even permanent, as Cat got her name restored after the short game of name hot potato with undead Chider.

### [Márton Koltai](#)

That's not how it worked. It was not the name Squire itself that got damaged, but Catherine's Name. It remained damaged

until she had it. Which was not very long since she temporarily lost it in Liesse. She even tells Akua how much she messed up by accidentally restoring her name to full.

Names are like stories or concepts. You can destroy them, but not through the Named. That's what the Miezans did to the orcs. They destroyed their culture so completely, that there were no orc Named until Hakram.

Of course, you can weaken enemy Named with this method, but it would only affect that person and not the Name itself. Though I seriously doubt that it could be used without very special circumstances. The only reason it happened to Cat was that she tried to claim her 3rd aspect early, and with a demon of corruption nearby.

*Snowfire1224*

You just got me thinking. As I recall chider was able to steal Catherine's name through a ritual Akua set up. What would happen if someone stole the bard's name. Would they become her?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Now, *there's* a thought horrific enough to keep a body up for 72 hours straight. \*shudders\*

Klingon Promotion... Backfire (aka "Blessed With Suck"). With all the trimmings.

*Snowfire1224*

It gets worse the more i think about it. For example what would happen to the person that was bard before the name is stolen? Would they go back to who they were or would they remember everything the bard remembers?...

I think I need to to stop thinking about these things.

*burdi*

Hakram threatening Thief when she first join Catherine  
now Thief threatening Akua when she first join Catherine

[sengachi](#)

I'm looking forward to these revelations about the Bard trickling down to Akua, Akua realizing she's been operating within the Gods' cage this whole time, having some real come-to-self moments about what that means, finally making some genuine character growth steps which might take her in the direction of actual remorse and...

And then being killed as soon as she finishes polishing up her redemption arc, because choosing to murder 100,000 people for personal gain and there being the slightest possibility of you

doing so again puts you on a permanent "To Evil To Let Live" list.

*burguulkodar*

I don't like thief at all. I do like all the rest of the Woe more, even Juniper. Catherine is kinda the second I like least. Masego>Archer>Hakram are the best characters, followed by Juniper on the callowan side.

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## Chapter 32: Kernel

*"Match the smile but watch the knife."*

– Soninke saying

The precarious balance the Woe had struck travelling through the echoes together was gone. Within an hour of Masego going into the imprint and harvesting what he could from the Bard and the Dead King that much had been made plain. Thief kept close to Akua's shade, always in earshot, but had fallen into a sullen silence. Archer stabbed our most recent addition through the throat the very moment she attempted to strike conversation, laughing delightedly when the body reformed like mist after she withdrew the blade. I denied her suggestion that Diabolist be made to run ahead of the rest of us and used as target practice, though I was honestly tempted after what I'd overheard last night. There was no point in coddling a snake, true, but mistreating a dangerous and bound entity led to a particular kind of story and not one that ended well for any of us. Hierophant was still feeling the aftermath of stealing an entire language from Arcadia so he walked on his own regularly drinking from some herbal mixture he'd put together. Archer, thankfully, was leaving him alone. She had a talent for discerning between being a pest and being genuinely unpleasant.

That left only silence or Adjutant and I, for Diabolist to make conversation, and I got the impression that after so long in the box Akua was actually quite eager to talk with people. Which led to my finding out something quite interesting: Hakram made Diabolist uncomfortable. Not so much that it showed on her face, but I'd been looking at her closely and when conversing with my right hand she was just slightly off. There was no trace of the easy grace she'd used to run circles around Thief to be found, and while she didn't blunder either I suspected it was because she was being exceedingly careful. I was slightly amused by that, but mostly curious. She could have been faking, of course. That

was always a possibility with Akua Sahelian, the footnote added to her every single action and behaviour. But I was pretty sure she wasn't, and that had me thinking about the reasons she'd feel that way. Was she racist? It'd been my impression that by Trueblood standards she was actually pretty tolerant. Which translated to looking down on everyone not a Trueblood more or less equally, with maybe a dash of additional contempt added because greenskins were just so *uncivilized*.

Assuming it wasn't simply the spectacle of an orc being articulate and calm that had her on the back foot, there might be an angle there. Vivienne had her number in some ways and Archer was usually too willful to influence meaningfully, but Masego enjoyed talking magic with peers enough it could become an issue if left unchecked. It'd already led him to argue for the sparing of the woman who now ran the Observatory for him, and though I doubted he'd go on a similar limb for Diabolist of all people I couldn't dismiss the possibility he'd grow somewhat fond of her over time. There were similarities to the way they'd been raised. His only objections about mass murder tended to be either on a professional basis – human sacrifice was an amateur's crutch, he'd always argued – or because it would displease *me*. Considerate of him, but not exactly a solid foundation either way. It was a load off my shoulders that Adjutant looked like he'd be able to handle her. I'd long grown to rely on Hakram tidying it all up behind me, a pair of eyes that picked up on all the details I missed. It was fitting that it him who brought up the matter when we paused for a meal around noon.

"We'll need to change her appearance," Adjutant said, head inclining towards Diabolist. "A few people will see through it regardless, but it can't be openly known she is now in our employ."

"That would not be unwise," Akua agreed. "Your subjects have reason to be less than fond of me, and my presence would not help your reputation abroad."

Understatement of the decade, that. It would have been unproductive to make her choke herself again, I reminded myself.

"I'm not sure how well glamour would work without something physical to be anchored on," I frowned. "I can weave illusions without one, but I do need to concentrate. It's not a long-term solution or even a reliable one."

"I have become part of your mantle, dear heart," Akua said with a pleasant smile. "Changing my looks through it should not be all that difficult."

I mulled on that. It was true that she was no longer just bound to the Mantle of Woe. I'd known that the moment I summoned her before beginning our journey. My influence over her shade had

grown stronger, broader in scope than simple hold and release. I breathed out and focused, Winter slithering through my veins like whispering smoke. I looked her into the eyes, those brown orbs so dark they were nearly black, and... withdrew what made them. Or at least the thinnest surface of it. Akua blinked, eyes now completely white and without either iris or pupil. I swallowed a flinch. That'd been a little more than I was aiming for. Thief made her way to us, cocking her head to the side.

"Fae," she said. "Give her the appearance of a fae. You're known to have dealings with them, it's the most plausible story we have."

"And not," Akua mused, "entirely untrue. As all the finest lies are."

I was unsettled by the idea of moulding another person – even if their soul was all that was left – like clay, but I pushed that down. Diabolist was already almost inhumanly beautiful, the result of centuries of Wasteland highborn breeding, so twisting her into something fae-like was not as much effort as I'd thought. Larger eyes, the way most fae had, and coloured a vivid scarlet like the dresses she used to wear. Long dark hair, the tresses going down her back, and her already high cheekbones were shaped into a face that was just a little too long and finely boned to be human. I would have made her shorter, if only for the novelty of having someone not towering over me around, but I'd never met a fae that was short. Instead I elongated her, for lack of a better term.

"Fewer curves," Thief said, fixing me with a steady look.

I sneered back. I didn't ogle *all* my enemies. And despicable person or not, it would have been a deplorable waste to make Diabolist stick-thin. I did adjust her to her taller height, but left it at that.

"Pointed ears," Hakram suggested.

Difficult to mould, but not impossible. It still took longer than the rest of her face put together. I watched Diabolist as I did, for even a hint she was uncomfortable at what was taking place. People with good looks tended to be attached to them, in my experience, and more than that for Named most of all appearances mattered. There was a reason Black still looked in his early twenties and my hair had remained the same length since I became the Squire. Our perceptions of ourselves made us fixed points, to an extent, in one of the subtler rebellions against Above a villain was made of. But she remained indifferent. Like her face was no real importance. It might actually be, I finally decided. Akua was Praesi to the bone, and the highborn of the Wasteland saw everything as a tool – even their own appearances.



"I don't feel like I'm working with a set amount of clay here," I admitted uneasily after finishing. "I could make her tall as an ogre without trouble, and she certainly wasn't that large to begin with. Isn't there an original law about that? 'Something cannot be made of nothing'."

"It would not apply," Diabolist lightly said. "You draw on Winter as the substance of my being. One does not dry an ocean by removing a droplet from it."

That was less than reassuring, though her tone had seemingly been aiming for that. Thief assessed her with a frank gaze, the most practiced of us as disguising herself.

"It would pass muster, for most," she said. "The voice has to go, though. It's too recognizable."

"I'm not sure how to do that," I admitted. "She's a shade, so is she really speaking with her throat and chords?"

"It is a mere property, now," Akua said. "No different than colouring or height. Twisting it only requires the appropriate exertion of will."

Well that was just helpful of her, I thought drily. Unfortunately none of this had come with a manual so I spent almost half an hour struggling in vain before calling for Masego. He was irked at being called away from his almost-nap with a cool cloth on his forehead, but what was being done interested him enough the mood passed quickly. He held my metaphorical hand through the process and we'd made Diabolist's voice lower and throatier within moments. It would do, for now. I could have tinkered more, but the simple fact that I could *tinker* with someone's appearance was raising the hair on the back of my neck. That level of control was... No one should have that. Certainly not me. We got moving again afterwards: the centre of the shattered kingdom was close now, we could all feel it.

I doubted I would enjoy what I'd find there.

—

Shard by shard, the fall of Sephirah was coming together. We spent most of a day journeying through plague-ridden cities and losing battles, watching desperation grown on the Sephiran side. I could understand why the nobles at the funeral had been dismissive of the chances of the People of the Wolf: though decked out in iron, their warriors were helpless before tall walls as most Sephiran cities boasted. They seemed more like a pack of raiding tribes than a true army, without siege weapons or any notion of supplies. If they could not ransack granaries, they went hungry. There'd been a mention of an organization of mages at the funeral, the Conclave, and Hierophant grew excited when he

finally saw them in action. They were certainly a notch above the early practitioners we'd seen: the few Sephiran victories we saw had them playing a central role. Rituals seemed to be their specialty, nothing like the fireballs and lightning bolts that were the bread and butter of the Legions.

The boiled the ground under enemy soldiers, snatched the air out of their lungs and even drew storms towards the invading host. It was not, unfortunately, nearly enough. They were too few, less than two hundred, and not unmatched besides. The People of the Wolf were led by their Named queen, and she broke their rituals whenever she took the field. She had mages of her own, if few and seemingly all from the same tribe, and though they used little offensive sorcery they seemed to have a knack for calming and dispersing rituals. The sacking of a great city – for the times, anyway, it was barely the size of Dormer – was the turning point. There were piles of burning plague victims outside the walls, and when the invaders arrived they scaled the walls in the dark of night and slaughtered the beleaguered defenders. It got vicious after that, on both sides. The People of the Wolf began having a semblance of a baggage train from the sheer amount of plunder they were dragging along, which slowed them down, but their numbers kept swelling.

Repeated and richly rewarded victory had drawn more tribes to the war. That was my guess, anyway, because the warriors no longer all spoke the language that Hakram had told me shared root with Reitz. The dead king's eldest son wore the crown for some time, with one of his sisters as the lesser queen sharing his reign, but we watched the Witch Queen feed him to wolves after she broke his army beneath city walls and captured him. That was when Neshamah began appearing along with the Conclave. Not often, but whenever he did the Sephiran mages always won the day. And their rituals were always a little more vicious every time. One battle where the defenders were particularly outnumbered led to the first use of necromancy we'd seen, the dead rising to make up the odds. It was far from the last instance we came across.

"Their manner of rule is not without merits," Akua said as we watched yet another coronation in the royal hall unfold beneath us from a balcony. "Though it would never function as intended in Praes."

The entire story was unfolding over what had to be at least a decade, I'd come to realize. Possibly more. The royals I'd first seen at the entombment were all growing older my more than a few years.

"It's not just primogeniture," I said. "The lesser king beneath the ruling one isn't always the next oldest in the family."

"They are the favourite or closest ally of the ruler, I suspect," Diabolist said. "The purpose behind the practice is quite clear

regardless. The successor is allowed to entrench themselves in the court and kingdom so that any war of succession would result in their crushing victory. A cunning enough method to keep such matters stable in an era where they were anything but."

"We haven't seen them fighting each other yet," I agreed. "But they're going through kings like a basket of pastries. Not much entrenchment going on there."

"The Dead King is positioning himself," she smiled. "He is the youngest, yes? And was long gone from the kingdom. He must earn enough acclaim to be seen as the worthiest candidate for the lesser crown even though his ties to the others are weak. Once the succession reaches a sibling without sufficient support, they will inevitably appoint him beneath them to benefit from his repute."

I didn't reply immediately, eyeing my companion in silence instead. It was still jarring to hear the different voice and see the difference appearance, but that was a passing thing. No, what had been uncomfortable was how easy talking with Akua was. She was, well, surprisingly pleasant company. I could have done without the occasional endearments, but the more I spoke with her the more it became clear she wasn't a raving lunatic. I'd known that, of course. That she was just twisted in a way that couldn't be undone, not actively mad. But living with that truth in front of me was different than knowing it in this abstract. If she were not responsible for the single greatest loss of Callowan life since Dread Empress Triumphant, I might actually have caught myself liking her once in a while. It was made worse by her usefulness. Thief had been tutored as a noble's child, even if her father had lost his title after the Conquest, but like me she'd always felt more comfortable in the streets than sitting down at a writing desk. Diabolist had been raised as heiress to Wolof, and though she was mother to half a dozen atrocities I could not deny she understood the halls of power in a way none of the Woe did.

Her words to Thief still echoed in my mind, sometimes. That she'd fought the better part of the armies of two nations to a standstill, led by eight Named. Her methods had been disgusting, and I would not forgive or forget them. But she had done it regardless, and cornered as I was by the Empress and the First Prince I could not deny there were things I could learn from the monster on my leash.

"He succeeded," I finally said. "We know that. But I'm not certain how. He's forging a reputation as the savior of the kingdom, but at some point he must have gotten the lesser crown or even the one above. If Sephirah kept losing even then, as it must have if they got desperate enough to resort to a Greater

Breach, how did he remain king? A reputation like that has to be maintained or they'll turn on your twice as hard."

As it happened, I knew a thing or two about that. The Black Queen would only reign so long as she was not seen to bleed.

"You still think like a Callowan, dearest," Akua said. "Even before the Conquest, the kingdom of your birth had been a single entity with largely static borders for centuries. The loss of even outer provinces would have been felt a slight by all the rest. These Sephirans, however, are less than a century from the days of their unification. The royal army fights for the realm entire, certainly, but we have seen that the armies of their twelve cities are not willing to bleed for their sisters."

I frowned, following down the path she'd set out for me.

"It's all expendable," I finally said. "Except for Keter itself. That one city's all he really needs. The rest is willingly on the chopping block, because it allows him to accumulate power for his ritual without damaging his powerbase enough it unseats him. Merciless Gods. That's brutal even by Wasteland standards."

"Many usurpations of the Tower has been executed through Callowan swords," Akua said. "It is an old trick. Evidently older than I had believed. I will confess surprise, however, as to the Dead King's chosen method of ascension."

I flicked a glance at her.

"He's building up to a massive ritual by bleeding everyone else," I said. "That's the classic Praesi play, Akua. You can't crack open a history of the Empire without finding an instance."

She dismissed that with a graceful movement of the wrist.

"It matters, my dear, that his path to that ritual is so indirect," Diabolist said. "He did not usurp the crown, though opportunities must have abounded. The fullness of his influence seems to be his unspoken prominence among this Conclave and his popularity with the masses. He is not wielding his own might to seize authority, but instead relying on outside pressures to propel him to that desired summit."

I considered that. On one hand, he was using others as tools to place himself in power. On the other, those people weren't true accomplices. There was no plotting cabal backing him that we'd seen, and even his influence with the Conclave was odd. He was teaching them sorcery, that much was clear, and leading them to slowly dip their toe in darker waters. But he wasn't turning them into his own personal circle of sorcerers. Hierophant had been the one to first say the way necromancy was being introduced was odd, but Diabolist had agreed. Neshamah knew a lot more than he

was teaching them, and what he *did* teach them didn't seem like he was offering a true education. *Even within the purview of necromancy there is a great deal of latitude in structure and variance*, Masego had said. *Some of those rituals are near completely unrelated*. I'd had a growing suspicion for a while that winning victories wasn't the point of the corpse-raising at all. And if the ends were unimportant, it was the means that mattered. And it could not be forgotten that beyond necromancy, there was another set of means at play – the scheme he was using to rise. Most notable in that it put a crown on his brow without conflict. Without breaking the mores of the Sephirans.

"He's not after the quickest or most effective way to rise," I said.

Akua's scarlet eyes turned to me.

"Then what *is* he after?" she asked.

"The one that leaves no openings," I grimly replied.

I ended our conversation there, without gracing her with an explanation. Akua Sahelian was not someone I ever intended on telling of what Masego and I had witnessed.

—

The centre of the maze was the birth of apocalypse. I'd known it was coming, but nothing could have prepared me for the sight of Keter's final hours. It was, I had to admit, a great city. Almost as large as Laure, which was astounding for a people that could not even forge iron. Tall walls of blocks of stone without mortar hid away most of the insides, though Indrani told us they were a pittance compared to the walls now encircling Keter. The capital of the Kingdom of Sephirah stood on a low plateau that formed a dais of sorts over the surrounding plains. There were abandoned mining pits scattered across it, and cobbled stone roads leading to four great gates of bronze facing the four directions. Copper shone in the dying afternoon last, covering the roofs of the great houses surrounding the central great tower looking down on the city, but none of us spared much thought for the beauty of it. The horror of the unfolding battle saw to that.

How many invaders were there? Easily over ten thousand, and not all of them from the People of the Wolf. Banners decorated with animal skulls and skins formed a sea beneath the walls, the host of what must have been half of what would become Procer assembled to take the last of the twelve cities of Sephirah. The invaders were dying in droves, but the city was slowly edging towards a loss. Sorcery crackled, weaving storms and raising the dead, but the tribal mages tore through the spells and bestowed enchantments upon the assaulting warriors that allowed them to climb the walls without thought to their weight. We were

witnessing the death of a nation, and in the sky above twilight was growing crimson.

We headed deeper in. That was where the gate out would be, I knew instinctively. Indrani threw a grappling hook over the walls and eagerly began to climb, but I drew on Winter instead and formed a narrow set of stairs that the others took even as she catcalled. Ghostly warriors of both sides dying around us, we ascended into the city. Fear hung in the streets, thick and lingering. Doors were barred, prayers and weeping sounding everywhere we tread.

"The Hall of the Dead," Archer said, pointing to the tall tower ahead after catching up. "What it's called now, anyway."

The city around the tower was deserted. All those beautiful mansions, and not a soul in sight. It was inside we found our ending. The chanting could be heard as we walked through the labyrinthine corridors, only growing louder as we got closer to the royal hall where we'd seen so many get crowned. Files of kneeling mages spread out from that centre like tentacles, each singing the same incantation in unison. There would be consequences to missing a step, we learned. One young girl mispronounced a syllable and let out a blood-curdling scream as her body withered, leaving a husk of a corpse behind.

"Fucking Hells," Indrani murmured.

"Workings this powerful leave little room for mistakes," Hierophant noted, eyeing the corpse with interest.

We reached the hall as the ritual neared its end, the chanting growing quicker. We'd seen this place before, many a time. A throne room richly decorated with banners of the twelve cities and statues of copper. There was no throne here today, nothing save for a tall sculpted arc of obsidian and the man standing before it. Neshamah was no longer young. He was closely-shaven and his hair was messy, and even now there was no trace of great Evil in him. No sunken eyes and horrid sneer: only calm, patient expectation. We advanced in silence until we could hear our own footsteps echo. Not a whisper to be heard. Then the Dead King spoke, and the shard ended. In the blank emptiness that enveloped us, we heard a woman's soft laughter.

My hand rose, the gate opened where the arc of obsidian had once stood and into Keter we went.

A long plan with a sharp drop.  
And in the end he failed. He further chained himself up instead of his intended 'freedom'.

### NZPIEFACE

Yep. Guess he failed what Malicia is doing now.

*MetruX*

Uhh... Malicia? No. He failed what Black is doing now. Malicia doesn't care for the freedom, she is, in a way, only fighting for herself. But in another way, she is fighting for a united Praes. The Story behind and being free from Fate has never trully interested her.

### NZPIEFACE

Yeah, I kinda get the goals of the two mixed up sometimes. Malicia and Black both want a Praes that withstands both Above and Below. For Malicia, it's something more of a duty for the country she rules; for Black, it is to break the cycle that "Villains always lose".

*werafdsaew*

Black wants to win while Malicia wants to stay in power. And she wants to stay in power because she, as Tikoloshe puts it, "craves control the way a starving man craves a meal."

*Jane*

It's not a failure until he dies. Bottled up in a hell dimension for centuries? Zombified his entire kingdom? Routinely harassed by Ranger as a worthy opponent? Anything, to avoid the Big Fire below.

After all, his goal is immortality to usurp the Gods. So long as that path isn't broken, he hasn't failed – just taken a detour. What are the passing of centuries to one immortal, after all? Now, he's had plenty of time to hone his technique and watch the magics of the outside world grow into more suitable tools for his use.

*usernamesbco*

At this point idk if we can say if he failed or succeeded, but is anyone going to point out the parallels with Cat?

They both wanted a crown, so they started a war so they could rise in the chaos? She incited a civil war via William, DK set off a plague to invite an invasion.

Eliminating other claimants? He got them killed via the war, she killed them more directly.

Bending social mores just enough they'd accept a villain on the throne? Granted, after 20 years of villainous occupation and Callow's "gtfo invaders, she's OUR monster" attitude Cat didn't have as far to go.

She's taking a stab at him things she did herself.

*stevenneiman*

I'm not so sure. He seems to have ossified, as is the curse of any eternal being. But maybe he really just has plans that stretch for thousands of boring years and he hasn't wanted to attract undue attention? He has more or less an eternity to wait for favorable conditions, and those conditions almost certainly include people thinking the Kingdom of the Dead more or less contained.

*Argentorum*

But those century long plans are the ones with no openings.

*MetruX*

And as we've seen he has since the beginning worked for no mistakes, instead of easy paths.

*Sylfa*

Who's word do we really have that he has stagnated? Isn't that the observation made from others about him? Assuming he'd behave like the immortal Fae and/or Elves?

My point being, if he has been expanding on his magical powers all the while and gathering strength for his usurpation of the gods, then why would he let anyone know about that when he can just pretend to be stuck whenever someone can observe him?

*SpaceDorf*

Rangers visit to Keter is actually a pretty decent description of how the Dead King can still adapt to her and therefore evolve. Keter is ever changing

*JD*

Those poor fools. They have no idea that this entire war is a sacrifice for one man. And because no one knows, no story can arise to defeat the plan.

*PotatoMan*



Hmm. So Cat is suspicious of Akua but accepts her as a friend because she is hot. Truly, Catherine is the embodiment of the comment section.

*Someguy*

Cat's weakness isn't that she can't keep her mouth shut, it's that she can't keep it in her pants.

*Jane*

Hey, hey, I'm not interested in her *that* way, I just like classical villains with a flair for drama and clever plans 😞 ! She has some *great* lines, when she's not about to make a terrible mistake.

*Jane*

Ah, I forgot to append, this comment is intended in jest, not in petulance.

*Soronel Haetir*

Into the valley of Death rode the Woe.  
Theirs but to do and fuck things over.

*Gunslinger*

Woot we finally reach Keter. And is that jolly laugh at the end our friend The Bard? Quite a delightful hero that one.

Finally do vote for the guide on <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Byzantine*

She seems to be laughing at the Dead King's foolishness. He ended up failing his true goal and made himself more bound than ever.

*ruduen*

And so ends their information gathering trip.

Based on well knowledgable in story and magic he appears to be, the Dead King probably knew what they would learn if they entered via that path. So, I'm curious as to why he would intend for them to learn it.

*IDKWhoitis*

There is the small chance that the Dead king may not have been able to study Arcadia much, and may NOT know what lies yonder.

Theres also a chance that Bard may have fiddled with the path instead.

*Jane*

It might be that he just doesn't care as much about the risks or possibilities it presents as he does the fact that it's the fastest, most secretive way to arrange the meeting. They don't have much time to prepare for an assault on Procer, and it would be a significant advantage to catch their enemies unaware. Meanwhile, realistically speaking, why should the Dead King fear what Cat has learned? There were no glaring weaknesses exposed that we know of – and the only thing that *may* have been a risk was when they plundered a shard with Witness, something that could hardly be anticipated.

Mind you, it was a great way for the Dead King to showcase how the Wandering Bard is their *real* threat, should that have been his aim; I'm just suggesting that there were a ton of advantages to travelling this way without any secret agenda involved.

*dood*

Oh fuck man, the Dead King is after Winter! I think all this intrigue is off base, he just wants the power to raise cheap smart undead and oppose the gods above and below.

*burdi*

there are possibility that catherine will ask the dead king to teach her how to beat wandering bard  
after all, maybe he is the only man ever beat her

*IDKWhoitis*

Dead King seems to have pulled the whole "Only way to win, is to not play gambit" when 'beating' bard. He also did this when Bard was learning. Trying to exploit the same tactics would get Cat nowhere, as Bard has gotten better, and Cat is too pivotal a player in the Meta Story of Calernia.

*Novice*

Did he really beat the Bard though? The soft laughter of a woman at the end of the shard implies it's all according to plan.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I suspect Bard is the one who arranges for the construction of cages when anybody seeks true freedom and grabs at a Name to do it.

Note: she's also in a vicious cage of her own, when normal travelling ministerial are supposed to be primarily about their freedoms from many settled norms and practices – with all the advantages and disadvantages those affords them socially. But, WB's lot is a dark, unending parody of bardic life.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

/minstrels – apparently, one minstrel is fine, but two minstrels requires me whacking the autocorrect to stop them becoming ministers or ministerial. 🙄

*Antoninjohn*

Harvest the knowledge of the ritual from the shard and suddenly Cat had a fallback plan of making a new kingdom of the Dead, she will probably invade and take over part of Arcadia instead of one of the Hells to store her living subjects

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

ye but she controls winter where nothing grows

*HandyCapped*

Why would she make callow into a kingdom of the dead, if her motive is to keep the kingdom alive?

*IDKWhoitis*

Ok, so its either Ranger visiting an old friend again, before going to pull Black's ass out of Procer, or its Bard.

Im really hoping for Ranger.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

You've probably jinxed yourself, mate. 🙄

*Jane*

Ditching her appearance and voice... Clever. It helps break the reflexive hatred her companions have of her, by tricking their subconscious into thinking of her as someone "different". Then, she only needs to be her pleasant, conniving self to overcome their *conscious* hatred of her, so that there would be some resistance to the notion of sacrificing her without a second thought.

Big mistake in not asking for wings while she was at it, though. Who doesn't want to be able to fly? Sure, sure, she has magic that can pretty much accomplish that anyways, but it never hurts to have a second option.

Joking aside, though, assuming they can't get Aisha a Name and add her to the Woe, they really do need Akua, as this chapter demonstrates. Having someone who can instinctively read the flow of politics and manipulate them would save them so much trouble. Thief is decent at that as well, but it doesn't seem to come to her as naturally, nor do negotiations with nobles. For that matter, it also helps to have a magic specialist who knows how to deal with normal people...

Unfortunate that whole, you know, mass murderer thing, though. And the years spent trying to undermine and kill them. Kind of puts a bit of a damper on everything.

*Jane*

Ah, one more thought...

She should *totally* take this opportunity to change her name to Ubua, as well. I mean, she needs an alias, does she not?

*letouriste*

hum...no, that's the kind of joke losing strenght quickly.

*Jane*

But it was the first time I found a good opportunity to use it 😞 ...

/joking

*Novice*

The appearance change is worrying not only because of the subtle deception but also because of the possibility that Akua could become a real fae. She has: a sliver of Winter inside her, bound to the only titled Winter fae; the appearance of a fae; and presumably still has the Name of Diabolist – the Name that is focused in dominating, controlling and usurping entities and forces from outside Creation.

If Cat can bluff and stab her way to faehood, why can't Akua?

*Jane*

Hm, the chapter *did* just reiterate how a Villain's appearance is tied to their Name, their self-image anchoring themselves to their place in the world in defiance of the Gods Above...

Even if it's unrelated, though, I can see how Cat, a Fae monarch, leaning on Akua, a living fragment of Fae wrapped around a soul, could end up with Akua becoming a Fae in truth. With how much Winter power she runs through Akua, and just leaves lying around, it wouldn't be *that* surprising if

Akua was collecting some of the detritus, deliberately or accidentally. It's not as though she has a body to anchor herself to Creation proper anymore, after all, and she's with Cat literally all the time.

I wonder, though... If she ever becomes a real girl again, how does the whole soul-ectomy thing work? She's removed her soul in the past, so we know she can function without it, but for how long? And what are the side effects? And can Cat still threaten her with it?

*Ruh roh*

Also Catherine literally just used her mantle and Winter to turn Akua into a fey. I think that's going to have a narrative weight that she hasn't taken into account. Let's hope Akua hasn't got access to Winter...

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Anyone got Dark Souls vibe from the Keter section here? The painting needs the fire to draw over again.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Except, I actually prefer Neshamah to Gwyn. I'm not sure why: maybe it's because he doesn't come across as a temperamental firebrand with ego issues. And, also doesn't seem to make friends with incredibly weird, genocidal dragons with fragile senses of identity. Still zero morals and questionable ethics, though. 😊

*Novice*

So I've been thinking, what are the odds that the namesake wolf of the People of the Wolf and the wolf companion of the current Witch of the Forest are one and the same, or at the very least related? I mean the Named leading the People of the Wolf is called the Witch Queen. Perhaps the current Name of Witch of the Forest is a cultural evolution of the Witch Queen Name?

[saiman92](#)

Is the dead king thing a Name? Because I think he beat the bard in the sense that the only way to win is not to play. Kinda like Cat actually. People call her the Black Queen, but all she has is the Winter mantle and a few wisps of the squire. His necromancy gets him immortality and he seems powerful enough. it would also explain why he is rarely active outside his domain so that he doesn't become embroiled in the game.

*Azure*

Did Catherine just do the equivalent of character creation in a game, and put the boob size slider to max? Haha Thief was certainly not impressed. Jealous

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Gods below Cat, no playing dress up with Akua!

[Antony444](#)

Hmm...well, I'm sure the besieging army had a really, really nasty surprise when the ritual was completed. They expected a sack in due form, they got an immortal lich and an army of undead with really no way to disperse them...I suspect things went really ugly and the enmity between Keter and the future kingdom of Procer was born on that day.

Now I'm sure we are going to have an unbearable cliffhanger on Friday, for the Woe are at last entering the capital of the Dead King...

*Jane*

That's rather optimistic of you, thinking there were survivors.

*Argentorum*

Procer came from somewhere. I just can't wait for when Car gets to call Hasenbach and her forefathers evil barbarians and sackers of good cities. And not be lying.

*Dylan Tullos*

Argentorum:

If you go back far enough, everyone's got some Evil in their family tree. And Northern Procer has certainly suffered for the sins of their ancestors over the last few millennia.

It's interesting to learn that an aggressive confederation that attacked fortified cities is now a defensive confederation that defends great walls. They're some of the most dedicated Good people in Calernia, and they're committed to fighting Evil rather than squabbling with their neighbors.

[Euodiachloris](#)

We now need to find out how what is now Praes was once on the side of the angels...

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Oh god don't get everyone calling her Car now. That kind of thing can push a man right into the arms of the Gods Above goddamjt, and nobody wants that

*Jane*

How about Truck, then? Because of how she makes all of her enemies reincarnate? Or Bus! Can we call her bus, for how she pushes other people out of the plot? Maybe Train?

You have to let me call her *some* kind of vehicle D: !

/joking

*Hardric62*

Yup. Lycaon was a guy Zeus changed into a wolf for his crimes. Wolf People. Great-ohmygodshowmuch-Greatmother Witch Queen really ducked up things for her descendants... How much would you bet if she's remembered in any way in modern Procer, it's as a heroine?

*Marcustitus10*

Is it just me or are the Hero's really screwed if they actually kill Black. Because Ranger is going to go to town on anyone even remotely near his death. So go get him GP and SwordS you hypocritical douches!!;) Also WhiteK because f&\$k you to!!

Ps. Don't really Black K forever!!!!!!

*Marcustitus10*

Also did Akau 100% kill Assassin? Or is the jury still out on that?

*termite*

Pretty sure he will die again lots of times intil getting down for good

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

When Grey Pilgrim looked at that one Proceran lord no-one likes during his interlude, he saw some terrible darkness in him. I suspect that this means Assassin survived and did a kill-and-replace maneuver. It's only a theory, however; that lord could just be that much of an asshole by himself.

Also, in the bit where Akua made Cat go through several alternate continuities, it was mentioned that Assassin was permanently killed in one of the continuities; I don't remember the phrasing and am too lazy to check, but got the impression that the perma-killing took many temporary killings to achieve.

In short, I at least am deeply unconvinced of Assassin's death. Besides, if a Calamity had truly fallen, there'd be grief among the survivors as with Captain's death; we've seen and heard nothing to suggest that they're fussed about it this time.

### NZPIEFACE

Assassin died by two means during Cat's reruns.

- 1) Tolltaker used a fuck ton of goblinfire.
- 2) Implied that Above used some fuckery through White Knight.

### *Byzantine*

Assassin was fine, as far as we know. Whatever it is can't be killed by simply destroying its body.

### *Berder*

With her makeover, performed in Arcadia no less, Akua seems poised to become a different being. This may free her from the oath to kill her at the end of her service, because that oath referred to the old Akua. If Akua becomes truly fae, then that is also another step in the direction of stealing the mantle of Winter from Cat.

Why was Akua nervous around Hakram? Hakram was the one who suggested changing Akua's appearance. That's a move that plays into Akua's hands. I speculate, therefore, that Akua was counting on Hakram specifically making that suggestion, and was nervous that he wouldn't. I wonder if Akua and Hakram had a conversation they didn't mention to Cat.

### Euodiachloris

Akua doesn't know how to interact with orcs on a face-to-face level, beyond "order them about" and "screw them over" – it's mostly racism, but also the fact that she's never had to think of them as individuals before, let alone had a relationship with one that's lasted more than two hours a "session", tops. Worse, he messes with her idea about how the world works, as he is actually Named.

She's got no template on how to act to follow.

### *Berder*

I don't believe that's enough to explain it. Cat considers your hypothesis but says Akua is a more tolerant example of Praesi nobility, and then says "Assuming it wasn't simply the spectacle of an orc being articulate and calm that had her on the back foot, there might be an angle there." So, that speaks for some hidden reason Akua would be nervous, and not racism.



PotatoMan

I think it is that Adjutant is forcing Akua indirectly to face some of her deeply-held beliefs. I think that Akua always thought that she could do whatever Cat did, but Akua didn't because she chose not to. More specifically, Akua has always and still does believe her methods superior to Cat's. This is why Akua thought she lost to The Black Knight, not Catherine. But what about Catherine's right-hand orc? Hakram as he is is something Akua never could have created. Not would not, as she was assuming before she met him, but could not. Akua is notably tolerant for a High Lord, not actively hating orcs but simply viewing them as subhuman race. Catherine does not view Orcs this way, but Akua does, and Hakram represents an investment Akua simply would not even have thought to make. In Akua's world, Orcs don't get names other than maaaaaaybe Warlord.

Akua bases herself upon bedrock-firm premises about the way the world works, and Orcs being able to exist mentally above the level of cannon fodder or mere brutes is one of those beliefs. Hakram probably simultaneously flummoxes and kind of weirds her out. It'd be like if one of your friends brought over a four-foot tall talking toadstool to your high-society luncheon, acting like it's perfectly normal. No, it's not normal, Carol, and what do you even talk to a sentient mushroom about? Gods woman, for a college graduate sometimes you act like a complete nonce.

[benthelynx](#)

So they missed their chance to appropriate knowledge from the proto Wandering Bard or Dead King.

Booksie

Dang, should've grabbed wandering bard brain. That opportunity will never come again.

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## Chapter 33: Keter

*"And so Triumphant said: 'Tremble, for I am not yet content.'"*  
– Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes

My boots scuffed the stone and a poisonously warm breeze caressed my face. I strode forward, leaving room for the others to pass

behind me, and resisted the urge to drop my hand to my sword. Gods, this place was a nightmare. Though it was in the royal hall we had crossed, we'd evidently emerged outside the bounds of Keter. More precisely, on one of the four stone ramps leading into the city across the gaping maws of a chasm. It was dark for miles, down there, before flickering flames cast a light deep in the depths. The sound of the wind against the man-made cliffs was eerily akin to a dirge. I turned my eyes ahead instead of peering into the madness, but found only more of the same. Indrani had warned me that the walls of the Crown of the Dead were absurdly tall, but even then I had not expected the likes of what I saw. Jutting out of the sharp drop at the edge of the cliffs, the ramparts must have been at least a thirty yards high at the lowest point. No part of the city behind could be seen from out here, save for the spire of dark stone stretching out into the sky – and the orb of hellfire that hovered atop it, an indistinct silhouette shifting within.

This was not a city made for the living.

"Godsdamn," Archer said, letting out a whistle. "I know he's just a pile of scheming Evil bones, but you've got to respect his style. That's as doom-like as a fortress of doom gets."

"Drawbridges would have been more tactically sound," Adjutant said.

I glanced at him and found Hakram was unmoved by the sight of millennia of darkness and arrogance made into a city. In some undefinable way, it was so very much like him to take his first look at the Crown of the Dead and immediately start criticising its defensive layout. Any moment now he would mention that the artillery firing lanes could be improved by further overlap, or that the barbican was overly crenellated.

"I would wager that, to the likes of the Dead King, every bridge is a drawbridge if given sufficient attention," Diabolist spoke amusedly.

Ugh, Akua. She was not supposed to actually be kind of funny.

"Are we not meant to be honoured guests?" Hierophant said. "Making us stand outside his gates is poor manners."

Like *he* was one to talk about those. Still, as if magically summoned by Masego's complaining, our 'hosts' came out of the woodworks. From beyond the gate chilling howls were heard, and then the flap of great wings. Dozens of... not dragons, but perhaps the bastard child of them, took flight. Wyverns, though made of bone and leather with radiant red eyes. Each one as large as a house.

"Thief," I said. "The seal."

Vivienne flourished her wrist, palm becoming filled with the obsidian circle that had come along the Dead King's message. She tossed it at me, and though I snatched it out of the air without trouble I gave her a hard look. What if I hadn't been paying attention, and it'd tumbled off the edge of the bridge? How fucked would we have been, this deep in the Kingdom of the Dead without our proof of invitation? Regardless, the wyverns passed over us without trouble as I raised the seal above my head. The flock parted in both directions, diving below the stone bridge and passing under. With perfect timing, they came back up and landed simultaneously on the edge of both sides. The leathery wings folded back, and ahead of us the tall gates of steel began to open.

"An honour guard," Akua said. "How mannerly of him."

A show of force as well, though I didn't need for her to remind of that to be aware. Though I knew, objectively speaking, that the Dead King would not have invited us for the sole purpose of murdering strangers I could not quite manage indifference as we passed in front of the perfectly still wyverns. Their eyes, I felt, followed us wherever we went. It was a pittance compared to the welcome that awaited us beyond the gates. The closer we came, the greater the chill going up my spine. Indrani had told me everything Ranger had taught her about Keter, in particular the kinds of undead that dwelled within. There were, she'd said, three kinds. The Bones, the Binds and the Revenants. The Bones were undead as I knew them, raised corpses little more intelligent than dogs when left to their own purposes. Most were ancient enough they were nothing but skeletons wearing armour. The Dead King, Archer told me, could seize control of those at any time. The Binds were corpses with souls bound to them, as sapient as humans. They were the captains and servants of the Kingdom of the Dead. The third kind, the Revenants, were a breed apart. Named stolen from the grave, keeping a shadow of the power they'd once wielded while living.

The Dead King was a kind of his own, she'd added. Without equivalent or easy description.

What awaited us beyond the gates was an honour guard beyond the ability of mortals to assemble. The avenues of Keter were filled to the brim with silent dead, bearing arms and armour spanning centuries. Bronze helms in the ancient Baalite style, iron breastplates as were long borne by the Lycaonese and more than a few longswords of the distinctive Vale make of Callow. Banners from half the continent were stirred by the warm breeze, though none stood as tall as that of the Kingdom of the Dead: ten silver stars, set in a perfect circle around a pale crown. *By the regal crown you will know him, the old verse went. His horse is the death of men, his voice the fall of night and he strives doom unto all the world.* Villains drew epithets, myself among them,

but none quite as many as the Dead King. We advanced, six of us surrounded by silence and blasphemy. The very instant was passed the threshold, thousands of dead kneeled in unison. I shivered. There had been a single mind at work behind it. In the avenue ahead of us, the dead parted to allow a pale man followed by six palanquins to pass through. I could hear his heartbeat and my eyes lingered on his approaching silhouette before my fingers clenched at the sight of the first palanquin.

Four dead carried it, but it was the drapery falling down the side that drew my attention. Black silk, embroidered with heraldry. A set of silver scales, balancing a crown and a sword. The sword weighed heavier. The words embroidered beneath I did not need to read. *He is not blind*, I thought. *He was never blind*. Whether the Dead King had imprisoned himself into his personal hell or not, he knew of the affairs of Calernia outside it. And in much greater depth than my worst predictions had anticipated. The pale-skinned man was the only living soul in sight, and memorable for reasons more than that. Raven tresses went down his back, his body perfectly proportioned as if he were more sculpture than man. He had, I thought as he came closer, warm and kind eyes. Given the surroundings, that only added to the horror of it. The stranger came before us and slowly knelt.

"In the name of the Crown, I greet you," he said in flawless Lower Miezian. "Black Queen, Tyrant of Callow, the King of Death extends his hospitality to your august presence and that of our attendants."

There was a slight accent to his voice, but not one I recognized.

"We accept this hospitality with the gratitude it is due," I replied. "Rise."

"I cannot, for my purpose is not yet discharged," the man said, pressing his head to the stone. "As gift of welcoming, the Crown bestows my existence upon you."

My lips thinned. Had I just been handed a slave? No, now was not the time to make a mess. If the Dead King knew enough of Calernian affairs to know the motto on my banner, he had to know how repulsive a Callowan would find slavery. Was this a test?

"The gift is accepted in the spirit it was given," I said. "Rise, now."

The man did so, gracefully.

"My face name is Athal, Great Majesty," he said. "I have been instructed to serve as your host for the duration of your stay."

"We have a guest-gift to offer the Dead King," I said calmly. "Though that can wait until audience is granted. Until then, we would see our quarters. It has been a long journey."

"The Silent Palace has been prepared for your pleasure," Athal said, bowing low. "If you would deign to enter the palanquins, honoured ones?"

"Very civilized, not making us walk," Masego noted approvingly. "We should see about obtaining those in Laure."

I deigned, or at least began to. I paused when I finally took a closer look at the dead bearing my litter. No mere skeletons in armour, these. Their flesh was dead but well-preserved, their faces still human and their finery fit for royalty. Which they very well might be: crowns had been nailed to each of their heads.

"If it please you, Great Majesty," Athal said, coming at my side. "As a sign of respect, the Crown had put worthy souls to your service. You look upon—"

"Princes," I interrupted quietly, "Princes and princesses of Procer."

"That is so," the man agreed. "Prince Mateo Osuna of Aequitan and his twin sister Princess Nicoleda. Princess Clemente Milenan of Iserre. Prince Friedrich Hasenbach of Rhenia. Their tongues have been sown as penance, and crowns put to their brow as a reminder of the follies of arrogance."

They all came from principalities that had been pivotal in the war against Callow one way or another. At a guess Rozala Malanza's own bloodline was too young to the throne of Aequitan to have a representative, so they'd drawn from the one that ruled before it. Merciless Gods. The statement here was more alarming than the show of force surrounding us, in some ways. That Neshamah had hordes of dead was well known, but this was both a reminder that he'd broken more than a few princes in his time and that he knew exactly who my opponents were. The Dead King was making a point. I got on the palanquin in silence, and allowed dead royalty to carry me to the Silent Palace.

—

The accommodations lived up to the name. We'd gone through the streets of Keter, passing a multitude of dead of all stripes, until we neared the infamous Hall of the Dead. I'd seen this district before, in the echoes. It had been where the powerful of Sephirah once lived in their copper-roofed mansions. Those were long gone, replaced instead by a circle of sprawling palaces surrounding the demon-tipped central tower. The Silent Palace was a strange wonder of architecture, six interlocked rings of

different heights in marble black and white. Zombie had followed us with our affairs, though our personal packs had been taken by unsmiling dead, and the moment we entered the first hall white-robed servants knelt gracefully before seeing to all our bags. Every single one of them was alive, and no older than twenty. Athal followed me like a shadow, as I as watched the servants divest Zombie of her saddlebags I half-turned towards him.

"I did not think there would be so many living in Keter," I said.

The man had been both talkative and helpful, so far, and apparently genuinely believed I owned him now. Though the thought was repellent and there was *trap* written all over this 'gif't, I could at least hit him up for some low understanding of this place.

"We are none of us from Keter, Great Majesty," Athal said, bowing low. "All of us chose to become Hosts upon our coming of age, learning the trade of that choice. It is a rare thing for our service to be called upon, and a great honour."

My eyes narrowed.

"You were born in Hell," I said.

"A strange thing to call the Serenity, honoured one," the man murmured. "It is the world beyond our guardians that is most deserving of that ugly term."

"You've been outside the Kingdom of the Dead?" I asked, surprised.

"I have not. Yet we are not ignorant of the nightmare called Calernia, Great Majesty," Athal gently said. "The Journeymen return with the tales of their time in your brutish world every season, sacrificing their first life so that we may learn through them. It is a most noble duty. If not for my facility with languages, I may very well have chosen to serve as one of their number."

Hosts. Journeymen. *The Dead King is breeding people in his Hell for chosen tasks*, I realized with fresh horror. There'd always been rumours that he had human farms to swell his numbers with fresh dead somewhere in his hellscape, but I'd assumed it would be through regular reappings. *No*, I thought. *He has taught them it is an honour. Everything they know passes through his hands – by the time he's raised them up to the age of culling, they must actually volunteer.* I should have known better. The kind of man who'd plot the death of a kingdom and a half to obtain immortality with the Bard after his hide the whole time would not have made so elementary a mistake. He didn't treat his cattle like they were that. No, he'd tend to them lovingly and reap the benefits of that kindness again and again over the span of

centuries. He must have shaped all their customs from the cradle, I thought. An entire realm turned to the sole purpose of strengthening him without forging heroes in the process.

"And these Journeymen," I said slowly. "They've told you of how the rest of the continent sees the Kingdom of the Dead?"

Athal seemed amused.

"Are we to put faith in the words of those that slaughter each other for sport?" he asked. "There is no war in the Serenity, Great Majesty. No murder or sickness or any of the brutalities outsiders inflict on each other. We are born and raised to the loving embrace of the Crown, and repay that kindness when our first lives have passed. It is the least of that which is due."

"And the devils?" I asked.

"Beasts of burden," Athal said, sounding surprised. "Save for those of the Writhing Palace, were none trespass."

That, I decided, did not sound like a place I ever wanted to visit.

"You're aware the Kingdom of the Dead has attacked other nations before," I tried.

"The Procerans," the dark-haired man agreed. "A warlike folk that have attempted to destroy the Serenity many a time, assembling coalitions of blind hatred. Are you not yourself come to Keter to seek help against their depredations, Great Majesty?"

Well, he had me there. I was also fully intending to throw the Dead King under the cart at the first opportunity, after carefully ensuring his leash was loosened but not loose, but that was best kept quiet. Assuming Neshama had not already deduced as much, which was looking increasingly likely. And still he had invited me. Why? I needed to figure out his game before meeting him, or I might just come out of that conversation having birthed an atrocity greater than Akua's Folly.

"So why is this place called the Silent Palace, anyway?" I said, changing the subject with all my usual elegance.

"It is so named for it had remained closed and untouched since its last and only guest," Athal explained. "You would know her as the Dread Empress Triumphant."

No 'may she never return', huh? I supposed this particular crowd had different ideas about the kind of person she'd been. I was a little unsettled at the very real possibility that the last person to sleep in the bed I'd end up in tonight was the worst monster to ever come out of Praes. Hopefully they'd changed the

sheets since, because I wouldn't dismiss out of hand the possibility she'd gotten demon all over them during her stay.

"Any notion of when we'll be granted audience?" I asked him.

"If it please you, it has been said that tomorrow's dusk would be auspicious time," Athal replied.

"It pleases me," I said, a tad drily.

I regretted it immediately. It was unkind, to mock a man so obviously twisted even if the manner of it was fairly gentle. It sometimes occurred to me that I wouldn't like myself very much, if I met me as a stranger. That I'd ended up stabbing one of the doppelgangers in my soul seemed less and less a coincidence as I grew older.

"Then it shall be so, Great Majesty," the man bowed.

Zombie had been divested of her saddlebags and I allowed her to be guided away by a white-robed servant without protest. Odds were there was a stable in here somewhere, and it wasn't like I'd ever have a hard time finding her. The rest of the Woe had been led to their own chambers, save for Akua who'd denied her servant. She made her way towards me instead and my brow rose. I supposed she didn't really need rooms of her own, now that I thought about it, but she was in for a hard awakening if she thought she could haunt my own. Athal flinched when she approached and knelt at her feet.

"There's no need for that," I said slowly, crouching to help him back up.

"I mean no slight, Great Majesty," he said, still looking down. "It is simply that I have never hosted one of the Splendid before. I was not taught the proper manners."

"Splendid, am I?" Akua drawled. "Well, I've often thought so myself."

That might have amused me, if the man wasn't so obviously frightened.

"She's just an attendant," I reassured him. "No need to worry about her."

Diabolist's scarlet eyes flicked to the man and her face softened.

"You gave no offence, Host," she said. "And your manners, though not lacking, offered honours underserved. Treat me as any of the others and you will find your actions faultless."



Customary annotation: she was, of course, likely faking this. It was good to remind myself of that, lest my impression of her improve. Praesi highborn were not usually kind to servants, whenever they remembered their existence, and Akua Sahelia had sent people dearer to her than a stranger to their deaths without batting an eye.

"I heed your words, honoured one," Athal murmured.

"You needed something?" I asked flatly.

She folded her hand into her sleeves.

"Mere assurance over minor matters," she said, smiling at Athal. "I was told that our movements within Keter would not be restricted, save for the Hall of the Dead. Did the servant err in telling me this?"

"It is not so, Splendid," the dark-haired man said.

I eyed Akua curiously.

"The Lord Hierophant has expressed interest in sightseeing such a glorious city," she said.

Ah. Well, it wasn't like I'd brought Masego with the expectation that he'd be useful in the negotiations. He was here to ease our way through Arcadia, and as one of my larger cudgels in case things went south.

"Have Archer go with him," I ordered Akua. "And tell them to be back before nightfall."

I should not have to impose a curfew on a grown man and woman, but I most definitely *did* have to when it came to that pair. Indrani wasn't someone I'd usually consider or employ as a restraining influence, but she knew the dangers of the Keter better than any of us. She'd pull him away if his nose led him somewhere they shouldn't go. If wandering around kept them occupied while I prepared for tomorrow with the others, I'd count it a victory.

It was all about the standards, really.

"By your will, Black Queen," Diabolist smiled, bowing.

Lower than what Praesi court etiquette dictated, even if she considered me a ruling Dread Empress. She was being careful about maintaining the illusion of her change of appearance, which I couldn't help but approve of.

"All right, Athal," I sighed as she walked away. "Take me to my rooms."

"By your will, Great Majesty," he said, bowing as well.

I detected a hint of amusement in his voice. I could grow fond of that one, I decided. I allowed him to lead me deeper into the palace before clearing my throat.

"So, about those sheets," I began.

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*Aeon*

Everything I just read is awesome. I know Cat doesn't plan for this to last, but I'd love it if she was forced to keep this alliance. This whole empire seems fascinating, and I can't wait to see more.

*Amoonymous*

Agreed. Maybe my opinion will change in the future, but Neshamah doesn't seem like TOO bad of a guy (currently, that is – what he did in the past was pretty damn bad).

Now though, if his living citizens are basically living in a paradise (yet again, from what we know – it might turn out that what they think is paradise is pretty terrible), it would make sense that they'd willingly sign up for an unlife after life.

Seems like a good deal for his people and himself. They live perfectly safe and satisfying lives, he gets stronger with time.

Also, it does seem like Procer was the first to attack them, so it makes the Crusades and Dead Raids seem more like extremely extended warfare than anything else.

*Cicero*

Cat... Cat...

Everything, EVERYTHING, is screaming, SCREAMING, that this a HUGE MISTAKE!

Please think very carefully about what you are doing.

*Big Brother*

How is it a mistake?

*sheer\_falacy*

For one thing, he's more powerful than her, incredibly dangerous, and she knows basically nothing about him or his motives.

For another, this is a bad story for her no matter what. Either it's a story about allying with a monster or it's a story about trying to betray a monster by setting it free, and neither of those ends well.

We'll see how things go but frankly going to Keter in the first place seems like a terrible idea.

### *Euodiachloris*

He may be a monster, but technically, so is Cat (monster in battle, necromancy, dark magic, glamour, mind altering speech, fae...). We, and she, don't know why he's done all this, exactly. Or, how well it's working in subverting the Gods' program.

Until we do know more, I'm suspending judgement.

Besides which: he may not view the living as actual cattle in the way Cat supposes him to. Don't forget, she's thinking of him using Callow as her filter. This, however, is not Callow. Nor is it Praes, nor is it Procer.

### *Dylan Tullos*

Euodiachloris:

He murdered everyone in Keter to ascend to godhood.

When you use your entire city as a blood sacrifice for your own exaltation, you view people as cattle.

### *Euodiachloris*

He quite obviously didn't, though. Inside his own skull, as he discussed with the Bard, he was helping his nation break from the stuck-record cycle in a way most wouldn't choose beforehand due to lack of education, using an "illness" that just so happened to be necromantic in nature.

Before all necromancy was a thing deemed totally E-evil (and, it got that way primarily after what he did).

From a certain point of view, organ donation and defibrillators are necromancy and, therefore, evil. Some people truly believe that any modern medical intervention, particularly surgical intervention, is BAD and morally questionable.

I'd argue that the evil ones are those who refuse to e.g. give kids the shots, cleft palate surgery, antibiotics, artificial limbs, cochlear implants or antipsychotic medication that they actually need. But, those who fight to withhold things like this (and abortion) are convinced they are doing good, sound, moral work. Just as those who believe wholeheartedly in cryogenic preservation of their remains think they're not being conned.

So, yeah. Imma gonna wait and see where this is going.



*Dylan Tullos*

Euodiachloris:

The Dead King killed everyone in his kingdom. Then he brought them back as undead controlled by his will, forced to obey his every command and unable to do anything he didn't want them to do.

I'm not opposed to necromancy because it's icky. I'm against it because it involves murdering people then turning them into meat puppets.

It's a crime to perform a medical procedure without a patient's consent. Why would it be less unethical to kill someone and bring them back as a slave who has to obey the necromancer's orders?

*Euodiachloris*

I'm not saying that everything he's done is highly moral. But, it's no more nor less moral than attacking a sovereign nation that's done nothing to you for decades/ centuries on the grounds that "the Heavens told me to do it" or "he might invade us" or "he's damned scary and undead". Or, brainwashing an entire population at once (rather than the brainwashing in increments that seems to happen to heroic Names on an individual level) to attack said nation (all kamikaze-style, to boot) for that matter.



They're on a par. When both sides are using equally hideous measures, neither has the moral high ground. So, you get people trying to buck the system. This "undead population = fuck you, inherently unfair program" is one way to try, however selfish part of the means. Not necessarily the best way, mind.

Cat, too, has a body count of innocents under her belt trying to gain power enough to fix things. And, has a soul enslaved for her use. She's got ethics, though, which she tries not to break. That I can applaud, at least – mainly because I know more of her motives.

I suspect the Dead King to have ethics, too. Even if I would find issue with the morals behind them. However, reasoned ethics can prove moral in ways that are not immediately apparent, which is why I always pause before condemning them. I just don't have enough data to draw conclusions about his motives. Yes, he slaughtered a lot of people to get ahead. So has Cordelia. So has every head of government, save one very reluctant one (and he's condemning people through inaction).

I'm not sure the Heavens have reasoned ethics. Unless "always act as if mortal opinions or wills are bugs to be patched or deleted" is an ethical standard worth applauding. 😊

And, I really don't have a clue what the Hells are up to. <\_<

*Noscopy*

Do you mean like the Christian God that makes us suffer and die on Earth so that only then if we put all of our faith and literally our soul in his hands can we go to a place of perfect peace called Keter, I mean Heaven?

*Abrakadabra*

How the Hell abortion comes even close to the things you previously listed? I personally think the Dead King is all for abortion, only he aborts people when he reached adulthood, not in the womb.

*stevenneiman*

Yeah, I'm seeing this as a variant of the classic "summon and bind the god of evil" plot. He might not technically be a god even with the lower case "g", but he definitely serves the purpose and I wouldn't put divinity past him considering that he has a whole minor civilization that basically worships him. The idea is that a villain believes that they can trick a mighty being into accepting a summons to the outside world in a situation where the villain believes that they can force their will on that being. And to my knowledge, that always ends one of two ways.

Either the heroes manage to kill the villains before they complete the summoning, or the summoned being turns on the villain because their control wasn't as strong as they thought, and then the heroes have to clean up the mess of the now free and rampaging god or whatever.

*Metrux*

There are several reasons why this could be a bad idea, but this story isn't one of them. For starters, he isn't being summoned, but freed, and there is distinction in those stories (when Heroes summon Evil, they end up having to kill them, but when they free Evil most of the time the enemy ends up an ally, for example). What breaks it even more is that she doesn't treat him as a monster, god, or called being. She treats him as a ruler to ally, and then betray. Sure, not the best of stories, but not one inherently Evil in the books, and sometimes it even works. There is also the thing that she, herself, can be considered a god with minor g, and we all know that stories are different for those in that scale.

*stevenneiman*

She is very definitely not a god. She is a beloved ruler and the last noble of Winter. The Dead King might be a god but if he is it's basically secondary. And even if she's not quite magically binding him like the classic version, she's totally thinking that she can bring a horror with power beyond comprehension into the world and then control it well enough to benefit from its actions.

Of course, it's made even worse because she's just realized that he's way more knowledgeable about her than she realized.

*Myatt*

On the outside he may seem to be a monster but he seems to have an entire people that view him as savior and protector loyal citizens who don't see him as a monster at all I think that his country of the living isn't just for breeding soldiers but for some manipulation of stories if a crusade would have made it to his personal hell they are no longer fighting the armies of the dead but the savior of the people seems like it would derail a lot of attempts to get to him

*Dylan Tullos*

Big Brother:

The Dead King knows all about Cat, while she knows almost nothing about him. He's almost certainly aware that she plans to backstab him, and he's happy to negotiate with her anyway.

Imagine playing cards against someone who can see your entire hand, while you have no idea what they're holding. That's Catherine's position right now.

### *Big Brother*

That's been Cat's position since before she became the Squire. Black's networks had a full dossier on her as a potential Hero recommending her death.

Akua was always more prepared and knowledgeable about what she could and couldn't get away with until Akua's Folly.

In matters of statecraft, Malicia has ALWAYS been more well informed, and used that knowledge to apply pressure so Cat couldn't leave Praes alone.

The Dead King is only the latest in the chain, and so doesn't really stand out to me as a risk from your point of view.

### *WuseMajor*

The main difference is that everyone you just listed are pieces in the chess game being played between the Dead King and the Bard. From everything we've seen, he's really the only one old enough to actually have a shot at challenging her.

### *MetruX*

That statement is wrong in several magnitudes... Yes, he's greater than they all, but he didn't influence any of those "pieces", and the bard only started to influence after Cat was the sole Squire, starting slow and only doing more later on. Yes, calernia is a strange game of chess, and they are all pieces, but for the gods, not for the bard and the dead king. The Bard influenced alot, but not everything.

### *d0m1n1c*

"That's Catherine's position right now."

That's the position she believes herself in; we don't know that the Dead King isn't genuinely looking for an alliance. From what we know, it appears that both he and Triumphant benefited from their alliance; diplomacy doesn't need to be a zero sum game.

[taliesinskye](#)

I think whether an alliance with the Dead King can be genuine will come down to what the Dead King wants. If it's something Catherine can live with him having, then there's no need to stab him in the back. If he wants to do something that's a threat to everyone like conquering all of Procer or something, that's a big problem.

*Ca\$hMoney*

What's wrong with Reverse Redlining? By golly, where do I sign?!

In this example the lender is Keter, low income neighbourhood being target is Callow, and the arbitrarily higher interest rates are *"Do what I tell you to do or I will let Procer righteously murder you"*.

*Dylan Tullos*

Ca\$hMoney:

Being righteously murdered by Procer is sounding better and better all the time.

Most of Callow will survive, which is not a likely outcome if the Dead King does manage to slip his leash and overrun Calernia.

*Cicero*

I reminds me of the old joke about why Mormons side with the evangelicals who hate them and would probably murder them if they could. (This is a historical fact, in the American South Mormons were often hunted and murdered by the KKK).

When asked why he sides with the evangelicals the Mormon answered:

"Well, on one side I got people who would like to murder me and all my family. On the other side I got people who want to teach my children to love sin more than God and thereby damn their souls to Hell for all eternity.

"On the one hand: death, on other: eternal damnation for my children. It's not a hard choice, I guess I'm gonna team up with the people who want to murder me."

*RanVor*

Except there's no such thing as righteous murder. There is only murder.



No matter their intentions, Procer attacked another country without provocation, and by doing so, opened the door to the horrors of war. It was a conscious decision of Cordelia Hasenbach, and all the blood is at least partially on her hands. There won't be a single atrocity inflicted on Procer they haven't brought on themselves.

*Jane*

Does she really have a choice? The Dead King really didn't leave her any openings. If she refused to come, it was pretty much certain that Callow would be crushed. Now that she *has* come, the Dead King can squish her like a bug if she tries to back out – or just leave Callow to die, it's not as though her circumstances are changed.

Her only choices at this point are "give up", which fundamentally goes against the nature of Named, or to shake the hand of an unfathomably dangerous creature who really, *really*, seems to want to make her his friend.

*Big Brother*

Hm. The Dead King actually runs a Necromantic Empire in a similar manner to how I'd described making one to my friends. I'm not sure if that speaks well or ill of my mind.

[Euodiachloris](#)

It's so far no worse than organ donation. I suspect those who volunteer get more perks than those who turn up trying to wreck the place.

[taliesinskye](#)

I'd almost be OK with him animating donated bodies into his Bones. Binding souls to them for all eternity sounds pretty evil though, even with volunteers.

*Brian Heward*

How is binding a willing soul to their own body evil? You are giving them a choice, extending their effective life, and not hurting anyone. The only difference is they get an after-life that's the same as their normal life instead of moving on to wherever souls go in this universe. (For some people that would be preferable, but it's hard to judge without knowing for sure what the alternative is.)

Do we know what happens to normal people who die on Calrnia?

*ArkhCthuul*

Indeed, and potentially even a more powerful modification of preexistent stories.

Just about everything in this chapter was as close to perfectly done as I can imagine.

Simply wow.

*JJR*

We still don't know enough about how things in the Dead Kingdom work at this point, For all we know Binds who wish to stop existing can petition the Dead King to unbind their souls, leaving their bodies as simple Bones.

The Revenants seem a bit more Evil in this regard. The Souls of Dead Heros forced to serve against their will, but they were trying to destroy the Dead King so it does seem less bad.

*Soronel Haetir*

It must be nice to have centuries or millennia to learn how to slap a nice coat of paint over the horrors. The Dread Emperors simply have never had enough time to discover that truth.

*WuseMajor*

This is a Kingdom that has traded freedom for the security of a despot. And, in the process, not ended up with several of the usual problems that come with that, because their despot is immortal, ferociously intelligent, and, apparently, not cruel.

Granted, based on what he's done before, it wouldn't surprise me at all if he murdered every living member of his kingdom if he decided to open another hell gate, but I don't think he'd do something capriciously.

There's also the question of whether you definitely get to have a second "life" as a Bind or if that's only for high ranking people. There's also the quality of that "life."

One assumes he arranges aptitude tests and things, so that people are placed where they are best suited because that's efficient and another way to control his populace. I really get the impression that this guy has read the evil overlord list. In some ways, he sounds like he could be what Black or Malicia would become, given another few hundred years to work. Which is scary on several levels.

*Abrakadabra*

Yup. The heavens are great at it tough. Good in Calernia has fantastic PR.

*Someguy*

There are no openings. Every move he makes ensures that there are no openings against him by Bard. But his existence and sovereignty as a backdrop, Bard can use that. This is more dangerous for Callow than I thought.

*MetruX*

Actually against Fate, not Bard itself. The thing with Bard is that she can't do anything herself, all she does is manipulate, lie and tell truths, so that other people do what must be done. Yes, she is scary because of her experience and the span of what she has influenced, and you should be wary of her... But she isn't the main enemy, and never will be. It's not in her Fate, because Fate is the main enemy. It's no mistake that we say he didn't leave openings, because she can't appear where she wants and do what she wants, thus if there isn't already a story forming, she can't do a thing. Also, like Cat mentioned, there is no fear of Heroes appearing in his kingdom, and that by itself makes it much easier, since even without the Bard having Heroes born could topple him.

*PotatoMan*

I have a deep distaste for the Dead King. He truly is a monster, good luck Cat!

*Evgeny Permyakov*

I dunno, he is probably one of the most successful rulers on Calrnia and his people are actually OK with him.

*Dylan Tullos*

Evgeny Permyakov:

The people he didn't murder are OK with him. Keep in mind that the Dead King used his own city as ritual fodder for his ascension.

*Evgeny Permyakov*

Please. How is it any different from what First Prince is doing now ?

*Unorginal*

Well, the current First Prince truly believes in a United People of Procer, an end to the internal strife and the advancement of good across the entire continent with a grand alliance. So very, very different in methods and drives. The Dead King just wants to de-seat true immortals and gods/join them and everything else feeds into that.

grzecho2222

Well there was a guy who believed in United People of his nation and wanted to end their troubles with grand alliance and he hated other nations and attacked east and wanted to get rid of a few nations and conquer others and talked about greater good and...

*PotatoMan*

The single person whom we have met whose job is literally to represent the country is ok with the Dead King. Hanno has access to memories of heroes from the Kingdom of the Dead, meaning that there has definitely been dissent inside in The Kingdom at some point. Taking our view of the Kingdom from an appointed interpreter is like taking our view of North Korea, a similarly ruled and isolated Kingdom, from it's own appointed interpreters.

The Dead King is also historically a master at crushing dissent and enslaving his own people, as well as tricking them into killing themselves. Literally everything he has done has been in an effort to increase his personal power, at any cost. I don't think giving the Dead King more power will lead to other Calernian nations being "successfully ruled" as it were.

All this means is that I am worried for Cat, for we have literally no idea why either The Bard or the Dead King want her there.

*Evgeny Permyakov*

>Hanno has access to memories of heroes from the Kingdom of the Dead, meaning that there has definitely been dissent inside in The Kingdom at some point.

A small amount of dissent is an inevitable consequence of free will.

>The single person whom we have met whose job is literally to represent the country is ok with the Dead King.

True, we have to get more. But it is a pretty strong initial indication.

>The Dead King is also historically a master at crushing dissent and enslaving his own people, as well as tricking them into killing themselves.

Just like what Hasenbah is attempting to emulate. And pretty every competent ruler wants to have.

=====

All in all, I see DK as a competent ruler and as such a person I would like to have on Cat's side. Of course, the only way to achieve it is a mutual co-dependence and this in turn might turn pretty ugly, so the consequences should be weighted carefully.

I also consider plot to betray DK a very dangerous thing as it might force Cat into Evil vs Evil plot, which would inevitably benefit Procer.

*Anon*

Why, oh why, oh why, would you leave Akua out of the box.

Giving her more credence as a story piece, when you have zero idea of what the dead king will be able to twist the story into, has next to zero positive benefits when compared to the risks at this point in time.

Hell, Cat's already admitted that the Dead King is on another level even compared to Black when it comes to setting up foolproof stories (save for having the Dead Kingdom be locked away until it's time for him to come out and rampage).

*Dylan Tullos*

Anon:

Akua is an expert in necromantic rituals and Hellgates. She can provide unique insight into the Dead King's magical accomplishments, and she's extraordinarily experienced in Villainous backstabbing.

Adjutant doesn't have much experience in diplomacy, Thief isn't particularly good at intrigue, Hierophant would get distracted by the Dead King's magical accomplishments, and Archer is, well, Archer. The only person who can possibly help Cat is Akua.

The sad fact is that Cat is very good at stabbing and terrible at negotiation. She needs help, and Akua is the only person with the knowledge and mindset to provide useful guidance.

*MetruX*

I think you're not reading the same story as me. Adjutant is almost a master diplomat, if only in mortal levels, and thief is the one responsible for all the intrigue in Cat's reign. Yes, Hierophant and Archer are useless to the negotiations, unless magic is involved, but Akua is not nearly the only person who can help her here.

*Dylan Tullos*

MetruX:

As you point out, Adjutant is used to working with mortal powers, not the powers of Hell. Diabolist is the expert on entities that exist outside of Creation. Thief is a capable schemer by Callowan standards, but Praesi are universally acknowledged as the leading experts in backstabbing and generally sneakiness, and Akua is nothing if not a paragon of Praesi Classic Evil.

Cat is dealing with an ancient sorcerer who specializes in necromancy and devil summoning. Akua is probably the greatest living expert in those two fields.

### Rey d`Tutto

Not that Akua is technically alive...

### *Argentorum*

The only good answer to Akua was to crush her phylactery and shred her soul immediately after her death. Anything else plays into her role in the story. Either she's changed up in the cloak as "the monster" which is dangerous for it's own reasons (and doubly so because she tried to make Cat \*her\* chained monster), or she's out and equally dangerous as a member of the woe.

So really, there's no stopping it, and Cat's backed into a corner so she can't even try to discard her out of hand. Really, it all comes down to how genuine Akua's feels about Cat (that we saw when she puppeted Cat's body vs the heroes) are. Because when Akua thought she had won, said that she was going to make Cat love her, so there's a chance, however small, that the same fate gets imposed upon Akua by reflection, and she becomes the devilish if subservient follower that she is pretending to be.

Or she breaks loose and kills all of their guys, but that's what Commander Shepard is for, I guess.

### Javvies

I wonder – is reincarnation a thing in the Guideverse?  
If so, might Cat be the reincarnation of Triumphant?

So many questions.

Also, Cat, it's been long enough that the sheets from Triumphant's day would have disintegrated, probably. Besides, it's a palace. No way they're going to reuse old sheets. For that matter, they might actually only use sheets once (at least for the dignitaries).

*Agent J*

And given how often they're graced by dignitaries – all of twice in untold millenia – even a niggardly king could stomach splurging on new sheets.

*Argentorum*

Even without Reincarnation, Cat's an orphan. Her being a bastard descendant of Triumphant how ever many generations down the line? Just impossible enough to be completely possible.

*grzecho2222*

Whole situation with Cats family is weird. We know that both Brandon and Kegan tried to look up her family and both came up with nothing which kinda creeped out Kegan somehow. We also know that there are magics that allow to check people family which were kinda established out of blue and never used again. And given how strong are Long Lost Family and Lost Legacy and Lost Heir as tropes that come hand in hand with Orphan Out of Nowhere it would be weird if hadn't become relevant at some point.

*Yotz*

'Bastard' as in 'out of wedlock'?  
So, what if the dreaded Writhing Palace is just a temple, where Triumphant and Dead King exchanged their vows, and nine months later a child was born. Or several centuries later – time in Serenity wiggles around a bit. The *Prodigal Child*, true successor of both monarchies, who was deliberately lost in the mist of time to ward off the inevitable Intercession... Come to think of it, Dread King Robber has a nice ring to it, n'est-ce pas? The One Ring, that is...

*Highwayman*

Black sheets for the Black Queen; silk, not satin, and a hot water bottle between them to warm her feet

*Gunslinger*

Soooo she wants to betray this guy? Yeah that's not going to happen as planned

*Yotz*

It may just going to happen *exactly* as planned.  
As planned by the Dead King, that is.

*"Your sudden but inevitable betrayal folds nicely into the final stages of my master-plan. Your chaotic incursions aimed*

*to disrupt my planning finally allowed me to push most stubborn of the gamepieces on their designated places, and all the players have now accepted their roles and dance to my tune. Thank you for rebelling against the system in exactly a way I have foreseen."*

[\*ahd\*](#)

Is there a material difference between Akua being a loyal, useful and devoted minion for the rest of her time in Creation; and Akua always and everywhere acting exactly the same as she thinks a loyal, useful and devoted minion would act?

Because I just reread the Sixth Ranger entry in TV Tropes.

*Jane*

Slightly, mostly applying to things like what she's capable of doing under mind control and what is revealed by truth spells.

Practically, though... Kind of. If she's faking, she won't be insulted by how everyone else distrusts her, and they'll feel justified in doing so. If it's genuine, that would actually be hurtful, and make the rest of the Woe almost jerks (only almost, though, since they're perfectly entitled to dislike her after all she's done). It could affect the nature of any narratives unfolding around them.

Outside of that, though, personally, I don't think her reasons matter much so long as the "always and everywhere" part holds true. Which it will, if she's smart, as we know she is. But if some really, truly tempting bait were dangled in front of her... Then yeah, her reasons suddenly become very important.

[\*ahd\*](#)

All very true.

True resurrection into a body with the Gift, maybe?

*Darkening*

They could maybe stuff her into a zombie body, but remember, Resurrection is only for Heroes. Villains just get to cheat death, and Akua is happily doing that right now. Cat stealing an angel's power is the kind of thing that was supposed to be impossible, and was heavily dependent on both the scenario and her coming into her aspect of Take. Just like heroes pulling tricks out of the box with a new aspect at the perfect time, that first dramatic use of an aspect has benefits for villains, too. That would be incredibly difficult to reproduce, not least because they don't have access to an angel feather.



[ahd](#)

Heroes. True.

Redemption story! (:

Akua Sahelian, Wizard of the West?

[shieldredblog](#)

She could however rip a resurrection Aspect out of a hero and use it. That's a thing she can do.

*burdi*

it really looks like when Black offering her to become his apprentice, awe and surprise of how much he know about her. then come the explanation that very logic and convincing just like what Black did back then and the offer that impossible to reject because sound so good. The Dead King is truly beyond The Black Knight league, so it is impossible that he will threatening catherine because its stupid, useless and do disservice to alliance that he proposed whatever proposal that he cooked it will be very good that cat will have no reason to not accept it

*Metrux*

She is already backed in a situation where she accepts him or defeat, and he seems like the smart kind who leaves no openings whatsoever, so... This will probably not only be good for her, but something she desperately needs, or that he thinks she needs, anyway.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

The creatures that are wreathed in doom and despair, that gnaw on the bones of the dead and alive alike, and reap the souls of man, must now carry my luggage.

*Yotz*

"Oh, hi there, Neshamah!"

"Athal."

"Whatever you say, Athal, whatever you say..."

*Decius*

The Dead King is dissatisfied with his title; wishes to upgrade to Dead Emperor, ruling over the Black King of Praes and the Black Queen of Callow, and in unsteady trading neutrality with the Dread Empress. Also, he is willing to give Callow and Praes all of the autonomy they want.

## Tek

Wow. So, I'm a little confused, does he grant second life to everyone, or only to volunteers? Or they should deserve such a privilege?

Honestly, I don't see him as Villain. For all I care, granting immortality, even in exchange for some mere centuries of service is a great deal. He gives protection, peace, stability and an immortal life. It's like an utopic dictatorship (and yes, I am aware of irony here). Clearly, the Hells and demons, and undead abominations take some getting used to, but isn't the same with orcs, and goblins, and we already know they are not that bad, some occasional cases of cannibalism and backstabbing aside. He might as well genuinely believe that undeath is better than death, and benevolently trying to save mortals from their nature and Gods cruel designs.

And his "invasions"? He demanded some thousands of newborns a year, back in time, but wasn't that a mercy? An attempt to save them from live full of sorrow, and false promises, and untimely end? He was a Good guy all along!

Back in time I remember my own concept of semiutopic undead country, in which all citizens are undead, while retaining their consciousness. Because undeath is such a superior state of being. You are immortal, presumably can even survive a destruction of your body (as a ghost, after which you can occupy another body, which, with a little reshaping, illusions, and maybe plastic surgery would be just like your old one), or if you don't like your looks (or even your body's gender), you can switch onto another! And if you're feeling experimental, you can haunt a body of an animal or an object, if you are into that kind of stuff.

You don't need to breathe, eat, drink, pee, poop, or sleep, which gives you so much needed free time, and frees you from spending so many resources on ultimately doomed task – keeping your body alive. All the while, with a little bit of magic tinkering, you can retain a sense of smell and taste, a pleasure from sexual intercourse, or even acquire a brand new set of completely original senses. If you always wanted to have echolocation – wait no more.

The only downside of being differently alive is inability for child birth – but nobody pushing you! You can become immortal by the age of sixty, really, like a very good pension plan, that actually does not hope that you will die before getting it! And by that point you can't carry a child either way. But if you are male – some innovative cooperation with a Black Queen allowed us to freeze your sperm, so that you can still impregnate your living concubine, while being in your six hundreds!

I actually really want Dead King to turn up being genuinely enamoured with the concept of undeath, and just wishing that he, and his citizens (who are at least still conscious), to be recognized as legitimate nation, and not monsters, and peacefully promote the method of eternal life to each and everyone wanting. And once everyone become aware of just how much fun is being undead, there will be no shortage of volunteers! Honestly, I'm a little disappointed that I've yet to see a necromancer spreading the undeath by promoting it as an universal cure and an elixir of immortality, which it is! Put a positive spin on things, and people would beg you to turn them into alternatively alive.

So why wait to become your true self – your undead self? Join our swelling ranks today, for an eternity of happiness! Furthermore, if you will contact your nearby official branch of Guild of Necromancy in the next twelve hours, you can get a standard pact of undeath plus a bonus for ten first conscripted for a whopping 1.99 ducats! Be undead today, or be dead tomorrow, with a help of Abominable Sorceries Ltd.

*burdi*

it will not look so promised when you realised that being undead mean giving complete control of you to whoever make you the undead. whenever they want to take control over you

[TeK](#)

Oh yeah, fair point, and you are also very weak to all that is holy. On the other hand, you can't be stabbed, feel pain, get illness, and with a little soul tinkering you can be controlled even while being alive by a good mage and to top it off you probably still going to die!

An alive human is a slave to so many things, death, illnesses, nobles, money, public opinion. Your actions are not really your own. Yes, you may be enslaved as an undead. But you can also be enslaved while being alive! The risk is certainly there, but a risk of temporary enslavement (a couple of centuries, not much) is outpaced by a virtual certainty of encountering almost uninterrupted chain of astonishing suffering, which you usually call life. And yes, you can ignore all unpleasant things and live in willful ignorance, as most do, but you can do the same as an undead, and you still will be better off!

[TeK](#)

You are saying that somehow you trade your freedom for the undeath, as if you have said freedom. But you do not! Undeath is what sets you free, from so many shackles placed upon you by a cruel twists of fate, from pain, from suffering, from death, indeed.

I'm not saying you should trade your life for an unlfe right away. Give it time. Get old. Suffer from pain, weakness, start to lose parts of who you are to a merciless grip of time, get to the point where you'll wish for deaths sweet release. And if then presented at the option of abandoning pain, crippelness, you would not balk at it. Or, in the prime of life, get hit by a cart, or your arms and legs chopped of at the battlefield to which you got herded like a cattle, because some silkpants princeling payed big men with swords to make you go. Suffer a mortal illness, md then, when presented with this option, you will not hesitate.

A notion of abandoning your freedom is absurd, if you care to look past you prejudices and think.

### *Metrux*

Freedom is not the part that gets me, here, it is the why and how. No one, NO ONE, would give immortality to everyone without side benefits for him, especially because there are many scenarios in which his ending is bad, more so in a world like that of the Guide, where Fate itself molds stories. There is the uprising, the coming of a new master, the religious conquering, the lying despot, the descending of divinity... Really, there is simply no way for this undeath to exist for more than a couple generations as a utopia. Which is why the Dead King didn't create a Utopia.

### *Yotz*

Given that Hells give while not a infinite but still very large space for expansion, the immortality may be granted to very large chunk of the currently living population – that, and if it is seen as a blessing, than only most devoted, loyal, and gently bred people get to be fully sentient after the Second Birth – it's a privilege, not a right. All other will be used as spare parts and sustenance – just like we do with hospitals for the former, and graveyards for the latter. Yes, we prefer to beautify the process, but the bare bones of it remains the same – a nutrient cycle is a nutrient cycle, however you cut it. With the y'm-bhi caste freeing the living from the manual labor, the Dead guarding them from the outside threats, and the living solely devoting their lives to science and culture, it as close to Utopia as it can get. Or, rather, to the City of Sun, with patriotism engineering and mandatory eugenic program dressed as a religious practices and all. Not that it would be bad, necessary. Au contraire, this will create a very stable, healthy, and blooming society, functionaly indistinguishable from proverbial Malkuth haShamayim. Which is the main benefit for the King, of course, for in

this case he'll remain to be the King for the very long time indeed. Probably to the Age of Iron Stars, and mayhaps longer – to the point of entering The New Loom as an in-built Adversary, or even pulling a Nagash and creating a new world by himself (with a little help from the Triumphant, the Black Queen, the Intercessor, and some others).

Being constrained by the nature of World's Story is another thing, though, I'll grant you that. This may be the reason for them to stay in ~~K'n-yan~~Serenity, outside of Creation main Loom, only showing their hand when the Story allows them to without drastic repercussions. As in – the Great Patriotic War against foreign vandals from Procer, uniting all the people under the Kind, and affirming their unbreakable bonds once again.

Yotz

...typos, my worst enemy – we meet again...  
>:{

TeK

When it comes to the subject of motivation – pride is a thing. Building an Utopia is an enourmous achievement in and on itself, and some prideful beings will be inclined to pursue a subject (and someone THAT blasphemous have to be prideful). I long waited to segue into recommending Overlord as a stark example of “basically Dead King” building an utopia, just cause he wants to.

As for a failsafe measures – some backdoors will have to be established. And Names come from cultural background. Orks had been broken, and so, don't produce Named anymore (well, not technically anymore), it's plausible to create a society that does not create Named, because it does not need Named (there are no stories and conflinct, given the existence of Deus Ex Machina).

Yotz

Overlord...

Well, Momon certainly wants to build an Utopia, but the semblance is superficial at best, imo. For one, Dead King has no need to keep his underlings in “killing humans is wasteful” mindset, while titular Overlord acts as mere puppet of circumstances. He often is forced to sacrifice innocent people not to further the cause of building an Utopia – of which goal Momon has no idea until he was forced into it by the Jaldabaoth – but because he fears the possibility of his minions going

haywire otherwise. Dungeon Keeper Ami have actually worked with that premise in far more deep and thoughtful way despite being a step away from crack-fiction, imo. Also, I'm inclined to say that DKA done it first, but both DKA and Overlord have started sometime during 2010, afaik, and I can't place the dates exactly – add to that that there probably was much more works in that stead written long before both of them, so...

Secondly, Neshamah portrayed as a ruthless genius strategist, while Momon is forced to play pretend one because even in Yggdrasil he was a lame no-skill scrub. He literally bought his way into successes – and same can be said about all former members of Ainz Ooal Gown. His only saving grace is that miserable microscopic bit of compassion he has, which regularly gets overruled by his fear. Speaking of which – so far I'm getting the vibes of “I'm the one things that scare things-that-go-bump-in-the-night are terrified of” from the ruler of Keter.

And last, but by far not least – main reason that denies me even a possibility of drawing parallels between Overlord and anything at all, is Overlord being of brainless marysuetopian harem lit-RPG breed. And buck that shite, smite it with Hammer That Smashes Suns, and banish it to Tartarus for Eternity and beyond! Where is the Shadow Of The Black Horse gads about when you need him?!

In conclusion, Overlord is overrated, and I deeply despise that detestable heap of degenerocity.

*Cicero*

Overlord is blatant wish fulfillment fantasy. For wish fulfillment fantasy its actually pretty good, but it's still blatant wish fulfillment fantasy, which tends to mean it's not very good when compared to more general fiction.

As for the more general “hero forced to pretend to be a villain” trope like in DKA, I'm sure there are earlier examples, but of the top of my head Snape is the only one that comes to mind. I'm sure there must be older than dirt examples though... does Hamlet count?

*RanVor*

The wish fulfilment aspect is inherent to the isekai genre and, to some extent, to fantasy in general. I'm not really sure how does that invalidate anything.

*Cicero*

Actually, wish fulfillment is not inherent to the isekai genre, which is actually a much much older genre (referred to as "Voyage and Return" in the list of 7 basic plots). Alice in Wonderland is essentially an isekai genre, yet it is not wish fulfillment in the way Overlord, or many of the modern Japanese isekai stories are. (There are also some stories in the modern Japanese isekai genre that are not wish fulfillment – such as Re:Zero).

Nor is fantasy in general wish fulfillment – I mean, is Lord of the Rings wish fulfillment?

No, Overlord is wish fulfillment because it's protagonist is so very very powerful that there is no real external conflict worth writing about. He's powerful, able to do whatever cool thing he wants to do. Additionally, he's a villain protagonist, and not in the tormented pragmatically trying to save her people way like Cat is. He slaughters thousands of people and turns them into an undead army. Instead of being punished for his evil actions he instead is rewarded. He is a horror and terrifying to any right thinking human.

The reason it's well written compared to most wish fulfillment is that at least there is quite a bit of internal conflict in Overlord, as he tries to decide what to do and how to do it. Still, the fact that he ends up taking the easier route of mass slaughter instead of peaceful co-existence is ultimately disappointing, and makes the story pure wish fulfillment.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Yup. Prime example: *The Odyssey*. There's wish-fulfilment going on in that whole epic travelogue with fantastical elements, but also a massive helping of "be careful what you wish for". As well as "don't piss gods off".

Heck, go back a bit further: Gilgamesh. Includes the classic trip to the underworld, being offered the love of the cosmos' most attractive female denizen who can and will grant the mortal man who loves her great power (beware that, by the way) and *everything* Campbell holds dear.

Isekai has its place in the world, but me... I go Ancient School. Give me the shaggy dog, the

subverted, the bittersweet, the downright “that’ll learn ya” yarn. You know... *One Punch Man*. 😊

*RanVor*

On the contrary, the wish fulfilment is the truest core of fantasy, which itself is nothing else than a manifestation of humanity’s longing for things that are not true. Everything else is just an icing on the cake. In this light, yes, the Lord of the Rings, Re:Zero and a Practical Guide to Evil are all built around wish fulfilment. I could expand this reasoning to all fiction, but it’s too much of a bother.

I do not regard Overlord as a pinnacle of good writing, but in my opinion, it is written well enough for its primary purpose, which is to entertain.

*grzecho2222*

Heroes of Might and Magic 4 from 2002 had Gauldoth Half-Dead as necromancer that tries to create good nercomantic nation and whole thing is genius.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Cat was undead for a while, back before she stole her resurrection. It sucked. She couldn’t feel a thing, she felt her mind ossify, and there wasn’t anything that made (un)life worth (un)living anymore. Mortality is exactly what makes life worth it imho.

[TeK](#)

To be fair, she had her undeath crafted by, while a skilled mage, not an expert necromancer. When skillfull plumber fucked up fixing a roof, who’s to blame? Plus, her undeath was a haphazard solution, and the possibility of giving her senses and feelings was not on the table, since the plan from the start was to resurrect her, not make her undeath comfortable. Plus, many of mages efforts were directed at others, more pressing matters, such as containings an army of devils and a Demon.

So yeah, not really an argument. She didn’t gave an undeath a fair try. But you can! Sign up today. Our necromancers are top-notch and we provide a reason to exist free of charge!

[TeK](#)



Also, saying that mortality is what amles live worth living is like saying that carcraash is a reason to get a car.

*MetruX*

This is a logical fallacy, but I can't be bothered to remember which one. Just see for this: mortality is not the end, death is the end, mortality is a state, thus your logic is flawed.

*TeK*

Nope, my choice of words was incorrect. I meant "the possibility of getting into a carcraash". Now, you may argue that possibility is not a state, but at this point I just ran into the limit of my English speaking abilities. So if you still don't get what I'm getting onto, feel free to say so.

*Yotz*

Mortality is a sin.

*MetruX*

Well, we already know he isn't like that, from the past we've seen. But more than that, someone with those ideas would have to be delusional, and this kind of madness doesn't survive for long when Heroes are around, so I can't see him being anywhere near that.

*TeK*

Now, I did not argue is like that, I said that I want him to be like that. And your turn of phrase "someone with those ideas would have to be delusional, and this kind of madness" is plainly insulting. I hope you will retain your good manners in the future, while conversing with anyone else. Clearly, I somehow managed to hit a painful subject.

*TeK*

Scratch that, I clearly overreacted. And I'm sorry.

*werafdsaew*

In a world where heaven exists (because Angels exists), immortality isn't as useful, especially if it comes with side effects.

*TeK*

Nope. Afterlife is theorised, not established. I will quote EE himself on the matter:

"As for the Heavens/Hells that's a more complicated issue. Technically the Hells is where the devils are and the Heavens is where the angels are, in a physical sense. Good and Evil cultures believe that their souls go to their respective Gods after they die, unless angels/devils have a claim to them, but no one has ever passed on to the other side and remembered what was there so there's still a degree of uncertainty. Faith would be a pretty meaningless concept if the afterlife was a physical certainty."

*Yotz*

Hear, hear!

On the sidenote – even if Afterlife exists, there is no way be sure that you will become there, or describe it in mortal terms. What if Heaven's endgame is just an endless ocean of Light which absorbs and dissolves everything that was you, while its counterpart is just weeping and gnashing of teeth in the lone endless darkness? Are you ready to accept one or another just because you are afraid to bend Fate to your liking?

*grzecho2222*

Gauldoth Half-Dead would finally have some to relate to. Good Guys necromancers are very rare.

*TeK*

Yeah, prejudice is a frightening thing.

*Yotz*

That's a name you won't hear often...  
Though I wouldn't be so sure to declare the Dead King even Ambiguously Good. Comparison with Sandro seems far more apt in this case.

*grzecho2222*

Well he is not running around with any OP pls nerf artifacts and annoying everybody.

*Dakem*

Maybe the Dread King is one of the first practical evils in the world and build an undead utopia away from the meddling hands of above and below... Which the Bard countered by 1000 years of bad PR to unseat him or at least isolate him from allies. This in turn would also explain why the Bard works so hard against Cat and Black. In that light, may she never return is a perfect branding to destroy your opponents reputation e.g. Trumps crooked Hilary campaign.

*Dylan Tullos*

Dakem:

The Dead King murdered his people to become a god. That's the source of his "bad PR".

I don't understand why people keep thinking that "evil" is somehow a good idea. The Dead King is practical, certainly, but he's also willing to kill huge numbers of people so that he can be immortal. That's not the action of someone who views other lives as valuable or important.

*TeK*

Funny, how killing for greater good is really only legitimate when the Good Guys do it. It's not like killing few to save many is not a trope in and on itself... But, all pretence aside, it's quite obvious that Dead King is not a secretly benevolent being. But it would be really cool if he was.

*Cicero*

Except the Dead King did not kill a few to save the many, he killed many to save himself, the one.

I mean... dude, I know the "Good Guys" in this story are more morally grey than in most fiction, but it's pretty clear to me that I'd much rather be buds with the Grey Pilgrim than the Dead King. Dead King is much, much more likely to be willing to kill me to serve his own greater purposes than the Grey Pilgrim, no matter how close of friends we are.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Now that I think about it, doesn't Cat have the potential to have an infinite army of undead that's completely sapient?

[Tohron](#)

Not infinite – it's been stated several times that larger numbers place greater strain on her mind, especially if she tries to direct them to any significant extent.

*Yotz*

Just wait till she invents Object-Oriented Necromancy and Hierophant starts to work on the Abominable Intelligence project...

*JJR*

Those both sound like they'd get a paddling from the Gnomes.

*Agent J*

Not at all. It's been stated rather definitively that the gnomes give zero fucks about what you do with magic. It's scientific advancement that they're genocidally serious about preventing.

*JJR*

No one really knows what the Gnomes are on about. We see this in the chapter where Warlock gets a look at Pickler's repeating scorpions. He isn't sure if they'll draw attention and has very little idea as to what the criteria for drawing attention is.

Also, Object Oriented Necromancy, if it's anything like object oriented programming is probably too close to technology to let slide. A computer made out of undead is still a computer after all.

*Agent J*

I'd still be pressed to disagree. Praes has gotten two tickets. One for gunpowder and the other for fiddling with chemicals. They're against the proliferation of scientific understanding.

Warlock's ponderings were about how much science was too much science. Pickler is a hypercompetent engineer. She's at the frontier of siege machines, meaning there's no precedent for her creations. Very dangerous territory to be in. If she crosses the undefined line, the next letter is the final one.

As for whether a computer out of undead would a problem, we just have to look at Cat's favourite tool to find precedent. Goblin fire is basically napalm made from devils. If they got a letter for gunpowder, one would assume napalm would also get them lettered. Not so, apparently, as long as it's made through alchemical means rather than chemistry.

I say that to say this; we do know what the gnomes are on about. We don't know why or what the parameters are, but we do know what. The enforced limitation of scientific understanding.

*grzecho2222*

I think that pig-dragons mixed with Winter Necromancy have bigger chance of becoming relevant, because with how often they pop up it would be strange if they did not have some kind of conclusion

### Euodiachloris

Flying munitions.... When you need a kamikaze run with a side of guided missile/ drone. May include both dragon-, demon- and icefire along with ops. Might blow up before reaching target. Ask your nearest Monstrous Abomination™ for further details. Do not ask for refunds or compensation.

### NZPIEFACE

Don't her zombies improve automatically by themselves though?

### Antony444

Well...I think it is best for the Woe to assume the Dead King knows EVERYTHING before going to the audience.

I would have said before the 'invitation' he was not aware how Cat is Winter but this was disproved. These 'Journeyman' must really be good, for neither Black nor Malicia and certainly not Cornelia noticed them. I know they aren't looking like the agents of an undead abomination (since they're alive) but it's still an intelligence triumph.

Now we see the fate of the Procerans who fell in the different Crusades against the Dead King. Enslaved for all eternity by their enemy, I believe they really wish they had not gone against him. And the Lone Swordsman may have not glorified the White Knight of the Seventh Crusade so much if he was made aware of the fate of all those commanders and Named who are unable to challenge the orders of the King of Death.

The Dead King has style, I am forced to grant him that. Use the ancestor of Cordelia Hasenbach as a carrier for the palanquin, mute and with a crown on his head...no doubt he will wish to increase his 'collection' in the war to come.

As said by Ranger in her interlude, you can't enter Keter by Arcadia. This is really a bastion I see no easy way to conquer. The land is dead, the air is poisoned, the only accesses are the bridges and you will be under bombardment by the wyverns. There are probably more undead soldiers in this city than there are inhabitants of Callow. The walls are too tall, there will be undead heroes and as long as the King is intact and Hell not invaded, he can replenish his losses faster than you, because after all for his people he's the Good Guy.

And now Cat is offered the same Palace as Triumphant...this promises more epic chapters next week, for sure.

### *Darkening*

I suppose the dwarves would be the best option for conquering the place if they were willing to give it a concerted effort and tunnel into the city rather than sealing it all off with molten iron. We know they're pretty militarily powerful, though we don't know how magically adept they are. They seem pretty self interested though, and they don't really have a reason to see the dead king as a threat as long as procer keeps him contained and they have his region of the underdark sealed off.

*Metruux*

That made me wonder something that never came into questioning before: are the dwarves Good? And the Gnomes? The Elves we know are, both versions of them, but we never heard of the dwarves, especially since we know Praes is the only nation that doesn't uses the dwarvish war machines, which means other Evil nations use them aswell.

[erraticerrata](#)

The Gnomes don't sit down for Q&A sessions, so that's an unknown. The dwarves, as the major power of the continent, ran into the same problem most large nations on other continents have – when you get a large enough kingdom, it's inevitable that both villains and heroes are going to pop up regularly. Their long-standing difficulties in making that work are one of the major reasons they're not very involved with surface affairs.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Something to keep in mind: he may or at not have deliberately shaped his kingdom's culture and views over millennia with carefully applied propaganda and tales.

Also, the Bard may or may not have shaped the rest of the continent's cultures and views against the Kingdom of the Dead (bet they don't call themselves that) over millennia with carefully shaped propaganda and tales. Even in Praes.

*Cicero*

Actually I think the greater danger is assuming the Dead King knows things he does not, and thus inadvertently revealing them to him.

He knows more than he ought to, be he's not omniscient.

*Evgeny Permyakov*

>"It is so named for it had remained closed and untouched since its last and only guest," Athal explained. "You would know her as the Dread Empress Triumphant."

Wait-wait-wait. For real? I mean, is Dead King actually trying to force Triumphant's story upon Cat ? That... has potential. Both good and ugly.

RanVor

The Dead King becomes scarier by the chapter.

Remember to vote for Guide:

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Cat is pretty damned scary, as well. Never forget: she turned herself into an undead-wielding construct with mega ice powers and telespam abilities who has a hefty body count of her own. And, she's only recently started playing this game.

By Bantu-tales standards, she's a kind of Tokoloshe Queen of Darkness and Cold – who made herself that way. That ain't good; being within spitting distance of the Demon Queen of Tokolshes is... a bit morally iffy (as in, 'working to end the very nature of reality' kinds of iffy).

grzecho2222

I would say that she shapes up to Morvena/Marzanna Queen/Goddess of Winter and Death since she is horrifying but neutral and won't do anything to you as long as you don't bother her and mostly sits and does nothing outside of bringing and taking away winter. That would also have interesting implications since Sorcerous and Dead King seem like Evil takes on Twardowski and Kosciel and would suggest that there might be Weles in some form in story.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Cat and the Demon Queen have one big thing in common: wanting to stick two fingers up at the established hierarchy (the Gods Below and Above) and to break the existing world order. This is almost the African-style Order/Tradition/Law vs Chaos/Anarchy/Oblivion. Except, in this tale... Order may not be good, and Chaos may not necessarily mean complete oblivion with its changes. 😊

grzecho2222

In slavic myths it even wierder since in them humans, dragons, shapeshifters and hybrids of them are the forces of Chaos since all of them are children/creations of god Weles who is kind of mix of Loki, Hades and Athena and kinda jerk and troll to the most of other gods, but is always on side of his children/creations. The Big Conflict

is more of Orderly, Stagnant World Vs Endless Progress.  
Morvena is in this whole debacle neutral and mostly wants other gods to leave her and her people alone.

[frolamiz](#)

Yeah, the more we learn about The Dead King, the more it become apparent everyone is greatly underestimating him despite being seen as the biggest threat of the continent. Except for The Wandering Bard, but she herself is the expert at being underestimated.

It's also interesting that according to the Host, there are no other guests. I was half expecting Malicia to have already sent a body double.

*WuseMajor*

If Malicia had any idea this was going down, she'd probably be plotting with Hasenbach to stop it.

[tweid](#)

Man, the Dead King runs a tight ship. You gotta admire the man's diligence. Then again, he's had, what, hundreds? thousands? of years to set it up, so there's that.

Hopefully he's not interested in crushing Catherine under his heel, at least not immediately. I think it's safe to say that's a fight she couldn't win right now.

*crescentsickle*

In b4 the Dead King is all like "Hey Cat. Kudos on breaking fate and all that. Breaking, re-forging, and then divesting a transitory Name was a nice touch. Bonus points for it being a neutral Name.

"Now, I know you think you're here because of Procer's Crusade, and we'll get to that, but I need you to break the entire system the Gods have going on, and I'm going to take care of some of your problems so you can focus on that."

*Dylan Tullos*

crescentsickle:

The last people who accepted the Dead King's "help" served as ritual fodder for his ascension to godhood.

[shieldredblog](#)

Last person he helped that we know of is actually Triumphant. As far as we know, there was no betrayal there.



Also, I think the whole point of his philosophy is that he is not a classical villain at all. He didn't betray his people, Didn't start the war or aid the enemy. The only things he was guilty of during his rise to power were, not committing completely to his country's defenses.

If he'd turned traitor or tried to trick them, he would have been showing the kind of plot weakness that the Bard exists to exploit. All he did was offer just the amount of help that inevitably led to them growing desperate and dependent enough on him that they'd agree by to the Ritual.

---

> He didn't betray his people, Didn't start the war or aid the enemy.

Except, if I'm understanding the dialogue between him and Bard correctly, he started the plague in the first place to build up sacrificial weight, bait the people of the wolf into attacking and later control the course of the campaign by increasing the amount of victims in the invaded areas. Add to that the fact that the defensive nature of the campaign (i. e. walls being the only thing that could hold back the invaders) meant that the ashkarans' performance depended heavily on the magical support (for which the rituals were provided by none other than Neshamah himself) and "not committing completely to his country's defenses" becomes just one of the many strings that ensured he had full control over the situation – and that he bears the brunt of responsibility for it.

Frankly, I'm not sure how exactly starting a magical plague for an elaborate mass-sacrifice left the Intercessor no openings that would allow to expose him. The anti-Bard measures we've seen so far include culturally enforced voluntary acceptance of undeath (which doesn't exactly stop heroes from popping up now and then, as evidenced by Hanno having memories of the kingdom's practices), making her misread the situation (which is what their whole dialogue was about, but that wouldn't prevent her from taking any action at all) or playing out this part of the story between the characters other than the ones she's currently attached to (but it's not universal, since she still was able to hop around Marchford when Akua and Catherine had their struggle).

*Speck of Stardust*

due note that the bard only showed up after he did most of the heavy work, as she herself stated if she had gotten involved sooner she could have pull shit on him but all in

all she didn't have an opening by the time she got involved.

[shieldredblog](#)

Huh, forgot about the plague thing.

I guess it a unpredictable Evil opening move followed by careful decade long management of the situation.

Got to wonder why the Bard didn't try to out him. Perhaps it just wouldn't have made any difference. His people were dead without him at that point anyway.

*Helirous*

It has been noted that he always let someone else take the lead role until the end. I guess that limited the possible interventionpoints for the bard.

*Sol Invictus*

"Save for those of the Writhing Palace, were none trespass."

That, I decided, did not sound like a place I ever wanted to visit.

—

yup where definitely going to see the inside now

[superkeaton](#)

The more I learn about DK, the more fond I grow of him.

I might steal this entire location for a D&D game.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Carving a home in Shawdowfell. Or... hello, Mists. Wouldn't it be funny if he weren't the Darklord, but everybody thinks for ages that he is (and most of the play goes ahead with that in mind)? However, a certain fallen Paladin (not a cut-mod-and-paste Elena Faith-hold, Darklord of Nidala, honest), who happens to aid the party on and off/ shoves them at fetch quests that look significant, is still convinced she is fighting the Good fight against the Undead Lich King... except, dude just wanted peace and quiet and is maintaining True Neutral like its going out of style (even juggling that setting's messed-up karma meter with aplomb) , despite being stuck two doors over and across the block (plus change) from Castle Ravenloft... Heck, you have the option of adding some refugee Shadow Fae in the mix! Could make one hell of a game while the party tries to figure out what the bleeding heck is going on (and how to survive it) after being served plenty of the snark hunt with herring sauce special. 😊

*Myatt*

About akua anyone else think that cat has basically bestowed a winter title on her in every way but giving her an actual title?

[Javvies](#)

It's possible. Also, at this point Akua is probably closer to being one of the Fae than human – her physical body can be destroyed or maimed, but I'm pretty sure that Cat could just reform Akua's body back to spec more or less whenever she (Cat) felt like it.

It's also worth noting that Winter titles/empowerment could potentially be used as an alternative to Above/Below granted Named/Blessed.

If the only way to win is not to play ... a third option for getting Named- level power could be very useful.

*Nada*

Ok really Catherine there is a time for joking around and a time to be serious. Why is she still acting like a dumb frat boy at a party? Her thoughts were so frivolous that I have to wonder if she's being mentally effected by something? Is she going to be all like 'bruh nice fortress, send out the laaddies and the dooods'' when she meets the Dead King? I have to admit to being put off with her levity in this chapter.

*eatenbypie*

Honestly this is all kinda silly to debate, there have been more than enough hints given that his interest is Akua not Cat, and the recent focus on her development only supports that. His motives are fairly clear, the question is will Cat be able to accept Akua becoming his queen in exchange for support.

*Quin*

If it comes to a question between games of fate and games of dice there are two things in common. The task of knowing the odds are against you and are probably rigged... And trying to cheat back.

For Cat the odds are set with a nation of 'heroes' out for her blood not for goodwill or righteous intention... But to treat her as English excuse for invasion. she can fight until enough bodies pull up where she bleeds both her nation and the others dry until some band of heroes from to kill the black queen who slaughtered so many innocents (because soldiers who died fighting against evil count as innocent)

The tower is using her nation as a shield and may betray them if it suits them while the heroes are there to chop up her land and

make them servants while sending the oldest as present levies to be slaughtered by higher threats.

Oddly enough the undead king seems to be the nicest one around as he is also the only one not gunning for her head of her land. she knows the horrors that he can bring forth... But that's just it in the end.

At his worst he will slaughter thousands, kill millions, and leave a burning hope within the crusade... But he will not attack them because he NEEDS them. Slaughter well be horrible... But they will not be dead.

Also anyone else find it funny that Cat is getting near five years? Five like the greatest threat that ruled them all because she fought for her nation and was considered abnormal by their own standard?

The tower celebrates every villain and have loved every crime done by them, but not the one that actually won? How big was the big bad?

*Aston*

Three things.

One: The Dead King is not actually Evil or Named. People just assume that.

He's beyond that.

Two: Athal is actually the Dead King.

Three: Thank you so much for not having any this world was made through science stuff.

You're a brilliant author.

[Mirvra Wynter](#)

Huh... Zombie is an undead alicorn that's persevered where her kin did not... And she's growing sassy o.o

I guess Cat will at least have Blackjack when she builds her own tower XD She'll have to find some hookers somewhere though...

*burguulkodar*

I'm quite enjoying this tour through Keter. There should be a lot to see and to learn in there. Magnificent sights, even beyond Ater's Tower.

The Dead King (for what I've seen of him) seems an educated, interesting fellow, though perhaps a bit too dry, although maybe

that was only towards the Bard. I'm waiting to see. And I can't but respect the way he organized his kingdom, making his followers accept and even seek the bestowal of undeath.

*Levi Kalden*

The kingdom of the dead greatly reminds me of MATRIX. It has a similar moral conundrum.

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## Chapter 34: Abyss

*"You could gather the stuff of all the Hells and still find less Evil within than lies in the soul of a single man. The worst monsters are always those that chose to be."*

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"So," I said, "before we get into it. What are the odds that Athal is our good friend the Hidden Horror wearing someone's face?"

I couldn't exactly say I suspected that because it was what I'd do – though if Masego was to be believed, I was technically wearing a people cloak courtesy of Winter at all times – but come on. Of course the friendly servant 'gifted' to me was going to be a trap. Sure, it was possible Neshamah considered himself above those kind of shell games. People who murdered kingdoms for power did tend to have very particular notions about their importance and what they would lower themselves to do. On the other hand, it was becoming painfully clear that we had no fucking idea what the Dead King was really up to.

"I find it unlikely," Akua said.

The Woe and the murderer – the one not part of the Woe, I supposed it was necessary to clarify – weren't nearly enough to fill out the absurdly large bedchamber that had been given to me. It was larger than the entire Rat's Nest had been, and furnished so richly if Robber had been around I might have considered looking away while he got sticky fingers. Pawning the stuff in Mercantis could have probably earned me enough to equip a few hundred legionaries.

"Possession would be difficult, if not outright impossible," Masego conceded. "Bespelling the man for control is a different matter. It is not impossible anything his senses come across will be extracted and sifted through afterwards."

"I hear one for mind control and soul cutting," I said, putting a jaunty tone to my rising horror. "Anyone else feeling like putting their silver at work?"

"I bet he put some kind of fucked up devil bug in the man's brain," Archer mused. "You know, one he can look through?"

"One reason I'm glad I don't really sleep anymore, straight into the pot," I added, openly sickened. "I'm waiting on the rest of the gallery for counteroffers."

"I'd be surprised if there weren't enchantments everywhere taking our conversations straight to the Dead King," Vivienne noted. "Athal himself might simply be a red herring."

My eyes flicked to Hierophant, who shrugged.

"There are no active wards I recognize, save those surrounding the city and the Hall of the Dead," he said. "Though everything in Keter seems touched by sorcery to an extent. The protections I set around us should be sufficient to prevent eavesdropping, or at least very difficult to breach without my awareness."

"Reasonable paranoia, making three," I sighed. "Hakram?"

"Negotiations in good faith," Adjutant said calmly.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Playing the long odds, I see," Akua said amusedly.

The orc's hand rose to still the incoming tide of responses.

"We assume it a matter of course the Dead King is intent on crossing us," he said. "I would ask you this, however: does he truly *need* to?"

"From an objective perspective?" I said. "Probably not. He can get what he wants out of us fair and square. That said, he's a villain. 'Need' takes a different shade when it comes to those."

"Yet we are not dealing with Diabolist, it's true," Vivienne slowly said.

I looked at Akua from the corner of my eye. She did not seem offended in the slightest. She might not even have been listening, scarlet eyes still thoughtfully considering Hakram.

"I do not advocate for blind trust, or even trust at all," Adjutant said. "But let us not dismiss the possibility of forthright dealings from the onset, either. Salting the grounds prematurely is not to our advantage."

"He'd bleed us all in a heartbeat, if it got him anything useful," I pointed out.

"Is this not a recurrent trait in all our allies?" Masego asked, bemused.

It was a little depressing that I couldn't really deny that.

"Point taken," I conceded, passing a hand through my hair. "Which neatly takes us to our next point of order. Today's lecture: what we want from the Dead King, why, and what we're willing to give in exchange."

Hierophant raised his hand. I eyed him darkly. Had he even ever sat in classroom?

"Yes, Masego," I said.

"Is this a mandatory lecture?" he politely asked.

Archer smothered her convulsive laughter into Hakram's shoulder, the wretch.

"Yes," I patiently said. "Yes it is."

The blind sorcerer looked a little miffed, but I pressed on before he could get it into his head to argue.

"For those of you who forgot, or weren't paying attention," I said, glancing pointedly at Indrani whose lips were still twitching, "Callow is about to have around eighty thousand Proceran and Levantines soldiers led by heroes invading through the Red Flower Vales. We need them, very badly, to be headed elsewhere instead."

"Arguable," Diabolist noted.

"Akua Sahelian, arguing that slaughter *is* the solution," I said. "We are all blindsided by this turn of events."

I bit my tongue afterwards then forced myself to look at the others in turn. We'd begun light-heartedly, and it was my own fault.

"I know levity is how we've kept our heads on straight," I quietly said. "As much as Named can have those, anyway. But this is serious. We're at a crossroads, and ahead are dead ends all around. The crusaders are in it to the hilt, and there's no compromise to be had with them. Callow's on the chopping block for the coming world order and we're out of allies and alternatives – except for the Dead King. This is the deep end. So please, let's act like the situation is as grim as it is."

That sobered the room. I didn't particularly enjoy doing it – it kept the pressure off my shoulders to treat it as laughable, even when we were all deadly serious. But I could not stomach making it a game even on the surface when things had gotten this undeniably bad.

"The Dead King is our counterweight," Adjutant said, breaking the silence and continuing my thoughts. "If he breaches Proceran borders up north, the armies at our gate will be either thinned or entirely recalled to deal with him."

I nodded my thanks to him.

"That said, we don't want him to actually take Procer," I said. "Aside from the horrifying loss of life that would entail, we'd be trading the hound at our door for a much larger tiger. So we need him to be enough of a threat the Tenth Crusade turns north, but not so strong the First Prince can't win. I believe that's possible to accomplish, for two reasons."

"The heroes," Akua said.

I nodded in agreement.

"The Heavens have already assembled their footsoldiers," I said. "They're on the field and spoiling for a fight. Crusades have reached Keter before, so we know the Dead King's not invincible when there's enough Named thrown at him. Baited out of the Kingdom of the Dead, he might be vulnerable in a way he isn't while in his seat of power. That'll draw them like carrion does flies. It's an objectively better victory for Above to get rid of Neshamah than to topple us – the folks upstairs will push for it."

"And our leverage," Vivienne finished.

"To our understanding, the Dead King is stuck in his 'Serenity' unless he's either attacked or invited out," I said, inclining my head towards her. "Our current working assumption is that we've been called here because we can provide that invitation and we've been judged sufficiently desperate to actually go through with it."

Which, in all fairness, we were. The only person in the room not already in on the plan to a full extent studied me intently before speaking up.

"You intend to add clauses to that invitation," Akua said, eyes hooded. "Not obvious ones from an outside perspective, lest the First Prince find them out and consider herself to have options other than war against the dead. Limitation of strength? No, without a full assessment of his forces that would be too risky. Ah. *Territorial boundaries.*"



My fingers clenched. I knew there were few people out there who were both clever enough and knew me well enough to get to the conclusion so easily. It still worried me how little time it had taken Diabolist to see through me.

"Three principalities," I said. "Hannoven, Cleves and Hainaut. That would be the enforced limit of his invasion. Hannoven is fortified enough it will be hard to take, and as Klaus Papenheim's own territory it will strike bone with both the First Prince and her foremost general if it comes under siege. The other two principalities would give the Dead King foothold across the lakes, and so rally every Alamans of high birth in the Principate to the war. He's dangerous enough a neighbour with natural boundaries in the way."

"Preferably, we would want those principalities empty of civilians when the Kingdom of the Dead advances," Hakram said. "Their armies retreating as well, to strike back in strength when reinforced by the crusader hosts. Once war erupts up north, the balance of power of the Tenth Crusade shifts enough we have room to manoeuvre."

"Sounds like a clever piece of diplomacy," Indrani shrugged. "But you're not dealing with some prick of a prince, Cat. You sure the Hidden Horror is going to be willing to put ink to that deal? To put *oath* to it?"

"Our game's crooked," I admitted frankly. "But as far as we know, it's also the only game in town. He'd make appreciable gains through this deal, even if he went in expecting us to betray him. It's not the finest offer he'll ever get, but it's the one on the table. And if he wanted to stay behind his walls, well, he wouldn't have sent an envoy in the first place."

Akua stirred.

"A warning, if you would," she said.

I glanced at her and nodded.

"All of this rests on uncertain foundations," Diabolist said. "Namely, that invitation his needed for him to escape his Hell. This is speculation, not established fact."

"I'm aware," I bluntly said.

"Then follow the thought to its logical conclusion," Akua said. "If no invitation is needed and he still sent an envoy to you, what is the Dead King truly after?"

"We're going into guesswork," I noted. "And blind guesswork, at that."

"If you try to ascertain objectives purely from his perspective, yes," Diabolist said. "But that is not the full sum of the information we have. He sent for *you*, specifically. You are not the first cornered villain, Catherine. Yet you warranted an envoy where others did not. We can garner some knowledge from studying what sets you apart from other villains."

I met her gaze, unblinking.

"And what would that be?" I said.

"Two facts seem most important," Akua said. "First, you are now the crowned and recognized head of a traditionally Good kingdom. Ensuring you remain in power might represent a chance to tip the scales of the Game of the Gods on Calernia."

There was a cheerful thought. The Pilgrim had bought into the notion, anyway, so there might be something there. We had no indication that the Dead King's game relied on the balance of power, however, so the grounds were shaky.

"And second?" I asked.

"You are Queen of Winter in all but name," Diabolist said. "Fae are sworn to you. You are capable of granting titles and assembling a court."

Adjutant's brow creased.

"Titles," Hakram gravelled. "It's about the titles, if Winter is relevant at all. If you start handing them out, our potential strength escalates faster than anyone else can match. All the heroes capable of fighting are already out there, and the crusade still hasn't broken through. The Heavens are currently winning, but not by wide enough a margin to hold up. They would have to put a full hand to the scales to compensate, and if they do..."

"Below gets to do the same," Vivienne quietly said. "It'd start a vicious circle. The Heavens push again, Below matches, and all the while the fire spreads. Winter's the match to tinder. If Arcadia really was the sketch for Creation, then bringing Winter into this is like stealing the pieces of an earlier match to play in the most recent game."

"I haven't been granting anyone titles," I flatly said.

"Precisely to avoid this kind of complication."

"If you did, however," Akua said. "What entity is arguably the most powerful on the side of Evil?"

We all knew the answer to that. An argument might have been made for Praes, back in Triumphant's day, but that era had passed.

"So if it all goes up in flames, he's likely to be involved when Below makes its play," I completed grimly. "He'd want to put his finger to the pulse before it comes to that, and have assurances in place for when the arrows start flying."

"Indeed," Diabolist smiled pleasantly. "Which is quite the interesting development, don't you think? Whatever the truth of his intent, we have something that is desired. What we succeed at making of that is all that matters."

Gods forgive me but in that moment, even after all she'd done, I was glad she was out of the box.

—

The white-robed servants came to help us prepare for the audience several hours before twilight, but I dismissed mine. Hakram was quite enough for me. It was soothing, to have him help me into my armour. A ritual just for the two of us. The carapace of steel grew steadily around me, until all that was left to add was the cloak around my shoulders and the crowned helmet that had already needed reforging several times. I only put them on after the others were readied, the Woe in the fullness of their regalia. There was sense of solemnity to it. Archer's ceremonial garments were not significantly different from her usual, merely trading her usual leathers and silver mail for ones we'd had tailored for her in Laure, but it was oddly nostalgic to see her with the face covered by a hood and scarf again. Hierophant was all flowing black robes and silken eye cloth, somehow turning the simplicity of it into a statement of might. Adjutant and I were steel from head to toe, a frank admission of the nature of what we wrought. It was Thief that was barely recognizable. Her short hair had been styled and coiffed, going from haphazard to carefully arranged, and her prowling leathers were traded for Callowan court garb: a dark green overcoat bordered in brocade, over a long high-necked white tunic going to her knees. Soft and well-polished boots went up to her calves, with only a simple sheathed knife at her hip serving as a reminder of her Name. Diabolist remained as I had made her, somehow wearing her ghostly garments as if she'd been born to them.

Athal was our guide to the Hall of the Dead, along with several others Hosts. The pale man was subdued today. Not cowed, but well aware of the gravity of his duties. It was not often one was granted audience with the Hidden Horror. The inside of the spire was not as I remembered from the shards, everything within having shifted. Dimly, I could trace the pattern of our journey in my head. It all revolved around the royal hall now. The heart of the tower, where the portal and the man who'd made it awaited us. The antechamber to that hallowed place seemed filled with statues, at first glance, but a second revealed otherwise. The fifty

silhouettes standing still were not stone or the remembrance of kings.

"Revenants," Archer said, and none of us replied.

*Heroes, I thought. Dead heroes, and perhaps villains as well.* Ripped out of whatever ancient age they had fallen, still garbed in the armaments of their defeat. Men and women of every stripes, knights and sages and wizards. An honour guard that none but the Dead King could boast. We passed them by in uneasy silence. Athal bowed low as we stood before the bronze gates of the hall.

"We part ways here, Great Majesty," he said. "What lies within is not for the likes of me. May you find all that you seek, and leave a friend to the Serenity."

I nodded at him, then took a deep breath. A memory flicked back to the front of my mind, quick and silver-bright. Too clear for a mortal mind. A thumb running up my cheek as the lesser god smiled

"You are in need of a reminder, Catherine Foundling, of the difference between bravery and ignorance," I murmured to myself, with a bitter smile.

Another king, that one, that I had only ever beaten on his own terms. Something to keep in mind when facing the king ahead.

The bronze gates opened, and we went forward to meet with the King of Death.

"Her Majesty Queen Catherine Foundling, Tyrant of Callow, Sovereign of Moonless Night, the Black Queen."

The announcement rang loud and clear in the hall as I advanced, coming from a dead man's throat. The others were announced behind me. *Lord Hierophant, Lord Adjutant, Lady Archer, Lady Thief. The Shade of Splendour.* The words washed over me, made faraway by what I witnessed. No portal there, not today. A tall dais with a throne of bones, with a long table set before it. From the tall rafters hung banners from all the great hosts of Calernia. Old and faded. Some still keeking of blood long turned to dust. Yet the greatest of all banners hung behind the throne, the deep purple of the Kingdom of the Dead's heraldry set with crown and stars. None of it mattered, compared to the thing that sat the throne. It was a man, or perhaps just the mockery of one. Not living yet not dead, so thin bones could be made out through the parchment-thin skin. Pale locks of hair tumbled down messily, reaching down to the elaborate purple robes decorated with gold chains and riotous jewels that together twice earned a mortal king's ransom. The thing was sprawled lazily, the ancient crown of Sephirah on its brow, watching us with sunken yellow eyes. A curtain of power hung between us and it, unseen but thick against the roof of my mouth. *Illusion.* The Dead King was not within the

hall. It was not Neshamah's body I was seeing, either. Not his first one anyway.

"I greet you, Black Queen," the abomination said in a rippling voice. "And confirm by my own tongue extension of hospitality to you and yours."

I bowed my head.

"We are duly grateful of the offered courtesy, Your Majesty," I replied. "And offer guest-gift as a sign of our own."

Hakram strode forward, face serene. It had been trouble, finding something that was a worthy gift yet easy to carry through Arcadia. So many of the things that would have pleased the monster would have been dangerous to us. In the end, it'd been Ratface that came through. He knew people that know some people in Mercantis, and for a cost that made me wince they'd nabbed something of worth from an auction. Adjutant removed the silken veil from the cushion he carried, revealing a small shard of black stone.

"A piece of the Tower as it once stood, before twice being cast down," Hakram announced.

A white-robed attendant, this one without a heartbeat, came forward to take the cushion from his hands. It was offered to the Dead King, who took it in hand and studied it with a thin-lipped smile.

"A sliver of greatness," he said. "And a reminder of frailty. A worthy gift, Black Queen."

I bowed my head in silence. He set the stone back down on the cushion, and it was spirited away by the servant as he returned those wicked yellow eyes to us.

"Sit," the Dead King invited. "You are my guests, after all. It would not do for you to remain standing. Would you partake of my table?"

"We would be honoured to do so," I lied.

"I am pleased to hear it," the thing that had once been Neshamah said. "We have much to speak of, and it would make me uneasy to do so while your throats are dry."

I forced a smile.

"I confess," I said, "that your invitation roused great curiosity in me. Talk is much welcome."

"And yet you wonder, what are we to speak of?" the abomination chuckled. "Allow me to shed light."

Yellow eyes met mine.

"We must speak of that most ancient trade of kings, Black Queen," the Dead King said. "*War.*"

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*PotatoMan*

I think I'm ready for the next chapter. Why isn't it Wednesday already.

*JJR*

No demons of time to speed the process along I'm afraid.

[\*TeK\*](#)

Leave it to us to unrepairably damage the fabric of reality because we are too impationed to wait a couple of days. Guys, ya all will make great Villains, and I love you for that.

*Jane*

Let's be honest here, little of value would be lost by tearing apart the fabric of *this* reality.

...Well, I suppose I *would* regret losing the Guide... But not much else. Bring out the demons, I say!

*lqueenofblades1*

Sadly. Oh what I could do with Diabolist's powers at my command...

*Yotz*

Eh, a gallon of vodka will suffice.  
In the "skipping a day" and "irreparable damage to reality" departments both, I suppose.

*PartMan*

Guys I used a demon of time to go four years in the future  
I lost all my college years, but got to read the whole thing.  
I regret nothing.

[\*sengachi\*](#)

I just had a thought. I bet the Warlock is inside Serenity. We know he navigates Hells. He probably escaped from the Witch of the West. But he hasn't come back, and his return is likely to be narratively relevant.

So I'll bet he got waylaid in Serenity.

*JJR*

I'm betting that he won the fight and is now waiting for Black to be in his most desperate straights before he shows up to pull off a last minute rescue.

*Jessica Day*

I'm imagining that the fight still rages on, the two of them caught together within their own spells and the winner tbd by the side who needs a save... If Black "accidentally" gets himself too deep into enemy territory, cut off from all allies...

[wyaldriddler](#)

>The Shade of Splendour

Oh hoh hello. What is this? How interesting, and some foreshadowing I think that means Akua's plans may not go exactly how she expects.

*Someguy*

It just calls her what she is, desiccated leftovers from the Age of Wonders.

*d\_o\_l*

IIRC The Dead King's culture refer to the Fae as the Splendid. He's basically just calling her what she is; i.e. a shade animated by the power of Winter.

*Someguy*

I don't think the Dead King can be easily fooled by a soul shapeshifting, the farce was mostly for the benefit of any Callowan or crusader watching as they travel.

*Danus*

I agree that the Dead King wouldn't be fooled by a simple cosmetic change – but Akua is literally animated by the Mantle of Winter. This episode devotes significant time to develop the importance of mantles in BQ's powers, so I read it as foreshadowing.

I wonder if Killian could eventually bear the mantle of Summer.

*Dantalian*

Now that her soul is kind of tied to Winter she's more Fae than human. Seeing how they refer to Fae as the Splendid, sounds like they see her as a shade created by the same thing Fae are made of.

*Morgenstern*

Or, mistakenly so (? #), the shade of a Fae. \*shrugs

(#) I mean, she could have gotten changed by being infused with Winter, already... 😊

*Agent J*

What plans? How does she expect them to go? In what way does "Shade of Splendour" foreshadow her undoing?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

When even the best necromancer to ever exists now denies the fact that you're a Named...

[Euodiachloris](#)

He's being polite enough to acknowledge the fiction of this "anonymous plus one fae ghost" that has been presented to him in a way that is, incidentally, open to interpretation the next time the Woe make a trip to the fridge. 😊

*George Maddux*

This is so hype!

*Someguy*

>"If you did, however," Akua said. "What entity is arguably the most powerful on the side of Evil?"

Robber & Pickler to fuck with the Goblin Matriarchs and maybe creating a new lineage of goblins with extended lifespans. Nauk as a test to see if the Winter Title can counter his mental wounds from Summer 's flames and restore him fully. Maybe Hune to pull the Ogres influence. Bringing the Greenskins/non-humans under Cat will allow her to undercut Malicia and widen her talent-pool to draw manpower.

*Jane*



...Allying with the *Goblins* sounds a lot like allying with Akua crossed with the Dead King, though. Ridiculously treacherous, and possessed of reckless power that could blow up on her just as readily as her enemies.

Working with goblins in the legions is one thing, but working with the Matriarchs is... Something else altogether.

*Someguy*

Not working with the Matriarchs, FUCKING them over by granting Robber power and extended lifespan. They kicked him out for shitting on their authority by not fighting remember?

*Danus*

Robber with a Title would be absolutely brilliant. I wonder how Summer is going to become relevant to the plot again, because it constitutes another "leftover" piece from the "previous game."

*Someguy*

Summer invaded Callow when someone pissed them off right? Winter had no idea why they were pulling that shit and there was no follow up.

*Death Knight*

That would be grounds for all out war between the goblins and the Callowans. Remember their entire culture is based around male subservience. For Catherine to bestow a title on Robber, an outcast male? If the matriarch's do not do something about that then it will weaken their perceived position in their own tribes and may initiate a culture change. A titled Pickler would be a manageable diplomatic situation, seeing as she is (or was) of matriarch lineage. But Robber? Not unless Cat wants to smite the Grey Eyries.

*MetruX*

But if she do grant him a title that has nothing to do with any other goblins, a title that is also held by other people of other races... Yes, it will piss off alot the matriarchs, but they won't have a clear reason to enter war, thus they can only act indirectly, and with nothing that can be tied back to them. Dangerous, but not as much.

*Agent J*

There's optimism and then there's that. No, Cat herself pondered the consequences of bestowing a

title on Robber when Larat first mentioned the possibility. The consequence was war with the Matrons. No amount of legalism or clever politicking will get them to stomach it.

That being said, I'm all for an all out war with the Matrons. Let the goblins and the highborn back Malicia. They make themselves all the easier to clean up.

[Tohron](#)

"Duke of Howling Wolves"

*me.me.here*

Yeah, the Lesser Lesser Footrest of Winter will be a sight to see.

*Decius*

Anyone capable of generating a Red Letter from the Gnomes can mobilize forces greater than everything on the scales so far.

But they can't WIN that way, so they don't.

*Yotz*

Cats.

Most powerful entity on the side of Evil are indubitably cats. And soon all the Good bases will belong to them.

*RanVor*

All their base will be belong to them.

*Snowfire1224*

And so we finally meet the dead king, or at least an illusion of him. Gods above and below, Wednesday can't come soon enough.

*Jane*

You know... It occurs to me that, no matter how much one trusts Heiropant's talents, it probably would have been better to have had this conversation in Arcadia, *before* they passed into Keter proper. I mean, the Dead King has had how many centuries to perfect some sort of eavesdropping spell cast across his entire domain? Much better to go over things one last time before returning to Creation, and just have a quick "Did anything we learn once we were here change anything?" session that repeat *everything* to prying ears.

I'm not saying that the Dead King was listening in, necessarily, but wasn't that kind of reckless?

Also, interesting (though not surprising, really) that Akua agrees that they could probably win the war if Cat were to start utilizing Winter to greater effect. I don't think the Narrative would work like that, but it's nice to hear that it's sound on paper – even if it would trigger the Guide-verse equivalent to World War Three. Akua once again proves herself the most useful cloak, providing a perspective none of the rest of them considered.

*Azure*

Yup this conversation should definitely have happened earlier, after Catherine had her epiphany after the vision with the Bard and Dead King. Yes the Woe's banter is part of their charm, and treating this like a road trip worked to an extent, but the serious parts need to be dealt with with the appropriate weight as well. I'm glad Catherine addressed the levity and it's timing, but maybe if Erraticerrata ever gets around to editing some parts of this, then perhaps he would move this conversation to an earlier chapter, perhaps to just after Catherine overhearing Thief and Akua conversing.

*Trickster315*

So I have a pretty crazy theory. what if instead of an alliance the Dead King is looking for something more impact full in terms of breaking the story. What if he is looking for a marriage to change the status quo, similar to the Winter King? We've seen that he acted against the Wandering Bard who was supposed to keep the game going and the status quo the same.

*Snowfire1224*

Going along with your theory then I propose the person that is most likely the "Summer Queen" to his "winter king" is Cordelia. She may not be named but she is the ruler of the big Good nation. I thought of bard too, but that wouldn't last because bard could just die and become someone knew again. The Dead King can only marry the person, not the Name or so I would suspect Bard would argue of that situation happened.

*Brian Heward*

Cordelia has a Name, "First Prince"

*Simurgh*

WOG is that "First Prince" is not and has never been a Name.

*OmniscientQ*

"First Prince" is her title, but it is not a Name.

*Dantalian*

If the Dead King is really thinking about marriage then he should be more aware of how unprepared he is trying to charm his "future bride" using a sack of bones as a body. After all, Catherine is well known for ogling attractive people (even her enemies).

*Berder*

They shouldn't have talked about their plans for betrayal while in Keter. The Dead King certainly has the power to spy on them here with a necromantic construct or some other trick. I suspect the Dead King is three steps ahead anyway.

Akua's hypothesis: granted fae titles lead to more Good playing pieces which lead to more Evil playing pieces which leads to the Dead King being put into play. But this supposes the Dead King needs to be put into play by the Gods Below, and can't do it himself.

Suppose the Dead King can put himself into play, and doesn't need any permission from the Gods Below or from Cat. And yet, apparently he only has exited his realm when attacked. (or "invited" – do we know if he was ever invited out to wage unprovoked war before? or is this just wishful thinking by Cat.) This paints a picture of a fundamentally peaceful, defensive monarch who doesn't care about conquering the continent, but who is attacked by Procer just because he's Evil. That sounds a lot like Cat. Is it possible that the Dead King sees Cat as a kindred spirit and genuinely wants to help her?

*Daemion*

He's constantly at Procer's borders and would invade them if they didn't defend themselves. So, not really peaceful or defensive.

*Agent J*

Athal seems to be of the opinion that those were punitive expeditions in response to Procer's "coalitions of hate".

*Dantalian*

Can't really take Athal's opinions seriously. The guy's been brainwashed pretty hard.

[shieldredblog](#)

Hes showing bias, not brainwashing. Nothing he said was actually wrong. If one takes the forgotten histories of

Keter and Procer into account, than its a pretty legitimate point of view.  
Depending on what the Dead King is actually like anyway.

*Decius*

According to Procer.

And not all of Procer, really. Only the people who have the most to gain politically from claiming so.

*Novice*

That was not according to Procer, that was according to Akua and by extension Praes.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Praes and Procer have been shaping each other for a while under the beady eyes of the Bard... I don't think either of them have the definitive word on what's gone down, somehow.

*Decius*

The information directly from Procerean interludes is more reliable than the information that filtered through more levels. Akua might have accurate information about the Keter/Procer situation, but her information isn't more reliable than the least reliable element in its source.

In particular, if the Dead King doesn't need a treaty to invade, and has the power to, it must be because he doesn't want to.

*MetruX*

He did small attacks, though none that were trully treatening, except for one time: He marched himself besides Triumphant. People have been drawing parallels between Cat and triumphant for several reasons, but if she is the second one to have him accompany her in war... Wouldn't you say this paints a pretty powerfull picture? The last one conquered the continent, for as small a duration as it was.

*Death Knight*

Of course it ends there, where else would it?

[TeK](#)

Homestly, it's already better than:

““And yet you wonder, what are we to speak of?” the abomination chuckled. “Allow me to shed light.”

Yellow eyes met mine.

And then the Dead King spoke.”

*Jane*

Pardon me, I do believe I have a few pitchforks and torches to prepare over that very *suggestion*.

*Novice*

I think I just gained a claim to the Rebel Knight Name at the mere thought of it.

*Death Knight*

I feel like that’s like telling me “We’re gonna kill you by shooting you in the head whereas we could have burned you alive.”

*Rook*

The war Neshamah is talking about is most likely not cut from the same cloth as the one that Cat is currently involved in. The tenth crusade is a big deal for small time players, but it isn’t worth fireflies for someone that’s playing the game on the scale that the Dead King is. I suspect he’s talking about the oldest war in the book: Good vs Evil

Which is a bit worrying considering that there’s been considerable foreshadowing that this trip is where Cat really starts going off the deep end, alignment-wise. All that talk of Evil being a steep cliff vs Good being a slippery slope, followed by a decision to go to Keter out of desperation in a chapter titled *\*Plunge\**, followed by ‘into dusk’ and ‘abyss’

Similar to how capital-G Good was shown to be so far removed from the traditional casual idea of good to be totally alien, this might be where capital-E Evil gets the same sort of reveal and starts to drag her in, even with her personal ideals remaining mostly intact.

Most likely scenario? He gives her a picture perfect solution to the threat of the Crusade on a silver platter. No strings attached in any tangible or magical way shape or form, with no visible benefit to himself. In ‘return’, I wouldn’t be surprised if he influences her in the process to really start going down a bad road, just one little nudge changing the direction of the course. No direct benefit, nearly no direct involvement, and no direct target – an airtight move with no gaps.

It would fit his style of operation, just like his ascension by having external threats indirectly propel him to power, and his messenger avoiding the eyes of creation via indirectly getting to the Woe via preprogrammed commands coincidentally in the right direction instead of a going to a target.

In this case he could indirectly secure an ally far in the future by making use of external (Proceran) pressure in the present.

*1queenofblades1*

Is it just me or did anyone else start shipping Cat/Neshamah this chapter?

*Decius*

Akua/Neshamah?

*mindsword2*

Yeah, so this is my worst case scenario.

"Black Queen, thank you for coming. I want to discuss war."  
Turns to Akua. "Good work on turning 10,000 zombies and opening a permanent portal to the hells. Lets talk."

*MetruX*

This is actually ridiculous. Akua was never called Black Queen, and the title doesn't go well with her in any way or form, she didn't even wear anything of black. Sure, imagining this is terrifying, but has 0 chances of happening.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

no no no, he's saying "Thank you for coming Black Queen, now I can talk to Akua since you brought her here." In this worst case he doesn't think Akua is the Black Queen, he's just aware of her nature enough that he knew to get her to him he needed to invite Foundling.

*mindsword2*

This was what I was implying. Also, a mistake on my part; 100,000 zombies.

But seriously, Akua's ambition killed 100,000 people, turning them into undead under her control and opening a permanent portal to Hell. His ambition caused his kingdom to be turned into undead and opened a permanent portal to hell. Sure they were for entirely different reasons, but all of this could have been for Akua, not Cat. And that is the worst case scenario I can think of.

*Dainpdf*

The difference being he did it in a way that didn't bring everything and the kitchen sink down on his head.

[frolamiz](#)

Well, I have been thinking that a political marriage may happen for a while, but only because it would be an interesting move with many possibilities. Nothing to do with shipping.

[TeK](#)

You guys will ship an undead ship and Forever King, given a chance.

*Death Knight*

I really am surprised I haven't seen the fandom try to ship Cat and a bottle of Aragh given how much Cat loves to go down on that.."bottle."

*Dainpdf*

And then it turns out that all he really wanted was to swap notes on necromancy, because Cat's Winter undead are really cool. And would Akua mind talking about Still Waters, because of course he knows how it's done, but he'd appreciate some commentary on her personal experience with it.

*Berder*

The big question on everyone's mind is, "What does the dead king want?" The chapter Witness seems to have cryptic answers to this.

(By the way – at the end of Witness, Cat tells Hierophant to extract memories from the Wandering Bard and Neshamah. Did this happen, and what did Hierophant learn?)

In Witness, Neshamah describes his belief that people should not die, and nor should they be trapped in a cycle of repetition. He says the Splendid are trapped in a cycle of repetition despite their immortality, to prevent them from learning too much. In the chapter Keter, we find out that Akua is an example of a Splendid. But what, exactly, is a Splendid?

Neshamah says this in Witness: "The Splendid are bound to repetition because they are feared, Intercessor. Because with the span of eternity before them, they might learn beyond what they were meant to learn were they not so tightly constrained. And so mortality is the answer to the deeper question: how do they loosen the bindings without birthing their own usurpers?"



And he answers his own question: "Why, by cursing their work with decay," he chuckled. "By ensuring the banner can only be carried for so long by any one soul before it is recalled at their feet."

Then the Bard counters: "Below's favour comes with the end of aging." To which Neshamah counters that those with Below's favor are cursed to die from strife.

To tell the story more plainly: the Splendid are bound to repetition by something that fears them, so they create work cursed with decay to help the Splendid escape the cycle of repetition, and Below's favor is an example of this work cursed with decay. That implies the Splendid are the Gods. (And so is Akua – so Splendid seems to simply mean any kind of immortal spirit. Perhaps the Gods were not always so powerful, and were once like Akua.) It also implies there was some other entity, perhaps above the Gods, that feared the Gods and was able to bind them with repetition.

Neshamah's highest objective, therefore, seems to be to escape both death and repetition, and usurp the Gods. Conquering Procer is not what he really cares about. He would like Catherine's help in usurping the Gods, given her unique situation with Winter.

And after that... they would have to contend with whatever originally bound the Gods with repetition.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

I read "the Splendid" to be the fae who reside in Arcadia. Who were/are, of course, a prototype for what Names would be in Creation.

Yotz

There is no god but Azathoth, and Nyarlathotep is His Messenger.

*MetruX*

You... Seem to interpret things in a very strange way. We were never shown anything of the Gods, only their agents, so we can't really know if they dabble in repetition. No, the most clear definition is that the Splendid is how he called Fae, and that they could grow in power, if not for the cycle of repetition between the courts, enough to be a threat to the Gods. While mortals, and Named alike, will die, thus they can't grow enough. Yes, he does want to surpass the Gods, or so it seems, but this is a desire thousands of years old, before he made his kingdom and his true claim. We can't completely know what he wants of Cat, because too much changed, and we don't even know if he can change. There isn't anything after the Gods, because the Gods created everything.

### *Berder*

If he was talking only about Fae in that passage, how is mortality the answer to the question of how to “loosen their bindings without birthing their own usurpers”? Are you suggesting the Fae created mortality?

Neshamah said: “Why, by cursing their work with decay,” he chuckled. “By ensuring the banner can only be carried for so long by any one soul before it is recalled at their feet.”

How does this make sense in regard to the Fae? What banner? It makes sense in regard to the Gods: the banner is the blessing of Gods Above and Below, creating Named. And if it was about Fae why would the Bard then counter that “Below’s favour comes with the end of aging”? The whole passage makes no sense if it was about Fae.

Now, the Gods might be some relative of Fae. We have been shown a couple beings that Cat called gods: Fae royalty, the King of Winter and Queen of Summer. This might be exaggeration by Cat, or there may be a true link.

### *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

“We must speak of that most ancient trade of kings, Black Queen,” the Dead King said. “Having the chance to have a sane conversation with a sane person.”

### *Burnsy*

He picked the wrong guests entirely for that. I think, between them, you could maybe fashion a single fully functional person. Or at least a lunatic capable of adequately faking it.

Maesgo could probably put it together out of some sort of flesh golem if you give him a lab and some privacy for a week.

### *Novice*

A girl that willingly mutilated her own soul for power cannot be considered sane.

### *Burnsy*

“Akua Sahelian, arguing that slaughter is the solution,” I said. “We are all blindsided by this turn of events.”

I have to admit, even though keeping her around is a decision that is inevitably going to blow up in everyone’s faces, it’s almost worth it for the banter.

However...

'She might not even have been listening, scarlet eyes still thoughtfully considering Hakram.'

\*Sighs\*

Akua. Honey. I get that whatever scheme you're running relies at least partly on you faking your way through a redemption narrative. Personally, I think that you're angling for one of those resurrections that only the good guys can dish out, but that's neither here nor there.

But. This thing you're going for here? The slow realisation that orcs are fully capable of being rational, intelligent and insightful beings? The whole 'Akua learns a lesson' you're building to? We can see you doing it. Vivienne can probably see you doing it. And Hakram can definitely see you doing it.

Which means the second you try to have a heart to heart bonding moment he is gonna throw it back in your face and, frankly, embarrass you sweetie. Because you're still faking it, and you're still underestimating him.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Shhhhhh – it'll be funny. If you spill the beans early, I know that Larat, for one, would be happy to wear your guts for garters for ruining the punchbag... I mean... punchline. 😊

*Someguy*

Belkar Bitterleaf is better at faking redemption.

*Agent J*

I read that completely differently. It was mentioned earlier that Hakram makes her uncomfortable. I think this plays into that. Rather than wide-eyed shock that orcs are fully sapient beings, I think her uneasiness around him is a show of extreme caution. Around him more than anyone else, Vivienne included, she makes absolutely certain to keep on her toes. He's the most dangerous to her. His eyes are sharper than goblin steel and his loyalty to Cat is unmatched by anyone, Nauk included. Worst yet is his disposition. The man is an unmoving stone amidst raging rapids. Nothing shakes him or clouds his judgement.

I liked what Cat said of her, Akua's uncharacteristically open-minded for one of her breeding. Everyone is equally beneath her. It's not a smart orc that worries her, it's Hakram specifically. Whatever scheme she's cooking, if there's anyone in Cat's camp that can spot it and shred it, it's the Lord Deadhand. And she fucking knows it.

In short, her underestimating Hakram is the absolute last thing she'll do.

*Yotz*

So, riddle me this:

A Girl Lost, her Beast Tamed, a Keeper of Corn, a Knight of Tin, a Trembling King, and a Ghost of the East enter the chambers of the Beryllium Magus...

*Jessica Day*

I find myself wondering if the worst fate that could befall Akua would be if she was *\*truly\** redeemed...

Like, any Buffy fans out there remember what it was like for Angelus to get a soul and become Angel?

What if she had to truly understand the full extent of her crimes and accept responsibility for them?

*Yotz*

A guilt of such magnitude can be a powerful drive behind The Redeemed actions, but given Akua's history and attitude, her path to redemption will be a story in itself, and any attempt to tell it would force Author either to gloss over nuances, making a disservice to all involved, or shift focus of current story specifically to her. Though telling that story aparallel, or as a possible sequel – a-la *Angel* to *Buffy* – would make for a splendid tale. Especially, if she'll try to earn the redemption while retaining the title of Diabolist...

*Agent J*

A redeemed Diabolist? Only if she becomes a horrible drunkard, dyes her hair blonde, and miraculously develops an English accent.

[Euodiachloris](#)

There should be bad poetry in there, somewhere... 😊

*John Smith*

Yeah, uh, I'm gonna need it to be Wednesday, like, right now? Thanks.

[Antony444](#)

Fifty Named...the Dead King has more Revenants guarding him than there are heroes in the Tenth Crusade at the moment and it is AFTER four visits of Ranger. Forget Black and Assassin, the

undead abomination is the true leader in the contest of killing heroes...

The negotiations are going to be explosive and fascinating, but I wonder how Cordelia Hasenbach would react from a position of 'forcing Catherine to abdicate as Queen' to 'we have lost three provinces to the Dead King'. Losing three Prince territories out of twenty-four would be the greatest defeat of Procer in its entire existence since it was born after the defeat of Triumphant.

And of course there's the classic cliffhanger...well done.

Yotz

Also, piece with the shard of the First Tower was magnificent. Thank you.

*crescentsickle*

Adjutant is a brand new transitional name for Chancellor~

Akua's got her knickers in a twist because he's her prime competition~

She doesn't know what else it could transition to because Orc Names are brand new, so she can't force him to be anyone different unless she tries to do so blind~

*nimelennar*

I thought we've been told, again and again, that greenskin Names used to exist, even if they haven't for a long time. This is why Catherine will never get the Name Warlord: it's a greenskin Name, and she isn't part of a greenskin Story.

Adjutant being a new Name, though, comes out to about the same thing.

*crescentsickle*

Yes, we've been told that again and again. I'm not sure what the point of saying so was? I don't think Adjutant has been confirmed as an old Orc Name. My hypothesis is that it's not even an Orc name. It's possibly a Praesi Name, or perhaps just a Practical!Evil name.

The point of my prior post was that I believe Akua's current fascination with Hakram is because his existence jeopardizes her plot to become Chancellor, because if Cat magically became Empress today he would be the only one in the running to become Chancellor.

More than that, Adjutant is basically Chancellor in role itself, if on a military skew, which has been repeatedly emphasized with everything about Catherine (armor in this audience, flag of scales where the sword is heavier, etc.). Given that, Akua is probably thinking Cat would be less inclined to outlaw Chancellor like Malicia did.

*crescentsickle*

Ah, disregard the bit about not knowing why you mentioned Orc Names. I forgot I had that specific bit at the end worded like that.

Didn't mean new as in Actually New (TM) but that they're an unknown quantity suddenly relevant again.

*PotatoMan*

Orc names as a !New Old thing are only relevant again because the orcs have experienced under Black and Cat a culture shift, eg. being allowed to have a culture at all. I thought that Akua was having racism issues with Hakram, but it could be that she is realizing how Cat gains power by investing in and lifting up her subordinates and allies, as opposed to spending her followers' lives on throwaway actions all the time. IDK though. Guess we'll see.

*Someguy*

Adjutants are generally a junior captains or senior first lieutenants in the US Army on the Battalion managing administrative functions so it may be a Transitional Name to [Captain] now that the Name is empty without repeating history with the next [Cursed].

[oracleindex](#)

I'm growing fonder and fonder of Edmund Inkhand.

[Bart](#)

Looks like nobody has said this yet...

Territorial considerations don't mean much when two people mean different things when they say the same territory. I bet it'll turn out that one of those territory names was actually the continent name when the Dead King was alive, or something like that.

*JJR*

Ehh, as long as they specify that the treaty refers to the current boundaries of said territories they are safe from that sort of rules lawyering.

### [Barthumphries](#)

The current boundaries as specified by whom? The boundaries as the Dead King has known them for the past three millennia or the boundaries as per the current upstart country that has usurped those names? 😊

### *Soronel Haetir*

I've been thinking some about the theory that Cat is triumphant reborn. I can think of few things that would piss her off more than if that turned out to actually be the case.

It would mean she really is nothing more than a pawn in the game between the gods above and below and that it doesn't matter a stinking crap what she does, the show must go on and all that.

### *RedoneAgain*

You know, I'm seeing a lot of overlap between what is going on now and the summer and winter thing. Summer seems to be in many ways a mirror of callow, and cat is the queen. The Dead King is a king stuck in a cycle he hates and wishes to escape. He also rules over a kingdom of darkness. The winter summer conflict ended with the winter king marrying the summer queen by making marrying him the only option besides giving up her central tenets. Are we going to see cat marring the dead king?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Technically, Procer is more the Kingdom's designated opposite than Callow is. Well, Cordelia's single... 😊

But, I doubt wedding bells of any kind are in the offing. There is more than one way to gain a merger.

### [CorpseMoney](#)

I'm a real life villain, I love this story. But my reality is dark fam

### *Aston*

When does Practical Guide to Evil update?

### *Wry Warudo*

Would bestowing a title onto Kilian eliminate the need for the human sacrifice procedure she was going to go through?

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## Chapter 35: Stroll

*"Seventeen: always agree when offered to share in the rule of the world by a villain. The three to four heartbeats of sheer surprise that will earn you are a golden opportunity to kill them before it comes to a monologue."*

– 'Two Hundred Heroic Axioms', author unknown

The Dead King kept a good table, for a corpse.

It was a little surreal that after that last bit of dramatics we were expected to have a meal, but wasn't that diplomacy? Vivid theatre, followed by long stretches of tediousness. There were half a dozen kind of spiced meats on the table I didn't recognize but tasted delicious, with the only dark mark on the affair that it was apparently expected that undead attendants would cut my meal for me. I dug in with reluctant enthusiasm, since it was unlikely I'd get to eat this fine a meal for months yet. The cooks at the palace had been weaned off the more complicated fare they'd learned from Mazus and the Fairfaxes and gently guided into making the simpler fare I liked better – if it used to squawk and had since been roasted, odds were I'd enjoy it – but they seemed to have taken that as a challenge to put all their efforts into dessert. Which, well, I had not found it in myself to deny. Masego had a sweet tooth as well, and blueberry tarts were one of the few plates that were never at risk of coming back full when sent into the Observatory. I laid off the wine, though out of politeness I took a few sips. It still tasted like ash to me, as all lesser spirits had since I fully claimed my mantle. Setting down the silvers, I politely dabbed away the bit of sauce on my lips with the provided cloth and leaned back into my seat. Meal time with the Woe tended to be a riotous affair, but not today.

Trading barbs with the Dead King as audience would have been a little too much even for Archer. The abomination sitting the throne waited patiently, by all appearances pleased with how quick we'd been to dig in. I caught his eye, purely by happenstance, and when I faced those yellow orbs the throne room went dark. Sighing, I put down the cloth.

It'd been about time for something to go wrong, hadn't it?

A quick look around told me I was no longer sitting in the throne room. This was the pitch black of nothingness, not deep shadow. The cloth had disappeared into the dark the moment it left my



fingers, and the table had followed suit the moment I took my eyes off of it. The only visible thing around was a standing man, and my brow rose when I took him in. The throne-sitting corpse had not been the Neshamah of millennia ago. This, however, was. Pale and mess-haired, with those thick eyebrows and calloused hands. Closely-shaven as he had been when I'd last glimpsed him, a heartbeat before he wrought the doom of Keter.

"There is no need for alarm," the Dead King spoke in Ashkaran.

I forced a frown in my face.

"I'm afraid you've lost me," I said.

No amusement bloomed on his face. He did not strike me as offended by the lie, either – if he even knew it was one. What had been spoken was simply put away behind those golden-brown eyes, to be studied at his leisure.

"My apologies, then," he replied in Lower Miezan. "Would you walk with me, Black Queen?"

I rose to my feet, swallowing a snort when the greatest abomination ever born to Calernia chivalrously offered me his arm. *In for a copper*, I mused. I looped my arm into his and allowed him to lead me through the nothingness.

"I judged a private conversation to be in order, before negotiations began," the Dead King said. "As reparations for the imposition, the least I can offer is an interesting sight to accompany it."

The darkness bled out. It was like watching a painting in reverse, I thought. Instead of splashed of colour being put to canvas, strokes of black were removed and bared the sights beneath. He'd not lied, at least, about it being *interesting*. The two of us stood dozens of miles in the air, watching the slaughter that took place below. It was a siege, or at least an assault part of one. Surrounding a Keter near identical to the one I'd seen in Creation, hundreds of thousands gathered beneath colourful banners to take a run at the walls. My eyes lingered on the few heraldries I recognized. Most of them Proceran, but a few Callowan ones as well. The bells of House Fairfax startled a finger clenching out of me. That banner had not flown in the wind since the Conquest.

"Sixth or Seventh?" I asked.

There could be no doubt, after all, that it was a crusade beneath me.

"Sixth," Neshamah replied. "The depths of that failure led to the birth of the Seventh, in many ways. The Choir of Contrition is hard of learning."

"My own encounters have left me less than fond," I said. "The first hero I fought was sworn to them."

"The Lone Swordsman," the Dead King drawled. "Ah, those pesky Hashmallim. All those centuries and they still believe the right sword in the right hands can accomplish anything. Their string of failures had made them increasingly heavy-handed. Mercy is the the Choir to watch, for subtlety."

"And Judgement?" I probed.

"That sword only ever clears the scabbard when something needs to die," the abomination smiled. "No coincidence, that the current White Knight is one of theirs. The Heavens have pressing need of blood on the ground, and the man will serve to herd the others towards the fated abattoir."

"They can be beaten," I said, watching a wooden ramp collapse under stone thrown from the walls.

Hundreds fell to their screaming deaths in the pit below.

"In a manner of speaking," the Dead King said. "Praesi have slain and tricked them into falling, as have I. Yet the Choirs stand, for their existence is fixed. A dead angel does not detract from the whole. It remains as it ever was."

"They have to play by the rules," I said.

"Oh yes," Neshamah murmured. "And they will pay for that, in time. That delightful child in Helike wove a trap for them right under the Intercessor's nose. I expect the end of that play to be nothing less than *magnificent*."

The Tyrant, he meant. I forced myself not to stiffen. I'd expected him to take a swing soon, either a Procer or whatever nation was limping heaviest at the time. This was a hint there was another game afoot, though. And I doubted it had been offered lightly.

"He's offered me eternal friendship," I said, hoping to shake a little more loose.

The abomination grinned.

"To me as well," he said. "And the rats, though they ate his envoy. I confess I quite enjoy his sense of humour."

The Tyrant of Helike was mad, this was well-known. I was starting to wonder if it was perhaps *too* well-known. Behaviour could seem

erratic without actually being so, when you failed to grasp what someone was truly after.

"But I digress," the Dead King dismissed. "We did not take this stroll to speak of the League of Free Cities. It appears we have a common foe, Black Queen."

"Procer," I said. "I would have preferred not to fight them at all, but Hasenbach left me little choice."

"She is an interesting one, their First Prince," Neshamah said. "A shame that her understanding of what a crusade is was so lacking, but it is too late to leave the saddle once the lion is ridden. She must follow through or break the Principate for a few generations."

"A matter of some interest to you, I imagine," I said.

"Come now, my young friend," the Dead King laughed. "Do you take me for such a fool I would want the Principate to *fall*?"

"Without Procer there's little left to contain you," I pointed out. "The Dominion and the League might manage to salvage parts of the south and Callow would hold the passes to the east, but you'd be trading a single mighty opponent for several weaker ones."

"I could bring ruin to them," the Dead King mildly said. "Drown the Lycaonese in death, devour every field and city from the Tomb to Salia. I could have done this when they were grown fragile from their war of succession, and none would have been able to stand against me. Yet I did not."

"Because it'd have hung a sword over your head," I said.

"Not immediately," Neshamah mused. "They would have allowed me to glory in it for some time. Lovingly tended to my legend, my thousands years of darkness – or, more likely, my few centuries. They would have been willing to pay that price twice over, to have me bare my neck."

"And yet here I am," I said. "Invited to speak of war. Because there'd be two heads but only one sword. It's how you survived Triumphant, isn't it?"

"She was a great woman," the Dead King fondly said. "There was a *clarity* to her that I'd never seen the likes of. But you misunderstand my intent. I do not seek to use you. My war on stillness will not be waged in so half-hearted a manner. This is merely a welcome, Catherine Foundling."

"To what?" I asked.

"That most rarefied of societies," he laughed. "We few immortals."

"I can die," I flatly said.

"So can I," the Dead King said. "So can she. And there have been others before, who came close yet passed in the end. But I have great hopes for you, Black Queen. You have crawled through the cracks in a most fascinating way – never before have I seen anyone reach apotheosis by *accident*."

I bit my tongue before I could deny him. He was wrong. Had to be. I'd carved away at myself piece by piece and put a mantle over the remains, but I was hardly a god. Even a lesser one. If that delusion made him civil and open to negotiation, however, he could keep it.

"She," I said instead. "The Wandering Bard."

"The Name changes," he said. "The faces as well, swift as seasons. The Role has not. Intercessor she was and will remain."

"She's got her hands all over this war," I said. "She was in Callow, before it all went to shit. In the League too, before the shockwaves of that rippled across the continent. I know better than to believe she won't pop out again."

"She encountered a nasty little setback in the south," Neshamah said. "And has remained... discreet, since. But do not believe her absent because she is not before your eyes. She has as many irons as there are fires."

I bit my lip. Should I? It was a risk. But when would I ever have an occasion like this again to speak with one of the few entities that might have a decent grasp of her? The Wandering Bard was a shadow cast on everything I had been trying to accomplish.

"What is she after?" I asked. "I used to think it was destroying what was made of Praes, but this is too much. Too large. She didn't need a crusade to accomplish that."

"I thought I understood her, once," the Dead King pensively said. "Then she ruined me with a smile on her lips. A dozen times again did the two of us dance that dance, and yet even now she remains inscrutable in her intent. Know her to be your foe, and that in this game of ours there is nothing more dangerous than allowing the others to grasp your heart's desire."

"But I should trust you," I said. "Because Evil is one big happy family, give or take the occasional knife in the back."

He laughed.

"Never trust me," he advised. "Or anyone else. Those are the last remnants of who you once were seeking to shackle you. You will betray me, if we make bargain. Or I will betray you. That is the nature of things."

His arm left mine and he smiled gently.

"I need you to understand, Catherine, that none of it should be taken a slight," Neshamah told me. "That even if you wound me most grievously, there is nothing to bar you from seeking me out for alliance in centuries to come. That if rip out the heart of you, it is not a declaration of war: it is simply a single tide in a very old sea, and in time it will pass. All things do, in the end. Save for us."

"You do not sound like a man who wants to make an alliance," I said.

"Yet I will listen to your offers, and accept them should they suit," the Dead King said. "I am in no hurry. Neither are you, though you have yet to grasp that truth."

He patted my hands affectionately.

"You are about to begin a journey, Catherine Foundling. They will hound you," Neshamah said, "to the ends of Creation. No matter where you flee, no matter how you plead and bargain and reason. They will scour the impurities from you until all that is left is the devil they feared all along. And when you rise from that grave of ash, crawling through blood and smoke?"

He smiled.

"I will be waiting on the other side."

I swallowed, though my mouth was dry.

"The day is yet young," the Hidden Horror said, looking down at the slaughter that once took place beneath his walls. "Let us return, and speak of earthly treaties."

A drop of darkness touched the world, and like ink in water is spread. It was mere moments, before I sat before the table again. The meat on my plate was still warm.

My hands were trembling, and I could not bring myself to believe it was not warranted.

—

I watched moonlight wash over the Crown of the Dead in silence. We'd spoken with the Dead King for more than an hour after the meal was finished, but I'd been unable to concentrate as much as I should. Hakram had done most of the talking, presenting our

offer and terms of alliance. Nothing I hadn't known before. I'd provide the invitation out of his Hell, in exchange for limits on how much he could swallow. No promises of assistance in the defence of Callow required, none offered in his battles against the Tenth Crusade – though I'd left the door open for further dealings there. I did not intend to ever cross that threshold, but the pretence that I might should be enticement in its own way. Neshamah was, after all, preying on my desperation. He would suck that teat try if he could. No accord had been reached. The Hidden Horror told us the offer was worth considering, and that he would do so with due diligence. We were to meet again tomorrow at twilight, for further discussion of the proposed treaties. It was not a refusal, at least. I suspected that if the Dead King had been uninterested in the terms he would have made that clear without stringing us along, but that was just a feeling. As Akua had pointed out afterwards, the longer we remained in Keter the better his bargaining position became.

If we stayed here long enough, there'd be no time for further preparation of Callow.

That should have weighed on me. The possibility that this dark gambit would come to nothing, and I'd walk from Keter with nothing to show for it. But it wasn't what my mind was lingering on. To him, all the treaties in the world were nothing but play-acting. I'd gotten a glimpse of what Neshamah believed Creation was, and it was nothing that a makeshift bargain could truly change. The kingdoms, the armies, the borders – they were just ink on maps. The Pilgrim was willing to let Callow burn if it meant the Grand Alliance turned its swords to the Kingdom of the Dead, but the abomination had never once been worried about that. Gods, he didn't even need to *fight* them did he? He could just wait them out. Let the petty feuds of mortals tear apart that ambitious edifice. A century or two of keeping to his borders meant nothing to a creature like that. As long as the Serenity kept churning out soldiers, kept growing within the hellscape, he would pull further ahead. *Because his realm doesn't fight itself, while Calernia is a tinder box no matter the era.* And that was the entity I meant to use for my purposes. It scared me, that he'd outright said he wouldn't much care if I did. Because it meant that all of this was a passing distraction to him. Nothing that really mattered.

The flare of the match drove back the dark, for a moment, until I flicked it away. The wakeleaf in my pipe brought a sharp taste to my mouth when I inhaled, pouring away when I spat out a stream of smoke. The highest ring of the Silent Palace offered a beautiful view of the madness below. Wyverns passed the skies, silent save for the batting of wings, while in quiet streets the dead marched in blind patrols. Athal had brought me to the balcony when I'd asked for a view, and I'd remained here ever since. My hands itched for a bottle, but I'd forced myself to indulge other

vices. I could think of few things more foolish than getting drunk in Keter, much as it would have relieved me. Hakram had already come and gone, getting me to eat from a plate when I did not truly need to and then sitting in silence. Offering wordlessly to listen, if I wanted to talk. I had not taken him up on it, for once. Neither Indrani nor Masego had come up. They tended to avoid me, when I was in a mood. Vivienne had passed to discuss the treaties for a half hour, and left when she realized my mind was only halfway there. It was time, I supposed, for the sixth to make an appearance.

Akua Sahelian was a sight, under moonlight, and how I'd shaped her had little to do with it. She'd had a touch of the eerie even before the changes, that too-perfect look Praesi highborn had bred into their lines. Soninke more than Taghreb, true, but the difference was less than you'd think. Aisha was from a family long past its glory, and she was still worth more than a passing look. Diabolist's gown of silver and blue bunched up around her body as she leant against the balustrade by my side. I drew from the pipe and blew the mouthful of smoke out.

"And here you are," I said. "The proverbial devil on my shoulder."

"Is that to be my purpose?" Akua mused. "Let us spin wicked weaves, then. You lack not for enemies to entrap."

"You've got games afoot," I said. "I knew you would when I let you out. But I am not in the mood for them tonight, Sahelian."

"No," she said softly. "Evidently not. You spoke with the Dead King, without our knowledge."

My fingers tightened against the dragonbone shaft. I forced them to loosen.

"I did," I admitted.

"Such a creature can foster madness with but a sentence, when speaking to the weak-minded," she told me. "I would not put stock in what it peddled."

"An interesting thought," I said. "Since a lot of what it peddled sounded like Praesi rhetoric."

"We have our exalted," Akua said. "Triumphant, Traitorous. The Maleficents and the Terribilises. Yet there is reason we do not hallow Trismegistus' name so. Terror and awe are not treasured bedfellow among my kind. Our favourite gods are those that bleed."

"God, huh," I mused. "I keep hearing people throw that word around. Been guilty of that as well. But to this day I'm not sure what it means."

"There are those that would say the term is a mere recognition of power," the shade said.

I inhaled the smoke, filling my lungs before releasing.

"And you?"

"A fulcrum, perhaps," Akua said. "Nothing more or less than the point on which levers pivot. The weight of it is to be respected, but not held sacred."

"Except for the ones that get capitalized," I said.

"Oh," Diabolist said quietly, "not even those. When Below taught us of holy betrayal, it did not hold itself separate. It might be the single truest form of worship, to betray even our patrons."

There was a deep and abiding madness to the Wasteland, I thought. It had sunk into the bones of that land, mottled the souls of the people that dwelled within it. And still, part of me sung to hear the words. The unrelenting defiance in the face of even the Gods. Praes had shaped Callow as much as the other way around. In that tight embrace of need and hatred, we had each served as the crucible of the other. Diabolist would betray even the Gods, if she rose from that betrayal, and she was in so many ways the personification of the worst and the best of her homeland. I thought of John Farrier and his hard eyes, long lost to Summer's fire. Of Brandon Talbot, who would ride for Callow under any banner he could. Even of William, that tragedy of good intentions. *Would you hold a grudge against even the Gods?* I knew the answer to that, sure as my own heartbeat. To small slights, long prices.

There were none in this world or any that stood exempt from my people's rancour.

"You put up a fight," I suddenly said.

Scarlet eyes turned to me.

"What you did, Akua, it's not something I'll ever forgive," I murmured. "You showed me that, you know? That even as heroine I would have had no truck with absolution."

"It should not be forgiven," Diabolist said. "What are you, if you were wrong in this? That hatred should be stoked and kept burning, lest you forget the lessons it taught you."

I smiled ruefully.



"But you put up a fight," I said. "Against odds I'd flinch at. Against people that scare me still, for all the power I've gained. If there is any part of you that I can respect, it's that you might have been a monster but you were never once a coward."

"One of my ancestor once said that the spurs to greatness are never gentle," Akua said, sounding almost whimsical. "Mother often repeated that to me, when I balked at my sharper lessons."

"Did you really?" I asked. "Balk. Even once."

"I had a cradle-sister," Diabolist said. "One who shared my wet nurse. She was also charged with taking my canings until I reached an age where healing sorcery would not hamper my growth, but that was a rare enough occurrence. Her name was Zain. Common as dirt. I loved her, I suppose, in a way that children love those who so thoughtlessly love them back."

It was horrifying, deep down, that nothing of what had been spoken came as a surprise to me.

"When I was eight years old, Mother took me to the deepest chamber of the old labyrinths and put a stone knife in my hand," Akua said. "Zain lay prone on the altar, mind clouded by potions. Yet she was aware enough to know my face and reach out to me. She was scared, you see. Shivering like a doe. She was right to."

"You killed her," I said.

"My affection made her a valuable offering," the shade replied. "I had to be slapped twice before I cut her throat, and even then my reluctance made the wound a shallow one."

Akua laughed softly.

"That was the part I regretted most, in later years," she said. "She would have bled out twice as quickly, had my hand been steady. That was my mother's lesson, dear heart. Hesitation is never a virtue: faltering is only ever the mother of agony."

"Your mother was a monster," I quietly said.

"Mother was a failure," Akua said amusedly. "A far greater sin, in her eyes and mine."

I pulled at pipe again, standing silent under the insolent radiance of the moon.

"How much of that was a lie?" I finally asked.

"Not a word," Diabolist said. "Why bother, when the truth serves my purposes?"

"It doesn't change anything," I said. "You still are who you are. You still made the choices that you did."

"Oh, that was not my intent," Diabolist said. "The most important part of this tale is the moral, as your people are so fond of having."

The shade smiled.

"Do not hesitate, dearest Catherine," Akua Sahelian said. "If you are to cut the world, it is best to have a steady hand."

---

*Big Brother*

And this is why I love Akua as a character.

[TeK](#)

Also, she got really weighty tits.

*danh3107*

God Bless

*NerfContessa*

Interestingly enough, Zain in the bwsiqn dialect means to wait....

*Insanenoodlyguy*

For a sec there I really thought Cat was gonna kiss her. Oh she'd know it was incredibly stupid, I just thought she was in a place where stupid was more possible.

*ArkhCthuul*

The third near perfect chapter in a row.

I am in awe.

And agreed, Akua is growing on us. Like a radioactive, parasitic, mind afflicting fungus. :p

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Toxoplasmosis Gondii has got nothing on Ubua.

*Vhostym*

Terrifying. But not very surprising. I wasn't completely sure what the Dead King's deal was with his restraint, but him being bound in a literal sense to his Serenity was unlikely, and this seems like a fairly good display of why. I'm still confused as to why Cat didn't absorb the Bard's memories from the echo with her and Neshamah, but it seems like even larger of a loss now.

### [TeK](#)

I think she did. And it's not mentioned only because EE is a tease. Also, I think he is bound, but not in the way she thought. It's not that he can't leave Serenity per se, it's that he can't leave it without repercussions (of Evil). Invitation provides for him a fixed role, as a weapon of sorts. He is just a side story, and so does not risk destruction. Cat lets demon out of the box, and Heroes get him back in the box. He loses nothing.

### *Exrot*

I feel like Cat would probably end up the same if she played the long game. Hand out a few titles, let good drive her back into Arcadia and make sure they know she's staying out of Creation, only leave once every few decades when called upon but let her titled companions join villainous groups at their leisure and hand out lesser titles to notables occasionally.

### *stevenneiman*

He's almost like an evil Choir. Sure, he's less interventionist than they are, but just like them he needs the fig leaf of being called on by a villain before he's allowed to come out to play without consequences.

### [Javvies](#)

They might try that on the way back from Keter.

### *Metalshop*

Woof. That was a heavy one. The quality of this serial is always consistently good, but every once in a while we get one like this, where the skin of a character is peeled back we get to see some real artistry.

Well done.

### *matesbe*

I can't help but like this Akua, despite myself. And that like from Cat... "If there is any part of you that I can respect, it's that you might have been a monster but you were never once a coward."

A great chapter.

And the Dead King... he is every bit the Eldrich abomination that he seemed. Except when Ranger is around. That was somewhat anti-climactic.

*stevenneiman*

I wonder if he considers her to be among the eternal. She's almost as hard to kill as he is in her own very direct way, and as a result she's one of the very few villains who actually gets much use out of the theoretically infinite lifespan. I don't think she could actually take on the Kingdom of the Dead if she was trying to do more than have a bit of fun with some undead super soldiers and annoy the Dead King, but I'm not so sure he could kill her either.

[Javvies](#)

Probably not – Ranger is a half-Elf (IIRC), and Named, but there's a difference between Ranger's having functional immortality as a Named and having a Mantle of Power like Winter, or what the Dead King probably got through his ascension ritual.

Ranger is "just" a Named. Cat is the Queen of Winter and a Named(technically, she's still the Squire, if barely).

*narcoduck*

On the other hand, she leveled up enough to think she can take on the Summer Queen. Her aspects, after all, are Learn, Perfect, and Transcend. Perhaps she transcended into her own lesser godhood.

*Komploding*

I don't think Cat is Named anymore, something about her not having enough of a soul left to hold one, that's how she escaped killing Black no?

*Kartik Chawla*

The Aspects mentioned are of Ranger, he isn't talking about Cat.

*Komploding*

Ops mb

*stevenneiman*

I'm not so sure. Remember that the Bard has basically no direct power of any sort from any source. All she has is

what I assume to be Name memories taken to such an extreme that they take over the Name's host completely. Also, the Dead King himself has admitted that he could be killed in the right circumstances, so I feel like all that really leaves as a criteria is that someone must have a realistic shot at living indefinitely. Most villains don't because being a villain usually attracts heroes able to kill them. Cat is on the verge of being powerful enough to become a fixture of the world rather than a threatened player, and I think Ranger passed that threshold long ago considering that she goes out looking for the greatest challenges in the world, including beings like the Queen of Summer, just to assuage her boredom.

*MetruX*

The Queen of Summer and the King of The Dead aswell. But remember she never fought this guy directly, and neither finished her fight with the Queen, she retreated, even hurt. So yes, she is a whole league above the Calamities, but still under those of the most powerfull "small" figures. Call it small here because all of them are still part of the Gods game.

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

Counter-interpretation: Ranger chooses not to kill the worthy prey because then she couldn't hunt them again. She's also apparently had a history with the Saint of Swords, and from Saint and the Queen of Summer's survival of this and Ranger's repeated eye-gouging of Larat, I've begun to suspect that Ranger's hunting MO (Dead King notwithstanding) is "track down, beat down, wander off without killing whoever was important."

[frolamiz](#)

Did you not notice the "her" when he spoke of their little immortal club?

I believe it could only refer to The Wandering Bard, Triumphant or Ranger. There may be a good reason for him to put up with her whims.

*Morgenstern*

Context of what follows would point slightly more to him meaning the Intercessor in her various names/Names and ever-the-same Role, though.

*Morgenstern*

And he seemed to talk about Triumphant being one who \*got close\* – but then \*lost\* before actually ascending.

*stevenneiman*

One small thing: Didn't Hakram make Cat swear a binding oath never to drink while at war? I ask because she's definitely still at war but it mentioned her drinking a bit of wine to be polite.

*Death Knight*

The oath was only in effect until Hakram rejoined Cat.

[Javvies](#)

It was while she was on campaign. And/or when he wasn't around.

He's around, and they're not on campaign at the moment, but on a diplomatic mission.

*RoflCat*

When he's not around I believe.

[Hakurei06](#)

a binding oath not to do so while in the job, either in the court or on the field, so long as he isn't with her.

Hakram was away then, but isn't now.

*Stormblessed*

Apotheosis Hun?

Akua's backstory bun?

The Wandering Bard's apotheosis???

*Aeon*

This was just fantastic. It's one of my favorites in a long while. The greeting between immortals was great, and I liked Akua's little chat. She's not to be trusted, but there's a part of me that just wants to see her stay loyal, if only because it's so interesting to see the juxtaposition between her and Cat and the Woe.

[ayon96](#)

It won't be Akua if she doesn't stab in the back at the first chance she gets!

*Someguy*

If you find yourself liking Akua, it's a trap and she's playing you.

### *Decius*

If you find yourself disliking Akua, she's playing you and it's a trap.

### *Byzantine*

It's interesting how Cat assumes the Dead King is wrong about her. She really has yet to come to terms with what she is, now. Akua showed how her Mantle can really be used, but even she was barely dipping her toe into it. She is the Queen of Winter in all but name. And I suspect she can fix that by simply... letting it happen.

Also interesting that the Dead King doesn't actually care about current events at all. He is ever patient, and he is waiting. He simply... wanted an introduction to a new god, one that he has a feeling will be important.

### *Novice*

There is a danger to becoming the Queen of Winter in full that's worse than Principle Alienation or being stuck in a cycle or even the possibility of having a Summer counterpart in Creation: Catherine's loss of her tactical acumen. As we've seen whenever she dips into Winter, she completely loses everything that she has learned so far, a regression of character development which is a no-no in a meta-narrative sense.

### *Byzantine*

Yes, and so it is a question of how she will maintain her sense of self as she draws deeper on Winter. I suspect as Winter becomes more her the effect will be less pronounced. The question is how long that will take, and if Cat will find a way to cheat to skip the waiting.

### *MetruX*

One of my endgame theories is just this, a way to bind Winter to her without most of the bad repercussions, in the form of a brand new Name. Something specifically "tailored" for that.

### [Piotr Tokarski](#)

Still Akua managed to overcome most of these issues when controlling Cat, which makes me think that this could be mitigated (especially with Hierophant support).

### *Byzantine*

Nah, Akua was better than Cat, but she had nowhere near the power of the Queen of Summer. And that is the level of power Cat really has, now. She just never realized she was only calling on a fraction of Winter, for the mantle was simply too deep.

[daegone823](#)

I love the dead king is like where immortals so dont worry if you kill my armies or I kill yours we still cool at the end of the day.

Kind of explains why he is OK with rangers tactics. Chat is now considered maybe not his equal but a peer to him. They wills till play game/roles but since he is going to be sharing his time with her in the coming millennia he just wanted to welcome her, how sweet

Chat has a new father figure/mentor/enemy/horrifying nightmare

*stevenneiman*

I don't think the Dead King is so much OK with Ranger's behavior as powerless to stop it without wasting a lot more resources than she ruins and taking a lot of risks he can't afford to take with the Heavens gunning for him.

*BryceWilliam*

Ranger is to him what white caps are to large companies. they find holes in their security and point them out in a harmless way and the company pays them a nice sum. The Dead King gets exploitable holes pointed out and Ranger gets her favorite wine and a good fight.

*Rook*

Except instead of a white hat you hire she's more of an unwelcome one that keeps changing your screensaver to lemonparty, and you really wish she'd cut it out

[Euodiachloris](#)

Eh. The light trolling is still worth fewer bugs in the security framework. \*shrugs\* Besides, there's worth in dangling the dislike her pranks cause out where she can see: it keeps her coming back without explicitly inviting her to.

Because the minute Ranger feels as if she's completely welcome, she'll quit harassing the guards and him. That way, everybody loses out on training opportunities.

*stevenneiman*



I hadn't thought of that, but now that you mention it I could see it just being the Dead King playing off Ranger's natural defiance. If he ever stopped giving her the disapproval she craves I imagine she would either lose interest and stop providing valuable security checks, or else step up her behavior to a level that would cause him actual trouble.

On the other hand, Ranger is defined by her ability to do what others consider impossible, so if there's anyone who could actually exasperate him it would be her.

*Metrux*

The act comes even more into play when you consider the faces he used to deal with her, and how it is ever different for her, while still having the same wine she likes.

*Novice*

Is Cat becoming Chat a meme now? I see this way more often nowadays.

*Allafterme*

Suppose to mean Cheshire Cat. The metaphor still feels like going against the grain though.

*Agent J*

I've never understood that explanation. What exactly is it about Catherine that brings to mind a Cheshire Cat? It certainly isn't her personality, powers, or position in the story.

I think Novice's understanding makes the most sense.

*Yotz*

>What exactly is it about Catherine that brings to mind a Cheshire Cat

Probably a response to question about usage of "Chat" explaining the "Chat" thing as a "Cheshire Cat" abbreviation after the chapter where Cat is described smiling from ear to ear with distinctly inhuman smile, and some speculation about abnormal amount of teeth said inhuman smile shows in the comment section of the stated chapter.

Also, the grammar of the person constantly using the designation in question for the protagonist allows to suspect usage of skewed autocorrect algorithms in said

person's mobile device, constantly replacing "Cat" with "Chat" because of gigoformatted autofill functions.

Or Novice is right, of course.

*Byzantine*

No, it's always that same guy who makes that mistake.

*Novice*

Ah, a troll then.

*SpeckofStardust*

oh, I know what he wants, he doesn't want her to be a dead set enemy.

After all if they fight its one thing, but if she comes to think that he must fall, well the effort to deal with her would give an opening to the other parties in existence. That would see them both dead.

*Benztaubensaeure*

Damn that was a great chapter. The best thing, besides the characters, is that i still have no idea what is going to happen. This chapter widens roads that were not as prominent before (immortality, more Akua etc.), resulting in even more possible events and outcomes. After the whole Cat basically sets up her own death agreement, possibly even before i would have said this entire thing ends with her dying (still my most valid theory), but now other outcomes seem realistic. Just fantastic.

*Death Knight*

"Hesssitation is alwayss eassy. Rarely usseful."

[Andrew Mitchell](#)

\*nods\*

[daegone823](#)

Just wondering is this how the fae made peace. Two extremely powerful being Summer queen and WInrwe king made peace and were like look lets continually send are forces against each other that way we can never truly be wiped out. You take summer and I will take winter so its symbolic.

The way The Dead king phrased it with a dont take anything personal between immortals was sort of how I saw the relationship between the big bads of the fae world.

*stevenneiman*

Actually, the way that Summer and Winter existed for so long was because each was renewed with the turning of the seasons. Every year one of them achieved victory and wiped the other out completely and enjoyed their triumph for a time before wiping themselves out and clearing the stage for the coming of Autumn and Spring, which in turn give way to Summer and Winter again. They only ever escaped the cycle because the Winter King grew more hostile to the cycle than he was towards Summer and arranged for Cat to force the marriage.

*Katreu*

I presume this is a mechanical mistake but what an amazing (accidental?) quote by Akua here.

>> "A fulcrum, perhaps," Akua said. "Nothing more or less than the point on which levers pivot. The weight of tit is to be respected, but not held sacred."

The weight of tit indeed.

*Novice*

Robert Baratheon approves.

*John Smith*

First Black, now Dead King. Catherine you attract the oddest mentors.

[TeK](#)

Nah, as long as it's not Tyrant or Hierarch, they are not really oddest.

*stevenneiman*

I agree with TeK. Black and the Dead King might be mysterious, but they aren't peculiar the way that some of the characters are. Both of them seem to actually have the same simple and reasonable objective, of out-cheating the Heavens.

And speaking of our dear Tyrant, I'm dying (and possibly returning in service to the Dead King) to see what that trick is that he managed to get past the Heavens.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Finagling the Hierarch situation in ways Bard didn't see coming to plop Anaxares into the hot seat will not be the only result of what he did, no. That's a given. 😊

[Tohron](#)

Well, the Tyrant's thing is wanting people to be able to act according to their own nature, and his big maneuver was putting someone singlemindedly committed to enforcing the will of the people – with no regard to the will of the Gods – in charge of the Free Cities. The story play is that now the Gods Above and the angels have to respect that a sizable region has now removed itself from the usual story constraints.

*stevenneiman*

That's actually a quite reasonable possibility, especially given that his first act as Heirarch other than trying to refuse his authority as Heirarch was to order the Wandering Bard arrested, and that her Name seemed to respond to that exactly the same way as an immediate threat to her life. Which makes sense because if he could arrange to have her effectively imprisoned it might potentially hamstring the entire side of Good for a potentially unlimited span.

*Jane*

You know, it's been mentioned multiple times that Cat is now a goddess, but... Hey, someone actually *acknowledged* it, and it's ramifications. Akua kind of touched on it, but her perspective was rather limited; here's someone frankly acknowledging that she's now *above* the world in a way that not even the Named are, and can play a greater game than others. No wonder she's rattled, when she feels like she hardly ever has time to plan past the next day. Unless she gets herself killed, it's likely that she'll live long past a time when Callow is still recognizable, unless she decides to find a way to take Callow out of creation the same way that the Dead King did.

Though, hum, that does open a new possibility, doesn't it... I doubt the Guide will go in this direction, but she could *literally* become the patron goddess of Callow. Hand off her crown to a mortal Queen, and hang around as a goddess called in to protect Callow from her foes, and watch over Callow's winters. Maybe even set up a few churches in her name; it'd be reassuring to the people to have a goddess who actually answers their prayers, even if the priests have to send her a letter.

The Dead King has a pretty fool-proof plan, doesn't he? Just... Sit back, and let the centuries do his work for him. It's not a story that the mortal realm can do much about, since someone who only lives a hundred years will feel a need to *do* something within that hundred years, rather than work together to give their grandchildren an army that can challenge Keter. In the meantime, he gets to run his realm outside of creation without any tedious interruptions.

It'll be nice for her to have a piece on the board that she can always recognize, though. Whether as an ally or an obstacle, to one who will live millennia, it will be nice to have *something* that you can recognize throughout the years, and who won't just die off as soon as you look away. It's the kind of thing that is well known (in fiction) to drive a person to insanity after a few lifespans; having someone she can talk to will keep her grounded. Arguably. Kind of. Maybe she should look into making the rest of the Woe gods as well.

Though, uh, I guess she gets to keep Akua for all eternity? The Dead King seems certain the rest of the Woe will die in time, but that doesn't really apply to a soul in a cape, does it? That doesn't really sound like what she was aiming for as Akua's punishment...

Speaking of Akua, though... It doesn't really feel like she properly passed her empathy check here. She was probably the only person who Cat could talk to about this (possibly Masego, but he's not really good with the human side of it), but it doesn't really seem to have helped much. Well, just being able to draw her into a different topic probably helped in its own way, at least.

### [TeK](#)

You touched on the matter that makes me think: what if we are watching the birth (or rather a rebirth) of pantheon gods? Cat will be patron goddess of Callow and winters, whelp, this world need balance, so soon every nation will get it's own god. Then they will have their cults, their champions, and Good and Evil will simply lose their significance in those fifty shades of grey.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

The Whitecaps? A bunch of mountains which are encased in snow all year-round.

### *MetruX*

Not only winters, she'll come out every moonless night, so seven days for each twenty eight 😊 Also, this theory about she becoming a goddess that only comes to help has appeared before, long before, back when she was discussing things with Black and Malicia about the DOOM machine.

### *Alivaril*

The Ranger interlude prepared me for someone entertaining, but this was something else entirely. As in, I think the Dead King is my favorite non-Woe character now. I mean, a few people seem to be saying, "confirmed Eldritch Abomination," but aside from the

bit on trust, he might actually be the sanest member of the entire cast. I sincerely hope he isn't called the Hidden Horror because of that being a pretense.

[TeK](#)

More likely, he's called Hidden Horror exactly because he is so sane and rational. I mean, what's more terrifying: someone who commits atrocities because of Evulz, or for a cold and rational reason?

[donforrester456](#)

Being sane in an insane world is insanity.

Xellso-\_^

It is really wrong to ship Cat and Akua together?

*Jane*

Well, looking at it through that lens, Cat *did* kind of accidentally marry Akua when she bound her sentient soul to her cloak for all eternity, without considering what eternity meant to one truly immortal...

*Unorginal*

Even Better, Akua's no longer bound to the cloak anymore but winter itself. She's bound to Cat even closer.

I say 60,000 years will be enough time for wounds to close and an understanding between the two. Then... wedding bells.

More seriously though, I have no idea whether or not Erratica will have Akua literally, figuratively or effectively destroyed before the ending of the story or turned into Cat's 'loyal' and 'trusted' adviser/freind/hatedally/lover for eternity.

*Decius*

Disloyal and untrusted, but competent and playing the long game. For two immortals, that means "not likely to betray you this century".

*Yotz*

Even more – evidently deceitful but competent adviser would serve an immortal ruler as a constant energizer, keeping her sharp and purposeful, forcing her to fight the lethargy of the Great Slow Beast, and whipping her to constantly rage against the dying light. ...or dying Night in Cat's case.

[frolamiz](#)

Yeah. Everyone is underestimating The Dead King so much. Except the bard of course.

[frolamiz](#)

Oh, and The Dead King is REALLY good at knowing things happening out of his kingdom, to the point I suspect an aspect. I mean, he know about the conversation between The Wandering Bard and Hierarch.

[TeK](#)

"They will hound you," Neshamah said, "to the ends of Creation. No matter where you flee, no matter how you plead and bargain and reason. They will scour the impurities from you until all that is left is the devil they feared all along. "

Is that the bitterness I hear? #GoodDeadKing ftw.

But on more serious note, now I understand Ubuah more. All Villains are technically immortal, but as Neshamah hinted, some are more immortal than others. And Ubuah's endgame makes so much more sense now. She's going to be the most trusted treacherous underling to the Goddess of Winter.

Also, it's really funny in hindsight that Dead King basically invited Cat because he is so very lonely. He literally said that earthly matters matter not to him.

*Rook*

I don't think that part was genuine. All the rest of it might have been, but the bit about being hounded was a surgical targeted attack.

It hits every sore spot of Catherine's both short term and long term. Ever since she was the squire (or even before, when she was an orphan) she's been hounded nonstop by enemies or troubles, and she's very visibly showing the fatigue of it. On top of that the factor that brought her to the current breaking point is that all her reasoning and bargaining and pleading with the Crusade is falling on near completely deaf ears.

Amongst all those great truths and honest opinions he slid a well-worded knife into her hopes of ever getting to the light at the end of the tunnel – saying it won't ever change, THEY won't ever change until you force them to.

On top of that Akua just took her chance to twist the knife afterwards. Don't hesitate, no half measures? Near perfect push over the edge when Cat was rattled after the Dead King's stroll. The very moment Catherine voiced that she respected

Akua for her fight, that was a turning point. Akua just won a major victory as far as pushing Cat down the Praesi mindset rabbit hole and she damn well knew it the moment she heard the words.

*RanVor*

The scariest part is that both Neshamah and Akua are absolutely right.

There's no reasoning with the enemy who believes you're a threat to their continued survival. No matter what you say or do, they will never let you live. No price is too high to pay for your destruction, for in their mind, it's you or them. There's no middle ground. Your only choices are to let them kill you, or adopt the same mindset and fight back with everything you have.

Fighting half-heartedly leads only to more bloodshed and suffering. When you strike, you must crush your enemy utterly, lest they come back stronger and more determined than before, until they wear you down. When you defend, you must leave no openings, lest your enemy exploits every one of them, leaving all you've built in ruin. You mustn't grant mercy, for you won't be given mercy in return.

Being Evil is like running from a fire up a tree. You know it's not smart, but you do it anyway because you see no other way. And the higher you are, the more desperate you grow, until you're willing to sacrifice anything to escape the fire.

That's how monsters are born.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Cat is talking with a monster who killed his entire city to rise to godhood. She's planning to unleash the Dead King, the "original abomination".

The Dead King sees the road ahead of her, and he thinks that in time she can become like him. It would be better to turn and go into the fire than to embrace becoming an evil that would turn Callow into the Kingdom of the Dead.

*Offset Crank*

You say that but his "people" live in peaceful harmony in a hidden dimension protected by the valued ancestors who willingly volunteer to serve on their death.



Its almost Cats dream, her people protected and unassailable by almost any means.

*Snowfire1224*

Wasn't there a comment early on in the first book when Cat met Black about how the real devils give you exactly what you want and let you find your own way to hell?

*RanVor*

Out of several replies I thought up for you, I choose this one: do you really think someone who spat in the face of the Angels and usurped Fae for power would consider suicide an option?

*MetruX*

More than that, I must agree with them both being right in this point. The methods they used to get there are wrong, but the precept is true: When you act it must be with all you have, no half-measures. That's not only for villains either, it's even a real life thing, taught from ancient times, that to be kind to your enemy is to be cruel upon your allies. The plan you choose can and will change, but after you have a plan, no hesitation is allowed, you must go through.

*RanVor*

That's what I originally wrote, but Dylan Tull's Heavens-mandated perception filter parsed this as "all hail Dead King" or something, which is not what I meant, but I decided to reply anyway.

*SpeckofStardust*

She offered to die to the Grey Pilgrim to save Callow, so if the terms were right she would without hesitation.

*Byzantine*

It was all an attack.

But it was also all completely true.

The best monsters have no need to lying. The truth is a far more horrifying weapon.

*Azure*

Catherine was very stupid to turn away her most trusted advisers Hakram and Vivienne, and instead listen to Akua. She's done this to herself with very poor decision making, which is really frustrating to see.

Ok so yeah The Dead King just told her she's immortal. She can die, but guess what, she gets to come back. Suck it up Catherine, and stop making terrible decisions on some ridiculous teenage angst premise. 'Oh woe is me, I am immortal, the horror!'

And speaking of Woe, Catherine has something the DK and Bard do not, and this is her own band of trusted friends. She doesn't have to be alone on her journey, but if she keeps making dumbass decisions and allow Akua her ear, then that might lead to the Woe falling apart.

*Hellspirit*

I shiver

*Rook*

I feel like for all the power that the Winter Mantle gave her, the real apotheosis – the real turning point – just happened here.

The change in mindset, the slight change in perspective from an unfiltered exposure to the hidden horror, with the following moment of weakness being shored up by a shade of one of the most singlemindedly pure Praesi monsters to come along for centuries? That's going to have far greater consequences down the road than any mantle or Name power.

She just stared into the abyss called the Dead King and the abyss grabbed her by the throat rather than bothering to stare back. He poisoned her *\*perspective\**, and I doubt this kind of poison is going to be one that wanes with time.

*Gunslinger*

This is a really good point

[frolamiz](#)

A very good point.

That remind me of one of the quotes attributed to him:

"I stared into the abyss and found what stared back... wanting."

*nick012000*

Am I the only one who's sort of pitying Akua after that little bit of her backstory there?

I sort of wonder how often Praesi children turn their knives on their parents when they pull that stunt.

*Nethermore*

I'm guessing the parents know to teach their children to fear them enough first, so that they don't make that mistake.

*Byzantine*

I'm pretty sure the Praesi would agree if the child can succeed it was not a mistake.

*Euodiachloris*

No, you're not the only one. Praesi High Lord's are so fixated on "bigger, harder, stronger, better", they've forgotten to let themselves (and their children) be *people*.

When you view being human as inferior and only something holding you back, you kind of lose sight of the fact that the fae and the gods are supposed to be so much more... But, yet, it's the supposedly flawed mortals they need to have play the game in the first place.

The godly fae with their "sublime" and "splendid" nature's... failed. And, the very creation of the game is a failure, too. Since the minute either (or both) side(s) get an answer they don't like, they'll just try for a best of three, five or seven. 🤪

*Yotz*

"Do you remember *that* night, Father?"

"Night when you dared to rise against me? Night when you outwitted me, stabbed me in the back, and forced me to flee from my own manor? Of course I remember **that** night! It was the happiest night in my life!"

*Nethermore*

So it seems the Dead King isn't looking to marry... yet.

Also, Akua is great at playing shoulder-devil. Hey, Cat could actually downsize her so she'd fit on her shoulder!

*MetruX*

My god, I can never see her doing it, but I definitely want to see this xD

*Novice*

"Our favourite gods are those that bleed." Gods, I love this line so much. Speaks so much of Praesi culture. So good!

*burdi*

So, Cat came to The Dead King with many plan to use him for their purpose  
yet, the answer is simple...she being cornered because she hesitate  
She already has the power to repel the crusade, she just doesnt  
have the right mindset

*Novice*

To add to everything else, I think he is lying, or at the very least misleading, when the Dead King says he doesn't care what goes outside his borders. His "Finally" line at the epilogue of Book III is the biggest proof so far.

[frolamiz](#)

Or it could be that the orb only detect the birth of a potential new member for his little club. It was only précised that it had not lit since Triumphant, nothing more, nothing less, and this scene was just a little after Catherine let winter loose.

Event if I am wrong, since he obviously only comment about the orb lighting up, it does not particularly mean that it has anything to do with "earthly matters".

*Antoninjohn*

Cat does have the big escalation button with the mantles of Winter she can handout, after all Winter has almost Unlimited Power so if Cat wants to escalate she can just make her entire army into Winter Named, thousands of Named into an army requires a lot of force to beat

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Those aren't named in a traditional sense. Also, there's only so many people you can give court titles.

*Antoninjohn*

But the limit is hundreds of thousands at least, Winter is very powerful

[Antony444](#)

And so it begins...

The words of the Grey Pilgrim seems more hollow than ever. If the Dead King really wanted to crush the Good-aligned nations he could do so at any moment. There were hundreds of thousands soldiers in the Sixth Crusade, perhaps more in the Seventh...and each generation makes the Dead King more powerful. The Crusades in fact seem to give him more corpses to harvest.

Procer, Levant and Ashur have nearly zero chance to end the King of Death. He will outlast them all and should a Crusade be launched after the Victorious Tenth, he would exterminate the invaders once more.

I liked very much how the Undead Abomination spoke of the Choir of Contrition. They were treated as naughty and ignorant children, not as true opponents.

I can't wait to see what the Wandering Bard and the Tyrant of Helike have planned.

And one word after the next, Catherine begins her descent further into the darkness...

*Dylan Tullos*

Antony444:

It's true that the Choir of Contrition only seems to have one great victory.

But don't forget that it was Contrition that birthed the first and greatest of all the Crusades, bringing down Triumphant at the height of her power.

*MetruX*

The true problem with contrition is not power, but the lack of learning, and that is what he implies. They used to be great, and think the same formula will still make them great, but it doesn't, not anymore.

[Andrew Mitchell](#)

> "Oh yes," Neshamah murmured. "And they will pay for that, in time. That delightful child in Helike wove a trap for them right under the Intercessor's nose. I expect the end of that play to be nothing less than magnificent."

> The Tyrant, he meant. I forced myself not to stiffen. I'd expected him to take a swing soon, either a Procer or whatever nation was limping heaviest at the time. This was a hint there was another game afoot, though. And I doubted it had been offered lightly.

Any ideas about the trap The Tyrant has in store?

*mórrígan*

There's no way to know. I don't think we've heard heads nor tails of Tyrant in this book, so we'll probably get it covered in an interlude or something. I admit, I'm curious myself. A trap so well crafted that not only will Bard be caught flat-

footed, but (somehow) not well enough that the Dead King can easily recognize it as one. That's quite a slim margin for efficacy, as far as plans go.

Perhaps an excess of Stupid Evil (with no small amount of genre savviness) is the best way to deal with the Intercessor? Catherine should take notes.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

John Harrier? Who is that again?

*burdi*

Captain of the Gallowborne, he was dead when fifteen fought against summer court in dormer

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

John Farrior, but yes, *burdi* is correct

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

Hi EE, just wanted to let you know that the chapter's not appearing in the Table of Contents (at least not for me).

### [erraticerrata](#)

Yeah, it seems to not have taken when I put in the link. Should be fixed.

### *Anonymoose*

Did Cat forget to request that Black and his companions be left alone?

*Metrux*

Why would she ask of that? She has no direct line to them, and also, they must die for both her and Black's plan. Sure, it isn't to be now, and she will mourn his death, but they both agree he will end up dead so... If she has no direct line of fealty and he will die eventually, why ask for their safety?

### *mindsword2*

"You will betray me, if we make bargain. Or I will betray you. That is the nature of things."

His arm left mine and he smiled gently.

"I need you to understand, Catherine, that none of it should be taken a slight," Neshamah told me. "That even if you wound me most grievously, there is nothing to bar you from seeking me out

for alliance in centuries to come. That if rip out the heart of you, it is not a declaration of war: it is simply a single tide in a very old sea, and in time it will pass. All things do, in the end. Save for us."

Well, that adds one thing that makes me a bit... interested. In this Society of Immortals, the Wandering Bard is the other one. Does the Dead King view her the same way? Foe she may be, but is she a foe that he can betray and make alliance with again, or is she only a foe?

Also, we hypothesize she made Cat into her current form. She stopped the Elves from killing Akua so that the Gate could be made and Cat come to kill Akua instead. Everything with Black in the Free Cities was to push him to destroy the control, stopping the Name of Black Queen from ever forming. This pushed Cat to lose Squire with no new name to transition into, save for the Queen of Winter.

So while it was by Accident from Cat's actions, the Wandering Bard quite likely arranged all of it. If so, where is this dagger being aimed at? The Gods are what we hypothesize, as we think perhaps the Wandering Bard wants to End herself. But could Cat be aimed at the Dead King? Its rare one needs to make someone into a God after all.

*MetruX*

What if this is another kind of need? The bard has been shown to suffer alot more than the Dead King, so much that all that accompany her through all the lifes is the instrument and alcohol. Endless alcohol, that she never let's go. What if she, more than him, needed more people to speak with? Even enemies can bring respite to her solitude.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Great chapter! Cat has now had how many villains now try to break her out of her thinking that once an enemy, always an enemy?

But is seriously *no one* going to comment on the "dozens of miles in the air" thing? I assume it was supposed to be dozens of **meters**, because **miles** is ridiculous. This is the kind of thing that shatters my suspension of disbelief.

One dozen miles is 63,000 feet. For comparison, airliners cruise at 35-45,000 feet. This is already a wildly implausible height. Two dozen miles, or 126,000 feet, is beyond the edge of outer space by any definition.

*anon*

Actually while it is above the height of planes in flight, 2 dozen miles(~38km) is still in the range of the stratosphere(20-50km) where weather balloons fly and space is recognised as being separate from the Earth's atmosphere at the Karman line which is at 100km (~62 miles).

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I stand corrected about the definition of space, I should have looked it up before posting. But my point that this is an absurd height remains.

Yotz

Li, also known as the "Chinese mile", is now standardized as precisely 500 meters or 1640 feet. This makes one dozen miles (12\*1640)=19680 feet, or (12\*500)=6000 meters. Which in turn places two dozen miles height (12 km) either in the high troposphere or low stratosphere, depending on latitude.

Though I can speculate that Miezian mile would be some multiple of 12, and local units untouched by Miezian cultural legacy would be all over the map, without knowing precisely what kind of "miles" is commonly used in Callow/Calernia nowadays we can not determine exact height of their standing.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Sure, you can retcon it all you want, but there's nothing so far suggesting that a mile is anything other than 1.6 km.

Yotz

Retcon?

""  
Since I have neither time nor willingness to comb through each instance of "mile" usage in the text, you have my permission to chalk it up as your victory.

Yotz

Black Queen and Diabolist at Keter.  
Catherine, her eyes opened.

*burguulkodar*

Akua is great. She's up there with Masego as my favorite characters in the novel.

[broober](#)

broober a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/ym1KyFHTmuLPZiymh6I3k>



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## Chapter 36: Enchère

*"I've found that nothing quite sets the tone for council like strangling a courtier with my bare hands just before we begin."*

– Dread Emperor Venal

I stared down at the unfurled scroll, a frown creasing my brow. When Athal had shown up along our communal breakfast with a scroll in hand I'd expected him to be bearing the Dead King's counteroffer. Instead, what I'd gotten was a neatly-penned report about how the world had gone on without me while we journeyed to Keter. I popped a blueberry in my mouth. That it most likely came from hell did not make it taste any less sweet. Swallowing, I wiped my fingers on the tablecloth.

"How old is this?" I asked.

The dark-haired man bowed.

"If it please you, Great Majesty, the last of what is written took place eight days ago as of this morning," he replied.

"Well," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. *"Fuck* seems like the most appropriate reaction to that basket of stupid."

"Catherine?" Vivienne said, from her place across the table.

I pushed the scroll across, almost toppling a pitcher of fresh milk over it before Hakram leant over to catch it. I sent him a thankful look.

"Word from Callow?" Indrani asked, half a side of pork making her cheeks bulge.

"Swallow, you godsdamned savage," I said. "And something like that. Can someone tell me what the 'Lanterns' are, exactly? I think I got it from context but I'd rather be sure."

"The Levantine equivalent to the House of Light," Adjutant said.

Archer snorted, then finally swallowed.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "If to become an anointed brother you had to wrestle a basilisk. They don't have abbeys so much as warrior lodges. If they get old enough they go into the Brocelian to fight monsters until one finally beats them."

Across the table, Vivienne flinched.

"Merciless Gods," she said. "What was she thinking?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "Not Hasenbach's greatest moment."

I glanced at Masego, who did not glance back. He turned a page, blindly groping for what he probably believed to be a cup of tea but was actually a pot of cream. Well, he'd notice after drinking. Probably.

"Are we to be kept in suspense?" Akua drily asked.

"I've been declared Arch-heretic of the East," I said. "By a conclave of the House of Light in Procer, the aforementioned Lanterns and a delegation of Speakers from Ashur."

"A worthy achievement," Diabolist praised. "This is the first I hear of the title being granted to one who has not climbed the Tower."

"It's a feudal disaster is what it is," Thief said. "It means that any oaths sworn to her are dissolved by holy writ and that any who follow her are 'estranged from the light of the Heavens'."

"I didn't think the First Prince would go this far just to break my truce with the northern crusade," I admitted. "Or that she had this much influence over the priests, to be honest."

"She should not have," Adjutant said. "The House is highly influential in Proceran politics, and pushes back hard when attempts are made to twist its arm. Several wars were fought over it, if I remember correctly."

"The three Liturgical Wars," Akua said. "One of the rare Proceran squabbles to involve even the Lycaonese. The last member of House Merovins' bloodline was slain during... the second, perhaps? I confess my Principate histories are not as comprehensive as they could be."

"Oh *fuck*," Vivienne suddenly said.

I'd told her it was the most appropriate reaction, hadn't I?

"Laure?" I asked.

She nodded, slumping into her seat.

"I can't even begin to parse the implications of that," she said.

"This is getting quite tedious," Akua noted.

"You might remember the priests back in Salia declared me an abomination, after First Liesse," I told the shade. "That whole resurrection affair got stuck in their throats."

The dark-skinned monster was not slow on the uptake, for all her other glaring flaws.

"You were crowned by a representative of the House of Light, in Laure," she said.

"I was."

"They've branded heretics all involved in the matter," Diabolist said, and it wasn't a guess.

"If they'd just tarred my name it wouldn't have been too bad," I said. "They tried something similar with Henry Landless after occupying Callow, though without foreigners signing on. But they accused Callowan priesthood of heresy. They *really* shouldn't have done that."

"We so declare the following," Vivienne read out loud. "That all who took part in the seventy-third conclave of Salia are guilty, of: perverse service to earthly powers, false righteousness for earthly purpose and, declaration of godless sanctions."

"That first one," Archer decided, "will be the title of my memoirs. I feel it really captures the spirit of what I'm about."

We decided in turn, as a family and also Akua, to pretend she had remained silent.

"All three of those are lesser heresies," Hakram gravelled. "That's situation's going to get worse at a brisk pace."

"It did," I grimly added. "The House in Laure also retroactively declared every hero to have tread Callowan grounds to be graceless. That's not so much protesting the verdict as setting fire to the courthouse."

"Graceless," Diabolist mused. "As in 'walk without the grace of the Heavens', I presume?"

I nodded with a grimace. That verse was from the Book of All Things, when speaking of villains who cloaked themselves in righteousness when seeing to their 'dark purposes'. *You shall know them from the true children of Above, for they walk without the grace of the Heavens.* The House of Light in Laure had essentially just declared over ten heroes to be villains in disguise. And then announced as much at every street corner of the largest city of the kingdom.

"They kept their shit together in Dormer, at least," Vivienne sighed. "They lodged a protest and want to appeal the conclave's decisions."

"Thief, rioters torched the House of Light in Vale when the priests refused to speak out," I said pointedly. "This is not a situation under control. Juniper's going to have to declare martial law, if she hasn't already."

"The House in Summerholm upheld Laure's declaration," Thief said, sounding appalled as her eyes reached the end of the scroll. "Gods. Denier's going to fold as well, Cat, you know that. You're popular with the merchants and the priests that far east hate it even when the crown tells that what to preach. And the only reason Marchford hasn't declared already is that it'll take a while for the news to reach there."

"I have no idea what Hasenbach was thinking," I admitted. "The northern army's in no shape to take the passage from Kegan even if it turns around. She's setting fire to the diplomatic options for no real gain I can see."

"You're assuming she is behind this," Akua said.

"If a clever opponent makes a foolish mistake," Hakram added, "it is either not a mistake or not that opponent's doing."

Grem One-Eye had written that, I recalled. In one of his treatises, when talking about how even a well-led army could blunder when the field officers were poorly trained.

"That would imply she's lost control of the going-ons in her own capital," Vivienne replied skeptically.

*A shame that her understanding of what a crusade is was so lacking, but it is too late to leave the saddle once the lion is ridden.* That was what the Dead King had said, when we'd spoken of Cordelia Hasenbach.

"They might be right," I said.

Thief turned to me, curious.

"If this was just the House in Procer I'd agree with you, but with the Lanterns and the Speakers?" I said. "No. She can't have that many hooks inside nations that were hostile to Procer until so recently. I think that Hasenbach might be losing her grip on parts of the Grand Alliance."

And wasn't that enough to have me dreading? Because Cordelia Hasenbach had, for all her brutal idealism, a pragmatic streak. The castles she wanted to built were down here, not up in the clouds. But if she was no longer leading the beast by the nose,

then who was now in charge? Her refusal to offer even the slightest concession when we'd last spoken was starting to be cast in a different light. Her position was nowhere as assured as I'd believed. I clenched my fingers, then slowly unclenched them. Didn't matter, did it?

The mess was still in my lap, I had to deal with it.

"The Empress is going to throw a banquet, when she hears," Vivienne sighed. "Any possible bridges to the west just went up in smoke."

"Nok did too," I reminded her. "She's not exactly doing great at keeping her head above the water either. Black's wandering the countryside up to Gods know what, Warlock's nowhere to be seen and her coasts are burning. Not a great year for either of us."

A man cleared his throat. With a start, I realized Athal had been standing to the side this entire time. My mind whipped back, going over what we'd said with a fine comb. Had there been anything in there I'd truly hate for the Dead King to know? No, I realized after a moment. 'Bridges to the west' had unfortunate implications, but I doubted Neshamah was unaware I would have cut a deal with Procer instead of coming to him if I could.

"Do you have further use for me, Great Majesty?" he asked.

"I don't," I said. "Offer my thanks to the Dead King for his gift, Athal."

"I will do so promptly, honoured one," and with one last bow he left.

I popped another blueberry into my mouth. There was a clatter, like someone dropped a ceramic pot on the table.

"This is *cream*," Masego said, highly offended. "Why did none of you say anything?"

Well, I mused, at least the wait until my second talk with the Hidden Horror would not be absent of entertainment.

—

The Hall of the Dead grew no less intimidating with repeat visits. The honour guard of Revenants had the same faces as the last time at least, so it was possible that fifty dead Named was the sum of his forces. On the other hand, it was a little too neat of a number and it wasn't like he'd have *fewer* than what we'd seen. I kept the thought off my face as we were welcomed into the throne room and Neshamah graciously invited us to be seated once more. No offer of a meal, this time, and it was easy to see why. Neat stacks of parchments awaited us at the table.

"Your proposal was a worthy one, Black Queen," the Dead King said. "Yet it needed... expansion. These are the terms I would offer instead. Take however long is necessary to familiarize yourself, I will take no offence."

I traded a subtle look with Thief. Yeah, he could have sent us those earlier. He'd meant for us to be as little prepared as possible, and to go over them in an unfamiliar place. The throne room of ancient Sepharah was not a location that invited careful reading, though ironically enough I could think of few places where paying attention to the exact wording would be more important. The Woe sat after I did, and with a nod at Neshamah I took a look at his proposal. A single paragraph of beautifully calligraphied Lower Miezani, I was already blinking in surprise. I'd offered him the run of three principalities. Not even halfway into the first sheet of parchment, I was being asked for *eight*. All existing Lycaonese lands were included, and in addition to Cleves and Hainaut as I'd already put on the table he was also asking for Lyonis and Brus. Which would give him foothold on the opposite shores of the Tomb and the Grave, but also neatly encircle Lake Pavin. More worryingly, if he took all of Lyonis it meant his southern border was Salia. The *capital* of Procer.

Surprise only continuing to sink in, I thumbed through the other parchments. The alliance would be required to be announced publically. The invitation need be extended to him for at least one hundred years and – well, shit. He wanted me to occupy two principalities myself, Bayeux and Orne. The very principalities facing the two passes out of the Red Flower Vales. Last time that territory had been under Callowan rule was the days of the Queen of Blades, and even then they'd been tributaries more than vassals. Hakram was paying closer attention to the details, I saw, and I left him to it. I turned to the Dead King.

"Your Majesty," I said.

"Black Queen," the yellow-eyed thing replied lightly.

"This is a significant expansion of the terms offered," I said. "Which surprises me, given how amenable you seemed to the initial proposal."

"I was," the Hidden Horror agreed. "But then I was made a better offer."

The world slowed, and all I heard was the quickening of my pulse. A better offer. Who – no, that wasn't even a question worth asking was it?

"Dread Empress Malicia," I said, voice eerily calm.

"Has been an honoured guest of mine for some time," the Dead King said. "She also has an interest in securing an alliance, though I found it unsporting to never give you such a chance. You currently look at a transcript of her latest offer, save for the addition of the occupation of Proceran territory. That is a boon I offer you myself."

It was no such thing, I thought. He wanted me to take a bite out of Procer so their attention would be divided when the day of reckoning came. And to ensure that no deal would be possible to make with Hasenbach or her replacement, since I'd have outright occupied part of their realm. Something that would be difficult for Malicia to achieve, since she'd need to reconquer Callow before getting anywhere near the Principate – and to do all of that while at odds with her finest generals.

"A bidding war," Akua said thoughtfully, the first time she had even spoken in this hall.

"I prefer to think of it as an auction," the Dead King replied. "With the face of Calernia in our time as the prize."

I let out a long breath, forced myself to smile.

"An intriguing offer," I said. "Might we be allowed to discuss it between ourselves before giving you an answer?"

"By all means," Neshamah smiled. "Should you require light to be shed on any point, my Hosts are at your service. They were made aware of my intent."

I rose to my feet, feeling like a dozen pounds of lead were tied to them. I bowed exactly as low as was required. Shooting a quelling look at Archer, who looked about to speak, I gestured for the others to follow me out.

We'd been had, but here was not the place to rage about it.

—

Vivienne slapped down her pile of parchments on the table the moment the wards went up.

"That *fucker*," she snarled. "So much for 'negotiations in good faith', Hakram."

I spent a moment wondering whether I was responsible for the fact that my closest companions could be so cavalier as to call the likes of the Dead King 'that fucker' while shuffling uneasily under the silent pressure of Masego's sorcery. Being under that had not become any more pleasant with the passing of time. The itch was already under my skin, bringing restlessness with it. Whatever it was I had become, it was not meant to be *contained*.

My eyes flicked to Ajutant, who had ignored Thief's jibe to bring our finest map of Calernia to the table. He methodically set aside the parchments to spread it completely, then set down iron figurines at the borders the Dead King's last proposal had outlined.

"A lot of land to evacuate, even with forewarning," Archer noted, dragging a chair to the table.

The ugly scraping sound of wood against stone made me want to rip her hair out, but that was an almost daily occurrence with Indrani.

"Around a third of the Principate, in sum," Akua noted. "Though the Lycaonese territories are the poorest and least populated by a wide margin. Archer's warning is somewhat inaccurate, however. Keter's advance will not be immediate or uncontested: it is not impossible for mass displacement to occur before the principalities fall."

"It would mean several million refugees," Hakram said calmly. "Hunger, sickness and weather will slay them by the thousands."

"We'd get two principalities out of the deal, though," Archer said cheerfully. "That's nice of him. Good change of pace from the whole defence thing we've been on about. Would be pleasant to let them worry about us instead the other way around, for once."

"We're in no position to take or hold those lands, Indrani," Vivienne said flatly. "And the moment we announced publically that we're allying with the Kingdom of the Dead, half of Callow turns on us. Malicia has us beat there. The Wasteland might get worried if she announces that, but it won't *revolt*."

"It should not be impossible to remove that part if we compensate with other coin," Hakram said. "Brabant, or perhaps Arans? The latter would significantly enlarge his border with the Golden Bloom. The elves might not take kindly to that."

"It would also mean direct border with his expanded realm, if we take Bayeux ourselves," Akua said. "Salia itself would be a superior bid. Let him lose a few hordes besieging the heart of Procer."

"Or we could leave," Hierophant said, voice slicing through the conversation.

They all turned to look at him. Slowly I took out my pipe and ripped a satchel to stuff it.

"I've already learned enough from perusing the city to study for decades," Masego shrugged. "And there are more echoes to be



harvested while we return. If the terms are not to our satisfaction, why do we not simply go?"

I caught his eye and looked down meaningfully at my pipe. With a sigh, he flicked his wrist and a flash of flame saw to it.

"We need a counterweight, Masego," Vivienne said tiredly. "The crusade rolls through Callow otherwise. I don't like that we're playing his game, but we're low on choices."

"Must we?" Akua said.

My eyes turned to her, and she inclined her head.

"Let Malicia unleash the Hidden Horror," she said. "She is a rival here, yet not necessarily a foe. She would desire the Dead King rampant no more than us. Giving ground here allows us to achieve our purpose – an invasion of Procer by the Kingdom of the Dead – without wounding our reputation the way making that pact ourselves would. On the other hand, a bidding war hurts both our positions. We would need to make greater and greater concessions, with the Dead King the only true victor of that strife."

"We will not," Hakram said calmly.

As he should. Of all of them, he knew me best. I inhaled the wakeleaf and blew it out, earning the odd sight of smoke going through Akua's body.

"We will not," I agreed. "We don't know what terms Malicia would end up giving, but I am quite certain they won't involve anything aimed at limiting casualties."

"She's right about part of it, Cat," Thief said, sounding pained at the admission. "We can't keep escalating our offers. We'll end up selling out half the continent and it won't even come in sight of the Empire's bottom line."

"Go a step deeper, Vivienne," I said. "Look at how Malicia has been behaving since the crusade began. How has she been *acting*?"

"She hasn't," Hakram said, eyes sharpening.

Akua softly laughed.

"Poisoning the river when owning a well," she mused in Mtethwa. "She does play an exquisite game, doesn't she?"

"She let Callow bleed against the crusaders, but not to weaken the crusade like we thought," I said. "She was weakening *us*. The same way she let Black bleed his loyalist legions. The point was never to deal with the Tenth Crusade, it was to cripple her internal threats enough she can handle them herself. Because it

didn't really matter to her, whether the passage or the Vales fell. It was never going to be the front she fought this war on."

"The Dead King," Thief said quietly. "The Dead King is her army."

"We could bargain for a year and she'd still go deeper," I said. "Because this is her play. This is the force she *needs* on the field."

"That might be true," Vivienne said. "But it is no solution."

"Our offer doesn't change," I said calmly. "And like so many troubled young souls before us, we will let scripture guide our hands."

"There's stuff in the Book of All Things about this?" Archer said, leaning forward. "Damn. Maybe I should read it."

"It's a Wasteland foe we face," I said. "So it's that most sacred of Wasteland traditions we'll turn to."

I spat out a mouthful of smoke, let it wreath my face as I smiled.

"I speak, of course, of regicide."

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### *Jago*

It is interesting how the Church of Light, Levantine group included, has thrown the Grey Pilgrim under the bus. They think he is still in the same location as the Woes, so making the treaties null is a death sentence for him and the noble, for what they know. They are hostages. When a treaty is broken the hostages are meant to be executed.

### *NerfContessa*

In retrospect, indeed.

Given his status, that should not have happened... Which means they knew beforehand he would be able and willing to leave.

Also, sorry. Cat, Saint ain't here...

### *Cpt. Obvious*

The problem with having the Grey Pilgrim as a hostage is that he is very hard to kill unless he chose to cooperate. And though I'm sure Robber would love to try I doubt he would be able to do it as he lacks a Name. After all pure nasty, guile

and a nightmarishly imaginative gift for backstabbing only goes so far when dealing with Named. Yes he would probably be able to off most Named if he got to them within days of their naming. But against the Grey Pilgrim who's been around for decades if not a centurie I doubt he would stand a chance. Also remember that they are currently running short on munitions in general and are almost totally out of goblin fire with no way of restocking those.

The noble is however a soft target, at least if the Grey Pilgrim doesn't take it on himself to protect him.

However there are some interesting questions regarding the Heroes. If I understood things correctly, which is far from certain, they have been branded as heretics. Now as their power or aspects if you will, were granted by the gods above will being declared heretic change anything? My guess is that it won't as it wasn't mandated from the above. Yet it might weaken the trust in Good for some of the heroes.

The situation also has interesting implications for Cat. So far she's avoided the truly Evil options in order to keep a diplomatic solution on the table. Being declared to be an arch Evil the equal of the Dread Empress or the Dead King that option is no longer available. So now there's one less thing to keep her from using all her options to keep her people alive. If pressed enough she can start handing out titles of Winter, instantly transforming them to the equals of Named. A Robber Barron of the Lesser Footrest of the Queen of Winter is a horrible and wondrous thing to contemplate. And she's got so many good, or evil, people who could make good use of the powers such titles provide. Also I think there's no real limit to how many of these she can bestow other than her imagination in thinking up the titles.

In effect she's potentially a new player in the game of good versus evil, and unlike the gods below she doesn't go about it with a "hands off" policy.

*tynam*

The Grey Pilgrim isn't at all hard to kill in this situation. If Cat wanted to kill him, the story would be right there. He's the wise old mentor to heroes, who willingly offered himself as a hostage in the hope that evil could be redeemed, to guarantee a great peace treaty... which has now been betrayed for the greater good. The narrative practically demands his death.

(Yes, that was actually a power play on his part to kill Cat with stories, but the stories don't care about that motive, only what he did.)

usernamesbco

Cat needs to cut her losses and run, for a number of reasons.

She's wasting time in Keter when she needs to be at home putting out fires. I think he's doing that on purpose.

Callow has been under Praesi occupation for decades, they've already taken everything of value, she cannot outbid Malicia. Even if the Empress is facing trouble at home she has more resources than Cat. Picking a direct fight with her is more than they can afford.

DK outright stated he's not going to honor any deal he makes, so why even play that game? She'd be better off throwing the alliance against the crusade idea in the trash (where it belongs) and asking him for insight into Intercessor.

I'd almost say she should ask for no concessions at all, invite him to Creation for a year with no restrictions, and run for home. Either tell Procer and blame it on Malicia or let them figure it out on their own.

Unfortunately Cat is bad at politics, intrigue, and being Evil generally, so she won't do any of that.

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## Chapter 37: Offing

*"Callowans as a people can be summed up by the fact that, before the Uncivil Wars had even come to a close, it'd become a common boast among the populace that the Black Queen had not even spent a sennight in Keter before having several counts of arson and murder to her name."*

– Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

Follow the food. So went Thief's advice.

That Malicia or a flesh puppet were in the city was a given: Neshamah wouldn't bother to seriously negotiate with a High Lord. It would have been like a man having to keep a serious face while making a pact with mutton chop, in his eyes. I'd personally been of the opinion that it was a near certainty that the puppet would be the one in Keter, since the Empress leaving the Tower unattended for more than a few weeks was a recipe for usurpation. Akua, however, had made it clear that with the right precautions it was possible for Malicia to be here in person while a puppet

held the Tower for her. She was not the kind of Empress that had a strong presence outside Ater: apparently even by imperial standards she didn't leave her seat of power often. It made sense, in a way. Malicia wasn't a fighter, and for decades she'd had Black to send after messes sword in hand. Her almost crippling-focused talents were in rule and intrigue, and they were most effectively wielded from the Imperial court. Diabolist noted that the court at the Tower wasn't necessarily the centre of power in a Tyrant's reign – Terribilis II had barely held one and distributed most its traditional authority to Ater's bureaucracy. Malicia, however, had inherited a festering snake pit of a court from her predecessor Nefarious and then promptly encouraged the most murderous leanings of the highborn by rewarding the victorious in those struggles with riches and influence.

That, however, had been decades ago. Before the Conquest or my birth. Now that Malicia had spent years removing the aristocrats from the bureaucracy and Black had unceremoniously drummed them out of the Legions, her hold on Ater and the Tower was extremely hard to shake. She could afford to let the High Lords break their teeth on her power base while she placed most her attention on the negotiations in Keter. Akua even speculated that she might be baiting out would-be usurpers in order to have them out in the open when she returned home with a Keteran alliance. That turnaround was likely to see their own families turn on those ambitious few, neatly decapitating any nascent opposition without her having to lift a finger. It certainly sounded like Malicia, I had to admit. A plan with several ancillary benefits unfolding quietly while her enemies swung at mist. Regardless, it'd been a priority to find out whether we were dealing with the actual Empress or a puppet. From a narrow perspective, it didn't matter which it was if we managed to slaughter them all anyway: the result would still be us with the only bidder at the Dead King's auction. Looking at it more broadly, though, the difference was major. For one, if I killed Malicia in the flesh I'd be gaining a 'legitimate' claim to the Tower.

Kill the Empress, be the Empress: that was the law of the Wasteland. If you managed to scatter all the other carrion birds pecking at the corpse, anyway. Getting involved in the flaming tar pit that was your average Praesi succession was the least of what I needed right now, and pretty high on my list of 'things I would prefer never to have to deal with'. Malicia would have to go if the Liesse Accords were going to be implemented properly and I couldn't deny that the longer she had to scheme the more dangerous she became, but as long as the Empress lived there was a lid on the Wasteland jar of crazy. Much like Cordelia Hasenbach, she wasn't someone I liked facing but she remained very much preferable to whoever would step up if she was removed from power. I wouldn't put it beyond a High Lord trying to climb the Tower to take a swing at me as their foremost 'rival' even

while the Empire was being attacked by Ashur. Particularly if their lands were far enough from the sea. There were dozens of examples in the histories to be found of Praesi cheerfully emptying a whole quiver into their foot just like that. On the other hand, taking Malicia prisoner just wasn't feasible. Not in Keter. And for all that Praesi ambition could end up biting me, there was also a decent chance that instead the Empire would collapse into civil war as every prominent highborn tried to claim the Tower. I couldn't even dismiss the possibility that the legions in the Wasteland would try to proclaim Black as Dread Emperor and fill mass graves with whoever objected to that.

I didn't relish the loss of life it would involve, but if Praes was clawing at itself it wasn't looking at Callow. It might be a risk worth taking.

"So I've got a report for you," Archer announced, strolling through the wards.

She had a bottle in hand, I noted. That was definitely not what I had sent her out for.

"If you blew off reconnaissance to get drunk, there will be consequences," I mildly said.

"I would never," Indrani assured me. "I just happened to find a cellar while on my very serious fact-finding mission, and it would have been criminally negligent of me not to investigate."

"Was it locked?" I sighed.

"Is it really a lock if it breaks?" Archer mused. "That's a question for the philosophers, Catherine. We're straying off topic."

So I'd need to offer Athal an apology, then. Hakram's suggestion that we just make a scroll template with blank spaces to fill in with the latest thing she'd done was becoming increasingly tempting.

"This is what we call Atalantian baptismal, Cat," Indrani seriously told me, putting the bottle on the table. "I've heard that if an entire glass is drunk in a single sitting, it will outright kill a man."

"I'm considering killing as well, at the moment," I informed her.

"That would be a grave miscarriage of justice," Indrani told me. "Since I found it inside the only other palace that has servants in it."

My eyes narrowed. I'd asked the Dead King for further time to debate his offer before our next conversation and sent both

Archer and Thief out find the tracks of any Imperial presence in the city. Follow the food, Vivienne had said. Malicia's delegation would need to eat, would be offered all the trapping of hospitality as the honoured guests that they were. That left traces, in a city where the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants were walking corpses. I set aside the pile of scrolls that held our now-irrelevant bargaining position and dragged out the rough sketch of the palaces surrounding the Hall of the Dead I'd asked Masego to make. There were five in whole, forming a circle interrupted by the same number of avenues going into the city-fortress. The Silent Palace, our own, was slightly to the left of the gates into the Hall.

"Which one?" I asked.

Indrani jabbed her finger onto the parchment. Slightly to the right, on the opposite side of the black stone spire.

"The Threefold Reflection," I said.

Athal had helpfully provided the names of every existing palace when I'd casually asked as much, feigning idle curiosity. The dark-haired man had also revealed there were old sorceries protecting each of them, though he hadn't gone into detail. Not all that surprising. This whole city was a fortress, not even the guesthouses would be toothless.

"The place is... unsettling," Archer said, grabbing the seat across from me. "The layout is wrong. Hallways lead where they shouldn't: I went through the same threshold twice and ended up in different places both times. I'd call it a maze, but you can map out a maze. There's wizardly bullshit at play here I think might rule that out."

"Did you find out how many people are in the delegation?" I asked.

"I kept out of sight," she said, shaking her head. "Got a look at one of them, though. Tall man in steel plate, silent. Black iron mask over his face."

I nodded.

"I've seen those before," I said. "They're called Sentinels. The personal guard of whoever holds the Tower, though there's enough they count more as a personal army. Supposedly spells and potions keep them unconditionally loyal."

"Might be we have ourselves the real Empress, then," Indrani said.

"They're exactly the kind of guards a puppet would bring as well," I said. "Won't talk, can't betray and they probably have

triggers inside their body that'll kill them if someone tries to grab and extract."

"Would they obey a puppet, though?" Archer asked.

"I have no idea," I admitted after a moment. "But I know who we can ask."

I exerted my will and tugged at Akua's leash, gently. There was resistance. I tugged a second time, and when I did not feel her moving towards me I rolled my eyes and simply dragged her here. The shade poured out of the wall about thirty heartbeats later and only then did I loosen my grip. Diabolist was grimacing.

"That," she said, "was exceedingly unpleasant. And I barely had time to bid my farewells."

"Do it again," Indrani grinned.

I ignored her.

"Would Sentinels obey a flesh simulacrum the Empress occasionally takes over?" I asked.

Akua's brow rose.

"If instructed to, certainly," she said. "Authority over them can be even granted by certain court titles, it is not held solely by the Tyrant."

"Not a tie breaker, then," I told Indrani.

"Was that the sum total of your inquiry?" Diabolist asked, sounding a little miffed. "I was having a conversation of some import."

"Tell me about it," I invited, repressing a grin.

Occasionally yanking Akua's chain had lost none of the satisfaction even after the novelty faded.

"We will be expected to meet with the Dead King two days from now, at twilight," Akua said. "Excuses can be stretched no further."

I drummed my fingers against the table as Archer cracked open the bottle from – Atalante, was it? Strange, I remembered reading somewhere they were the religious ones in the League. The House of Light tended to frown on drinking to excess. The Callowan one, anyway, for all I knew it was different down there.

"So that's our window," I said. "Two days. Hopefully Thief has more to add, because we're low on information at the moment and I



don't relish the thought of attempting an assassination half blind in *Keter* of all places."

Whether or not Vivienne had anything to say remained a mystery for several hours after that. Hakram returned before too long, having exhausted the few points I'd sent him to seek clarification on with the Hosts to keep up the pretence of ongoing debate on our part. I went for a walk after that, in part to clear my mind but mostly so I get away from those fucking wards. I knew why we'd had Masego put it up, but it didn't make staying under them any more pleasant. I decided to get something useful done while I was out and about, so I moved towards the highest circles of the Silent Palace to get a look at the terrain between us and this Threefold Reflection the Empress allegedly resided in. The layout of this place was all interlocked circles so getting oriented was easy, but I'd failed to grasp the varying heights. The circle furthest out was one of the lowest, the rooftop almost a terrace. From the flat black marble I could get a good look at the broad open space that separated the palaces from the Hall of the Dead, but little else. There were, I noted, patrols now. There'd been a few of those before that I remembered, but nowhere as large or frequent. Was Neshamah tightening his watch? *You told me Malicia was here and that she was at odds with me*, I thought. *Considering that little talk we had the day before about how betrayal is a passing thing, that was as good as an invitation to kill her.*

Evidently, that didn't mean he would make it easy for me. This was a test of sorts, I decided. I doubted that breaching the laws of hospitality would rank in even the worst hundred of the sins to the Dead King's name, but he'd keep the pretence. He might not actively obstruct me, but unless I remained discreet there would be consequences. That didn't bode well. The Woe had many talents, but discretion was not usually counted among them – though that was in large part my own fault, it had to be said. I could barely make out the edge of the Threefold Reflection from the side of the Hall of the Dead, but I'd meant to get a good look and this told me less than nothing. Casting a look at the grounds below, freshly-scrubbed paving stones, I shrugged and leapt. I'd gone without armour for the day, so my knees barely bent when I landed. Cloak fluttering around me, I nodded at the approaching patrol as they turned to me. Archer had told me of the breeds of dead there were to be found in the city, but there were no differences to my senses. They all felt like little balls of will working a corpse, and though some might feel stronger it was not a certain thing. For one, the officers were supposed to be the Binds – those with souls and real intelligence – but the presence for some of the officer-armoured dead were almost entirely faded.

I'd have to rely on sight to tell them apart, and sight could be tricked.

"Just going for a walk," I told them.

A corpse in a lovely sculpted iron breastplate and conical helmet nodded.

"If you require escort, Great Majesty, it can be provided," he offered.

"Won't be necessary," I said. "Though I thank you for the courtesy."

They resumed their patrol without a word, offering polite nods when they passed me by. How long had that one been dead, I wondered? I could be centuries. I'd glimpsed flesh beneath the helm, but that meant nothing. Necromancy could preserve that near indefinitely. Strolling as casually as a girl could with a sword at her hip and a cloak embroidered with the banners of her defeated foes could – not all that casually, I felt safe in assuming – I passed by the palace separating mine from the Threefold Reflection. It was the largest of those I'd seen, and the Silent Palace dwarfed the one in Laure. The Garden of Crowns, Athal had called it. Wasn't seeing a lot of those, but the garden part seemed accurate. Instead of a single massive construction, this one was a display of smaller pavilions lost in a beautiful sprawl of stone and greenery. The beauty was somewhat spoiled by the fact that the trees and grass seemed to sprout directly from granite, but that might just have been me. It was empty, or so I thought. Then I caught sight of a silhouette seated under a shaded living oak arbour, looking down at a crystal-clear pond. Man, not a woman. Creation had not seen fit to have me run into Malicia, then. Torn between moving on towards the Threefold Reflection and having a closer look at this oddity, I eventually went for the oddity. The palace wasn't going anywhere.

I tread softly on the pebble paths that winded through the greenery, keeping an eye on the stranger. Too pale to be Soninke or Taghreb. Either an outside acquisition by the Empress, or entirely unrelated to her. I confirmed the second thought when I came close enough my otherworldly senses picked up on what lied within the man: power. Not a Name, no. That kind of power had a peculiar taste to it, life and weight and something like inevitability. What I felt from him was cousin to that, or perhaps just the remains of it. Like words engraved in stone left unreadable by time and tide you could still barely make out some letters from. *Revenant*, I thought. Indrani had told me they kept a shade of what they'd once been after their raising. The dead man did not react even when I'd come well within earshot for a mortal, staring silently into the pond. I could make out shapes in the water, fish and water lilies. The way light caught on them allowed me to realize they were not living things but sculpted and painted stone. I put aside the mild discomfort I felt at the sight and studied the man closer. Late forties, or so he'd been

before his death. A crown of white hair came in sparse tufts, and the beginnings of beard could be seen on his jaw. His clothes were rich drapery, though the colour had faded with the centuries, and there was a sword on his lap. None of this mattered half as much as the brooch on his chest: a tasteful little twist of silver with two golden ornaments on it.

Bells.

"There is no need to stand there, child," the Revenant said. "It is not my pond, nor my ruinous light that shines down upon it."

I swallowed.

"You're a Fairfax," I blurted out, and immediately cringed.

Catherine Silvertongue struck again. The Revenant turned to study me, pale brown eyes surprised.

"King Edward of Callow," he said. "And you are Deoraithe. A daughter of House Iarsmai?"

It had to be an Edward, didn't it? Callow had those like the Principate had its never-ending gaggle of First Prince Louis – too many to know by rote save for the numbers at the end. Suddenly I was glad I hadn't worn a crown. It would have felt tasteless in front of a Fairfax of the old blood. When he'd spoken that title it had been with that muted ripple of power, the one that said it hadn't merely been a title for him.

"Just a foundling," I replied, shaking my head.

"Named, then," he sagely said, and with a courtly gesture invited me to sit.

I settled into the stone seat by his own, tongue-tied.

"Would that be Edward the Fifth?" I said, desperately trying to remember which of those had gotten themselves killed while crusading.

"The Seventh," the king chided. "You will know my daughter Mary, at least. She was but three when I was claimed, she must be the longest-reigning monarch Callow has ever seen."

Oh *shit*. He was talking about Mary the Songbird. That entire reign had been a mess: the Marquess of Vale had fought a short but bloody civil war to seize the regency and refused to give it up even after she came of age. He'd kept her imprisoned in the Songbird's Cage until one of her cousins rebelled and overthrew him. She didn't survive the assault on Laure, smothered with a pillow by her captor before the palace could be breached. There were at least half a dozen songs and plays about the tragedy. Her

cousin took the crown, after, and all House Lerness of Vale hung save for the children.

"I have heard of her," I diplomatically said. "I'm sorry to tell you that House Fairfax is gone. As far as I know, the last member of it died during a Praesi invasion over twenty years ago."

The man chuckled.

"It was dead long before that, girl," he said. "I share not a drop of blood with the famous Eleonor. My forbear merely kept the name to justify her rule after her husband had the poor taste of dying before getting her with child."

I blinked. Yolanda the Wicked, that. Scholars centuries later still debated or not whether she'd been a villain or just *extremely* unpopular. Some argued she'd been demonized because of her Proceran origins and that she'd had lawful claim to rule, even though her children did not. The other side tended to point out she'd had the rest of House Fairfax murdered to ensure said children did in fact succeed her. This felt like a history lesson, until I remembered I was sitting next to breathing history. Well, moving anyway.

"Catherine Foundling," I introduced myself, since *girl* and *child* were starting to get on my nerves.

"I would welcome you to these grounds, Catherine Foundling, but there is no welcome to be had in this earthly pit of devils," King Edward said.

I nodded my thanks, for lack of a better answer.

"If I may ask, Your Majesty," I said. "You seem..."

"Lucid?" the dead man smile. "The Abomination's little jest. Most of my fellows are of more taciturn bent. You see, when he came for me I told him that even in the face of eternity I would spit on him and all his works."

My fingers clenched. Evidently, Neshamah had decided to test the truth of that.

"Do not look so appalled," the king gently said. "I will yet have the last laugh over that dark creature, even if I must wait until the Last Dusk for it. Though I am bound to serve in this place it is only a passing thing."

"So you're the guardian of this," I probed, hand moving to vaguely encompass our surroundings.

"In a manner of speaking," King Edward said. "This is the Garden of Crowns, young Foundling. None serve here who were not royalty

while they drew breath. The power once bestowed on me by Above has merely earned the role of the sword guarding this palace."

My eyes narrowed.

"So there's a former Named guarding all five palaces," I said.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Though the Abomination changes the watchers at a whim. The Bloody Sword once kept vigil over the that unpleasant pyramid beyond the Garden, but has since been replaced. Other than I, the only one who has remained for more than a century is the Thief of Stars."

"Oh?" I said, blood running cold. "And where does he guard?"

"She," he corrected. "The Silent Palace. It amused the Abomination to bind her there, as she attempted to rob it whilst living."

So we'd had a heroine with a talent for discretion breathing down our neck the entire time without a single one of us noticing. Lovely. This assassination plot was already getting off to a great start.

"You display great curiosity as to the nature of this pit," King Edward said calmly. "I will not inquire as to your purpose, as I would be bound to then speak it. But you are born of Callow, are you not?"

"I am," I warily agreed.

"It has been a very long time," he said quietly, "since I have spoken to one of my people. And I have worried, over the years. We warred with the Principate mere decades before they came, *beggars at my door*, asking for our swords to march north for their sake. Yet I know the gratitude of princes is an ephemeral thing. And to the east, the Enemy ever lurks. You spoke of an invasion?"

The snarl in his voice when he spoke of Procer had a warm feeling in my belly, I wouldn't deny it. I'd run out of patience with them as well, it was reassuring to know I was in good company there. Unfortunately, I had few good tales to tell him.

"We call it the Conquest," I said. "They won at the Fields of Streges and swept over the Callow. Until recently we were under occupation."

"That patch of grass has been watered by more armies than rainstorms," King Edward ruefully said. "It does not matter. The beast swells fat with the meat of us but it ever chokes on our bones. There will be another Eleonor, sooner or later."

I didn't know how to tell him that none had come. That if she'd ever been born, the closest thing I had to a father had cut her throat before her name could be known. That I might the closest thing to her we had, and wasn't that a horrifying thought?

"We're under siege," I said. "The Tenth Crusade marches right through us and attempts at peace have failed. The princes of Procer wants to carve us up and I am unsure how far up that desire runs."

"Procerans are always hungry," King Edwards said darkly. "And when that hunger leads them to the brink, they weep for others to pay the dues in their stead. Hold the Vales, young Foundling. And watch the Blessed Isle for a Wasteland knife."

I bleakly laughed. How could I tell him that the ruling Dread Empress was out for my blood, trying to crush me underfoot, and that she was *still* the closest thing I had to an ally at the moment? The dead man idly brushed his fingers against his brooch, then spoke up hesitatingly.

"It is unseemly to ask, I know," he said. "Yet, my daughter..."

I thought of pale green eyes, and the kindest lie I'd ever been told. That it wouldn't get easier.

"She is still," I said with a smile, "spoken of in song."

The naked relief on his face only made it worse.

"She would have loved that," he said with a quirk of the lips. "She had a lovely singing voice, my Mary. And she was good, even as a child. *Kind*. That is a rare thing in a ruler. There is a place for harshness, but kindness is the mother of prosperity."

I nodded slowly. I couldn't stand to stay here any longer, next to the man I'd lied to and his long-dead memories, so slowly I rose to my feet.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty," I said, bowing.

"Don't," he said. "I am not a fool, young Catherine."

He smiled, like we shared a secret.

"The first Albans were seneschals of Laure long before they were kings," he told me. "And Eleonor, for all her virtues, was born a mere knightess. There is no shame in one's birth. We are what we bring into this world, not what brought us into it."

He rose as well, and touched my wrist.

"Stand tall, Queen Catherine," King Edward the Seventh told me. "Stand proud. We have been broken before, humbled and rent

asunder. We have crawled through the blood of our kin and suffered the yoke of tyrants. It does not matter. We do not yield, we do not *bend* even when the sky comes tumbling down on our heads. Keep your grudges close, child, and never forget them. We are Callowans, and for every slight there is a price."

*Ours will be long, the song went, and paid twice.*

Woe on us all, but if the Gods demanded my home be ashes then the Gods would burn.

---

*Soronel Haetir*

Callowans do love themselves a grudge.

*Stormblessed*

Hmmm... another of a these transient chapters where Catherine speaks with someone hiding her truest self. I guess in a sense this chapter is supposed to remind us of the bonds between her and Praes. How she cares and hides from Blacks while hating and working with Malicia.

*Cicero*

Actually, I read this is emphasizing her connection with Callow, and how that is her true self, not all these alliances and intrigue with Praes.

*TameCurtsy*

For every slight, a price.

For every chapter, a vote: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Antoninjohn*

Acknowledged Queen of Callow by the former King of Callow, well looks like Cat just gained a legitimate claim to the crown

*Person2*

Kind of. While that is an interesting observation to make, he 1) doesn't know she's a villain and 2) no one else knows she was 'approved' by a dead Callowan Revenant of the Dead King.

I guess this does give her a stronger metaphysical tie to some kind of 'name' if she still had one and probably makes her infinitesimally stronger.

*Dantalian*

Why wouldn't he know she's a villain?  
She's peacefully walking through Keter, even though she's Queen of Callow.

Heroes simply don't make deals with the Dead King, they just throw themselves at him.

*Raved Thrad*

At this point, I think the Name Catherrine is most likely to inherit is "Local Girl Done Good." 😊

[Cold Cyberia](#)

He must at least suspect she's a villain seeing as she's casually strolling through Keter.

I think this is continuing the "sword from the stone" theme. By pulling out the sword she's proven to be worthy of becoming a Queen. Now, she's been legitimized by the past in the only way available to her.

Even though no one will know about this, for the purposes of the story she's even more than a person destined to rule – she's an inheritor of the Callowan legacy.

[shieldredblog](#)

Give him a Title and set him loose on the Crusades.  
People will hear of it

*ArkhCthuul*

Haha, 9h yeah, that'd be a laugh.

Still, liked the introspection and the acceptance of at least her core by a former Calloway king.

*burguulkodar*

That would be interesting enough to be possible, actually. Mayhaps Cat will include his freedom in the bargain she strikes. Who knows.

*Viconr*

Unless he was controlled by DK all along.



*SpeckofStardust*

"Callowans as a people can be summed up by the fact that, before the Uncivil Wars had even come to a close, it'd become a common boast among the populace that the Black Queen had not even spent a sennight in Keter before having several counts of arson and murder to her name."

For the metaphysical presentation of winter she does tend to solve problems via fire now doesn't she?

[Aaron Wagner](#)

I don't know about you but I burn more fires in winter than in summer

*Novice*

Oh, that was a great one. Kudos.

*danh3107*

Callowans are more Dawi than Umgi I think, vengeance for every slight and justice for every grudge beats in their hearts.

*Yotz*

General Callowan attitude regularly evokes remembrance of Dammaz Kron, yes.

Also, a story of an olden King returning as a Ravebant general at the head of an army of the dead to fight for his former land just because he still have several bones to pick, and is too stubborn to die without setting the score...

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Would you be tried as an arsonist, murderer, or heathen for trying to burn a god?

[Aaron Wagner](#)

I think you get deified if you succeed.

[sengachi](#)

I remember reading a story once where a god-killer escaped legal consequences because the only relevant crime on the books was \*attempted\* deicide. No one had ever bothered writing up a legal punishment for successful god murder, on account of no one anticipating anyone actually succeeding at the task.

*Byzantine*

You are now obligated to find that story, as I want to read it too 😊

[sengachi](#)

Tales of MU I think. Warning: it's a very sexually graphic story with a heavy emphasis on BDSM, and last I recall the story was (after several books) put on hiatus and had yet to be returned to last I saw.

It's got some pretty excellent worldbuilding though, I'd recommend it for that alone.

*Dainpdf*

And yet, doesn't one need to attempt the deed in order to succeed? Unless he managed to do it by accident...

*Gydd*

Tales of MU had a character mention that particular lacunae.

Only other character else who would/could is Telwyrn from TGaB, and for her, laws happen to other people.

*Mike E.*

Yep, I'm pretty sure it was Arachne from TGaB. The latest chapter sort of adds to that story in passing.

*Yotz*

Treason doth never prosper: what's the reason?  
Why if it prosper, none dare call it treason.

[daegone823](#)

I wonder is thief a transitional name she can perhaps gain a small bit of weight to her name in order to transition into a more noble or villainous name. Maybe the thief of night teaches her that somethings are not worth stealing or sacrificing and she turns on Catherine allowing diabolist to join the woe or the other hero tells her the history of Callow and how diabolist is just like the dead king thus she attempts everything in her power to end the noble.

Anybody else nervous about who or what diabolist was speaking to that had need of her being pulled away. She is always up to something.

Five towers five named sounds like the dead king has formed his revenants into a band of heroes we have a rogue, a noble name, so far only thing missing are mage, healer, barbarian.

*Someguy*

I think [Thief] is only transitional until they become powerful enough to have Of [Something] as a suffix to their Name.

*Erfling*

She stole the godsdamned sun, what more do you want

*Someguy*

But she's not the first or the only one to have stolen [the Sun] or [Fire] before, that was done following the paths of her predecessors. She is bigger than that, she's now in Government, I'm seeing in my mind's eye [Thief of Nations]. Rulers waking up in a world where their borders, holdings and titles are gone, people not having a cultural identity of any relevance or coherence, Black's crushing of the Callowan rebellion in Book 2 on a worldwide scale.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I believe names such as "Thief" are full Names themselves, while the "Something of Something" names are mostly sidegrades or downgrades when a "Something" already exists or that the person is way too specialized in a specific region to just be called "Something".

*Dantalian*

Thief did steal star, if you count that small sun of Summer.

*Hammerman*

Thief of Summers Might perhaps

*spencer*

If she takes a Winter title that could be a good path to a 'Thief of...' Name. Thief of Stars sounds like a good title. Maybe Thief defeats the Revenant and assumes her Name?

[Javvies](#)

He thinks Cat's a daughter of House Ismail on first seeing her. I wonder if that is solely because she's a half Deoraithe as part of a delegation in/to Keter, or if she looks like an Ismail.

Also, that opening quote is awesome.

---

By the way, it's also a typo: the name of the ruling line of Daoine is Iarsmai (at least EE fixed it to that the last time I asked him about it).

[TeK](#)

It can be not a typo, just a different house. This king is OLD. What gives?

*Yotz*

"Call me Ishmael..."

*Thea*

Ismael came up before and it was actually fixed... once, when it was pointed out. I think another case was left as is, because nobody mentioned it. Both times it referred to Kegan.

*Snowfire1224*

It seems even a long undead king accepts Cathrine as a Queen, even if Procer won't. Even if no one is ever told about this meeting, that has narrative weight to it.

*Someguy*

It's not like he has any high ground to stand on being of a bastard line thanks to Yolanda, it's what you bring to Callow and strive for that matters.

[Shogun no Yari](#)

Probably because Callowans don't really care for outside opinions. Cat is Callowan, that is all that matters.

*Death Knight*

5 palaces, 5 Named guards. One is the Thief of Stars, counterpart to the Thief of the Woe. The other, Edward VII, former king of Callow, perfect mirror to the Black Queen of the same.

I wonder who Masego, Hakram and Indrani's counterparts in Keter are?

[TeK](#)

Especially given a hint that Dead King changes those when it struck his fancy. It would be just like him, to specifically change undead Named guardians of palaces as a jest.

*Dantalian*

It would be pretty funny if there was a flesh puppet in each Palace. One of them would be getting a bit of help from the Thief of Stars to hide itself in the Silent Palace.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

It's possible Hakram's counterpart will be an Orc Warlord. The Dead King predates Miezans so they were still around and seeing a Named Orc at the height of their power would be a nice contrast to what they are now.

*nick012000*

Now I'm wondering if he's got any Dread Emperors hanging around...

*edrey*

on the other could thief become the thief of stars, she had stole the sun of summer, at least she could learn a couple of tricks from that one

### [wyaldriddler](#)

Hah, I was getting some \*serious\* Dark Souls vibes from this chapter. Stupid Idea, but I would be amused if Edward VII could follow Cat after all the stuff that is coming. I find that I really like him as he's been presented so far.

### [TeK](#)

Maybe she can ask Dead King of Edward, as a sign of good will for well proceived negotiations.

*Yotz*

And then Edward would be calling her "young lady" and nagging her about grand-(grand)-children for the rest of eternity...

### [TeK](#)

He will be like a grandpa that she never knew. It will neatly fall into her current family dynamic. An orc as a brother, a wizard as cousin, Archer as sister, Black as a father, and many murderous Named aunts and uncles.

....

Would be a fun twist to bring him back to Callow. Bad news, I allied with an undead army of doom, good news, it's led by an old Callowan king. I wonder if that would balance out in the eyes of the people

### [TeK](#)

It would raise morals of any Callowan to a peak. As a sort of blessing from past, an evidence of inheritance. Brandon may even cry a little.

### [daegone823](#)

Being crowned queen of Callow by a former ruler a Fairfax no less

Talbot would cry tears of joy, to see his great, great ... great grandfather? Nobles would not be able to doubt her claim and "good" would be confused to say the least but to be honest no Callowan care what outsiders think of them.

The name she would transition to would probably boost the Broken Bells, they would in memory of their undying former king revenant, and to praise there current named queen/immortal abomination they would be called the Unbroken Bells as soon as they die they would be ressurected by her necromancy becoming the first undead knightly order. A true testament to Chatharine blurring the lines between good and evil.

### [Shogun no Yari](#)

But you forget that he'll have access to the truth of his daughter's demise...which means someone lied and that equals a full scale Callowan grudge special.

### *Raved Thrad*

"We will never forgive and we will never forget." And with an admonition from a past king of Callow to stand tall and proud and spit in the collective gods' eye, no less. It is a great and terrible thing to be called kin by a king and to be counseled to hang on to your hate.

On an aside, does anyone else think Catherine has some kind of power that makes people underestimate her? It's like the first thing people think when they see her is "girl" or "child." Oh, and "short." She really hates that last, and so, she being a Callowan, the gods will burn.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

Power? No. It's an epithet.  
She was merely a girl when she came to her Name. Now she'll always be one.

### *Raved Thrad*

Sort of like a vampired turned young?

*Raved Thrad*

Vampire, rather. Stupid injured arm...

*Dainpdf*

Not always. So long as that's what she sees herself as.

*MetruX*

Which is even seen by way of Masego. He was but a small child when he became Named, but he kept growing until he met Cat. For Named it's more a matter of how you see yourself, and are seen by the world.

*Yotz*

With Black also – he was old and feeling tired of life, and had started to show gray hair consequently, but after Cat stabbed him, breaking the mold of Fate, he is feeling reinvigorated, young and able to wonder once again, and his aging is visibly reversed as a result – to a point where it is seen almost like a second youth.

That could be a thing of Evil Names exclusively, though – Good Names do not remove the Boon of Aging from the bearers as a norm, however young inside said bearers may feel. And Cat is a special case, of course.

*Argentorum*

Great chapter, my one nitpick (which returns for the first time we heard the rhyme) is that “ours will be long and paid twice” sounds kinda clunky. I’m a fan of:

“Ours will be paid long and twice”

\*gets off soapbox\*

The world is going to burn at her feat. It’s going to be glorious.

Say, I wonder if she can ask for King Edward back, you know, as a loan. What’s a rental hero between friends right?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

For every slight there is a price,  
Ours will be long and paid twice.

I feel it rhymes better than your suggestion, as both lines here have 2 parts to them where naturally stop. Your line would be said in a single breath.

*Lab Rat*

Your version also changes the meaning; “Ours will be long and paid twice” means that’ll we’ll hold our grudge forever and

once we catch you , we'll be even worse to you than you were to us. "Ours will be paid long and twice", on the other hand, means that when we get our revenge, we'll make it last a long time.

*Jane*

Heh. So even a proper Fairfax king puts country before the Heavens, eh? Callowans truly are vengeful to the bone.

*Simpli*

If he is indeed acting as more than a puppet of our local Hidden Horror, helping to push Catherine along the lines he wants her to go.

*Novice*

In Ranger's interlude, we saw two former Named have most, if not all, of their personality intact. But you're right, there's always a possibility that this is part of the Dead King's machinations.

*RanVor*

Ok, it may be prudent to expect skulduggery from the Dead King, but this is seriously starting to sound like a paranoia.

*Erfling*

It's only paranoia if someone isn't out to get you

*RanVor*

Only after you've been proven right. Until then, it's paranoia.

*Zourath*

I don't see him being a puppet, but he is probably also being used. The Hidden Horror strikes me as far too much of a subtle type to leave an obvious opening in the narrative like the king being puppeted, he knows the Bard would exploit it if he did. I think that he had the king guard there on the off chance an interaction like this played out, then just waited for Callowans to be Callowans.

*Decius*

"I will not inquire as to your purpose, as I would be bound to then speak it. But you are born of Callow, are you not?"



How will the revelation that this Revenant is disloyal to the Dead King but under certain compulsions play out? Surely the Saint of Swords, given the knowledge to do so, could cut the tethers that bind them; the Saint of Swords has cut several other things that aren't even objects.

### *Dainpdf*

The heroine is more likely to cut down the undead completely. A mercy, really. And, after all, it is the Dead King's sorcery animating the undead. It is unknown whether severing his influence without removing what animates them is possible.

### *Death Knight*

It depends on if the necromancy that power(s)ed the revenants is a continuous application of magical energy. If it is then cutting the "strings" of the revenant would most likely cause him to collapse. If not, then cutting the connection to the Dead King would most likely free the revenant from the Dead King's control. Unless the Dead King didn't implant a magical "seed" inside the corpse that automatically restores the link as soon as it is cut. Given his intelligence shown so far, it is quite plausible he would have such a fail safe, at least in all the dead Named he values greatly.

### *Dainpdf*

All necromancy so far has been of the first kind, so it seems likely that this is also that, especially since Cat mentioned the undead all feeling somewhat similar with the exception of the shade of name power she felt.

### *Decius*

The Revenant that wishes not to know something because it would have to report it has ALREADY been freed from control. It makes most of its own decisions and acts independently already.

Maybe cutting the bonds that compel specific actions would directly or indirectly result in the destruction of the undead directly. If so, it's still easier than cutting them directly, since the bodies of Named have plot armor, and the SoS has already been shown to be unable to penetrate plot armor.

### [\*blitzxs\*](#)

"Callowans as a people can be summed up by the fact that, before the Uncivil Wars had even come to a close, it'd become a common boast among the populace that the Black Queen had not even spent

a sennight in Keter before having several counts of arson and murder to her name.”

– Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

Heh. Guess that Cat’s fear of Callowons rebelling if word got out that she allied with the Dead King never came to pass. They must REALLY hate the nations of the Tenth Crusade when they wouldn’t mind allying with the the greatest monster in Calernia just to return the slight against them.

*Simpli*

Keeping in mind that they are having an Evil Ruler and Rulership sets the morality and personality of your territory and people – that might also mean that they are becoming more ruthless and hate-filled, no matter who their target of ire is.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Keep in mind this has only be stated by the Grey Pilgrim who isn’t exactly unbiased. It could easily be that Callowan people are simply getting more desperate and hence more prone to radical action.

*RanVor*

It kinda surprises me how everyone seems to take GP’s words as a face value just because he is a hero. Even if he doesn’t outright lie, there’s no way he’s objective in what he says.

*Dainpdf*

It’s not because he’s a hero. It’s because he’s the personification of wise advice, and he’s one of the big hitters.

We also take Akua at her word when she prattles about the treacherous tendencies of wastelanders.

*RanVor*

He’s already shown he’s not above manipulating Catherine to achieve his goals, and even when he doesn’t, he’s definitely heavily biased. I wouldn’t say he lied to her face or even intentionally hid information from her, but I highly doubt what he told Cat is the full picture of what is actually happening.

*Dainpdf*

That is true. But it does mean that Cat probably has a palpable influence on her people, even if the part about it bringing damnation is not necessarily true. And I hope people stop talking about Cat like she’s not

a villain. She admits she is, and she wanted to keep Akua's evil weapon of doom. She didn't want it made, but she was for keeping it. She's not Akua, but she was willing to bring the Hells into this.

### *Death Knight*

The only reason she is considered a villain is because of the in-story definition of a villain. If you don't swear to do the Heaven's will then you're considered a villain whether you are or not. That is just the perception that the populace of Calernia at large have which is probably why there hasn't been a Hero allied with below before Catherine.

I actually found it suspect that such a hero hasn't presented itself yet. Especially in Callow that are notorious for their grudges.

I could easily conceive of a situation where a Callowan peasant loses his family to a scuffle between a Judgment-sworn hero and a villain. In the aftermath, as he kneeled over the still warm corpses of his family amid the ashes of his home he feels an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. Of weakness that he could not stand up the Gods' favored champions. In that moment he swears death and vengeance to villains and heroes alike and leaves on a quest to seek power (Ironical and/or hypocritical I know). He swears never to stand by helplessly again as the people he cares for get trampled underfoot by a bunch of powertripping assholes. So he sought out the legendary Lady of the Lake to train him in the ways of murder.

Initially she refused, but our would be hero would not be convinced otherwise. He kept asking and asking, repeatedly getting rebuffed and even getting beaten to within an inch of his life by the half elf. Still he would not give up. He knew in his heart he would gain the power to beat the shit out of all those goddamn assholes even if it cost him his life. Their existence is a pain on his life and he cannot abide them living. This conviction would be enough to qualify him for a Name. Maybe Heir or something. His conviction impresses Ranger enough she decides to teach him the ways of the hunt. He practices relentlessly, LEARNING ways to kill everything that walks. PERFECTING the methods his teacher shows him and eventually TRANSCENDING them to deal with those pesky story save bullshit.

Eventually he leaves Refuge and earns the Name The Sword of Vengeance while standing above the still warm corpses of the Hero and the reanimated Villain that put him on the path. As he looks at their dead bodies his resolve strengthens. He decides to become the Sword that will smite all foreign invaders to his land whether they be hypocrites in the west or the lunatics on the east or enemies within. The Sword that protects with the righteous fury of vengeance.

...So I am no EE so forgive the shitty story quality, but shouldn't those turn of events have probably happened in the past? Or similarly?

*Dainpdf*

Sorry, Tl;Dr. Will read the story later.  
But as for Cat only being a Villain because she's not sworn to Above... She is under the Gods Below. As Akua has stated, Praesi will backstab the Gods Below if it serves their interest and that's part of their devotion. In the same way, Cat will burn the Gods Below for Callow... And that's part of her villainy.

*RanVor*

Whether or not Catherine can be considered a villain is irrelevant to my point which is exactly what I've written in the first comment, namely that people believe Grey Pilgrim unconditionally without any evidence, and I find it weird and a little disappointing.

It depends on how you define a villain, by the way.

*Dainpdf*

It is not the strongest argument, but he is an authority. The narrative he's trying to set up also works for him teaching Cat things. As a last point, there is some evidence which he himself pointed out in Callow.

*RanVor*

Not really. The evidence you speak of can be interpreted in a number of ways, and not all of them align with GP's position on the matter. Yet (almost) everyone treats it like it was a proven fact, ignoring the obvious interest Grey Pilgrim has in misleading Catherine and even more obvious bias characterizing pretty much everyone with a

strong opinion on any given matter. Note that it doesn't necessarily mean it's not true – just that we shouldn't take everything he says as a face value.

This is especially jarring considering that the Dead King is given a reverse treatment in the comments – everything even remotely related to him is immediately suspected of being a trick meant to manipulate Cat to his sinister ends. Again, it's not necessarily wrong, but it makes the readers look paranoid.

*Dainpdf*

Uh... You do remember this is the guy who outwitted the Bard, who tricked an entire nation in order to ascend to power, and who Cat keeps saying is untrustworthy? It's only paranoia if they're not out to get you.

On the other hand, the Pilgrim has always been trying to outwit Cat, but in his position as advisor and wise man cherry picked truth is a better tool than outright lies.

*RanVor*

It's funny how everyone keeps misinterpreting my comments no matter how clear I make myself.

I DID NOT TELL ANYONE TO TRUST THE DEAD KING. I'm merely saying not everything is a deception. Seeing threats where there are none is as dangerous as not seeing the ones that are. I'm pretty sure the Dead King has other things to do BESIDES manipulating Cat.

*Dainpdf*

You implied people were overreacting when it comes to him and compared him to the Pilgrim. I merely put forward all the reasons we have not to trust him, and some we have to trust the Pilgrim. Now, if many people keep misunderstanding you no matter how much effort you make, it may be that your measure of how clear you are being is flawed, or you are misunderstanding them.

*RanVor*

Actually, I brought the Dead King up to underline the commenters' inconsistency in being suspicious. Trusting the Dead King is foolish, that much is

true. But taking Grey Pilgrim's word on the matter without taking into account the enormous disparity between his worldview and the actual situation Callow and Catherine are in is just as foolish. This, and only this, is what I've trying to say from the very beginning, and any implied meanings are entirely imaginary.

*Dainpdf*

I believe I put forward sufficient explanation for why the Pilgrim's word can be trusted to be true, if cherry picked, while the Dead King's can't. It's not inconsistency if there is reason.

*RanVor*

And I believe I put forward sufficient explanation why you're wrong, so I think we're even.

*Dainpdf*

Did you? You provided no counterargument to the idea that the Pilgrim's narrative role stimulates him to provide true advice, that contrary to Neshamah we have some idea what he wants, and that it is not in his nature to outright lie.

*RanVor*

How long are we going to continue with this bullshit? It's not worth the effort anymore.

*Dainpdf*

I considered it spirited debate. I am sorry you feel that way.

*RanVor*

Please, don't be. You make me feel guilty.

*RanVor*

As for the Dead King, the general consensus seems to be that everything that happened since Cat first set a foot in Keter has been a part of the evil plot carefully orchestrated by the Dead King in order to trick Cat into doing something. While the existence of such a plot is pretty likely and some of the events that have transpired since Chapter 33 are probably part of it, I very much doubt ALL OF THEM are, and this is one of the less likely instances.

*Dainpdf*

Well, Neshamah has proven to be a meticulous planner, and he's had a few centuries to plan whatever this is.

Also...we don't know what his plan is, so we best be ready for anything.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

GP quite likely wholeheartedly believes in the trickle-down corrupting effect of having Team Evil ruling any land. However, Team Good *also* has rather staggeringly direct mind control techniques they use on both Named and muggles alike with all the subtlety of Trump at an international conference – and, GP has that number on speed-dial, so he couldn't fully spot the hypocrisy for what it is (he gets part of the way, then seems to get shutdown and diverted into killbot mode). But, see, *that* isn't corruption. Oh, no. That is meet, right and Good... even if it throws an entire city and countryside into, e.g. the maws of the undead who weren't actively doing anything at the time or could wipe a country off the map for four generations just to make a point.

### *Novice*

I don't know about Good rulers using mind control. Callow has been ruled by Kings and Queens of Callow on the side of Good, and yet that didn't stop their nobles from being self-serving assholes. Just ask Mary the Songbird.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

The rulers themselves don't have to. The Heavens do it off their own bat, often without telling the rulers. This is going by how Cordelia is getting the carpet whipped out from under her. Or how Liesse was going to be "saved" by mindraping the entire population through guilt trips... And, none of the Callowan lords or ladies who supported the rebellion were told about the incoming Angel ahead of time by Team Good, or asked their opinions about it.

My point was: it's not having Evil™ rulers that corrupts a country any more than having Good™ ones blesses it. People aren't that simple, and Good™ acting like compete jerks can still corrupt a nation just fine by sheer knock-on, butterfly effects. While blaming the other side for the

results of their own actions, of course. And, that's even without the Heavens stepping in directly.

*Dainpdf*

Yeah, Good isn't necessarily good... It is very willing to sacrifice the few for the many, as it sees, while Evil a courage the sacrifice of the many for the goals of the few.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

The thing is, there's a ton of evidence for Praesi being backstabbing bastards and not so much for villains corrupting the world.

Like, GP is literally the only guy who thinks this. If it was indeed the case, wouldn't the House of Light object more strongly to Cat being crowned? How about Black – he's lived and breathed Namelore for forty years so you'd think he'd give her a heads up. Hell, you'd at least expect a snide remark from Bard or something. But there's nothing.

Though you make a good point with the wise mentor angle.

*Dainpdf*

For evidence, one might look at Neshamah's rise, and what the Pilgrim pointed out in Callow itself. Black is concerned with Namelore mostly as it relates to breaking Creation into his image. I don't think he'd care much about corruption, but even if he did he wouldn't be likely to tell Cat things that might make her deviate from the path he wanted for her. And the Bard? She's barely talked to Cat yet. And she's more the "manipulate things so evil is defeated" type than the "trade philosophical insights with the villain" one.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

Black (or Malicia) would definitely point it out to Cat. Suddenly radicalizing an entire nation would make ruling a lot tougher and they're both concerned with keeping Callow mellow – they would let her know just so she could adjust.

With Bard, I meant more her conversations with William etc. At some point, you'd expect her to bitch about how a villain is objectively going to corrupt the country, but she never does.



Just to clarify, I'm not dismissing the possibility it's true but I am weary of accepting it at face value.

*Dainpdf*

No one said anything about "radicalize". If anything, increasing the traditionally evil traits in Callow makes them \*easier\* for both her and Praes to rule. Well, more her than Praes. Regarding the Bard, I believe we never got all her conversations with William. Plus, she didn't really need to give him that – he was already motivated.

*Dhael*

I get the feeling that Callow is more agnostic towards the gods, as both the God Above and Below have constantly used Callow as a battlefield for their wars for many, many generations.

The Grey Pilgrim may be simply underestimating just how deep Callowian grudges go and how little they actually care which side they're on as long as those grudges are paid in full.

Callow always repays its debts, no matter how long it takes. And Callow has a \*lot\* of debts to call in.

*werafdsaew*

I think the religious schism has more to do with it.

*RanVor*

How can setting Keter on fire be seen as a bad thing?

*Insanenoodlyguy*

We just saw that even back in the day, callowans were about the grudge. It makes sense, even if GP is wrong. The east invades and serves the gods below, fuck them. But the north invades and says it is the will of the gods above. Well fuck them too! The queen is a villain? She's from Callow, fighting for Callow. And even the priests just said "well fuck the holy decree", good to know they are from Callow too. She went to deal with the dead king? Oh, it was to fuck with Procer? Yeah that sounds like her.

And then they find out she torched the place. That's classic Black Queen. Good ol Cat, best ruler in forever

*Cicero*

Well, first of all, Callowans just had Procer declare all of them to be heretics, infuriating them.

Second, there is an aspect here of proof of hostility to the Dead King. As in “see, the Black Queen didn’t really ally the Dead King, she was there less than a sennight and she burned down some buildings and murdered the true villain – the Dread Empress. The Black Queen was obviously planning to doublecross the Dead King from the beginning.”

Thus continuing Cat’s pattern of walking the fine line of an anti-hero.

*Rook*

The threefold reflection is a bit of a scary name for the place. Very similar situation to the threefold crossing. In the home field of an opponent who’s all but invited her to metaphorically cross swords, with it being the blatant major trial in her path.

Not a great situation if there is any connection as far as the nature of the trap, considering Black failed it outright and Cat’s crooked crossing of it ended up with her chained to Akua’s will until she mutilated herself to get out.

*Dainpdf*

Well, the similarity is in “threefold”, but threes have always been relevant to the story. I don’t put that much stock in this particular coincidence.

*Argentorum*

Unless I’m misremembering, Akua’s trial was the “fourfold crossing.” Not threefold.

The Four Catherine’s were Canon, White Knight, Smuggler Queen, and Legionary.

*Dainpdf*

Thanks. I didn’t remember the name and assumed they had it right.

---

To top that off, it was called a Fourfold Crossing: Catherine’s first “fight” with Akua was an illusion too, and here she has enough of smoke and mirrors of her own.

*Burnsy*

Thief: “So how’d you get a name like that?”

Thief of Stars: "I stole the jewels from the crown of a Dread Empress, said to be as many and as beautiful as the stars themselves."

Thief: "Neat. I stole an actual star once. From a demi-god"

*Nethermore*

Thief's answer is beyond perfect here. Thanks for making me laugh.

*oaclo*

Man, am I crazy or has this whole story been setting up Cat for a Fisher King 'story'?

It's been established that the Fae come back in cycles every time they die and she is definitely a Fae at this point. Seeing as there apparently no more Winter Fae on their continent, would it be too crazy for her to revive in the winters when Callow is threatened for eternity?

*jacobhollander*

As Russia has General Winter so does Callow have Catherine Foundling. Don't invade in winter or prepare for an army of undead suicide goats and excessive usage of goblinfire.

*WuseMajor*

The king here certainly felt like the Fisher King in a lot of ways, honestly.

*Dainpdf*

Interesting. I start to wonder if the Dead King's scheme includes the idea of having Cat kill a guest and using the slight to drive her into a (more) unfavorable bargaining position.

*lennymaster*

Her bargaining position can not get much more undesirable. She is in a bidding war with Malicia for the Dead Kings help, trying to limit casualties while neither of the other two care the least bit about dead civilians.

*WuseMajor*

At least one of them might well find dead civilians very useful in fact.

*Dainpdf*

Oh yes. I meant he might have a catch 22 in place. Kill Malicia, you're screwed. Don't kill Malicia, you're screwed.

### *Death Knight*

EE, is the necromancy that powers the Revenants and the undead of the Dead King a sustained endeavor or is it similar to Still Water in that it only required a spark of magic to initiate?

### *Cold Cyberia*

Shouldn't Hakram use Find to, well... find Malicia?

---

She's the main user of Nefarious' certified remotely controlled puppets. Hakram's Find is a nerfed version of Providence as applied to directions, relying on it (especially in that particular situation) is more or less repeating Hanno's mistakes.

### *Cold Cyberia*

Sure, but how is following food any better? Presumably both the puppet and Malicia herself need to eat so it's not as if the current method differentiates between them. Using Find would probably be a lot quicker.

The situation is also quite different than with Hanno. Black knew the White Knight was on the opposite side of the battlefield and had a good idea of when the engagement was going to happen. Malicia likely doesn't know Cat is after her, hell she might not even know Cat's in Keter.

### *Metrux*

His Find is not a perception, but a luck based Aspect. He does not sense where something is, when he Finds something it is where it was, but he simply was at the right place at the right time. So he could wander around and Find her, but... He'd be alone and impossibilitated from doing anything for the moment. Not the best of plans.

### *Cold Cyberia*

Is that right? I don't recall it being stated as luck though I might be missing it.

It does seem to give him a sense of where something is though. Read through the Extra Chapter: Deadhand – the Aspect very clearly nudges him along in a particular directions to find Thief.

### *Cthulhu*

My take FWIW

Cat is badly overmatched here. She should tell the Dead King that she cannot meet his terms because it will lead to the destruction of Callow and further, she has no wish to bid against the arrest Empress, her ally. She should then tell the Dead King she will continue to fight the crusade and hope he will join that fight as an ally and friend. She should then go home due to the religious mess in her Kingdom. Then, she should find out if the Dead King will let her leave.

Run away. Run the fuck far away. Let Malicia cut the deal with the human embodiment of evil. Go home Cat and live to fight another day.

Killing Malicia is INSANE. Foolish. Deluded. You are making it an enemy of the empire and the Dead King.

Oh one last thing: stop letting the Diabolist talk. She cannot be trusted and is manipulating you. Kill her now before she becomes a the client at

*RanVor*

I think the previous chapter explained pretty well why this is not an option.

*Joan*

Wasn't Diabolist the one who proposed this? To withdraw from negotiations and let Malicia strike a bargain with the Dead King to fight Procer so Callow doesn't have to?

I agree that is her best move, and attempting to assassinate Malicia makes NO sense at this time.

[ahd](#)

The Silvertongue seems like a good Name to transition to. (:

[muffinfluffer](#)

STAND PROOOOOOOOOUD!

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## Chapter 38: All According To (Redux)

*"It is said that on the eve of the Maddened Fields, the Tyrant Theodosius consulted with the many Delosi soothsayers among his host. He asked them if he would find victory or defeat, should he give battle at dawn as he intended. The Delosi squabbled among themselves for hours, until the eldest among them looked the Tyrant in the eyes and spoke his answer: Yes."*

– Extract from 'The Banquet of Follies, or, A Comprehensive History of the First League War' by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

I woke up, which was somewhat worrying considering I did not remember going to sleep. My fingers clasped the knife under my pillow even as my eyes opened, and with all the stunning majesty owed to my rank came flailing out of the sheets half naked with a blade in hand. It was somewhat embarrassing when I found myself completely alone in my palatial bedroom. Making a very dignified cape out of my bedsheets I took a wary look around and found nothing unusual – ah, save for one detail. There was sphere of misty ice on the stone table still strewn with papers we'd been using for planning. That hadn't been there... Shit, what was the last thing I could remember? Walking out of the Garden of Crowns, then I drew a blank. And my head was pounding, had I gotten drunk last night? Hells, could I still have hangovers? It'd be just like Winter to take out half the fun of drinking and leave me with the worst part, but I couldn't think of another time I'd had such a brutal headache. I'd had them once in a blue moon before I became the Squire and the Gods saw fit to relieve me of my monthlies – one of the few things for which I might actually owe thanks to Below for – but even then they'd been rare.

Had I been in a fight, then? I carefully checked my head for wounds and found no obvious ones. I did, however, stumble across what appeared to be granite coming out of the spot where my spine joined my skull. I swore on the fucking Hells, if Archer had gotten me wasted and talked me into some kind of pissing contest, oh Gods no it couldn't be that. The stone didn't wiggle at all when I pressed on it but I could feel it going deep into my head. Some kind of cylinder? Yeah, not even Indrani would have been on board for that. I dropped my nifty cape but kept the knife, because this was still Keter. Padding softly across the floor I neared the frozen sphere and immediately notice this was my own work. For one, it was much colder than ice was supposed to be. And though the surface was misting and weeping, there was no puddle of water around it as there would be if it'd been melting for a few hours. That had fae bullshit written all over it. I leant over and wiped away the surface, eyes narrowing when I found there were objects inside. Cards, by the looks of it. Three of them, over each other with room in between. I couldn't quite make out the one furthest in, so I picked up the globe to turn it over.

It remained stuck to the table, as if nailed to it. Frowning, I tugged harder only to hastily stop when I heard a crack from the stone supports beneath. I checked under and found the base of the table had a sharp little fissure going through it. Shit, I thought, setting down the knife. Maybe if I pretended it'd never happened Athal would be too polite to point it out. I decided not to patch it up with ice, since it'd essentially be admitting I was responsible and the kingdom's coffers were running low even without having to pay for whatever fortune an antique Keteran table was worth. So, the sphere had been made so it couldn't be removed. Presumably, there was another way to get at the cards. I was already started on bad ideas for the days, so I might as well try to shove my hand in and see what happened.

"Gods that's cold," I hissed, as my fingers went straight in.

I fished the top card out and shook out the wetness, which apparently wasn't making the ink on it run. Was that from Indrani's deck? The Page of Cups stared back with his little smirk, but the interesting part was what'd been written on the card. No one else in the Woe had cursive this horrid, so it was clearly my own.

*It was you.*

So, I'd screwed with my own mind instead of having it done to me. That was... good?

*Ask about Isabella's deception. Don't force the cards, you savage.*

Ah, Past Catherine had evidently decided to be a smug bitch about this. Fuck her and her cryptic riddles. I flipped the card and found another few words.

*Skein. Thief of* – that was probably meant to be a star, but I wasn't exactly an artist. Shoddy work, Past Catherine, you could have asked Hakram for help. And, to end it, *Spellblade*.

Named, evidently. The Thief was supposed to be keeping an eye on this very palace, though if I'd encountered her since King Edward's warning I had no memory of it. I did not even need to know what this plan was to already know it was terrible.

*PS, fuck you Future Catherine stars are hard to draw.*

I'd have to ask Masego how feasible it was to arrange a ritual so I could go back and deck myself in the face. Who knew, maybe I already had and that was why she was being such a cranky asshole about the whole thing. I got the other two cards out, but they were encased in black ice. Bearing my worst enemy's instructions in mind, I didn't try to force them open. The working seemed to be have been tied off, anyway. The power within the ice was

slowly trickling away, though one of them would run out long before the other. I left them on the table and got dressed. I'd helpfully – wait, no, that was too neatly folded so probably Hakram – left clothes atop the dresser last night. A green and silver tunic, with trousers of the same make. My plate was nowhere in sight, but what looked like Indrani's spare set of chain mail was waiting next to my boots. That was... unusual. The time where a full suit of plate had slowed me down had ended around when I'd become strong enough to accidentally break tables. Which I had not in this particular place, for the record. Archer was taking the fall for that if anyone asked. I clasped the Mantle of Woe around my shoulders and idly ran a metaphorical chain that bound Diabolist to it, finding it already taut. She was nowhere close, then, and given the lack of windows in my room following the chain's direction told me nothing about where she'd gone.

I was among the first to wake, but not the first. Vivienne was already glaring down at a cup of tea, a half-finished pastry in her plate. No servants in sight, though the table was bursting with a morning banquet. I touched the cards in the inner pocket of my cloak, right beneath my pipe and wakeleaf stash, and plopped myself down next to her.

"So, I don't know if you're aware," I said, reaching for what looked like fresh bread. "But I think we tried to get clever right last night."

"There was playing card nailed to my bedpost when I woke up," Thief admitted. "It told me to look in my bag when Hakram joins us."

"Can you, uh, remember anything from yesterday afternoon or after?" I asked.

She eyed me cautiously.

"Skein," she said. "Prophecy by spun thread. It's all I was told I could say."

"So there's a seer on the board," I mused.

That did explain why apparently whatever the plan was it had to be kept secret even from us. Maybe they could only predict through conscious decisions? Black had theorized that was the Augur's weakness, in Procer. Also that she didn't always control what she saw, but that tended to be a staple of oracle Names. What the Gods believed was important and what mortals did were not necessarily the same thing.

"If I asked you about Isabella's deception, would it mean anything to you?" I asked.



Vivienne's brow rose.

"Nothing," she said.

Way to be specific, Past Catherine. I'd finished buttering my bread and was struggling to drip honey on it without spilling when Masego joined us. My eyes widened when he came in sight, which was mildly ironic considering the reason they did: one of the glass orbs that served as his own was missing.

"Hierophant," I delicately said. "I don't know if you've noticed, but-"

"I don't want to talk about it," Masego grunted.

He reached for the pot of tea, missing it by half an inch. Huh. I *had* wondered about his depth perception nowadays. Vivienne kindly poured him a cup and he settled into his seat, casting half a baleful glare at the world.

"So, can you see through the missing-"

He muttered in the arcane tongue and my breakfast caught fire. That twat, I'd just gotten it the way I liked it. I put out the flames with a twist of Winter, but now it was all soggy and disgusting.

"Fine, be that way," I said. "I was just worrying for you."

"I know where you stash your wakeleaf," he warned me.

That was a grave threat, and with the elegance of a tried diplomat I changed the subject.

"I don't suppose anyone knows where Diabolist is," I asked.

"No idea," Vivienne admitted. "Masego?"

"I am going to drink this cup of tea," Hierophant announced. "And greatly savour the accompanying silence. Shatter that dream at your peril."

Vivienne discretely covered her face before I could catch her smiling, wily veteran that she was. Hierophant finished his cup in the quiet, broken only when Hakram finally joined us.

"Isabella's deception," I said as he strolled into the hall. "Ring a bell?"

"Good morning, Catherine," he said amusedly.

"Don't you give me lip," I said. "We can't know who came up with this mess, but we *can* be sure we wouldn't have gone ahead without

your agreement. As far as I'm concerned, this is entirely on you until proven otherwise."

"She's taking to the works of queenship rather well, isn't she?" Vivienne told the orc.

"Give it a few years and my Name will become the Scapegoat," Hakram gravelled. "It does ring a bell, Cat. It refers to Isabella the Mad's scheme when she fought Theodosius as the Maddened Fields."

I finished buttering my second bit of bread, casting a wary eye at Hierophant.

"I'm listening," I said. "Elaborate."

"Theodosius was said to have soothsayers, or more likely a great deal of spies," Adjutant continued, grabbing a seat at my side. "So General Isabella secretly gave her commanders wildly differing plans to carry out during the battle. She turned it into an axiom, when she wrote her book after retirement. 'The heart of warfare is deception. Therefore, the generals who can deceive even themselves are invincible.'"

I sighed. So we were now taking operational advice from a woman whose moniker was *the Mad*. Lovely. What were the odds that there were actually several plans and most of them were false? Godsdamned me. I glanced at Vivienne, who was hiding away something in her palm with her other hand. Right, she'd been told to take out a card from her 'bag' when Hakram arrived, hadn't she? She crumpled the card.

"Now," she said.

Hierophant rose to his feet without warning, and flared with power as he barked an incantation. There were six doors to the dining hall. Every single one of them closed, glimmering with light.

"Domain, Catherine," he said.

I bit into my bread. Didn't get much out of the taste and even less nourishment, but the texture was nice. Melted in the mouth. Even as I chewed, I opened the floodgates and Winter came out to play. The darkness fell like a curtain over all the world. I felt the small bundles of warmth that were the Woe as everything froze with an ugly snapping sound, and herded the worst of it away from them. They still shivered. Our visitor was granted no such protection. Flesh hardened, bones shattered and the Thief of Stars went still. She spoke not a word, but in the darkness above a constellation of stars was birthed. The King's Crown, I thought. Back home they said it was an auspicious sign for the rulers of Callow. I swallowed and waited. Was it an aspect?

Probably. Or at least the remnants of one. But in the end a thief was a thief, and I was the Sovereign of Moonless Night. I had all the time in the world, here. A dozen eternities passed, and one by one the stars winked out.

Winter devoured everything, given enough time.

When the darkness left, the Revenant was revealed to our sight. Shivering, Masego wove binding sorceries around her through hushed whispers as I eyed the frozen remnants of my breakfast with distaste. So much for that. Within my cloak one of the cards shattered, the casing's unmaking accelerated by the touch of my domain. I took it out, and found my writing spread across the Four of Pentacles.

*Do you have the Thief?*

There were two bundles of words beneath the question.

*Yes, Zeze breaks first rune.*

*No, find Archer.*

I flipped it and found a single word on the other side.

*Lark.*

Enlightening stuff, Past Catherine. Good work, you riddling bag of crazy. What the hells had I learned about the Skein that made this elaborate a plan seem like a good idea? Everything I'd been taught about scheming screamed that multiple steps were a recipe for failure.

"I woke up with a list of questions on the Six of Swords," Hakram said. "I assume she is the one I need to ask."

I put back the card and frowned. Well, it wasn't like interrogating one of us would help. We'd screwed with our own memories.

"Masego, you need to break the first rune," I said.

Hierophant's lone eye swivelled towards me.

"The artefact in your head," he said. "I had wondered the purpose of it. Everyone else has a spell instead, but I suppose you would not so easily be enchanted."

"We shoved a magic stone into my skull," I said, quite uncomfortable at the notion. "Oh Gods. That won't have any ill-effects, will it?"

"Your brain is mostly decorative," Hierophant assured me.

"Could have told you *that*," Vivienne murmured.

I was going to start keeping count of her instances of sedition, I decided. Probably not a list, since she'd absolutely steal it, but there had to be a way.

"Just don't blow up my skull, Zeze," I sighed. "I'm not sure it'd grow back."

His lips thinned.

"If you'd just let me—"

"We have a rule, Masego," I said patiently. "What is that rule?"

"We don't vivisect friends," he muttered mulishly. "Even when we could learn the *most interesting things* from it."

He padded over and without any warning placed his palm against the back of my head.

"Oh," he said. "That is skilfully—"

—

"There's a Revenant overseeing every palace," I told the others. "If my source is to be believed, ours is the Thief of Stars."

"That is a much snappier Name than Vivi's," Indrani noted. "Have we considered trading in? This outfit needs fresh blood. Corpse. Eh, you know what I mean."

I met Hakram's eyes across the table. Idly, he shuffled Archer's deck of cards though the game they'd played before Thief and I returned was long abandoned.

"Nothing we can do about that," I said. "Especially if the Skein really is guiding all of them."

I very carefully did not begin to ponder how we might catch her, even though she would need to be at least temporarily removed from the board if we were to have any chance of success. Chaos was our only best tool here. To cheat an oracle, you had to cheat yourself. We would need a touchstone, but also a way to multiply and scatter the possible trails. And, to tip it all over, a blindfolded blade. I turned to Diabolist.

"Akua," I said. "I never thought I'd say this, but I need you to scheme."

The smile on her lips was less than reassuring.

—

"-Catherine," Vivienne said.

My eyes rolled back into their proper place.

"I'm here," I said, brushing away her hand. "This is... going according to plan, maybe? I think Hakram needs to ask her the questions. She's part of this, one way or another."

"You'll need to unfreeze her mouth first," Adjutant said.

I rolled my shoulder, more out of habit than need, and turned my gaze to the Thief of Stars. Like King Edward she looked almost alive. Quite a bit younger than him, too. Tanned, leathery skin and sun-bleached blond hair in a single tress going down her back. I did not recognize the cut or cloth of her short-sleeved tunic, though admittedly that meant little. Exerting my will, I freed her jaws and tongue without a word.

"You people are the worst," the Thief of Stars said in garbled Chantant.

Ugh, Proceran. Just my luck.

"Still fresh and exciting to us," Vivienne drawled in Lower Miezan. "Hakram?"

Looming over her small form, the orc cleared his throat.

"What does Threefold Reflection mean?" he asked.

"If I were not bound, I would have taken your eyes by now," the Revenant conversationally said. "It's one thing to be bound here, another to suffer your tender attentions *twice*. I do have my pride."

My eyes narrowed.

"We've done this before," I said.

"I can see why you're the leader," she said. "Your wits are truly peerless."

"Masego," I said. "I'm not sure how to phrase this delicately, but-"

Without replying he traced a pair of runes out of red light and the Thief of Stars hissed.

"You little Wasteland twat," she said.

"Compelling truth is not objectively possible by sorcery," Hierophant said. "But this should compel her to answer and forbid her from consciously speaking something she knows to be false."

"What does Threefold Reflection mean?" Hakram patiently repeated.

"There are three overlain palaces," the Revenant snarled. "The thresholds meld."

"How many Praesi delegates are there?" Adjutant continued.

"Forty-three," she said.

"Where is Archer of the Woe?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

Why had he asked that? No, the important part was why that'd been a question. If we'd needed to know where Indrani was right now, it'd be written on a card. So that couldn't be the point. If us having that information wasn't the point, then most likely the question was meant to establish she didn't have that information either. That must matter, to some extent. Did the Skein need that knowledge to predict us? The memory Masego had freed had involved thinking we needed a touchstone. Archer wasn't who I'd pick for something like that, but maybe that was the point. *Akua's still missing*, I thought. Too many parts were still unknown to have a proper guess.

"Is the Empress currently within the Threefold Reflection?" Hakram asked.

"Yes," the Thief of Stars said. "Gods, you could at least change the questions."

I hummed. So, same questions. We'd meant for us to have the same information we got from her last time. So we'd make the same plan out of them? That was a chancy roll of the dice.

"That was all the questions," Adjutant told us. "It seems unwise to simply leave her here, if we are to act now."

"That one's mine to solve," Thief noted. "No card, mind you, but it's the obvious solution."

She got up and laid a hand on the Revenant's arm. Nothing happened. Vivienne sighed.

"**Hold**," she said.

While the sight of the undead vanishing was interesting in its own way, it was Hakram's body-wide twitch that took my attention. He winced, and I recognized from the look on his face the signs of a dawning headache.

"Well, I know what we need to do," he said. "We're going to find Athal, and then we're going to start a fire."

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### [erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, and so extra chapter. This one is titled "Fatalism I", from First Prince Cordelia Hasenbach's POV. ( <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/01/fatalism-i/> )

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Thanks for the link to the extra chapter! And also for the chapter 😊

*ArkCthuul*

Love these types of chapters.  
Rediscovering what you did and why you had to do it differently this time, sigh.... 😊

*NerfContessa*

Restating my older statement.

Love these kind of twisty chapters.

### [Javvies](#)

Heh.  
That last line. Awesome.

Also, if they can dodge the Skein (a precog Name, presumably), they should be able to work around the Augur when the time comes. That's probably going to be useful.

*Someguy*

Revenants are less powerful than they were in life so this dry run is useful and on the Dead King's expense, all the better for the Callowan treasury.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

The Dead King also believes in hands-on, practical teaching experiences, it seems. Note to Cat: avoid any room he and Black are in when both feel like throwing you into the deeper end (again). They will be bantering at your expense while thrashing out the shape of both the teaching plan and the scorecard. 😊

*Darkening*

Well, this isn't where I saw things going after that last chapter. I'm interested to see how it works out though.

*Death Knight*

Gambit roulette. Nice....

[frolamiz](#)

So Malicia copied Hasenbach and found herself a seer. And she is here in person, they will probably never have a better chance to kill her.

And we were informed about the fire last chapter =)

---

Cat said that Skein is guiding the Revenants, not the Sentinels.

I still have no idea how she could have found out about the precog. Was it the Thief? How does one even do that unnoticed?

*Snowfire1224*

I am so confused and I love it.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

they didn't go into the past, no time travel here. In the last several(?) days they did something/plotted something badly, and if you read the bonus chapter, I think that clues us in on what's going on.

*RoflCat*

Welp, time to get those arson (and murder) count rolling.

*WuseMajor*

Well, now we know where the Arson charge comes from. And we already know they're planning regicide, so there's Murder.

Now all we need is Jaywalking.

Do we know who the Skein is?

*Gunslinger*

Nope looks to be a precog revenant though they must have been a combat one otherwise they wouldn't be at Keter

*Amoonymous*

They don't necessarily have to be a combat name. Remember Procer only recently started scrying at all and still aren't great at it. On previous Crusades a precognitive Named might



have to be at least relatively close to the front or they could risk the predictions arriving too late.

So the Dead King could either form some “non intentional” ambush of wherever the Skein was, or if they were just with the Crusade, once the defenses fall they’re vulnerable.

Though the possibility they are combat based and have an oracular ability is possible.

*Daemion*

This promises to be a lot of fun.

*matesbe*

Oh my god, I love it. This is going to be the craziest plan ever since possibly no one has any idea what it is. It’s like you took a puzzle then randomly gave out pieces to 5 people, and then they need to figure out what it looks like. Without actually putting it together again.

[TeK](#)

Or showing pieces to each other.

*Gunslinger*

This was brilliant. I always love it when EE does something structurally different in the story.

Also the humor continues to be on point  
>Your brain is mostly decorative,” Hierophant assured me.

Finally if you can do support EE on patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>) Contributions there are what gets us 3 brilliant chapters a week (and bonus chapters)

*Novice*

The best part is that, to Hierophant, it’s not an insult. He is just stating a fact.

Zeze is the best straight man Cat could ever have, and this story would become a tragedy if we ever lose him.

*Yotz*

Then the third card thaws out.

It contains only one word.

**Duck**

...

And then giant fire-breathing duck starts rampaging through Keter!

*Jessica Day*

Actually, this makes me think:

- 1) Cat eventually finds herself talking to Malicia.
- 2) Archer is sent to shoot an arrow at CAT.
- 3) Cat reads "duck" and so the arrow intended for her hits Malicia by "accident"

*RanVor*

Absolutely demented. I love it.

*Yotz*

This is kind of plot I could get behind.

[Hakurei06](#)

So... a string of Plan A B C etc chapters?  
Sounds fun.

I wonder if we'll hear another verse...  
The second step...

*Cicero*

Wow... just... wow.

*Simpli*

Well... now I am getting worried as Malicia is still my favourite Villain here ^^

*Rook*

You can't foil my master plan if even I don't know what it is

*Novice*

Good ol' Isabella the Mad. Do we really know if she wasn't a Dread Empress in disguise? Maybe Traitorous in drag?

*Novice*

So I was having a look-see on the previous chapters for Traitorous shenanigans when I came across this: "... such wanton deviousness had been unseen since the days of Dread Emperor Traitorous, who famously passed for his own Chancellor through cunning use of a wig and a pair of cantaloupes..."

– Extract from “The Most Illustrious Histories of the Inimitable Dread Empire of Praes”, volume IV

Traitorous in drag was meant to be a joke but the madman already did it.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

From what we know of him, seems more like Irritant in drag, though probably not just drag.

“It’s been prophesied no man can take the Tyrant. Good thing I have a Warlock! Now, let all the records reflect that I am a woman! No really, tell the scribes, change all the records! Also my name is Isabella. ”

I doubt this is accurate but that really seems like something he/she’d do. If they weren’t the same person I feel like Isabella and Irritant would probably get along reasonably well. Though their tea parties would inevitably involve iocane powder.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

(foil) x (plan) = fp x fl ...

*Rook*

You can’t foil my master plan if even I don’t know what it is

*Burnsy*

– Dread Emperor Irritant

[Barthumphries](#)

I’m just commenting so that I can get all the wonderful comments emailed to me. 😊

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

No.

*Bart*

Not sure why not – it’s currently working. :p

*kinigget*

My absolute favorite thing about this chapter, is how it comes right after the chapter of Cordelia reflecting on her meeting with Cat and the achievements laid at the feet of said madwoman

And then we get \*this\*

I \*love\* it

*Nima*

A three palaces combines into one. Not a maze. Man that is dark soulsly

[Euodiachloris](#)

Eh. He's had time to really think about level design. And, Ranger helps with her beta testing. 😊

(I still think the entire Undead Burg–Firelink–New Londo intertwine setting up everything else should be taught in design schools as a mandatory unit.)

*Yotz*

A three palaces converged in one space...

One could say...

That it's,

*bigger on the inside*

*It's bigger on the inside*

*and once you've felt it inside*

*I'm sure that you'll agree.*

*It's bigger on the inside*

*but don't take it from me...*

*ask Amy Pond!*

*once you've felt it inside you will see.*

*JJR*

"How many plots can a man have at a time? At least one more than he knows about, of course."

-Horry Patter and the Philologer's Stone

*Burnsy*

A memory gambit. Yes. Also it's a :(redux)' of the beginning of what remains to be one of my favourite arcs. This is going to be chaotic, confusing, violent and really really awesome. More so than usual I mean.

Current contenders for the 'x's plan' titles? Cat, obviously, but I'd also say Malicia, Akua, the Dead King, presumably at least one of the Woe is currently running a second gambit that Cat isn't aware of, and who knows who else.

Man, this is gonna be good.

*Decius*

Does this entire plan hinge on nobody being able to forge the Woe's handwriting enough to fool them? Anyone who would be foiled

by the measures the Woe appear to have taken could well be subtle enough to bring about those actions- it would even be easier, if they had the cooperation of the Thief of Stars

*Snowfire1224*

Well I know with at least cathrine's I doubt anyone else could out cards in ice.

*Decius*

I'm pretty sure Thief could have swapped out the cards for ones of her choice, either before or after they were frozen. Could the Thief of Stars have done so?

The way the cards seem to operate is that each person takes a very obvious action on a very obvious trigger, but the trigger is what someone else says.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"Am I going to be victorious or suffer defeat?"  
"Yes."

*Novice*

Some say that said elder has the Name of Wildbow.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

do not speak of the elder gods so lightly. The Cosmic Swine is an unspeakable antediluvian horror of the greatest magnitude.

*breadknife*

So, the Woe's Thief can HOLD a person... or is the Theif of Stars just a thing, like the star and ship she disappeared before? If she can use her aspect on a person would it be akin to a Domain?

*Wry Warudo*

Could be it only works coz the Thief of Stars is technically not alive

[Cold Cyberia](#)

God Past Catherine, stop being such a bitch.

*Dantalian*

Now that she stole the Thief of Stars can we call her the Thief of Thieves?

*Burnsy*

Or as she's known by those with too little time for such wordy names Th0T

*Novice*

Can't wait until she faces Grey Pilgrim.

*Yotz*

I presume the reaction would be something akin to this

*Yotz*

Around the 1:16 mark.

Bloody timetags seems to be out of question for embedded tubes...

*Jessica Day*

This chapter is absolutely amazing! No, seriously, I mean amazing. I loved every moment from start to finish. Keep up the great work EE. Well done.

*Azure*

Yeah this was a great chapter. Just the right amount of funny and serious. It's also about time we saw aspects back in play. It's been a long time since Catherine has used her domain. One thing I do want to ask though, why does Catherine interchange using the Woe's real names with their 'name' names. People don't usually do that when they're thinking of someone. They would usually stick to one name or the other, but in this chapter Catherine was all over the place for no rhyme or reason. Like I can understand her using Thief when she's being long sufferingingly commenting on Vivienne stealing stuff, but she shouldn't be switching in between so often. Unless it's intentional showing that they are their names? A literal name thing?

[TeK](#)

I would need to reread, but my guess is that she calls them by their Names when they actively move plot via their Roles.

*nimelennar*

It might just be for texture. Using different nouns to refer to the same character breaks up the tedium of repetition. In addition to "Adjutant" and "Hakram," he's also referred to in this chapter as "the orc."

[Euodiachloris](#)

The true mark of a pragmatist: looking at the box of clown props, custard pies, villain balls and Heath Robinson blueprints you

cannot usually abide and usually keep in a vault with weapons-grade security measures... And breaking it open to use as a confusion-fu, anti-scrying measure...

Why am I also looking at Kairos, all of a sudden?

*beleester*

Okay, how does not knowing the plan work against a Seer? I can understand how it would work against a mind-reader (can't read your plan if you don't know it), but the future is the future regardless of whether you know it or not.

...are there no actual precogs in the setting, just heroes with mind-reading abilities who don't realize they're hearing plans in the present rather than visions of the future?

This should be testable – get a Seer to predict the result of a die roll or some other event that you can't plan for.

[frolamiz](#)

It has been stated before that Hasenbach's seer's weakness is that she is unable to predict unplanned events or choose what she predicts. Probably because she is not predicting the future, but that the gods are directly whispering into her ears what the plan of the villain is because they know it and like to cheat. I like to imagine the gods above as power gamers always trying to cheat with meta and the heroes as their player characters.

*Decius*

Some of the precogs can read the script. They can be defeated by going off-script.

*mavant*

This has been my favorite chapter in a while. Hail Eris!

[daegone823](#)

Can someone explain what the thief of stars did. She pulled out a crown and it was eaten by winter. I don't know what that had to do with stars or eons or why she pulled it out?

[Tohron](#)

It was a constellation called the King's Crown.

*Morgenstern*

And she seems to have pulled it out in an attempt to battle Cat's "darkness" (Fall). Only, it failed. Again.

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

All according to redux.\*

\*Redux means "brought back; revived."

*Oranckers*

Erratic uses (Redux) whenever the chapter title is a repeat of a previous one. In this case, the last time "All According To" was used was at the start of the 5-way battle at the end of book 1.

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

I'm aware, thanks. 😊 I was invoking a meme.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/just-according-to-keikaku>

*ericwinter*

So, I was just about to go to sleep, when I had an epiphany. We've all been throwing our ideas for what, if any, Name Catherine will form. Many have guessed Queen of winter, Queen of the hunt, and other such things. One thing most seem to have in common is that theme of Queen, which is nice and all, but far too obvious for the exact reasons Black Queen couldn't be allowed. But then I thought, isn't there another word for ruler, one far greater and with several alternate meanings that fit Cat perfectly? One that isn't just about ruling, since that was never what Catherine's story is about, or even a crown, but something more. Someone who keeps others in line, someone who makes laws and upholds them, and someone who can stand before even the gods and demand their obedience. As defined by Merriam Webster "a : one possessing or held to possess supreme political power or sovereignty  
b : one that exercises supreme authority within a limited sphere  
c : an acknowledged leader :"

To put it simply, Cat's name, if she gets any, will simply be Sovereign.

*Decius*

She's also in the running for Dead Empress.

*Jason Ipswitch*

But... Cat doesn't a look anything like David Bowie!

[Euodiachloris](#)

She's a construct: give her two free hours, a VHS player, a matching TV set, electrical compatibility and a copy of *Labyrinth*. Done and dusted. 😊



The next question is: what/who does she remake Akua into. xD

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I thought I was reading HPMOR for a second at the beginning!

*lennymaster*

HPMOR?

[Barthumphries](#)

<http://www.hpmor.com>

*Ben*

It's an aggressively terrible Harry Potter fanfiction written by a guy who pretends to be a lot smarter than he is to recruit people into his cult of personality.

*Yotz*

>Hierophant's lone eye swivelled towards me.

While the other was still focused on the Thief of Stars, I presume.

Zeze finally managed to channel his spirit animal, I see...

*Draconic*

You might have missed the part where it was mentioned that one of Masego's eyes is missing.

*Yotz*

Not so missed as completely forgot about the "missing" part by the point of "swiveling". Must be Demon of Absinthe shenanigans.

Thank you for reminding me.

Also, this means that his spirit animal is G'Kar now, since Zeze can probably just leave his eye as a portable camera anywhere he wants. ...or just plainly enchant both eyes to float around as independent surveillance drones...

*Brackas*

Ok so thoughts on the story. I feel the woe are being typed cast wrong. The world is a very heavy good evil reflections (duh right!) But cat and the woe are all neutral i feel. The squire is a neutral named. Same with hierophant, archer, thief, and adjutant. And this is where issues come into play on a world break scale. They are a third party in a world that doesnt need or want that. Its a reason why the wandering bard didnt want cat

to succeed. She read ahead in the narrative to see the issues that were coming. So yes cat does a lot of evil but she does good as well. Hell she gets where and what she is evil and how she is viewed by the many. But she isnt evil no more so than you or me. The heroes cant see this, she wears a black cloak so she is bad and must be killed. Oh she speaks sense it must be well crafted lies meant to manipulate. Good can be evil once you flip the perspective.

Sorry yes the whole group is a neutral force. The hierophant is a new name in the world cause none of the others would have fit zeze. The hierophant has never been a good or evil force in other lores he just is (if im remembering right). The thief is to neutral in concept as well it falls to the person to define it. The name feels like a transition name to me and has many different ways to transition to something else. The archer, the adjutant, the scribe (yes i know not part of the woe) all side with evil but are not evil names. Everyone is so hamfisted into black or white by the powers that control and the wandering bard. That no one can see otherwise. Then in walks cat frick your rules, frick your reasons, frick your morals ill do what i need to get what i want and my country needs. Evil fine ill be called that ill still do what im looking to do.

I wonder how off the mark i am?

*SpacyRicochet*

I love how Hakram is wildly uncomfortable with something he was targetting with **\*\*Find\*\*** suddenly vanishing without trace.

*Lemon*

So, uh ... Vivi just stole the Thief of Stars. Threw them in her Hold aspect. And she's stolen a Sun. If that's not a transition to Thief of Stars herself, I don't know what could.

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## Chapter 39: Hakram's Plan

*"My dear prince, why would I settle for merely being on the right side of history when I could be on all sides of it instead?"*

– Extract from the minutes of the Conference of the Blessed Isle, between the Shining Prince Harry Alban and Dread Emperor Traitorous

Black had once told me that people could get used to nearly anything, if it happened regularly for long enough. It'd been while we were having one of our evening lessons in Ater, talking of the many reasons why there'd never been a serious attempt by the Tower to forbid diabolism across the Wasteland. It was one of those little truths he enjoyed that seemed vague but ended up relevant surprisingly often. To demonstrate: arson. No matter what rumours Robber kept spreading, I didn't actually enjoy setting things on fire. Sure, it was one of the most frequently used tools in my arsenal even if it did have the nasty tendency of collateral damage. But it wasn't, like, my first resort. There'd even been a time where I'd been somewhat conflicted at the notion of dropping goblinfire on the head of the latest Named, army, entity – I supposed with the Tenth Crusade in full swing I was due to add 'continental coalition' to the list – that was after my head on a pike. Not without reason, either. When you tossed a match onto goblinfire, the closest thing there was to control available was *damage* control. Sadly, as I helped Vivienne pour oil on a wooden frame, I was forced to admit that I had gotten used to arson. It was just one of those things. I still wasn't an advocate of tactically setting fire to things, mind you, unlike your average sapper. I was, if anything, lukewarm to the notion.

"You look like you're trying to convince yourself of something very hard," Thief noted.

"I'm just saying it's disingenuous to call me a pyromaniac when I have actual pyromaniacs in my employ," I told her. "It trivializes the word to use it like that. Is that really so hard to understand?"

The other woman cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm going to pretend you never said that," she informed me. "And hope Hakram fixes whatever is wrong with your..."

She paused.

"... everything," she finally said. "What's wrong with your everything."

"Just pour the godsdamned oil," I sighed. "I still don't understand why we can't just have Masego wizard it, but let's be generous and assume there's a reason."

Setting fire to a palace that was mostly marble was fairly tricky, but we had it mostly under control. The walls might be stone, but the largest rooms all had crisscrossing wooden beams beneath the rafters to hang tapestries and decorations from. Vivienne had climbed her way up, but I wasn't in the mood for wall-climbing in chain mail so instead I'd reached for Winter and spread a ramp of ice that took me there. Hakram had insisted that

there be at least three different sources for the fire, so we'd rinsed and repeated twice before seeing to this particular dining hall. We'd yet to run into a single white-robed servant, which was a little odd. Had we told them to clear out last night? It wasn't like our breakfast table would have appeared out of thin air. Thief emptied the remnants of her jug and wiped her hands on her leathers, disappearing the empty receptacle without a word. I didn't know if there was a limit to how much her 'bag' could hold, but if there was she'd never spoken of it. Considering she'd once dropped a fleet of barges in the way of the Fifteenth, I supposed it would take a truly spectacular amount of knick-knacks to take up all of that space. And that was without even considering that at some point she'd stolen the sun.

"It's done," she said, eyeing her still-wet fingers with irritation.

"We'll still need to actually light them," I noted.

"Athai first, allegedly," she said, and without any ceremony leapt down to the floor.

She managed that landing in perfect silence, to my mild envy. If I did that it'd sound like I was running around with a dozen rings of keys. I slid down the ramp smoothly, though in truth that had more to do with my shaping of the ice than any skill on my part. Hard to fall down the stairs when you controlled where they were. The ramp shattered into shards behind me and I brushed off a few pieces from my shoulder.

"Think Hakram found him yet?" I asked.

"He's got the aspect for it," Vivienne shrugged. "I'm more interested in why we're starting a fire in the first place."

"Smoke will be visible from outside," I said. "Could be to draw the patrols."

"We could have moved quietly instead," the dark-haired thief pointed out.

"Not so sure about that," I mused. "Mind you, we can sort of manage quiet. But against a seer? As long as the patrols are out there, a single message is all it takes for them to be in our way."

"That assumes they're all coming into the palace," Vivienne said. "The Binds, at least, are sapient. It would be an elementary mistake."

"We don't really know how they function, Vivienne," I pointed out. "It might be that the Dead King gave them the order to check

on disturbances and they literally can't disobey him regardless of context."

"Guesswork will only take us in circles," she sighed. "Let's find Hakram. One assumes he knows the next step in this cavalcade of merriment."

We ran into Hierophant first, as it happened. He'd been weaving spells at the other two bonfires, just small spurts of flame that'd get the blaze started after long enough had passed. His mood had not improved since breakfast, and he merely grunted at us on his way to the hall we'd just left.

"Nice to see you too, Zeze," I called out as he cleared the corner.

I wasn't a fool. I'd waited until he could no longer aim easily at my wakeleaf. Not even fifteen minutes we found Hakram navigating the corridors with Athal at his side, the dark-haired Host looking rather harried. Had he been sleeping?

"Great Majesty, honoured guest," the man greeted us, bowing low. "I was told you had need of my services?"

"It will wait until Hierophant has joined us," Adjutant gravelled.

I did not gainsay him, since I had no idea where we were going from here.

"I have a question or two for you, until then," I told the pale man. "Did we happen to speak last night?"

He blinked in surprised.

"Indeed, Great Majesty," he said. "You were wondering as to the steps the Crown took to assure your safety within these walls."

Well, that was ominous.

"Anything in, uh, particular?" I probed.

"You were quite curious as to the nature of the measures that would be taken in the face of a natural disaster, such as an earthquake or a fire," Athal told me. "Do you not remember this, honoured one?"

"I've had a lot on my mind," I muttered.

Most of which I did not remember, apparently. So the fire had a payoff beyond just serving as a distraction, probably. Before I could think of a way to delicately ask what, in a pure hypothetical, would happen if the Silent Palace caught fire,

Hierophant joined us. Masego took one look at us, hid his hand behind his back, and I felt a small flare of sorcery.

"Lord Hierophant," Athal said, bowing once more.

"The palace caught fire, Host," he said.

The dark-haired servant blinked.

"How?" he asked, aghast. "When?"

I clapped him on the shoulder.

"Listen," I said. "Don't worry about it. Those sound like details above our pay grade."

"Are you not a queen, Great Majesty?" he said in a strangled voice.

"And, as a queen, I'm deciding this is above my pay grade," I sagely said. "Obviously we can't stay in a palace that's on fire. That'd be dangerous. So were are we headed, my good man?"

"There is a passage to outside," Athal said. "I will lead you through it, if it please you."

He sounded a little dazed. Well, I didn't blame him. Lots of that going around today. I checked on the last card in my cloak, but the ice casing had yet to melt. Blindly forward it was, then. The Host led us deeper into the palace until we reached the end of a corridor with two opposite-leading doors. Instead of taking one of them, Athal took out a small knife from his sleeve and cut his palm open before smearing his blood on the wall. Even as runes lit up I rose an eyebrow. Why did people always go for the palm? It made it so much harder to hold things afterwards, and it wasn't like hand blood was better than forearm blood or anything. What had previously appeared to be a wall vanished into nothingness, leaving only the blood-red runes hanging in the air for a few moments before they vanished as well. Masego let out a noise that implied he now felt like sticking around and having a closer look so I discretely kicked him in the shin.

"There was no need for that," he whispered.

"Maybe not," I replied just as low. "But someone screwed with my breakfast this morning so I'm all moody now."

He half-glared at me, which to be frank was more amusing than intimidating.

"If you would follow me, honoured guests," Athal said.

The threshold led into what appeared to be a dark tunnel, though the moment the Host stepped within magelights began to light in

sequence. By the look of them, we were headed down. Thief went still at my side.

"I forgot something in my rooms," she announced. "Go ahead, I'll catch up."

I cast her a look but she shook her head. So it'd been nothing she could share.

"Honoured one," the dark-haired man said. "Please do not. The guards will be arriving soon, and smother the flames long before anything within your rooms can be lost."

I blinked and Thief was gone.

"She's hard of hearing," I told Athal. "And not very bright. Also, frequently mutinous. I'm going to start a ledger."

The last part had no bearing on the situation, but I felt like it needed to be said for posterity's sake.

"I must find her," the Host gravely said. "It would be a grave breach of hospitality if-"

"Oh, look," I said. "Adjutant is sick."

There was a heartbeat of silence. Hakram coughed into his fist.

"I am," he loyally said.

"It's the fire," I told Athal. "Orcs are notoriously afraid of it. We have to get him out of here before it gets worse."

I felt Masego twitch and shot him a glare. *Now is not the time to be a pedant, Zeze. Do not contradict my blatant lies.*

"I feel faint," the orc added dutifully. "Like a dove. A dove that is sick."

Way to sell it, Hakram. Glad to have you on the team.

"We must make haste, then," Athal said.

He looked like he very much wanted to express scepticism but was too polite to do as much. Ah, the joys of diplomacy. We followed him as he briskly led us into the tunnel, and I pretended not to hear Masego mutter *no they are not* under his breath. The entire passage felt drenched in sorcery to my senses, heavily enough I could barely sense the magelights when I stood next to them. The Host apparently knew the way by rote, as when a crossroads appeared he led us down the left corridor without hesitation. All right, so Thief was going after something. She'd been necessary to the first part of this mess because we'd needed her to put the Thief of Stars into her bag – she'd also given Masego the signal

to close the doors, but we could have given that card to anyone. Diabolist and Archer were still out there up to the Gods knew what, and since there'd been no instructions to seek them most likely the next part could be accomplished by Adjutant, Hierophant and myself alone. The Empress was still inside her palace, so that was likely where we should be headed when we emerged from this. Alone? Ah, that might have been the whole point of Thief splitting off: that Athal would have to go after her, leaving us to our own devices after opening the passage.

The thing was, a plan with this many moving parts wasn't going to work. I should have known that last night, but I'd gone ahead with it anyway – which either meant the plan wasn't supposed to work, or that I was missing something. All pithy Imperial quotes about planning aside, there were too many points of failure for even the sections of this I was presuming had worked as intended. What if the Thief of Stars had taken a card, or added a fake one? To play the rebel's advocate, it might be that the Revenant wasn't supposed to meddle in our affairs. Only listen in on our conversations. But that was quite the mighty *if*, and it was making a lot of assumptions about the agency of all involved. It had to be about the Skein, one way or another. Why else screw with our own memories? Thief had called what they did 'prophecy by spun thread'.

I'd mentally considered the enemy Revenant to be an oracle, but it didn't quite sound right. No seer was omniscient, even those who also bore a Name, and the source of their visions tended to give a hint about their limitations. For example, as a heroine the Augur most likely took her cues from Above. I had a nifty little booklet from Black that was half speculation half observation on the nature of her abilities, which were terrifyingly broad in scope but also as fatally flawed as those of any other Named. The Eyes were convinced her limit was that she could only foresee things that were already in motion – or, as my teacher had put it, *initiated decisions chains*. It was why the Empire's once-frequent assassination attempts on the First Prince and some of the most key supporters of her regime had always failed. So the Empire had managed to catch diplomatic couriers and even the odd tactical coup by leaving agents in place with no instructions except taking advantage of presented opportunities. Except it wasn't actually that clean-cut, because there'd been an attempt on the First Prince's life that fell under those characteristics two months after Second Llesse and it had failed. Black had amended the theory to note that it was feasible the Augur could make two kinds of prophecies.

The first would be those she got handed by Above, about whatever Above cared at that time. Those were likely to be significantly more detailed, but also significantly rarer. The Heavens couldn't repeatedly put their finger to the scales like that without enabling the opposition to do the same – and more than that, the



Augur was only one of many tools. They wouldn't send her a flock of eagles or whatever she read the future through when whatever that prediction was about could be handled just as well by a hero they'd sent in to take care of it. If the likes of Black and Malicia had been handing out prophecies to their people, I had no doubt that trusted underling or not there would have been predictions given anyway. Just to be sure. But heroes were already supposed to win, weren't they? Unless that loss was part of the story, meant to pay off down the line. And the whole point of the wager known as Creation was that the Gods didn't know which of them would win their pissing contest. Black had a whole half-page of scribbles going on about how the Augur could likely read 'Fate' as seen by the Heavens but couldn't go beyond those bounds, making heroes a blind spot of sorts, but in my opinion it was simpler than that: the Augur's Role was that of a coordinator. She got the message out so troops would stand at the right place at the right time, but she wasn't supposed to actually guarantee a victory.

She couldn't, I suspected. If the game was that blatantly rigged, Below would have whelped out an oracle of their own to check her by now. Above had to toe the line.

The second kind of prophecies would be those she sought out herself. It was on record that the Augur had wielded visions to help her cousin the First Prince win that same title on the battlefield against the other contenders in the Proceran civil war. It was dubious the Heavens have much of a shit about Procerans slaughtering each other – if they had, a hero would have popped out to take care of the mess – so the Augur herself had likely sought out those visions. And that was the interesting part, because then she was acting as a person and not a messenger – which meant she was fallible. Odds were that was when the decision chain limit came into play, but that was too low a bar. She couldn't be impossibly hard to interpret, since she was capable of passing coherent military information along to the Iron Prince that was usable for campaigning. That left the oldest of mortal failings: she only had one set of eyes, metaphorical or not. If she had to seek out the vision about something, it followed she couldn't see all things at all times. And that meant she could be fooled, if she was looking at the wrong unfolding plot. It wasn't a flawless solution, as Black had written in his notes.

If the failure was too large in scope, she'd likely receive one of the first kind of visions to make up for it. Coordinator, yes, but perhaps also a safeguard.

Sadly, I did not have one of foremost namelore experts alive and an Empire's worth of informants to help me puzzle out how the Skein's future-telling abilities worked. We had something of an idea, evidently, because Vivienne had given me a hint earlier.

How we'd learned that was impossible to puzzle out at the moment, so I'd set the question aside to pick at later. What I wanted to know, as a stepping stone, was whether the Skein had been a hero or a villain while alive – or even one of those Named that floated somewhere in between, cast into one Role or the other depending on the story they came in touch with. Neutral was the wrong word for it: there could be no such thing as neutrality in the Game of the Gods. Even objecting to the rules was to take a side, in its own way. I was jarred out of my thoughts when we finally reached the end of the passage, Athal smearing blood on solid stone to open it up once more. We emerged into daylight, the four of us blinking until we'd acclimated again.

I glanced around curiously. We weren't on the wide avenues surrounding the Hall of the Dead. No, this was the base of a rampart. The innermost set of it, right before the ring of palaces. Near the outer edge of the Garden of Crowns, though I could see our target from where we stood. The Threefold Reflection, as King Edward had implied, was a pyramid of faded white stone that held so much sorcery it was almost visible to the naked eye.

"Guards will soon come to guide you to a temporary resting place," the dark-haired Host informed us. "I must return to find the Lady Thief, but I implore you to remain here until your escorts arrive."

I smiled and put my hand over my heart.

"On my teacher's honour," I said.

A flicker of amusement passed through the man's eyes. Yeah, I wouldn't have bought that in his place either.

"May your hours be fruitful, Great Majesty," Athal said, and after a bow went back into the dark.

The three of us stood there for a moment, and eventually I cleared my throat.

"Hakram?" I asked.

"My health has improved, thank you," the orc drily said.

I rolled my eyes.

"I assume you remember the plan," I said.

"I do," Adjutant agreed. "I must proceed alone. The pyramid has three gates, leading into three different intertwined palaces. You are to take the western gate, while I take the southern one."

"We're splitting up," I slowly said. "Oh Hells. This just keeps getting better."

"Look on the bright side, Cat," Adjutant grinned, ivory fangs bared. "How can they foil our master plan if even we don't know our master plan?"

I much preferred, I decided, being on the other side of that brand of quips.

---

*JD*

Poor Hakram. His constitution is just so weak and flimsy.

*Novice*

I know right? It must have been all that campaigning. Clearly, orcs are not meant for warfare.

*Daemion*

I'm fairly sure Athal, and through him the Dead King, know exactly what's going on and choose not to act because watching it is so entertaining. Who cares about a Dread Empress anyway? She's not truly immortal like Cat or the Dead King.

*Decius*

Athal knows exactly what is happening, and is making sure that he continues to not hear anything that he is bound to report.

*RanVor*

Nay, it's just above his pay grade.

*Yotz*

My take. Athal hears and reports everything as it is – or, at least, as it seems to be; and he is "paid" enough to mess with anyone who breaks the rules of Keter. And that's the crux of the problem – rules. That "Athal" persona is perfect executor of Dead King's policies, but never an exegete of His divine will. As long as "honored guests" are formally following the pre-designed sets of patterns and rules, Athal has no reason to go beyond analogously pre-determined set of responses – despite being very well versed in bullshit, and understanding that "hypervelocity kinetic penetrators" are more commonly known as "bullets". Just as long as guests wouldn't do something stupid – like breaking the law while he can witness it – they can and will get away pretty much with anything.

*Decius*

My guess is that the Dead King treats his Ravenents like a stupid person treats a hostile genie, by explicitly protecting against every contingency that he could think of. They are bound to report to him things that meet a certain threshold of “interesting”, but ‘hard-coding’ that level of mandatory reporting is doomed to fail when a free-willed hostile entity knows what rules it must follow.

And every Ravenent is undeniably as hostile to the Dead King as they were in life, adjusted by how much of their living will they carry into undeath. It seems possible that all of the will that they do have is left over from their life.

For all of his training, Athal is inexperienced at dealing with hostile living enemies. He would likely have trouble recognizing that his confusion is the result of deceit, if he has been raised in an environment where deceit is uncommon. And if he’s playing against Akua, he doesn’t stand a chance of seeing the lies.

[Javvies](#)

Skein is probably only part of the full Name.

Also, at this point, as a Revenant, I’m not sure it would really matter much if the Skein had been empowered by Above or Below in life.

*Miles*

It could speak to his personality at least when the dk is letting him be semi autonomous – so so which kind of conversation is more likely to be productive.

*Snowfire1224*

And it could speak to the kind of visions he/she gets as well, since names influence personality and vice versa

*SpeckofStardust*

“To demonstrate: arson. No matter what rumours Robber kept spreading, I didn’t actually enjoy setting things on fire.”

”  
I think I’m just going to quote someone here.

“You look like you’re trying to convince yourself of something very hard,”

*rangamal thenuwara*

Speaking of Robber, I'm really missing the amusing little murderous minion. Here's to hoping to see him soon.

*Gunslinger*

This plan seems to be right out of Dread Emperor Irritant's playbook.

The speculated limitations of the Augur is quite interesting and an answer of sorts as to why the Augur isn't OP.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I dunno: we got a Traitorous quote. \*shrugs\* Maybe a little from Column A and some from Column B and a lot from Column Pyro. 😊

*nimelennar*

I wouldn't be surprised if "How can they foil our master plan if even we don't know our master plan?" is a historical word-for-word quote of something Irritant said.

*Lark*

...or perhaps Isabella the Mad.

[frolamiz](#)

Actually, I feel there are quite a few similarities between them, except that one was a villain and the other a non Named general.

*matesbe*

That's a great line from Hakram. I can't wait to see just how all of these actions, put together, work. I hope for their sake this is actually some genius mastermind plot, and not a series of semi-random events happening that they hope will open a gap in Malacia's defenses.

*JJR*

When a plan like this is in motion is there any way to even distinguish a "master plot" from a "series of semi-random events happening"?

*Jonnnney*

I've got an odd feeling that all their actions we've seen are an attempt at a distraction.

[Sengachi](#)

If the “one set of eyes” limitation applies to Skein, they may just be trying to occupy their attention so Archer can do what she does best and put a murder-arrow between the Empress’ eyes.

*Antoninjohn*

What is Below going to do to match Above after all the Heroes are going for Cat and she’s Fea not a Named of Below

[Javvies](#)

Cat is still technically the Squire, empowered by Below.

*Oshi*

No she is not. She has no aspects. They are the sign of Squire “empowerment”. I believe its the same for the Dead King. They have both reached a point where power is sourced elsewhere. Cat and Trismegistus are still bound by story but their power is no longer from story if that makes any sense.

*Zourath*

Cat’s power is that of being the queen and only lord of Winter. If anything her power is story distilled. The fey were the prototype for the game of gods, and if anything were more bound by story than named are.

*RanVor*

I don’t think her not being Named really makes that much of a difference. She still has a Role, is still connected to Below, etc. The only thing she’s really missing out on are Aspects, but the power of her Mantle easily makes up for those. She’s pretty much functionally Named, even if she doesn’t have an actual Name anymore.

*IDKWhoitis*

She herself has said that name is dead to her by now. The connection to it was “Destroyed” by Black.

Ongoing debate whether Black Queen is going to win.

*Miles*

Iirc Black queen is the one that was destroyed by black. Squire was being replaced by black queen.

*dalek955*

No, she’s not anymore. She doesn’t have a Name at all right now, and hasn’t since Akua’s Folly.

## *The Quietest*

Is Skein maybe one of Malicia's things? We know that she instinctively anticipated plots against her on a name level, so perhaps that's it.

## *Activ*

Did Diabolist come up with a plan that required turning the story into a comedy?

## *RoflCat*

Well, supposedly it's Akua's scheme they're acting out....

Maybe that's the plan, to have so many scheme of so many people piled up to create chaos that no seer Name can see anything. Then have Cath, the master of utilizing chaos, do her own thing to get out of it.

Archer is already chaos, so she's out, Akua knows the plan, so she has to sit out too, otherwise her proximity to the area might cause her to 'know' which of the many possible 'route' she's schemed for Cath's group is going through, which would in turn allow the seer Name to see through it.

## *Decius*

Archer has been granted permission to kill either the Dead King or the Empress or both, and everything else is just chaos to keep the people who should be looking for Archer and/or Ranger busy looking at the monkey.

## *Metrux*

1. Archer has NO CHANCE against the Dead King, especially in his home turf strengthened by millenia and Ranger advances.
2. They are going to attack Malicia's palace, if Archer was to do it, why would they also go for it? Would only make it easier for Archer to be found.

## [Sengachi](#)

If the Ranger doesn't even bother trying to hunt the Dead King, then I'm pretty sure Archer's not trying to do that.

## *Gibborim*

Ranger hunts the Dead King repeatedly. She's gotten to him every time. It just seems that she chooses not to destroy him when she gets to him.

## *RanVor*

Killing the Dead King at this stage would be counterproductive. Catherine needs allies really badly and murdering the only one eligible for this position isn't going to help in this regard.

Even if Cat was able to take over the Kingdom of the Dead (which is highly doubtful), she wouldn't be able to keep it secret, which would hurt her agenda greatly and require her to split her attention between Callow and Keter, making her more prone to costly mistakes. Leaving the Kingdom in ruin is out of question – if anything, it would paint an even bigger target on her back. When everyone is out for your blood, proving how dangerous you really are is never a good idea, and doubly so when you know you can't win. Hasenbach would be unseated within moments if she as much as considered treating with the Arch-heretic of the East (and possibly executed on the spot if she happened to meet the White Knight), so there's no way to end this peacefully.

Whether she likes it or not, Cat needs the Dead King, and gunning for him now would be suicidally stupid.

*Snowfire1224*

Well zanny schemes are more likely to succeed in a comedy than in something serious.

*Yotz*

As if her "I'm sworn protector of People of Callow and their potatoes and in the name of Moonless Night I will punish you or whatever" wasn't a dead giveaway of her current attitude towards such things. Specifically ordering her to *scheme* is like giving a kid ten pounds of sugar and a Super Soaker.

Death suits her.

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

Horrible thought: Akua learning how to be the Joker.

*Death Knight*

"Look on the bright side, Cat," Adjutant grinned, ivory fangs bared. "How can they foil our master plan if even we don't know our master plan?"

AhahahahahahahaHAHAHA No. Just, no.

*Spectator*

That line would make a good quote for the start of a chapter.

*IDKWhoitis*



Im just imagining the Dead King watching this comedy through a spell while eating popcorn, afterall he rarely gets visitors, and less so not annoying ones.

Yotz

That is a very logical and reasonable thing to do.  
Also

*Welcome to the Running Queen! You know how this works. The game zone is divided into four hundred square blocks, left over from the Big Quake of '97, and I don't think any of us will ever forget that. [audience laughs] Once inside the zone, the Runners have three hours, they've got to go through all four remaining palaces, three hours or less, and they're going to need every second, 'cause you know who's on their tail?*

RoflCat

So, on the assumption that this is all Akua's scheme.

What's the chance she'll ask for a Title when this is over?

Afterall it's already been said Cath can definitely give them out if she want to, and Akua's not part of the Wild Hunt so she's eligible to get a title.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

probs will, how else would she have power

[Euodiachloris](#)

Bound Jester of Frosted Morns. Tada! One Jackass Frost! 🤪

[TeK](#)

She will not. It would be really stupid, like a convicted murderer asking a guard for a handgun "Oh, come on, we were getting along so well!"

[donforrester456](#)

This scenario is the plot device of many, many movies, books and series. Off the cuff I can think of scifi, horror, western, and buddy-cop examples.... Farscape premiered with this for example.

But yes, it *\*is\** really stupid.

RanVor

I dunno, seems a little too soon for her to declare her agenda that openly. I think she has too much to lose for too slim a

chance to try that. It's not like she can force Cat to do anything, and if she tried, she'd most likely just piss her off and get stuffed into the box again.

[Elliot](#)

Totally. Besides, being a shade bound to an immortal entity isn't the worst position. You can bide your time for a VERY long time. Playing the slow game is what it's all about here.

*WuseMajor*

Given that one of the titles she's handed out so far is "Lesser Footrest," I really wouldn't want to ask her for a title while on her bad side. She might name you something you'd really dislike.

I suspect she'd name Akua the "Knight Protector of this particular Oak Tree" or something and require her to stand guard over it 24/7.

*Cthulhu*

This reads like something written by Donald E Westlake. It reminds me a little of THE SLY IN THE OINTMENT or perhaps THE HOT ROCK. It is awesome

*Miles*

Did Masego vanish in the tunnels?

*fbt*

this was awesome, and really funny. Loved it! I thought Cat had the best lines, tho, not Hakram.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I love this comedy.

Athal is a great bro. Hope he's kept around.

*Snowfire1224*

I never thought I'd hear an orc compare themselves to a dove

*Drd*

Yeah, his poor constitution!  
I'm very glad I didn't have a mouthful of coffee as I read that, my monitor doesn't need another dousing. >\_<

*Someguy*

I'm certain they will next find kinship with fluffy baby bunnies.

*Snowfire1224*

Ha, probably the Killer Rabbit if anything (Look at the bones)

Although I must admitt your comment made me picture Hakram tenderly stroking a black rabbit while cradling it in his arms.

[Euodiachloris](#)

The Black Rabbit of Inlé deserves some pampering, you know. His schedule is always beyond insanely busy, so somebody should step in to enforce some me-time. 😊

*Snowfire1224*

I'd like your comment if I had an account

[Sengachi](#)

I will like it for you.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

This kind of reminds me of when Cat was first in Arcadia. The Dead King clearly knows she's bullshitting but he's too entertained too care, and it plays into his evil scheme. Next thing we know and she'll be presenting a clearly fake invitation to the guards to get through.

[TeK](#)

First of, I disagree with Cat over one thing: she seems to think that her plan is multisteped plan that have a very high chance of failing, which was referenced over and over along the Guide. But per previous chapter, we see that plan is not set in stone, rather, it's a number of plans, either of which activates when the previous plan either failed or succeeded. Kinda like Xanatos Gambit. Also, there's a bit about seers not being able to predict a plan if they can't imagine to look for the possibility of said plan. What if they actually plan to save Malicia from assasination, which they also planned, and also have a plan to foil their attempts to save her?

And I wonder if they really go after Malicia. She spoke of regicide, why everyone so sure that she plans to kill a royal? Maybe she wants to recruit a Saint of Swords, why everyone is so rush to accuse her of planning a murder? Eh? Eh?

All in all, though, unexpectedly deep chapter, that posts deep metaphysical questions for us. One of which somehow elluded me since I started reading the Guide, mainly:

“Why would Gods care about morality?”

And, bear with me, this is important. Morality is a petty human issue designed to preserve human society from killing itself. Different races would require different morality, and Gods would require none. So either they don't care about morality (and I'll explore this later), or, it makes ask the second question:

“How did Gods come into being?”

To save you my wall of text (well, a larger wall, anyway), I'll say this: either they care about vaguely human morality because they are human, or they don't care about morality at all. And this makes way more sence then I could've thought. It explains why Good vs Evil is more like Grey and Black morality, why Above is so eager to angle the scales, while Below only steps forward in retaliation, and why most Heroes are so improbably dim: it's not a about morality, it's about the stories they like. Gods Above are like teenagers: they like wish-fullfilment power fantasy, and can and will intrevene into the plot if their self-insert got into trouble. They basically writing Mary Sue fanfics on Creational scale. Gods Below though more like Historians: they like to see the story moving forward, written by the agents inside the story. I'd go so far as to wager that Villains appeared as an answer to Gods Above just spamming shonen protagonists en masse. And this is why the Creation is so intertwined with patterns and narratives, it's because it is a story, for a bored Gods, and some of which attempt to write their own stories, while others either nerf Above, or just ignore everything not inconviencing them entirely.

TL;DR Either Gods are human, or bored fanfiction writers.

*RanVor*

“why everyone is so rush to accuse her of planning a murder?”

That's why:

Arson is done. Time for murder.

[TeK](#)

To be fair, it can be a false rumor spread by treacherous elements. Such as drunk Archer, for example.

[Dragnor425](#)

Yeaaaah

Nah.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Does Archer really have to be drunk for that, though? ;P

[TeK](#)

Can Archer really not be drunk? A question for philosophers, that one.

[Sengachi](#)

\*Several\* counts of arson. It may be time for murder, but that doesn't mean we're done with arson yet.

[frolamiz](#)

Yeah, I like to think of creation as a tabletop roleplaying game, with above being a group of power gamers that play meta and try to cheat every time they don't like something. As for bellow, they are a group more focused on the story and roleplay that get annoyed by above's mary/gary sue and try to kick them from the game. It would explain why it's the villains's quotes that are usually more interesing to read.

aran

More like arsonal.

[TeK](#)

I feel punny today.

Azure

Catherine and Vivienne and their banter while comitting lukewarm arson lol. Hah Thief stole the freaking sun, she's hardly in a position to comment about playing with fire. Can't get enough of those two together.

Sooooo splitting up the party. That's not asking for trouble or anything right? What could possibly go wrong as they wander all alone in the Kingdom of the Dead.

John Smith

I'm rapidly growing very fond of Athal. Sure, he's DK's meat cattle, but he's polite and not an idiot.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Also, an excellent straight man to have when you go all Marx Brothers. 😊

[Sengachi](#)

"To play the rebel's advocate"

Bwahahahahahahahahaaaaaaa. Oh this was wonderful. I love it when little tidbits like this make their way into a story, small variations on our mundane colored by the world the story is written in.

*dalek955*

The term I use for not-quite-heroes-not-quite-villains like Ranger is "gray Name".

*Shequi*

I love the way the title of this Chapter shouts back to book one's Chapters in the grand melee.

If this is Hakram's Plan, which will we see next? I'm hoping for Akua's Plan.

*RanVor*

My bets are on Catherine's Plan or Akua's Plan next, and the other one is going to be the last. Unless something goes terribly wrong.

*Snowfire1224*

I would have thought Cathrine's plan would be the last to go with how her plan was last in the previous chapters.

*RanVor*

Depends on who is the mastermind of this mess.

[TeK](#)

Nah. If the structure will be similar (five commanders, five chapters, five plans), and we have five Woe, at least we would have Hieropant and Archer, untill we get to Akua/Cat.

*Alex*

It will probably be Akua's plan, because she has been absent for the rest of the plans.

*MusouMiko*

"On my teacher's honour," I said.

A flicker of amusement passed through the man's eyes.

Doing a re-read and I love the foreshadowing.

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## Chapter 40: Vivienne's Plan

*"A battle is, in my experience, a handful of hours where one of two generals proceeds to destroy his own army while the other simply happens to be there."*

– Prince Fernando of Salamans

For anyone to come up with the underlying principles of the Threefold Reflection and to then decide someone should live in there required an impressive amount of dementia, so in a sense it made sense that Neshamah had built the damned thing. I'd seen drawing of the pyramids that could be found in northern Praes – Wolof, in particular, was known for them – but this one was of a decidedly different bent. Stone instead of mud, for a start, but where the Soninke works tended to be broad and gently sloped this one was tall and unpleasantly angular. I suspected if the monuments were going to have anything in common, it was the amount of bodies buried beneath them. Akua had been vague about the rituals that still took place by the city she'd once been in line to inherit, but Masego had been disturbingly informative about the most infamous atrocities associated with the place. It took a particular kind of people to decide it was a going idea to sacrifice a few thousand people to make something called a 'plague cauldron'. The only reason I was pretty sure Diabolist had never been taken down there to murder puppies as a kid was that after the whole 'murder your childhood friend' party it'd feel like a bit of a let-down.

I pulled the Mantle of Woe closer around my shoulders after running a metaphysical finger down the chain binding Akua. Still pulled taut. Wherever she was, it wasn't anywhere close. After Hakram informed us we were meant to split the group in two to take different doors – the western gate for Masego and I, while it was the southern one for him – we'd wasted no time dawdling around. A trail of smoke going up into the sky of Keter made it plain that our work there had not been discreet, which I assumed to be the point. Hierophant was not in a chatty mood as we passed through the colonnades surrounding the pyramid proper at a brisk pace. Whether it was our piecemeal fiasco of a plan or the loss of an eye that had him in a tiff I didn't know, but either way I couldn't blame him. There was much I despised about what I'd become through Winter, but I would feel... naked without the eldritch senses of my constructed body. I'd come to take what they told me for granted: tasting heat and fear, hearing beyond that even of a Named. That muted sense I had of the intents of

others, which straddled the line between sorcerous boon and a flood of details put together I would never have noticed without Winter. All that, and I was only a bastard child of Arcadia.

No wonder the fae had reputation for exquisite machinations, if they had all these senses and more: it was like being the only person in a pitch-black room that could see in the dark.

"Our gate," Hierophant said, breaking our stretch of silence.

I nodded slowly. It'd been too much to hope, I supposed, that it would be wide open for us. Instead the two slabs of sun-drenched stone remained tightly shut, which was admittedly something of a problem.

"I'm guessing hammering through isn't an option," I half-guessed.

"We have no hammer," Masego reminded me gently. "And even should we employ sorcery, it would be loud and difficult to open this through force."

Figured. It wasn't like the Dead King bothered to build on anything but titanic scale.

"Maybe there's a magic word," I suggested.

The dark-skinned man inclined his head in concession.

"Neshamah," he tried.

Nothing. Yeah, I supposed it would be a little like a Callowan wizard using 'revenge' as the key to a magic door. There probably *had* been at least one that embarrassingly lame in the past, but it wasn't common practice.

"Could you-" I began, but he raised his hand.

"Quiet," he murmured.

His brow creased, and after a moment he traced a rune against his temple. A dot of light came out, and in a streak came before the both of us. It changed into an illusionary card, the Eight of Wands, and on the projection a few words in Old Miezian were written. I winced. I'd never paid as close attention as I should to those lessons – I'd had a deal with another girl where I traded her translations for my history essays – and I was horribly rusty besides.

"Translation?" I asked.

"Sparrow," Masego said. "And I am instructing myself to remove the third rune from your artefact."

"That's skipping one," I noted. "Last time was the first."



"It occurs to me," Hierophant, "that the confusion here might be the purpose instead of a mistake."

Yeah, I'd come to that conclusion myself a while back. I wouldn't work off anything this messy and complex if I had a feasible alternative, which once more took me back to the soothsaying Revenant awaiting us inside: the Skein. I was starting to get the impression we were not playing shatranj with the oracle so much as tossing handfuls of pebbles at the board and hoping one ended up tipping over the king.

"That aside," I said. "Did you engrave a card into your own head?"

"Several," Masego replied. "It seems wiser than keeping them at hand, where they could be witnessed. Aunt Eudokia always told me that treason is the one thing one should leave no paper trail for."

That might be true, but it didn't make him any less of a show-off.

"All right, Zeze," I said. "Magic fingers it is."

With a put-upon sigh he rested his palm against the back of my head and-

—

*"The palace isn't a maze," Vivienne said, elbows on the table. "Not in the traditional sense. There's a chamber at the centre with a guiding artefact."*

*Akua got it before any of us, which did not strike me as odd. Masego might boast a broader base of sorcerous knowledge, but these kind of traps were as milk and honey to Praesi highborn.*

*"Three palaces, reflections in overlap," she said. "The artefact is able to decide which threshold connects to which across the span entire."*

*"It looks like three wheels on a stick," the other Callowan said. "With pieces of twine hanging through, tying places together."*

*The look on Masego's face at the revelation was pure avarice. Godsdamnit. His mild magpie tendencies when it came to artefacts had only increased since we'd technically robbed the Sahelians of their most precious artefact. In our defence, Akua had been in the box and it'd been just lying there. Finders keepers, right?*

*"You found the room at the centre," Hakram said, cutting at the heart of the matter.*

*Vivienne nodded.*

"More accurately, I was allowed to," she said.

"You ran into the guarding Revenant," I guessed.

"He's called the Skein," the dark-haired woman said. "And before getting deeper into that, I have a few questions for our foreign experts. What can you tell me about ratlings?"

Indrani set down her cup, looking interested for the first time in a while.

"The species?" she said. "Nothing too deep. Lycaonese call them 'the Plague' because they never stop being hungry. Just like a disease, they'll wipe out everything even if it starves them down the line."

"Said hunger has been speculated to be caused by their unusual physiology," Masego added. "They never cease growing. They are birthed as bipedal rodents smaller than humans, and have no theoretical check on how large they can be save for each other. The Chain of Hunger is so named because ratlings will promptly devour each other when there are no other sources of immediate sustenance. Father believes the entire species is a kind of strange Demiurgian phenomenon of unknown purpose."

My eyes turned to Akua, who'd been standing a little outside of the Woe's circle this entire time.

"Wolofite records agree with the Lord Warlock," she said. "There are scrolls dating back to Triumphant's campaign in the region that speak of a time in the life of their kind called the 'metamorphosis', where ratlings will transition from bipedal beings of observed sapience into the animalistic large creatures called the Ancient Ones. The few of those beings that manage to consume enough quickly enough while in that state are speculated to undergo a second metamorphosis into the elusive Horned Lords of lore."

"Those Horned Lords," Vivienne said. "Back on two feet, about sixty feet high, antler-like pairs spouting from the head, capable of human speech?"

"That's how the the Lady described them," Indrani slowly said. "Save for the antlers."

"Well," Vivienne smiled ruefully. "We have something of a problem, then."

—

"- Burning Hells," I exhaled. "Horned Lord, Hierophant. There's one of those with seer powers sitting pretty in the middle of the

pyramid just waiting to fuck with us through a maze-making control artefact."

"A ratling?" Masego mused. "Unusual. I suppose the Kingdom of the Dead does have a border with their kind. Do you have the magic word for the gates?"

I sighed.

"Apparently that wasn't judged a high priority," I said. "What had you reaching for the card, anyway? Any help coming from there?"

"I was instructed not to tell," Hierophant replied absent-mindedly. "I suppose attempting to jostle the wards open is in order, lacking alternative."

"That's feasible?" I asked.

"Quickly?" he said. "No. But a few hours of protracted study should do the trick. It won't take more than half a day."

"We're in a bit of a hurry," I said. "... I think."

"This is not the kind of miracle I am proficient with, Catherine," he replied peevishly.

Bickering would have been a nice way to let off the steam, but a notion reached the surface of my mind, quicksilver-swift.

"Sparrow," I spoke at the gate.

The heartbeat of silence that followed echoed with unspoken mockery. Ah, well, it'd been worth a try.

"Sparrow," Masego said as well, only in Ashkaran.

Without a sound, the stone slabs withdrew into the threshold.

"I would have thought of that eventually," I said, not the defensive in the slightest.

"I note you did not give a precise time limit for that statement," the one-eyed mage said.

If I stepped on his foot going into the Threefold Reflection, well, no one could prove it wasn't an accident.

—

I'd considered it a safe assumption that the creepy dimensionally layered murder pyramid would look like a dusty crypt inside, but apparently I'd done the Dead King disservice: it was actually pretty pleasant in here. Sunlight, fresh air, and the decorations

were both tasteful and welcoming. The unfortunate part was that 'here' was becoming a vaguer term every time we turned a corner or passed a door.

"Left," Hierophant decided.

"We literally just took a right," I said.

"In another palace, yes," Masego agreed. "This is... not that one."

After spending a solid sixty heartbeats in awe of the fact that it was natural sunlight and not torches or magelights that lit up the entrance hall of the Threefold Reflection – I'd checked out for most of the ensuing mutterings about 'fixed temporal sliver' and 'redistribution arrays' – he'd gotten his shit together and begun to serve as my personal navigator. Since the entire place was a madman's nightmare of wards and thresholds, it was possible for him to follow along the metaphorical dotted lines of the wards and get a bare bones idea of the layout of the palace. Took him a little bit and required concentration, but it was reliable. Unfortunately, it was also useless: the image he got from that trick was only a single layer of the reflection, which meant the moment we left that layer we were lost again. And he couldn't see the whole pyramid with that trick, either, which had bitten us in the ass swiftly. We were probably past the outer reaches of the palace, but the gates we'd come in through were nowhere in sight. Which went some way in explaining why it'd been so easy to get in, I supposed.

It was inside the palace that the Skein would find us easiest to contain. So why had we wandered in blindly? This was Hakram's plan we were following, and as far as I could see it could only end in failure. More than that, we were wasting precious time. Malicia and her minions might already be out of the pyramid for all I knew.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," I said, then winced at the accidental pun.

I looked up at the ceiling.

"Skein, right?" I said. "I'm assuming you're listening, because let's be honest – if *I* were in your place, I'd want a good look at the people I was screwing with. Don't suppose we could cut out the whole maze thing and have a civilized conversation instead?"

No answer.

"Cat," Masego said quietly.

He was gesturing towards a door we'd passed earlier, and my brow rose. The room behind that threshold – a cosy little antechamber with fainting couches – had gone dark. An invitation? Only one

way to find out. I made sure Hierophant was right next to me when I passed the threshold, as I had this entire time. The last thing I wanted was to get separated from my erstwhile navigator. My reflexes were quick, but not quite quick enough not to fall. Winter came eagerly when called and a platform of ice formed beneath my feet, though I almost slid off it when I had to bend over to catch Masego by the scruff of the neck.

"Impressive workmanship," Hierophant noted, lone eye looking down through his own body.

I glanced as well, and forced myself to count up to ten in silence. A spike pit. And actual fucking pit filled with sharp metal spikes. There were even faded skeletons at the bottom, which was really the spine in the wine as far as I was concerned. It wasn't like they hadn't had literal centuries to clean that up, I just knew they'd left them there as a statement.

"A simple no would have sufficed," I complained, looking upwards.

There was solid ground on the other side of the pit, and with a careful flex of my legs I leapt up here. No threshold there, at least. Jumping from pit to pit would have been a bit much even by fucking Keteran standards. I dropped Masego back on his feet fairly awkwardly, given that I was holding him by the neck and he had a few feet on me.

"Quiet bubble," I ordered.

The ward went up, and we tried to position ourselves in a way that would make it difficult to read our lips. Changed to speaking Kharsum as well, it wasn't nearly as well known as Lower Miezan or the other Imperial languages.

"This isn't working," I told Hierophant. "We need a change of tactics. Your source that you can't talk about, can they be any help?"

"I assume they already would have intervened if they could," Masego said.

Was that implying the conversation went only one way, or was I reading too much into it? That was the pain in this plan – well, one of them – I never could be sure whether I was supposed to try to figure out something or not. I shifted on my feet, though not because of what he'd said. His silence ward wasn't the same he'd used when we were inside the Silent Palace, it had no physical component to it. Not that it had helped in the slightest against the Thief of Stars that we knew of. It wasn't a sound so much as a moving of air that I caught, a difference in pressure. My hand snapped out and I caught a wriggling form by throat as I smoothly unsheathed my sword.

"Morning, Catherine," Vivienne said, snapping into sight.

I dropped her with a sigh.

"I could have stabbed you, Thief," I said.

"My aspect is the only reason we managed to run into each other," she said. "He shunts me off at will otherwise. If I remain hidden in his vision of the future, he cannot predict where I am. It is no absolute. The rest of the gambit was presuming you'd irritate the Skein enough for him to send you here eventually."

I raised an eyebrow at both things being implied – first, that Hide could ward her from whatever means the Skein used to see us. Second, that she'd *expected* us to end up here.

"This was planned," I said.

"Sparrow," she replied in Kharsum. "Owl done, we on my tack now."

Her hold on the language was bare bones, but Hakram had taught her enough we could have a functional conversation. My eyes narrowed. The second card had the word *Lark* written on the back, without an explanation. I'd taken it to mean an adventure or a bit of fun, because Past Catherine had a terrible sense of humour, but it was also a kind of bird wasn't it? Owl didn't ring a bell in the slightest, but it might be there were at least three plans unfolding. And Vivienne had told us we were now on 'her tack'. *Skein. Prophecy by spun thread. One set of eyes*. Were we... Gods, that would mean building at least three interconnected towers. The sheer complexity of that – we did have Akua, though. Who was still missing. And the first rune-bound memory had me considering the need for a touchstone, which might very well be her. It was a good thing I almost never got headaches these days, I decided.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked. "Your aspect can't cover all three of us."

"Not need to," Vivienne smiled thinly. "We hunted Malicia presently. Now by, the Skein have her on way out here."

"By now," I corrected.

She rolled her eyes.

"He can still move us between the layers so we never run into her," I said.

"Before answer. Object limits has," she said. "Can not bridge same layer. Can not go nowhere."

"How do you know this?" Masego asked.

"Skein," she said. "Flaw. Single speaker, must. Memory back."

*Monologue*, I thought. She'd met the ratling before, that much I'd already suspected, but this explained quite a bit. He must have been a villain while alive. Which still begged the question of why the Dead King had put someone in charge of the Threefold Reflection he had to know would give us a solution to the riddle if pressed. He could have put a hero instead, and they might not have been as skilled at using the artefact but they wouldn't have *talked* either. It felt like he was willingly giving us an opportunity to kill Malicia if we were sharp enough, and while that fit with my suspicions this was a test it also had me wary. Guessing at the Hidden Horror's motives was a dangerous game at the best of times, which these were most definitely not.

"That's useful and all, but how do we find Malicia through the shunts?" I asked.

"No go layer," she smiled. "Centre artefact. I saw."

She tapped Masego's belly.

"Extract," she said.

And she tapped mine.

"Gate," she continued. "No inside. Cold iron protect. Close."

I frowned.

"Then why didn't we gate directly from the Silent Palace?" I asked.

"You can't thread through different pieces of fabric," Masego said. "I would presume that chamber to be removed from Creation. This layer, however, is directly connected."

Then why hadn't we done that the moment we entered the pyramid? Why leave a necessary piece of information, the location of the central chamber, solely in the hand of – I winced at the sudden spike of pain from my forehead.

"Second rune is flaring," Hierophant murmured.

So we hadn't. Masego and I had just never thought of it, and Vivienne being here was a contingency. She must have entered through a place that guaranteed she'd be here to wait for us – evidently she'd found it the first time she came here, she must have moved the exact same way. What if the Skein had never sent us here and we'd never thought of it? Mhm. There might be other contingencies, then. Hakram was now unaccounted for as well as the other two. And I still had a card encased. Fine, then, maybe we'd been surprisingly cautious in our recklessness. I clenched my fingers and reached for Winter.

Time to pay the Skein a visit.

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*IDKWhoitis*

What are the ongoing odds that Bard intervenes to save Malica? Like Bard has been quiet, and she gets a peek at the script. To her, Malica being dethroned may interfere with her other plans.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

i suspect that object that activated at the end of book 3 was the Dead Kings indicator that Bard was out of comission for a while. Something about Hierophant's rejection, or Hierophant himself took her out of the game. Not forever, i'm sure, but long enough that Dead King could make moves safely. I don't think he'd have let all this go down if it'd only be long enough for her to come back at the climax. I feel like she's gonna miss this.

*Ethereal*

Not Heirophant...

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Oh for... I meant to say Hierarch there. Not sure what happened.

*Nima*

Its Hierarchy. Im guessing he sort of put fatwa on bard. Thus make her cannot go to free league area.

[ayon96](#)

The object that activated at the end was probably how Melissa contacted with the Dead King

*Sylfa*

I think the most entertaining path forward would have Malicia being sown into Cat's cloak: that way Malicia can continue ruling Praes through the puppet, but only as Cat allows. Except Malicia would be running circles around Cat's restrictions, but she can't escape Cat. And Cat can't keep her hidden entirely or Praes will go into meltdown while people are trying to climb the tower.



It just seems like the most entertaining path to me, giving her a win here and now and a huuuuuuge headache later.

*Argentorum*

"If I stepped on his foot going into the Threefold Reflection, well, no one could prove it wasn't an accident."

From small slights, long prices.

*Someguy*

Anyone else have the same headaches as I am? Using an entire team to make Manchurian Agents of themselves and each other with multiple intertwined plans and contingencies...I need a freaking drink.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Definitely a sharp twist in the plot there!

*username**s**bco*

This is more like falling up a few flights of Penrose stairs than a plot twist.

I second the headache and the drink, and really hope there's an explanation later.

*Yotz*

/reads epigraph

*"Zo, you vant to kill my zoldiers? Two kan play zis game!"*

[daegone823](#)

Why would rattlings need to see the future.

Why is a name that sees the future considered villanous

Is this the answer to the augur of Procer Ratlings came up with there own future seeing name just to counter

I thought they were mindless how could they develop a culture to support the name of skein

[frolamiz](#)

Up until now, we only got informations about them from their enemies (in particular the First Prince) or characters that only have second hand informations about them and not very interested in them.

So given their tendencies to attack by hordes and that they eat

people that try to discuss with them, it's not surprising that everyone consider them mindless.

[TeK](#)

I concur. That reminds me of my Stellaris run as a fanatic purifier. The fact that I consider any species but my own (and, indeed, sometimes my own) as food is no reason to think I'm mindless. The opposite, if anything. We already developed social darwinism and absolute upward social mobility.

[frolamiz](#)

That would be a devouring swarm. The fanatic purifiers are the ones that purge the galaxy to purify it.

*Yotz*

When your millennia-spanning egalitarian democracy unanimously decides that xenos untermensch have only one inherent universal and inalienable right – to be tasty... It is at this moment all fanatics and devourers of the galaxy understand that only thing they can do – is to nervously smoke on the sideline of history. For soon they will be smoking on skewers.

*Someguy*

They are sapient until the Hunger comes upon them. Just because they are a kind of strange Demiurgian phenomenon of unknown purpose does not mean they cannot develop as a people and culture. Creation is a test-bed for the theories for the Gods Above & Below after all.

*Yotz*

No, no – pupae are mindless. Larvas are sentient and sapient, and adult ratlings are *extremely* intelligent. It just that after the first metamorphosis their body begins to outgrow their mental capabilities, dampening their higher brain functions until hypothetical second metamorphosis forces brain to develop in rapid tempo to would be able to correspond with physical capabilities.

As such, only most cunning and brutal larvas get to become Ancient Ones, and only most prominent of the pupae have chance to reach adulthood. Thus, each Horned Lord must be – by definition – a paragon of cunning, intelligence, and physical capabilities of their race. Think of them as Xenomorph Queens.

*Metrux*

That is one hell of a disconcerting image.

[thesurfer99](#)

not that i think you are wrong but as Metrux said that is a really really scare thought

### Mental Mouse

Foresight can be on either side (though Good probably gets more sendings), but they think the ratling's a villain because it monologued.

### frolamiz

Great, we are going to get more info about the ratlings. Maybe they can be buddy with Catherine? Their endless hunger remind me of the dream she had when the Winter King took her heart, and "insatiable hunger" is one of Winter's theme.

### *Someguy*

I thought she could devour them to turn their entire species into the physical embodiment of Hunger of Winter. But isn't Autumn the Season of Harvest as animals gorge themselves with as much food as possible to store fat for Winter? That's when they hit Procer for food and Hasenbach's men have to hold the line or the Procerans starve due to too little food and too much men right?

### *Forrest*

Multi layered amnesia plans: Only the best of plans will do.

### *Yotz*

On the off note, also – each time I read 'Hidden Horror', I can't shake a feeling that I must chose and discard a creature card, else I'll be forced to bury him...

### *ArkhCthuul*

Awww, Magic anecdotes, always a classic. :p

What do. You think he does with his hells if not pay his upkeep? ^^

Also this is mindboggingly weird. And great stuff.

### *Antoninjohn*

Now-Now Cat will be fail-eaten by the Great Horned Lord of Skavan along with her fellow man-things and orc-thing

### Javvies

Did not see the Skein being a ratling, super ancient or otherwise, coming.

Yes, Cat, the Dead King is testing you. He doesn't particularly care one way or the other about Malicia – she's not particularly distinct from any other Dread Emperor/Empress – and even if the Crusade had nothing but victory against Callow, Praes, Black, and the League/Tyrant of Helike, it'd have little or no lasting impact against Keter. Maybe a few Revenants would get destroyed and a few new ones would be created.

*Gian*

DIE DIE, MANTHINGS

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

I see a man of Skaven culture here.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Oh god. It's not that she doesn't know her own plan.

She doesn't know any of anyone's plans.

*Argentorum*

Kinda funny how it's the exact opposite of the first All According to, isn't it?

[TeK](#)

What if their plan is to have to not have a plan, and just bullshit their way through, while pretending to have many plans?

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Did Triumphant create the Golden Sea in the Chain of Hunger?

I think it was mentioned at one point she allegedly razed them to the ground and salted the ashes. It would make for an interesting symmetry between the south and the north, given how her battle with the spellslingers created the Titan's Pond. Kinda similar to how Bellerophon has a ton of laws and the Everdark is seemingly completely lawless.

*Yotz*

That notion has a nice ring to it, and brings interesting possibilities – like, say, gnomes being supersymmetrical counterparts to dwarves. And if dwarves are in control of underground, that explains where are gnomes hiding at. Geostationary orbital habitat, large enough to cause full eclipse in the possible scenario of Global Red Letter Incursion. After all, why fight with the whole world, if you can just freeze it into the stone age... Such disposition, however, would mean that dwarves are

incredibly advanced in all things sorcerous, of which we so far have little to no supporting evidence.

### Mental Mouse

What we've seen so far is that different species have different views of the world, and in this universe, that's enough to give them very different power-sets. At least a few of those seem to have *\*more effective\** views of the world, in that their perspective gives them power far beyond those of humans and similar species.

### *Simpli*

Thus I am still left hopelessly routing for Malicia – the vain hope that maybe the Dread Empress put up those whole plans for one reason or another ^^

### *agesbe*

Why are you voting for her? You know she's planning the mass deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, right?

### *ALKATYN*

She's an interesting character and a great weaver of plots, so it would be a shame to have her off the board. Maybe the Dead King will keep her around as a revenant

### *Decius*

Maybe Cat will sew her into her clothes.

### *Yotz*

Specifically – into panties...

### *Gunslinger*

This whole Keter plot thread has been fantastic. I expected a battle to break out here but not one of intrigue (and chaos)

Also I'd not expected the Ratlings to have Names for some reason. It makes sense now but then I have to wonder why Procer doesn't have many names considering they're opposed to each other. Maybe only Horned Lords can be Named.

By the way the guide is only 2 votes from the top spot on topwebfiction.com . Let's get it there <http://topwebfiction.com/?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

P.S: Viv's broken Kharsum was hilarious but I first thought it was an EE typo. The small downside of web novels I suppose

*Someguy*

> It makes sense now but then I have to wonder why Procer doesn't have many names considering they're opposed to each other.

"I don't trust wizards. Every time I levy taxes on them, they try to get my political opponents to pull swords from stones."  
—Attributed to Louis Merovins, seventh First Prince of Procer

They rendered their Wizards Guild politically toothless (out of public consciousness aka out of plot) so they cannot pull this shit.

Also as exemplified previously, I think their House of Light in Procer declares any Named who challenges their political power to be "Graceless". Given that the political players act like Praesi with better PR sense, the Robin Hood type Names probably get less momentum. Too bad they aren't one Droit du seigneur away from becoming Bellerophon.

[Javvies](#)

I'm not sure the ratlings do have Names anymore – remember, you need a solid cultural basis for (most) Names, and Triumphant broke the Ratlings and their culture a whole lot harder than the Miezens broke the Orcs.  
The Skein had to have been acquired by the Dead King somehow, and I think Triumphant's day was the last time the ratlings were a major player – the Skein is a Revenant, and they don't exactly have an expiration date like the living do.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Would you happen to know where this was mentioned exactly? I remember it, but I can't recall from where and would like to refresh my memory. This particular tidbit seems to be becoming quite important.

[Javvies](#)

Second half of Chapter 24: Invitation (Redux).  
Where they are discussing alternatives to allying with the Dead King.

According to Masego, Triumphant killed over nine tenths of the Ratlong population, and then withdrew after burning everything down and salting the ashes.

*Jessica Day*

I'm wondering if all ratlings who reach horned one status are named by default- it sounds nearly impossible for most of them to

accomplish and who else would you tell stories about in a culture like that?

*Decius*

More likely basically all Named ratlings reach horned status.

*Jessica Day*

Sort of 6 of 1 half a dozen of the other I think.

*narcoduck*

Wow, they're looking for a rat in a maze.

*Notsteve*

Hakram's plan: cheese.

*mavant*

Oh I'm sure the Skein betrays Neshamah every chance it gets, but he must have planned for that.

After all –

despite all its rage

it IS stil just a rat in a cage

*mavant*

> erraticerrata liked your comment  
senpai noticed me!!!

*aran*

Quickly, what's the ancient Keteran word for "enemy"?

*Yotz*

No, no – the real magic word always was "doorhandle".

[BarthHumphries](#)

Typo thread

a handful of hours where one of two general proceeds to destroy his own army while the other simply happens to be there

Change general to generals

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## Chapter 41: Akua's Plan

*"Note: though 'fell down the stairs' is common fate for Praesi highborn, further study demonstrate this is not nearly as lethal as the records would imply. It took, on average, five repeats to reliably kill someone in this manner. The tiger pit remains most practical."*

– Dread Emperor Malignant II, the Particularly Petty

I honestly wasn't sure this was Arcadia.

It didn't make sense for us to have ended up elsewhere, since it wasn't like a fae mantle was a key to the infinity of dimensions in existence, but this didn't look like Arcadia in the slightest. Or at least no part of it I'd ever seen. There was a sky, though grey and with no obvious source of light hanging, and ground to walk on. Which was where it got unusual, because it wasn't earth our feet were on. Or even stone. It was some sort of hard black material that felt like softer obsidian. I could handle that much, truth be told, but the shifting shapes of the same material around us were where I drew the line.

"Go into Arcadia, she said," I mused. "It'll be a shortcut, she said."

"I never actually said that," Thief muttered back.

Without us ever moving an inch what had been the sky above our heads now seemed perpendicular to where we stood, like we'd moved from the ground to standing glued on the side of a house looking upwards. I closed my eyes and opened them, which got me situated again but also had me gritting my teeth. Because I could have sworn I was now standing on the ground, but the sky was to my left and what had been the ground before was now a massive wall. One that was slowly disassembling into smaller blocks, shifting into staggeringly large structures.

"Creational laws run particularly thin here," Hierophant noted, standing at my side like nothing was wrong. "Arcadia always did have the tendency to work on say-so, but gravity here seems purely a matter of perspective."

"A geometry trap," I complained. "That's just great."

My tutors *had* said I'd regret not taking those lessons more seriously.

"Shall we proceed?" Masego suggested.

"You're sure this is Arcadia?" I asked.

"I have valid reasons to believe so," he replied. "Do you not feel the nascent gate at the end?"



"I do," I said. "It's far on the other side of the... ground. Wall. You know what I mean."

"Clutter," Vivienne helpfully contributed, pointing there.

Clutter was about right. There were stairs, not all of them making sense at the angle I currently stood on, but also a myriad other structures: columns and bridges, towers and plateaus and things I'd never seen before. Not too far away I could see a spiral of blocks that only made sense if you went up with a certain perspective and down with another.

"I'm guessing that's the way, through," I sighed. "Let's get a move on."

We began our walk through insanity, taking a diagonal bridge across nothingness that put us on... top? Top seemed about right, of things. I leapt down at what was the foundation of a tower going the wrong way, landing smoothly. Vivienne followed a heartbeat later.

"I hesitate to ask," she said. "But what exactly ensures that we don't fall off, Masego?"

He managed a crouch landing, but would have tripped if I didn't catch him by the shoulder.

"Strictly speaking," he said, "nothing."

I would not get vertigo on solid ground, I told myself. Gods, I would not get vertigo on solid ground.

"Reality could be said to function by the fiat of the Gods, in large part," Hierophant continued. "This particular place seems to extend that privilege to anyone within it."

"I should have stolen more grappling hooks," Vivienne muttered under her breath.

We moved on to a vaguely sinister promenade of black columns, which went some way in quieting the instincts in the back of my head screaming I was about to fall and die, but then we took stairs that went down through the ground and the shift of perspective had me under the impression I was hanging from the basement of this nightmare through only my feet.

"Remember when the worst we had to worry about was William stabbing things with an angel feather?" I said. "And Vivienne hilariously failing to knife Hakram."

"Not all of us took so well to killing as you," Thief replied defensively.

I wondered what it said about us as a group that we frequently ragged on Vivienne failing to murder my closest friend in the world. Even Akua got it on it, these days, and for an unrepentant monster she had a *scathing* way with sarcasm. Masego patted Thief's shoulder.

"It's all right, Vivienne," he consoled her. "No one thinks less of you for it. You're very good at other crimes."

"I – you – thank you, Masego," she finally got out, soundly defeated.

Truly, of all the terrible sorceries at Hierophant's command the most dangerous was his occasional bouts of disarming sincerity. Aside from headaches and the occasional existential crisis, this little detour into the worst of wonderlands did not prove to be a major hindrance. Slowed us down some, but less than I would have expected. The shifting structures were fairly accommodating. It was maybe half an hour before we got in sight of where I knew the still unformed exit gate to be awaiting us. Atop a massive cube of blocks, which meant I had to leap onto the side and think very hard about why I wouldn't slide off the way common sense dictated I would. Masego had absolutely no trouble with it, the fucker. He'd taken to this place like a fish to water. I got off my knees, having learned from our earlier travels to shield my face so it wouldn't stack straight into the new 'ground'.

"Straight across, then we shift plane again," Hierophant said. "This was quite the interesting interlude. Would it be incriminating to thank the Dead King for widening my horizons, do you think?"

"Yes," I replied immediately.

"Very," Vivienne added.

"That's a shame," the one-eyed mage murmured. "Perhaps just a gift, then. I would not want to be an ingrate."

"He's the immemorial undead overlord of a hellscape and a half, Zeze," I said. "I don't think fresh apple bread and decent wine are ever really in order with him."

"Maybe the soul of a minor irritant, bound to an ironically chosen household object," he mused. "I still have a book on Imperial court etiquette somewhere, there are customs to things like this."

"We'll talk about it later," I lied. "For now, let's-"

The ground opened up beneath us. No, it parted. Like waves, hollowing out the thick of what had been a cube and forming an eggshell ceiling above us from the blocks. The broad ramp that

emerged led straight to where I could feel the portal awaiting to be born. With the small hitch of there being man sitting on a throne to the right of it, legs crossed.

"And it was going so well," Vivienne said.

I winced.

"We've had talks about saying things like that, Thief," I said.

"Well, he's already there," she said. "How could it-"

I covered her mouth with my hand.

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," I growled. "Hierophant, assume hostile."

"I always do when you're there," he cheerfully replied.

That'd been perhaps a little too honest for comfort, but I couldn't deny the general accuracy of the assessment. I released Vivienne and took point, hand on the pommel of my sword. Thief to the side, Hierophant in the back with room to manoeuvre. Fae eyes meant I did not have to wait for anything as pedestrian as actually being closer before having a better look at the stranger. It was not human. Pale and thin and angular, like it'd been cut out of marble to look like a human with a too-large chisel. Whether it was a man or a woman I could not tell, or even if the label would apply. It wore a long sleeved-shirt of white satin, trousers of the same and had not bothered with boots. Its eyes were narrow and dark, and I found nothing but scorn within when they met my own. It was the ears that gave it away: long and sharp. Almost triangular at the tip.

"Elf," I quietly said.

Vivienne inhaled sharply. Masego did not waste his breath on an answer, immediately beginning to layer protective spells around himself. Was it a Revenant? I had no heartbeat I could hear, but that might be normal with elves for all I knew. If it was this deep in Keter, even through Arcadia, then I'd assume it was undead until proven otherwise. The elf did not move even as we approached. Was negotiation an option?

"Good morning," I said.

It stared at us, completely still. I kind of hoped deep down that it was just an intimidating corpse and we'd have a good chuckle about it afterwards, but I doubted my luck was that good. I could see no weapon in its hand or anywhere near. Close quarters fighter?

"Don't mean to interrupt," I said with a winning smile. "But we're lost, and I was hoping to ask for directions."

The elf rose to its feet, still silent. Its hand snapped out, and before I could get so much as a get word out there was a *rip*. For a heartbeat I thought it was tearing away at the fabric of this half-world but it wasn't that, not exactly. Like it was ripping away an invisible screen, it tore out the gate I had yet to make. Dropping it on the ground afterwards, it eyed us patiently. I could no longer feel the way out of this place.

Not to be overly dramatic, but that was something of a problem.

"I take it that's a no," I said. "We'll, uh, just be on our way then."

A ring of golden flames formed around the elf's hands and burned with blinding brightness until they... solidified. Formed into a long single-edge sword of what I might have thought to be simple bronze, had I not seen its making.

"Spellblade," I grimaced. "That was a little more literal than I'd expected."

"You may kill yourself now," the Revenant told us in a voice utterly devoid of inflection. "It will spare me the filth."

All heart, this one.

"Would you consider us to 'proper fucked' at the moment?" Thief asked lightly.

"Well, if you want to get all technical about it," I muttered back.

She passed behind me, and after moving my hand pressed what felt like a card into it. There was a thin covering of ice over it, and a sliver of will was all it took to shatter it. Another exertion had three reflective pieces of ice growing on my armour at the proper angles, and I took a look at what was written on it without ever taking my eyes fully off the Spellblade. On the Queen of Wands two bundles of writing awaited.

*Skein.*

Not the most pressing danger at the moment, but whatever.

*Don't. If Hakram is there, Swan. If not, Dove.*

Fucking Hells, how many plans did we have?

*Spellblade.*

That was more like it. Past Catherine better astound me with her wisdom and foresight.

*If Masego is there, Buzzard. If not, good luck.*

I was officially not astounded by Past Catherine's wisdom and foresight. I flipped the card and found nothing on the back, so I crushed it.

"What was the trigger for that?" I asked Vivienne.

"Your handwriting, 'when proper fucked'," she replied. "Note it was not *if*."

"Buzzard," I replied. "Zeze?"

"A kind of bird," he kindly supplied. "Although..."

His fingers twitched and the word appeared in red letters in front of him.

The elf swung and in that exact same moment I lost an arm.

It'd been instinct that had me putting my arm in front of Hierophant. A vague sense of danger. The red letters vanished like smoke, four layers of wards on Masego broke like glass and he was violently thrown back even as my sword arm dropped to the ground. I'd formed another blade out of ice before my arm was done reforming and immediately made for the enemy. Thief had disappeared, thank the Gods. She wasn't cut out for brawls like this.

"You should have obeyed," the Revenant said tonelessly.  
"Irritating."

They swung again, almost casually, and when the instinct flared I ducked down without hesitation. The slope broke behind me even as my body bent forward while I ran down. Fuck, how had the Revenant done that? There'd been no flare or sorcery or anything, it'd felt like a perfectly normal swing of the sword. It stepped to the side, and impossibly that took it right to my left. Distance warping, maybe? It couldn't be teleportation, the sheer amount of power those spells required was insane. The first swing down towards my torso I followed. My footing shifted, I spun to the side and it was just out of the trajectory. Then the elf moved again, a lateral cut, and that one even my eyes failed to see. I had just enough time to guess at where the hit would land and cover myself in ice before I was blown away by a hundred horses kicking me together. The elf was behind me even while I sailed through the air, having simply *stepped* there, and I was entirely done with this. Winter howled.

A dozen spears of ice shot out of my back, avoided and parried without fail, but I twisted around and my feet landed on the platform I'd woven. I filled the space beneath me with ice and leapt down into it, passing through it like mist. I felt the edges shatter beneath a blow as I did and wove glamour even as I rolled out of the way. Two doppelganger spun out of me and I left

another behind in a crouch as I mimicked the stance of the others. The elf ripped through the last of the ice with a single hand, then simply struck the illusion left behind. Golden flames ate at my mail and I was smashed into the ground, biting my lip so I wouldn't scream. It was above me again a moment later, the entire glamour broken, and with a fluid shift of grip it came down towards the still burning wound on my chest point first.

"Fine," I grunted. "Be like that."

It wasn't like my organs actually mattered anymore. The sword went right through me, puncturing the blocks beneath. My hand clasped the burning spell blade, reforming my fingers as quickly as they turned to ashes, and I opened the floodgates. Ice and shade ate at the bronze-like material, spreading across it lightning-quick, and the elf abandoned the blade. A step had it withdrawing where it had first begun, silver light forming in rings around its hand. Change of weapon, huh? I wasn't allowing that so easily. Ice crept across the ground, encasing my feet, but all it took was a thought and it was dragging me along faster than I could have moved on my own. Two heartbeats and I was on him, just as the light turned into a blade.

"Three truths do I now reveal," Hierophant said.

The elf flicked the blade backwards and I ducked, feeling something powerful scythe through where my upper body had been. I extended forward, every muscle bending, and the pommel of my sword struck its chest. There was a sound like a crack of thunder, but it remained unmoved.

"First, that which I see is the mask worn by void," Hierophant said.

The elf kned me in the belly, but I caught it with my free hand and ate the vicious impact with a grunt. It kicked me upwards into the air, blade already swinging, but I formed a handhold of ice and used it to kick its smug fucking face. It barely even noticed, until ice spikes grew beneath my foot. It angled its head back, just out of range, but with a twist of will I had them shoot out. While it ducked beneath I wove more ice out of the handhold and made it hammer my back so I'd smash into the Revenant. The silver blade flicked towards me, tearing through the ice I set in its path effortlessly, and with gritted teeth I formed a tentacle out of the ice trail behind me and had it drag me out of the way. The elf straightened up even as I landed.

"Second, in a world that is nothing there can be no partition," Hierophant said.

Change of tactics. Slugging it up close wasn't going my way. I stomped down and thick mist billowed forward in a tide. No doubt it could see through that, but so far it hadn't used more than

one trick at a time. That should allow me to make a dent, if executed well. If felt the elf move through my working, and in that moment I struck. I opened a gate, right through its torso. If felt its skin shiver, but it was still whole. *Countered, but now I've got you.* I grasped the mist, sucked into into a spike, and hammered at the silver blade with it. It felt like... light. No, more than that. I felt fury well up in me, unbidden. *Moonlight.* Mist turned to shade and ate away at the blade like a drop of ink in water. It was trying to burn me out, but I had the fucking power to spare. I brute forced it, Winter coursing through my veins, until the blade shattered.

"Third, if all is one then to master a grain of sand is to master all of Creation," Hierophant said.

"Enough," the elf said.

"Agreed," I smiled, and filled its goddamn mouth with ice.

It stiffened for a moment, and before it could finish cheating its way out of that I was on the Revenant. My sword carved into its side, shattering its way through the spine. There was a shiver of power, and if I'd been half a second slower I'd be dead. I stumbled back onto the ice, unseeing. The forward half of my body was just... gone. Winter was sluggish to react, as if shocked by the depth of what it had to reform. My eyes came back just in time to see a silver blade about to punch right through my forehead.

"Mine," Thief said, and snatched death and moonlight both.

She was gone the moment the word was finished. The elf grabbed me by the throat, but my mind was elsewhere. If half my body could just be formed out of Winter, what was I really? Lies and mirrors and the stubborn belief I was still a person. Maybe it was time to leave that delusion behind. I was a construct, and what had been made could be *unmade*. My flesh turned to mist around its fingers and I slipped out of its grasp before it could crush my windpipe. I heard Masego begin to speak and backed away.

"And so I act," Hierophant spoke conversationally, "wielding a blade of absence for higher purpose."

The ground shifted. Blocks collided against the Revenant, ripped out of the floor, and within that ever-growing cage it was forced into the air. There was another shiver, the shell disappearing as if by writ of some ancient god, but more filled the gap. That was as good an opening as I'd get. My instinct was to strike, but I'd not come here for a brawl. This was just a distraction. I remembered where the gate had first been ripped out, and with a steady exhaled made another one.

It opened into nothing.

"This is not great," I admitted.

I closed it with a flick of the wrist. Masego made his way to my side, panting, as the elf kept wrecking his ritual above us. That wasn't going to last much longer, it was going through blocks quicker than they gathered now that most the surface was gone.

"I think I lost the thread," I told Masego. "What can you do?"

He grimaced.

"I don't know," he admitted. "We've never-"

The gate opened again. Thief appeared at my side.

"Catherine?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"That wasn't me," I said.

A head popped through the opening.

"Do hurry," Akua Sahelian said with a pleasant smile.

---

*magesbe*

First like and first comment? Unless someone commented while I was reading.

And man is this something. That Elf was strong as fuck, and Catherine is finally honest about her own body and it's lack of... bodyness. Does this mean she would survive decapitation?

This plan is so fucked up. I still don't know what Past Catherine was trying to say.

[taliesinskye](#)

Now we know what the Dead King meant by Catherine being truly immortal. No doubt there are ways she could be killed, but not by mere injury anymore.

*Andrei*

Theres a few ways so far. The first one is the bullshittery The Saint does where she just flatout cuts winter. A more "Mundane" way seems to be moonlight and having a hero receive a sword soaked in moonlight sounds like a story to me. A third way would be goblin fire.



*Metrux*

Goblin fire being made from the stuff of Bellow, we can assume both Angels and Demons can kill her, though I'm not sure about devils.

*letouriste*

magic can probably trap her forever too. she can lose her form but if she is trapped formless in a prison...she probably can't do anything to free herself...

[tyizor](#)

A sealed villain sounds like a story leading to eventual escape when the world thinks they're safe from her grasp. Sounds like a bad idea for the heros.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Evil in a Can, TVTropes.

*Jeremy*

Well... damn. It's one thing for your protagonist to become an Eldritch Abomination, and quite another to show it in such beautiful detail.

Great work, EE!

*Tai*

Always show, not tell.

The most basic premise of good writing, yet so often forgotten in the scheme of things.

EE does not, however. At least, not often.

*ArkxCthuul*

Absolutely agree. She finally admits to what she is.

Now let's see where this leads, shall we?

On a sidenote, that elf... Ouch.

*soonnandnaanssoon*

I'm pretty sure now that this whole thing is just a team bonding event and skills workshop the Dead King planned for Cat and her friends.

He's like that Uncle who believes in tough love but is secretly a softie inside.

*Gunslinger*

The dead king saw every anime training sequence where the protagonist is thrown into the pits and decided to improvise

*usernamesbco*

Almost all of Cat's plans can be summed up as "throw a bunch of crap at them and see what sticks." This is just learning to do that on purpose to fool seers (and possibly the Intercessor).

With a side of applied body horror.

I still hate this plan, slogging through it calls for vodka to kill the headache.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

So Elves are cheat characters.

Wait are Drow like the elves in terms of powering up over time?

*Yotz*

Drow have no time to power up properly – they are too busy murdering each other.

Such situation is what led to creating The Rule of Two among the Sith. To prevent weak gang-up the stronger ones, thus diluting the Divinity of Strength. If there are only two of them at any given time, then testimony of strength would be true. Madness, if you ask me, madness and utter stupidity – but then again, both Sith and Jedi always were shewn incomprehensibly stupid in depictions of their supposed "wisdom"...

Back to Underdark – elves manage to gain such weight in the Creation in no small part thanks to their incredibly long lives. Spend a millennium or two in constant meditation and training, multiply that by the inherent aptitude for perfection among knife-eared pests – and voila!

Drow, on the other hand, are deprived of such luxury – as soon as one of them would rise among the others, their weaker congeners will immediately crowd-source the final solution to nascent problem, amputating all supernumerary appendages of person in question.

Starting with head, of course.

[TeK](#)

Not exactly. It was stated that elves imcreased their narrative weight with time, creating something akin to dominion inside. Also, they can choose one creational rule that does not apply to them at any given moment. So, it's really not so much about immortality or perfectionism.

Also, your theory, while interesting, is not mandatory. Drow might as well be Praesi with pointy ears, who follow the strong with iron clad loyalty – as long as they are strong, that is.

That being said, I rather enjoy your take on Guideverse, so please keep spouting theories ^\_ ^

Yotz

//bowing, with outstretched lower lip  
Thank you, thank you!

As for my theory – I presumed that said increase in narrative weight is a result of them mastering different aspects in different areas. I very well may be wrong on that point and elves grow over time in spirit just like ratlings do in body. Though even so, to imagine someone with ego of that size setting down for anything less than perfect, is a herculean labor in itself. And you need to kill time somehow – a century of training will suffice, I suppose... Immortality is only a road in that case – I presume the mere centurian elf would be naught but prey for the Woe, but a master with several hundred centuries of narrative weight under the belt – other matter entirely. Also, if that one is of the Golden elves, he/she/it must be at least as old as their hold on the Bloom. Afair, there was no child born among the elves after they took Deoraithe land.

>Drow

It may be some imp of the perverse – or some perturbing glitch in quantum lattice of my memory, but I seem to remember that local Drow deem betrayal as a highest virtue... Feel free to correct me on this one – I need to know. Even so – so long as leader strong enough indeed. Weaker henchelves will flock to the strong leader, and if the flock – or, rather, the pack – will be growing faster than the leader can increase their personal power... We all know that happens to weak Praesi leaders, are we not? >^ ^<  
Add to that constant state of anarchy among them, and the resulting picture would be of constant turmoil, backstabbing, coups and juntas. Drow simply have no time to grow into power; though if – *if* – one of them'll manage to survive long enough... Well, if they *are* elves of alternatively light origin, in that hypothetical case we will have local Eldritch Monstrosity of Demonic scale near the borders of Callow. And that would be the case where "another continent" falls under the "near the borders" thing...

[daegone823](#)

I remember a while back that the reason drow suffered was because of breeding. Centuries of inbreeding has caused them to lose the ability to build numbers or was it that they somehow broke a rule in creation where they had their breeding stunted don't remember but it was around book 2 in the beginning I believe

---

That was about the ogres, though. Nothing was said about the drow save for the Everdark being burned down by the arriving elves and Tenets of the Night being about murdering one's way to the top.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

Where was it mentioned that the elves burned down the Everdark?

Alex

They burned the ships they sailed across the ocean on after arriving in the Everdark I believe. It's from the chapter where the Bard scares the Emerald Swords away from killing Akua during a conversation outside Liesse.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

I don't think the elves and the drow are related. Basically all elves are OP – Cordelia believed that a handful of young elves could slaughter a company of soldiers without a problem. Meanwhile Akua hired a thousand drow mercenaries (back in book 2) and no special remarks were made regarding their capability. If they had any elf-like abilities, I think it would have been mentioned.

---

The number "thousand" referred to the helikean mercenaries, the drow were a mercenary company of its own, without numbers stated, and Cat captured only seven of them.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

Huh, I guess you're right. Doesn't change the fact no one remarked or raised an issue with the drow being employed on the battlefield. If they were as effective as the youngest elves they would have slaughtered half of an army.

*1shot4living*

Wait, what? Elves can choose to ignore a creational rule? I must have missed a chapter somewhere.... pleasure sir, may I have some sauce?

*Novice*

"The elves did not appear, because appearing had the implication they had not been previously there. They had been, they'd just decided that Creation would not be able to see them. That was the way with the older elves: they decided what rules applied to them. They could not ignore more than one, but that was usually enough." – Epilogue, Book II

*Ishot4living*

Huh, I completely forgot about that, thank you kindly dearest stranger.

*George Maddux*

Fun! Turns out there are more beings the equal of a lesser god than we realized! Honestly this reminds me somewhat of Xianxia, with a new cast (and caste) of opponents now that she's an Immortal.

*WuseMajor*

Eh, Cat has tons more power than she's actually willing to use, because of the whole "Fae Mindset" side effects. Also, the local Elves are all jerks.

What worries me is that Akua can apparently open Arcadian portals now. And that this was her plan, instead of Masego's plan.

*Rook*

The interesting thing about this is that since Catherine's body apparently no longer has anything to do with her being and her own soul is woven into the winter mantle, the argument can be made that she essentially is winter and winter is her, there is no difference, or at least the partition is becoming exceedingly thin.

Akua having influence or a grasp of winter can likely end up in one of two ways, depending on the direction the narrative heads and the details. The obvious one would be a struggle for control, which while isn't exactly risk free is also fairly routine by now.

The more interesting, far messier, and far more dangerous one is if Akua's manages to shift her creational identity into the piece of the mantle she got a hold of, which might drag

in both her soul and the cloak it's bound to. It has the potential to create a Frankenstein amalgam of Catherine, Akua, and a Named artifact. All the brutality and practicality of Catherine, the scheming and arcane knowledge of Akua, wrapped up in a demigod's mantle which is near immune to lesser sorceries and grows in narrative weight with every defeated banner added to the collection. Literally turning every major defeated enemy for into narrative experience points.

The next step in Catherine's self-mutilating, accidental transformation into an ever-scarier abomination.

*mavant*

OT3.

*burdi*

i think its happen because cat not yet master her power, not because they are equal in power and she actually not even thirty year old when her opponent has all the time in the world already

[TeK](#)

At least there's no rumble that splits the heavens and shatters the earth.

And about lesser gods – I thought they were not that strong, or rare. As per Warlocks explanation, there is a difference between Gods and gods.

*mavant*

Well, now I want to go watch Labyrinth again.

*Yotz*

May I suggest *Dark City* by one Alex Proyas?

A film much more deserving praise than *Matrix* ever was, imho, and nicely depicting some aspects of *Labyrinth*'s maddening topographical worldsponge-shifting. It is truly sad that after a promising start and long drought Proyas ended up with despicable "Gods of Egypt" to his name..

*mavant*

I've seen it. Good film! Labyrinth has a special place in my heart, though. And a condescending elfin being.

*Antoninjohn*

The plan Cat needs to do is Step 1: Shatter the moon  
Step 2: Use the pieces as astroid artillery to crush her enemies  
Step 3: Profit  
First step always works

*WuseMajor*

I'm pretty sure that, unlike in a video game, the moon here doesn't regenerate regularly so you can drop it on people. Though, it might I guess?

Regardless, it's safer to just open a portal to whichever hell has rains of burning stone regularly. Similar result and you can do it as many times as you want.

*Yotz*

Regular Moon stays shattered, I presume. Arcadian reflection of the Moon – another story entirely. It may regenerate, or it may not – the jury is out on that case. Also, in the world where symbols matter that much, shattering the Moon and using its lightless husk as a weapon against the adversaries would be much more preferable to Duchess of Moonless Nights than colony-dropping random pieces of Hellish geography on quite suspecting enemies like some boorish Sovereign. Twofoldly so if she dives into the Faerie mindset.

[TeK](#)

She's the duchess of Moonless Nights, we both know she and a moon are not on speaking terms right now. But the Cat's dominion is, per her name, moonless, so if she drew enough power to drop the moon, there will be no moon to speak of.

Of course, that's not taking all that shady "astronomy" thing, but come on, gravity fizzles out when presented with a classical element of the void, and space is a void, therefore there is no gravity in space.

*Yotz*

True, true. Even if Moonless Night will come to be through the act of shattering the Moon, it may be a classic case of "win more".

[donforrester456](#)

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[donforrester456](#)

\*Sovreign\* of Moonless Nights, lately. She got an upgrade somewhere on that.

Yotz

Well, "Sovereign" is a generalized term for the ruler of something – so, being Sovereign doesn't necessarily precludes one from being Duchess.

Though, being the only Entitled Winter Fae left, Cat technically holds the right to the Title of Queen of Winter – but even so, one can hold both "The Ice Queen" and "The Duchess of Moonless Nights" titles, along with dozens upon dozens of others.

Exact nuances of feudal chains of inheritance can be more than mind-boggling, and quite a bit obscure, though.

[taliesinskye](#)

Something I'm wondering: if Cat started calling herself the Queen of Winter and nobody gainsaid her, would she get all the power of Winter's Monarch?

ALKATYN

I thought previously that elves were the same thing as Fae, but it seems like they're unrelated? Puzzling. So elves are basically another humanoid species like humans, orcs, goblins, etc. but immortal and assholes?

Yotz

Descendants of Assholetep the Insufferable, ruler of the Dikh-Ehd dynasty, without a doubt.

MetruX

It has been said before that elves, TRUE elves, not the golden bloom ones like this one, are one of the major powers of the world, like the gnomes. While Fae deal with all kinds of lower powers. Thus, we can very much assume they are very different things and, more importantly, that you don't want to deal with elves. I mean, the golden bloom ones are the racists and not good ones that got cast out, and this single one is already almost impossible for them to deal with. Imagine if you had to deal with the real deal?

Yotz

If I remember correctly, non-bloom elves are one of primary powers in the world thanks to their humongous empire where they intermingle and interbreed with other races freely. It was one of the points – if not *the* point of contention between them and Golden elves who saw that practice as a degrading, leading to diminishing of inherent power of elven



race through defiling the intrinsic purity of the Chosen by detestable acts of rampant bestiality. So, non-bloom elves may, in fact, be less powerful than rabid racists who spend whole entirety of their lives accumulating and refining individual power.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Depends on what kind of power we're talking about. Because the Goldenberks might be more narratively hefty, but they lose in the whole "able to rule a huge state without being cursed with sterility" and "nobody, not even the ground you walk on, can stand you" departments (the two are linked).

Social know-how and being nice are also... powers.

Yotz

Well, best defense is not being where the strike lands, so... Yeah, powerset of Ungold elves may indeed be spread through other disciplines, and be comparable or greater in scale than one of the Gold ones.

### [frolamiz](#)

Not to mention that the elves that breed with others races don't die of old age. So while they watch their grand-grand-grand...-grand-children living their life, their empire should still have a good chunk on "pures" elves that should be on par with the ones of the golden bloom, but in greater numbers since the golden bloom's ones are supposed to be a minority.

Yotz

Come to think of it – and mind you, this is again purely speculative thing...

What if elven prowess in all things mundane and magical is a result of them, how should I put this, "investing" their souls in the "thing" in question? Exempli gratia, self-absorbed fanatical racial purists invest their souls – and narrative weight – into their own personas, making them literal demi-gods; all while their more open-minded kinselves put their souls into the world itself, growing as a result into something akin to daemons – not demons, mind you – and being rather flimsy in comparison as a result. Not "weak" per se, but only slightly more better than your average "peak physical form" human. That would translate itself into ungold elves, in a matter of speaking, "dissolving" in the some part of the Creation, leaving their mortal coils behind or tracelessly vanishing altogether, thus preventing inevitable overpopulation and

making "ancestors will protect us" very literal statement. Just imagine trying to conquer a land where every little thing *hates* you. Animals, insects, trees, grass, springs – hell, *air itself* will fight you, all while you blunder pointlessly through ever-shifting labyrinth of improbable landscapes...

But the elves of the land themselves are weak and easily murderizable for any competent opponent – all while their Golden counterparts live in state of constant war with very land they seized and consequently enslaved, and can't stomach even the idea of interacting with anyone beyond very narrow group of directly connected to the Above *creatures*. Because only Golden elves are persons, obviously.

### *Quite Possibly A Cat*

The average individual non-Bloom is almost certainly weaker than the average Bloom elf. At the very least the Bloom Elves haven't had children in a long time, so are all automatically going to be very old.

However, the non-Bloom elves probably have far more old pure elves in terms of absolute numbers. The Golden Bloom was a small group of outcasts that got kicked out when the hybridizing started happening. So non-Bloom pure elves were almost certainly more numerous than Bloom elves, but they've just added a massive number of hybrids to their ranks.

Worst (Best) of all, natural selection is still a thing. So it's very possible that the non-Bloom elves are going to make hybrids with the best of both worlds. From humans you might get things like not needing approval from the local spirits to have children and freedom from narratives, while the elf part spits out longevity and power. Of course that depends on selection pressures and underlying genetics. If the non-Bloom elves are focused on ramping up their power it's possible they are vastly more powerful. Something stupid like: "The current generation is 60% elf, 20% human, 10% ogre, 10% dwarf, 5% goblin, 15% dragon, 10% djinn, 5% devil, 5% Fae and 3% demon on average. We aren't quite sure how we got over 100%, since the gnomes wrote us an angry letter when we tried to figure it out. Population growth is 7% a year. Most of our food is grown in Arcadia. We're gonna colonize Hell soon!"

### *ArkCthuul*

That post just made my night. Damn funny.

Also the theory of the elves above are quite insightful, let's see if they are true as well.

## *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

I see Cat's found a match made in heaven, an elf willing to choke.

[TeK](#)

He was forced to choke her, it was all a set up!

*mavant*

Is this just general praise for breathplay, or a reference to something further back in the text?

## *Silverking*

So, I know it's been a while, but what exactly was the chapter where Vivienne failed miserably to kill Hakram?

[TeK](#)

When she was a heroine. Laure, when Hunter lost his arm and Cat helped him find it. Of course, she sucks at searching, so Thief got angry and tried to stab Hakram, because he lost his arm, just to mock Hunter when he later found it.

*RanVor*

Book 2, Chapter 9: Rematch.

## [Javvies](#)

Huh.

Is Spellblade an Elf-associated Name or just a known Elf ability?

Also, Thief can steal moonlight? Is there anything she can't steal?

Interesting. Cat now demonstrated the difference between having unnatural longevity and the kind of Immortality that the Dead King takes an active interest in.

*Metrux*

Well, we have seen her steal a sun before... That she could steal his blade was not a surprise to me, but that she succeeded at it was. Also, is this trully a revenant? If yes, then the Dead King has SEVERAL hidden cards above what we first believed.

*JJR*

There is one thing Thief will never be able to steal. Anything that she already owns.

(<https://www.nuklearpower.com/2005/07/28/episode-582-trickery-trickery-trickery/>)

*Nima*

jesus christ. the dead has all race named.  
and all of them like hidden boss or something

*Novice*

So Catherine just went into full Winter mode and it didn't deprived her of her rational thinking like in the past? She didn't go full villain monologue? Interesting. Very interesting.

I wonder what changed.

*Novice*

Jesus Christ my grammar skills plummeted. Don't go commenting immediately after getting out of bed, kids.

*MetruX*

Well, it's time to get to bed for me, so... I'll take your advice? xP

*nick012000*

Most likely what changed was her imprinting it with her mind/soul, which is why Akua wound up summoning her back when she drew really heavily on Winter while Cat was K0ed.

*Gunslinger*

Akua's creation can't have changed Principle Alienation so it couldn't be because of that. My guess is there wasn't enough time since the battle started for her to go all Winter Fae on everyone.

Either that or the repeated cutting of her construct kinda damages Winter itself like the time against Saint thus reducing the impact of Winter.

[donforrester456](#)

My theory? She's being called Sovereign of Moonless Nights, now. Not "Queen of Callow and Duchess of X"... but sovereign. Given the behavior of a prior sovereign of winter we know about, I'm apt to think that status adds a bit more personality in the mix.

*Jane*

Well, Cat seems to have gotten over a big stumbling block between her and accepting her new self. Thanks, Elf! Internalizing that

her body isn't *her* anymore can only help her in the future (unless she *stops* being Winter, somehow). She's been happy enough to sacrifice limbs in the past, when needed, but there's a big difference between knowing you can regrow an arm in a minute, and understanding that your body is just a convenient fiction that you leave unchanged out of habit.

Incidentally, is it just me, or did she throw out a lot more ice than she normally does? I think she mentioned a couple of chapters back that she was taking advice from Akua (a genuinely good idea, incidentally), but I'm a bit surprised that she didn't seem to suffer any ill-effects from it. Was it less Winter-intensive than it seemed, or is she getting a better hold on Winter?

*werafdsaew*

Probably both? It makes sense narratively that she would keep powering up as long as her opponents are still stronger than her.

*Notsteve*

It might also be that this is a situation where her state of mind matters less. Before she was fighting heroes, where fighting like a traditional villain would get her killed. So she had to hold herself back and be ready to run at a moment's notice, which was the opposite of what Winter wanted her to do. So she had to carefully control the influence Winter was having on her mind.

Here she's just trying to kill a powerful non-hero. She doesn't have to worry about the narrative. So she can go all-out and doesn't have to worry about her state of mind, so she doesn't have to fight Winter's influence even if it's just as strong.

*1queenofblades1*

Honestly Cat should just let Masego study her to see if he can help her become more powerful. Something tells me she's going to need it.

"Whether they be Gods or Kings or all the armies in Creation"

*Gunslinger*

She could let him behead her now even.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

So, bets on who will be the fifth member of the Dead King's protection squad?

Personally I'm partial to either a monk-type (to cover Grey Pilgrim) or maybe an orc Warlord (because that's the only way we could see an old Named orc). I would settle for a White Knight too, even though it's not my preferred choice. Let's be honest, the White Knights are kinda vanilla.

[TeK](#)

We could see a dwarf, I want a dwarf.

*haihappen*

This pocket dimension dungeon would make both M.C. Escher and Gygax proud.

*Yavandir*

Lolz from the chapter when they started their 'master plan' this is how i see it...

*ALazyMonster*

I'm curious if Cat can make a spellblade now since wasn't it part of her aspects(that just turned into part of winter) that she could take and use other abilities. I know she used winter combined with her aspect to take "call" from Akua and that it was mentioned before the night raid with the wild hunt that she could take powers and turn them into trinkets like that whistle that still hasn't been used.

It would be an interesting way for Cat to inadvertently gain more power in my opinion. Kind of like "oh I devoured a zombie elf's blade that was made out of sunlight(I'm assuming since the first one golden light), so now I can make my own spellblades out of darkness or something(I figure it would shift to fit the mantle's nature)"

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I've been thinking. If Akua ever becomes a part of Winter, will Cat get her Aspects?

*RandomFan*

If Cat ends the book as Heiress I am going to be so mad. /s

*RanVor*

The Heiress is a transitory Name, so probably no. I would be so insanely ironic, though.

[frolamiz](#)

Now that I think about it, Catherine could learn a lot from an old elf.

What they can train/gain with old age, she got naturally with her mantle. She is just not aware that it is possible to do or is unwilling to acknowledge it.

Even if the abilities are not compatibles, I'm sure she could learn a lot of tricks.

[TeK](#)

So, an elf, huh. I await that next in the parade of "Previously Unknown Races" will be the undead King Under, which protects Keter underground, through which Cat and Co will make their escape after successful regicide.

Also Cat's being able to reform body on the whim is just super awesome. She can totally turn herself into the blizzard now. Heroes gonna be so dumbfounded, how they're gonna take a swing at something that is not physical? Also, she can really experiment with her looks, like, for example, making herself taller. I hope she thinks about it and does just that out of the pure vanity, making herself just a little bit higher than Hakram and then taunting him. Oh, oh, oh, can she make, like, a thousand little copies of herself? That all will jump at enemy and stab them with their little stabbing blades. And banter, between each other. She can totally go through locked doors now though. Unless they are warded.

And Thief, she can steal any amount of bullshit, it seems. Can she steal herself? Creating a paradox which will restart the Creation. Awesome, I'm so hyped right now.

*Gunslinger*

>how they're gonna take a swing at something that is not physical?

You don't ask that question of Heroes. Especially Pilgrim.

[TeK](#)

Well yeah, untainted radiance or something can evaporate some Cat. But most heroes still prefer brutal swordswinging, or not-swordswinging. The point is, they really like to swing. They're swingers.

*Novice*

Saint of Swords managed to cut a piece of Cat's Winter mantle, so it's possible depending on a hero's story.

*Gunslinger*

And also heroes develop counter measures to villainous tricks. Thus any hero with less than 3 aspects would be able to counter mist Cat

### [Sengachi](#)

Yeah, regenerating is one thing. That way the heroes whale on you and get hits in but you walk it off at the end of the day. When you make it so that the heroes can't touch you though, that's just begging for the Heavens to get creative.

### *Gunslinger*

This battle was so epic. And that elf probably wasn't an Emerald Sword.

I wonder if Masego's spell where he can change creational laws will go stronger now that he's witnessed the elf's ability

### *Death Knight*

Woe to all Villains should they face a Named Heroic Elf.

### *superkeaton*

Oh goody, Cat's finally figured out that if your body is just stuff you control, then it doesn't always have to be a body. This should lead to some fun and horrifying new avenues for fights and adventures.

### *Someguy*

It makes sense. Akua is a Mage Archetype so she uses Winter as a source of power and utilises it like she does spells.

Cat is a Warrior Archetype so utilising Winter in melee as a shapeshifting force of Nature would work best for her.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

In short: Cat has just fully activated her Winter Pact Bladelock (Unchained) side. 😊

### *Azure*

Also she can now make herself taller than EVERYBODY.

### *nipi*

Guys! Things are really really REALLY bad. Masegos words are grammatically incorrect:

"Third, if all is one then to master a grain of sand is to master of all of Creation," Hierophant said.



*nipi*

You know be afraid! Be very afraid!

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

Hey, its not his fault spells can't always follow grammatical rules!

[Sengachi](#)

I'm not even sure that was a spell. More like a miracle duct-taped to some high arcana and held together by whatever the opposite of prayer is.

*Yavandir*

If Arcadia is reflection of Creation then when they went into Arcadia from threefold reflection were they in fourfold reflection?

*RanVor*

Something just occurred to me: Cat's physical body is a construct of Winter. That means Cat's personality, memories, the entire core of her being must be anchored to something else. As we've seen in Kaleidoscope VI, this "something else" is the very fabric of Winter itself. That makes Winter and Cat one and the same, in a sense.

Now, Akua has intertwined herself with the shard cut off by the Saint of Swords, which is separated, but still a part of Winter as a whole.

The question: does that make Akua something akin to Cat's split personality?

[Sengachi](#)

No wonder the Heroes never took Keter. I mean, I'm amazed they've ever even made it to Keter at all. If the Hidden Horror can whip \*that\* out of the bag, I mean ... holy fuck. That Named(?) elf hit Cat at least as much as the Saint of Swords ever did. Fuck, Cat, Heiropant, and Thief together barely managed a delaying action against it in a space basically custom-made to enable Heiropant's nastiest tricks.

I mean that's probably a top-tier Revenant (I hope, I dearly hope) but \*still\*.

*RoflCat*

I mean, Dead King obviously LET them reach Keter after he's confirmed their worth.

How else can he get a new powerful Revanant to add to the collection?

*RanVor*

Remember that these guys *were* the Crusade. And they were even more powerful while alive.

*Yavandir*

Are you sure? I mean Dead King have some guys running around Creation maybe some of them were 'collected' by them.

*Roimata*

What, no "front fell off" jokes?

*Satan*

So I'm guessing "First, that which I see is the mask worn by void" means that nothing really exists, it's all an illusion of some kind.

"Second, in a world that is nothing there can be no partition" means that there is nothing inherently separate between the entities of the Universe, like Gods and men; it was earlier hinted that Gods are trying to prevent their creations from surpassing them.

"Third, if all is one then to master a grain of sand is to master all of Creation" seems to reiterate that nothing exists therefore it is all the same, so knowing one thing is knowing everything.

And if everything's the same, then there can be no partition.

"And so I act/ wielding a blade of absence for higher purpose" is a bit more confusing. I think it means that acting for the Gods (higher purpose) is therefore inherently pointless (an empty cause that is usually martial in nature => a blade of absence). I feel like I made enough nonsense that it makes sense.

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## **Chapter 42: The Skein's Plan**

*"Chaos is a ladder, Chancellor. It never goes quite where you need it to, and the rise is always more graceful than the descent."*

– Dread Emperor Perfidious

Like proper villains, we put a magic gate between ourselves and the consequences of our actions before silently agreeing to pretend none of it had taken place. The Woe had taken to that

part of villainy better than any other, truth be told. Probably didn't help that I was the closest thing Archer had to an authority figure in her life that wasn't *Ranger*, or that Hierophant had been raised to believe that repercussions were a thing that happened to people who didn't have family dinners involving the full roster of the Calamities. Seriously. I would be dishonest not to acknowledge that having Black cleaning up behind me for year hadn't, uh, encouraged me to display a perhaps disproportional amount of recklessness in my actions. But even at my worst there'd been an amount of calculation involved in those risks. In contrast, Thief had at some point robbed a Legion pay convoy and somehow expected to get away with it, while Diabolist had gone out of her way to personally piss off every single living villain with a higher body count than her. Well, before Liesse anyway. She'd murdered her way to the top of that list quick enough. It was telling that the closest thing we had to a steady hand around was Adjutant, and he'd rather famously gotten into a slugging match with a demon.

Gods, was Juniper the voice of sanity? She ate people, for fuck's sake. Well, corpses anyway, and she hadn't done it in a while that I knew of, but *still*.

"I have so many questions," I told Akua the moment the gate closed.

"Flammable and inflammable mean the same thing," she replied without missing a beat.

I paused.

"What?" I managed.

"I noticed you've been misusing the latter," Diabolist said with a beaming smile. "The word is actually derived from the Old Miezan verb *inflammare*, which means 'to set on fire'."

Masego let out a noise of approval, the filthy traitor. Of course of all the Woe's habits the one Akua had to pick up was giving me lip in the middle of delicate life-and-death situations. 'Closing ranks in front of outsiders' had been too much to hope for, I supposed, but Merciless Gods I would have settled for 'prone to collateral damage we can't afford to pay for'. It wasn't like she didn't have a history. I made the decision that choking my only current source of insight on what was happening was unwise, which I thought was very queenly of me.

"Where are we?" I patiently asked.

"Before the gate to the central chamber," Akua said, inviting me to look behind her with an elegant gesture.

If you'd one sinister rune-engraved stone gate, you'd seen them all. This one was ridiculously large, but given the alleged size of the Skein that wasn't a surprise. Besides, this one didn't even have a terrifying face-shaped demon bound inside. Strictly small time compared to the Tower, that somehow-standing pile of horrors. I considered my next question carefully.

"How?" I finally said. "Just..."

I gestured to encompass Creation.

"How?"

"As a part of your mantle, she can draw on Winter to an extent if so allowed," Masego said.

"Yes, yes, we all knew that," I lied. "Not need to state the obvious, Masego. But here precisely?"

"The chain," Akua simply said.

Which bound her to me, or more accurately the Mantle of Woe, and to an extent Winter itself. That explained how she'd been able to open a gate towards my location, anyway. How had she even gotten here in the first place? The whole point of the Threefold Reflection was that it could be turned into an unsolvable maze at the drop of a hat.

"You used Winter, to make your gates," the shade reminded me. "Your works were known to me."

Setting aside the headache-inducing implications of that for later, I frowned. So she'd seen where I was planning to get out of Arcadia and gone there. Which told me why she was here, but not how she'd gotten there in the first place. I eyed her warily, since the question had been implied, but she did not speak again. More secrets. Exactly what we needed, at the moment.

"My eye, if you would," Masego stiffly asked.

Akua sketched a bow and produced the glass orb with a flourish of the wrist. My frown deepened.

"You've been running the ritual this whole time," I said. "He could see through his eye, you through his, and you sent him instructions through it."

"Cards," she agreed. "As I was instructed, though I did not always know the reasons why."

I passed a hand through my hair. Which, as I immediately remembered, had been formed out of Winter smoke and mirrors mere moments ago. There was no sweat matting the strands even after my extortions, which I was almost thankful for. The inhumanity of

that was almost comforting, compared to the reminder that any sweat I'd feel would be a lie I told myself and my will enforced.

"We're on Buzzard, I take it," I said.

She nodded. I eyed the stone door.

"So now?" I probed.

"We enter," Diabolist said. "After the sixth rune in your head is disabled."

Skipping a few there, huh. That aside, Vivienne's card had given me the eloquent instructions of 'don't' when it came to the Skein, so it was worth asking her if-

"And Thief is gone," I said. "Please tell me someone else saw her get out of Arcadia."

Masego finished putting back his eye in the appropriate burnt-out socket, yet another reason to be thankful eating was now optional for me, and straightened up.

"I did as well," he said. "Though she disappeared within moments."

"And you didn't think that was worth mentioning?" I asked.

"I assumed there was a reason," he replied.

Yeah, that was today in a sentence wasn't it? Could hardly rake him over coals for that.

"Romance my brain, Zeze," I ordered with a sigh. "Let's get this cart back on the road before it catches fire. Again."

His hand rose, and immediate-

—

*"He reads stories," Vivienne said.*

*"We can as well," Masego pointed out.*

*I intervened before that could turn into a proper bicker.*

*"So we come at him with a plan, he'll have seen it from beginning to end," I said.*

*"Essentially," she said, after flicking an irritated glance at the blind mage. "Though the interesting implication is that he can only 'read' a single story at a time. It is possible to fool him."*

*"Multiple schemes will be required," Akua mused. "With a degree of bridging between them. It would be ideal to begin on a scheme and move into another before the Skein can arrange for a point of failure."*

*"That means someone has to know enough of them to lead us to change tacks at critical moment," I noted. "Considering you can't really fight, Diabolist, it'll have to be you."*

*"She'll need to be fooled as well," Hakram spoke up. "Given more plans than we'll actually use and kept in the dark about which few options are really on the table."*

*"Go random," Indrani advised. "That always fucks with oracles."*

*Akua nodded in agreement.*

*"The rest of you will need to be kept ignorant of large swaths of what is planned," she added after. "Lest the moment you begin a plan the enemy be made aware of it."*

*"Masego, you can do memory blocks right?" I asked.*

*He nodded.*

*"An easy enough enchantment for all save you and Diabolist," he said. "Conditional triggers can be woven in, though no more than one per 'block'. Too high a degree of sophistication risks permanence, the human mind is a complex device."*

*"I don't like how complicated this is getting," I admitted. "But once you're wet, there's no reason not to swim."*

*"I don't follow," Masego said, brow creasing.*

*"We don't leave him to guess between a handful of plans," I said grimly. "We **drown** him in them."*

*—*

*-ly. Rude.*

*"So this is a stupid plan, but it's stupid on purpose," I said, rubbing my forehead. "That's comforting. You know, except for the part where we fail and die horribly."*

*"I was hoping we would avoid that," Hierophant gravely said.*

*"Yeah, well, you know what the Dead King put up on the gates into this place," I replied. "Fine, it's too late to run anyway. Akua, you got anything to add?"*

*She bowed smoothly.*

"I was ordered," she said, "to fight as an extension of you, should it come to swords."

"Well, it's not like today has been a cornucopia of good decisions so far," I mused. "So what the Hells, let's give it a whirl. Zeze, get the door would you?"

With a deep grinding sound, the stone slabs parted.

"This is the part where I praise his efficiency," Akua announced. "Because misunderstandings and incompetent assessments are humorous."

Was it wrong that the one of the most horrifying things about the mass-murdering maddened shade of my former rival was that she was trying to develop a functional sense of humour? If so, Black had shown a lot more foresight than I'd thought back in that alley.

"In we go," I said, warily eyeing the darkness within. "Before I start debating whether it'd have been more reassuring to blow our way through."

Robber was, inarguably, a horrible influence. The ground wasn't stone, I knew that just from the feel of it under my boots. It wasn't even flat. It crunched. Didn't even need to glance down, the sound was easy enough to recognize: bones. Charming. The inside was pitch black save for a single well of light illuminating the artefact Thief had spoken of: three layered wooden wheels on a stick, with pieces of string joining them haphazardly. She'd not mentioned, however, that every wheel was about as broad as I was tall. Hierophant followed behind me, and the grinding sound told me that-

"Yeah, so *that's* not happening," I noted.

Ice bloomed in the way of the closing stone doors, shattering for the first few inches but eventually forcing them to a halt as I kept pouring power into the working. I was already standing inside a massive dark cavern filled with bones, there was no way I was letting the Skein keep us stuck inside. Speaking of, there was no sign of the Revenant.

"At least he's not waiting on a throne," I mused. "Those fights never seem to go well for us."

There were tall curved rib bones from something definitely not human serving as a sort of antechamber leading to the wheels, but that screamed 'trap' even more than the rest of this room.

"Hierophant?" I prompted.

"We can use them," Masego replied. "I can already glimpse them. Deep, but simple."

Good to know. Still didn't tell me where the Hells the undead rat was.

"Oh what a stroke of luck," I loudly said. "The Skein isn't here. I guess we'll just walk towards those wheels and-"

Sword clearing the scabbard in a heartbeat, I stabbed the bones beneath my feet and poured the howling might of Winter into the mess. Frost crept through the mass of bones, and my eyebrow rose when I realized how deep it actually went under us. At least sixty, seventy feet. Not trace of the Skein though.

"Catherine," Akua said.

I sighed.

"He's above us, isn't he?" I said.

The answer wasn't so much laughter as it was the quiet rumbling of the storm. A massive shape leapt down and bones were sent flying in every direction while I smoothly rose and fell into a guard. Hierophant, prudently, came to stand behind me. Diabolist was at my shoulder now, and all I felt from her was a hunter's patience. Furred body bending over the wheels and cutting through the light, the Skein watched us with a leering grin. He was large as Thief had said, but her short description had not done the Revenant justice. Thick dark fur covered a body that was almost humanoid, save for the long wormlike tail that came from its lower back, but it was the head that was discomfiting to look at. We call their kind rattlings, but looking at that rotting leather it was a snake I thought of. The pale golden eyes with deep red gouges under them only deepened the impression. The two pairs of bone-like antlers ripping through the top of its head were wickedly sharp, even after what must have been centuries. A Horned Lord. Even Ranger considered the likes of that difficult to deal with, and when we'd come across that woman in Arcadia I'd felt like she could murder the lot of us in the span of a single breath. Not an opponent I should take lightly. Not an opponent I should fight at all, if I could help it. Sadly, my mouth disagreed.

"So can we knock off the theatrics?" I asked. "Because, let's be honest here, Akua's probably more Evil than you are and if I told her to fetch my slippers she'd do it."

The creature's dry red tongue licked at fangs half the size of me.

"Take the wheel, lead the Empress to the orc," the Skein said, then cocked his head to the side. "Or. The Empress escapes, yet dies to a blade of stolen moonlight. Two paths."



"Well, I'm glad someone knows the plan," I mused. "Would you care to monologue about how we're going to fail?"

The Revenant laughed.

"Then you strike," he said. "Or. She strikes with you. Or. You flee. Tricky little things, skittering around, but you entered the maze. You did. Surrendered too many paths. No end remaining is fortunate."

I reached for the last card inside my cloak and my fingers came away wet. My hand rose.

"Just give me a moment," I asked.

The ancient abomination stilled. I got the sense he was somewhat taken aback. Last card, huh. I slipped it out and angled it so the light well the Revenant was across would make it clearer. The Queen of Swords.

*You have an invisible crossbow.*

Written diagonally, across the whole thing. I flipped it. Nothing on the other side. Seriously, Past Catherine? That was the entire message? She might as well have just drawn herself flipping me the bird. What an asshole.

"Catherine?" Masego probed.

"If you were hoping for a solution," I said. "That was not it."

"It was pointless," the Skein said. "Seventeen stories? Pretty little tales, but you always end up here. No matter the path, the destination is the same."

Seventeen. Gods. There wasn't enough alcohol in all of Keter to justify that, and even worse I was pretty sure we'd planned this sober.

"Look," I said. "I'm with you on this one. This whole thing has been a debacle from start to finish, and the person responsible should be buried alive. We're on the same side, here."

The Revenant stilled again. Evidently, this was not unfolding as expected.

"You did this," he tried.

"That can't be, I don't remember it," I immediately denied.

I'd fought enough Praesi to know that sufficiently high station and blatant lies could get you out of nearly anything, if you played your cards right.

"We should look into it together," I told him. "Have you considered we might be getting framed? I'm just saying, this is a horrible plan. I could do better. It just doesn't add up."

"Does this actually ever work?" I heard Akua ask Masego in a whisper.

There was a beat.

"It got us into Skade," he eventually conceded.

"Are you trying to lie to an oracle?" the Skein said, by the sound of it genuinely offended.

"I would never dare lie to you," I lied. "You're obviously a... rat-person of highly discerning judgement. If you just get Malicia in here, I'm sure we can straighten all of this out."

"It's like watching a demon get loose," Akua murmured. "You know you should run, but you just *have* to look."

"You want me to bring the Empress here," the Revenant said. "The Empress that you are trying to kill."

"That's completely unrelated," I said, proceeding forward with greatly unwarranted assurance. "And hearsay besides. I'm as loyal to the Tower as any Praesi."

Assuming said Praesi was highborn, anyway.

"Did you truly expect this to succeed?" the Skein eventually asked.

"I've rolled the dice on worse odds," I admitted, perhaps a little too honestly.

While that was not a high point by any definition of the term, it definitely went downhill from there.

—

I'd learned several things today. First, elves were bullshit even when they were dead. I wasn't unaware that I didn't have a lot of room to talk when it came to recovering from wounds, but who the Hells just decided they were all right and had Creation agree like a drunker singer? Second, when the Lady of the Lake called a breed of foe 'hard fuckers' she meant 'how would someone even kill that thing if it wasn't already dead?'. I was now on my eighth sword, and beginning to appreciate why heroes always got handed some nifty legendary blade before they were sent into the meat grinder. I might as well have been trying to breach a wall swinging at it with a salmon. And, not, I grimly thought, even a large one. That was, sadly, not even in the top ten of my current problems. The Skein's jaw hung unhinged, gaping wide, and it

closed only when the last of the darkness had been swallowed into it. There went my domain.

Which he had eaten, because that was a thing that could be done.

"It comes," Akua whispered into my ear.

*Thank you, helpful collar fairy,* I acidly thought. If I'd wanted a running fucking commentary, I'd have asked Black for a talking sword. I leapt onto a platform even as the Skein's bare fist collided with the bones beneath where I'd stood, immediately leaping onto another before the swing of his tail could catch me. I'd learned the hard way that I couldn't take a hit from the Revenant without spending precious moments rebuilding whatever passed for my spine these days.

"Burn," Hierophant said.

Ribbons of golden flame streaked across the dark cavern, folding around one of the Skein's limbs, but he turned and casually sucked the fire into his open maw. The breath that spread was putrid, like something left to rot for so long the rot was all that was left. The Horned Lord flicked at glance at Masego, who stood atop a ring of bones surrounded by a pale globe of light, and without warning *moved*. Fuck. I took a running leap off my platform, then as the fall quickened my momentum called on my domain again. The brushstrokes of night came but twice before the Revenant lazily struck down right through them. The darkness dispersed like smoke and then the backlash hit. My eyes froze in their sockets, then shattered, and with a hoarse scream I dropped out of my controlled fall into a pile of bones.

"Move," Akua said.

I rolled to the side without thinking, and a massive impact close to me had me spinning back in the air. I reached for my face – was that a rib going through my cheek? – and forced the eyes to form quicker. Vision returned just in time to see the massive handful of claws headed my way. Flick of the wrist and ice sprouted on them, forming a long staff I caught by the side, and then the tail smashed me into the wall of this accursed place. There went my spine again. There really was not getting used to that, was there? I heard Masego bark out something in the mage tongue and dropped listlessly to the ground. Diabolist was there, red eyes and pleasant smile, helping me up.

"There was mention of fighting together," I said after spitting out a few of my teeth.

Akua Sahelian offered me her hand.

"Shall we?" she said.

Gods help me, but I took it.

---

*Gian*

DIE DIE FAIRY THING

*ArkhCthuul*

Ehmm, who or what?

*Akedus*

I know this comment is late but that's a reference to the Skaven from Warhammer Fantasy.

*16JSundberg4*

YES-YES, MURDER KILL COLD-THING!

*SpeckofStardust*

Akua is learning.  
She really does need to die after this.

*Rook*

I'm not sure if she'll ever go, all recent signs point to her being here to stay for the recent future imo

The first paragraph, when talking about the reckless tendencies of the Woe, Cat unconsciously inserted her right between Thief and Adjutant. That kind of unconscious inclusion is pretty telling about how entrenched her position is becoming even to Cat of all people. Then the last paragraph to end it is taking Akua's offered hand, which is more or less the most blatant possible symbolism for acceptance there is.

Combined with involving her in main character banter, of all things, basically indicates a semi-permanent promotion to recurring evil sidekick

*Azure*

You are forgetting that Catherine and Vivienne are both Callowan. They will NEVER forget what Akua did in Liesse. This is just a setup to make her think she's winning and when the time comes they will snuff her out.

*123355785*

You've read the title of the story, right?

Catherine did quite a few things she never thought she would do only a few chapters before.

*Azure*

Catherine swore an oath with Vivienne about Akua. As the last entity of winter she is bound by that oath. She is fae now and oaths are binding.

*Cap'n Smurfy*

She's sliding into the role of Treacherous Lieutenant far too well, which does not bode well for Larent. Especially considering he hasn't been playing that right or particularly well.

*Miles*

That's just Akua manipulating Cat's fae nature. She built a story for Cat to follow and Cat is stuck in that story until Akua wins or another Woe disrupts it somehow.

*Miles*

That's just Akua manipulating Cat's fae nature. She built a story for Cat to follow and Cat is stuck in that story until Akua wins or another Woe disrupts it somehow.

*mavant*

Nooooo she's the BEST

*Decius*

Too late. She died before this, which is how she got into this cloak-and-dagger gig.

*Big Brother*

And here is what I have been waiting on since Akua fought the heroes using Cat's body. Oh, I can't wait for Monday.

*Zarquon*

Akua x Catherine best ship.

*Shaerick 68*

Get out, Masego x Archer forever

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Masego x Magic

only true path.

*Halinn*

Dread Emperor Treacherous x Convuluted plots

*mavant*

Possible names for this pairing:

Marcher

Arsego

Mindrani

Indego (or Indigo, if we're playing loosely)

Archophant

Hieracher (I vote no on this one, too confusing)

Hierani

Indophant

Personally I vote for Indigo.

*RanVor*

ArseGo.

*Kittora*

This is a really good story. I feel like the song bury me face down by grandson really tees up the summary of the book so far.

*Coincidance*

- \_\_\_\_\_ -

*Yotz*

Collar Akua is watching your immoral activities.

*stevenneiman*

\*immortal

*superkeaton*

This might be the most amusing chapter in the latest book. I appreciate Akua being forced to watch Catherine's abortion of a diplomacy attempt.

*Someguy*

To be fair, that actually works. Though only when the other party has an interest in playing along due to mutual benefits with themselves having the leonine share.

*Rook*

It's like watching someone try to castle their opponents king in front of a grandmaster chess player

*Delakar*

That's the best fucking, god damn line I've heard in a while. The mental image of a grandmaster watching a betted game, where some fool reach over and castles for his opponent thus prolonging the game.

Fucking 200iq, I love it because there are so many reasons why it may happen. But none of them are all that good

*Letouriste*

« Castle their opponent king »? That's not a move in chess:D And castling is not so hard to do even against a GM

[TeK](#)

>that's not the move in chess  
Exactly his point.

*Yotz*

>On the table there was a chessboard with a formation of chess pieces on one side of the board, and a scattering of checkers on the other.

Protip: best way to win a game of Texan hold'em is to hit your opponents with a baseball bat until they stop moving. Though, decapitation with a hockey-stick is an interesting option.

*Forrest*

I mean, there's a horde of skeletal remains RIGHT under him.

*Someguy*

I'm surprised those haven't decayed into sponge and mould and slime over the centuries.

*Snowfire1224*

The gods wouldn't let something so undramatic happen as decomposition

*IDKWhoitis*

Dead King probably has a dedicated mold removal squad, or a general purpose maintenance crew of undead. He seems to have a firm grasp of organization and logistics.

Like really, Black and DK should get along like best buddies. They both are schemers, and they have a pissing match with the heavens.

*Decius*

Dead King has had enough time to eradicate all of the mold that would eat his country.

[TeK](#)

And then he probably created undead mold.

[ahd](#)

Not sure what would be more entertaining.

Skein swarmed under by an instant horde of Winterised undead.

Catherine's expression when the Skein inhales necromancy.

*RoflCat*

The solution is obviously exploding Winter zombies.

*Yotz*

...and stuff like this is precisely why I absolutely adore this book...

*Snowfire1224*

Akua, the evil exposition fairy. Well not exactly but that's what she reminds me of in this chapter.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Still nowhere near as exasperating as certain blue-white balls of lemme-strangle-them. 🤪

*mavant*

Hey listen, that's not a very nice thing to say.

\*rimshot\*

*Someguy*

I thought the plan is supposed to be Dove?

"Skein.

Not the most pressing danger at the moment, but whatever.

Don't. If Hakram is there, Swan. If not, Dove."



*Snowfire1224*

I think they're on dove now that they're actually fighting him. Buzzard was from when they were fighting the elf. The thing is they talked about being on plan buzzard before they ran into the skien in this chapter.

*IDKWhoitis*

I think the Lie Akua had caught on to was that one. Cat was throwing so much bullshit about, the skein missed the bull charging for his ass.

*IDKWhoitis*

So was the bolding on "drown", was that an aspect? Or just emphasizing? Because 17 stories does not a drowning make. Unless it was improperly used, and thus had little effect. Because we have seen Cat drown her enemies in Winter before, so that could be a type of power up. Maybe it's like Struggle, but it just lets Cat win harder or snuff out weaker opponents...

*Decius*

Were you keeping track of all 17 stories these last three chapters?

*IDKWhoitis*

While I'm not the Skein, I imagine it's like playing tragedy looper with experienced players. We don't have all the info the Skein did, because like the Skein right now, we're are focusing on Cats POV.

I feel like the drown aspect of this, isn't so much 17 storylines being a bit much, it's multiple plot lines being run simultaneously. Archer for example, may be on none of the 17 plotlines, yet. Thief is moving through another one, unseen. And the Skein is too busy trying to kill Cat, that he may not be watching the other plotlines closely enough to maneuver Malica to safety.

*Dantalian*

Aspects usually start with a capital letter.

*IDKWhoitis*

EE has made typos before, and it's been a while since we've seen Cat use an Aspect.

*Enjou*

Maybe it could be a proto-Aspect? She doesn't have a proper Name at the moment, so it could be an indication that she'll get one.

And it would be a suitable aspect, given how she dropped a lake on an invading army.

Perhaps she just needs a third instance where she does something that could be considered an attempt to drown the enemy.

*Gunslinger*

This was pretty hilarious. The best part is always new members to the Woe being stunned by the general stupidity of Cat's plans.

Finally regarding the Horned Lords all I can wonder is how Procer even manages to fight them off. I suppose even Procer will spawn heroes when these fuckers make an entrance

*Gunslinger*

Oops accidentally threaded this comment

*Aston*

You can drown in 5 inches of water.

The stories didn't need to be deep.

Time for Akua + bones + Winter.

Akira style.

Best web serial.

*IDKWhoitis*

I still believe that the number of plotlines wasn't so important as the number of plot lines simultaneously running. Also, the Skein seems to rely on physical sight to ascertain information, and past actions.

*mavant*

TETSUO

[noblemartel](#)

KANEDAAA

Yotz

>She might as well have just drawn herself flipping me the bird.  
...and winked and laughed all the way down the bedroom chamber...

---

I mean, all the plans so far have been named after birds, some kind of clarification is needed.

### Javvies

Interesting.

This is definitely a test/accelerated powerup montage type deal where if you fail you die that the Dead King orchestrated for Cat and the Woe, but mostly Cat.

### *Byzantine*

Yep. This is his actual welcome.

As stated before, I don't think he really cares about current events at all. It makes no difference to him what offer he takes. He's just using this to see what the new kid on the block can do – and how quickly she can improve. He knows everything that has been going on, so he knows what the King of Winter saw in her. This is him seeing if she's good enough (or can become good enough) for his purposes.

### *Decius*

Skein can see the stories, and starts the fight off by getting the upper hand and not winning? Haven't they seen enough stories to know where that ends up?

Akua powers Cat up, Antagonist side escalates (probably something to do with all the bones), Zeze does something to regain the upper hand, enter Empress, holding Thief by the throat and demanding surrender. Beat panel. Cat drops her sword. Beat panel. Full surrender stance. Beat panel. Invisible crossbow to the Empress.

I've got the details wrong, partly because this isn't a graphic novel, but that crossbow is going to kill either the Empress or the Dead King.

### *Byzantine*

Dead King is still in his Hell, I doubt he's at any risk. He arranged this whole thing intentionally, he isn't going to go anywhere near Cat with his real body until he's sure she isn't going to try something stupid.

### *Wry Warudo*

'Invisible Crossbow'  
...Archer?

*Argentorum*

If I had a guess. Her or Hakram. Or Hakram throwing archer.

[\*ahd\*](#)

Demon of absence?

*mavant*

God, if that thing never shows up I'm going to be so mad. Like, foreshadowing a demon that erases things from existence in a story about a world that runs on storybook rules, and then erasing it from the story... Is admittedly a clever subversion or lampshade hang or fourth wall painting or whatever the term is, but GODDAMMIT so don't play with my emotions like that!

Although I guess art is about making the reader / viewer feel something, so I dunno.

*Birdeye*

The absence demon has shown up, though. Everyone just forgot. In Ch. 4, Thief reports 14 heroes invading. By the time they engage, in Ch 10, there are only 12 heroes, and no one bats an eye at this discrepancy. In fact, Cat even notes that it never occurred to her that the number of heroes was "A tenth and two officers", and she mentions that everyone had been having headaches for the past few days.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

Also: In Arcadia, Zeze learned to do a certain thing/ became powerful enough to do said thing. Cat saw it happen for the first time there. She had two subsequent "first" times seeing that trick of his, both of them during the period of time in which the demon was active nearby.

*Cap'n Smurfy*

And that's not even counting the discrepancy in chapter numbers in the URL around that time and the fact that Catherine and the Woe all had headaches around that time.

*mavant*

At the time, I think I just assumed this meant 12 other than the Pilgrim and the Saint, but in retrospect your explanation is clearly superior, especially given the

detail of the headaches.  
Still, I want to know what happened to it.

*Rook*

Wait, what if she has a literal invisible crossbow? Plain old ensorcelled invisible weapon set to automatically fire whatever doomsday bolt it's loaded with, based on a set of trigger conditions

No one but Catherine knows what the card says, and Catherine herself thinks it means something symbolic because a literal invisible crossbow would be a stupid ass idea. The plan's set in motion but the skein never sees it coming because it's the king of all stupid plans among the pile of stupid plans, where no one knows anything about at all.

Thing goes off at the last moment when there are too many branches in the story closed off for the Skein to do anything about it by the time it fires.

*Sol Invictus*

Well I can't say this wasn't expected. Mesago was facedown on a pile of bones unmoving, Me feeling the strain of using too much winter, unable to even reform my spine without it becoming a gruesome array of icicles, heck Im not even sure if Akua was still inside her box.

"Stand down Catharine" the Empress said as her knife drew a trickle of blood on an unconscious Vivienne. "You are defeated, yield now"

Like Hells I would. Alright Past Catharine, you better have been good on your word or so help me, i would bend all of creation just to smack you in the face.

I raised my arm, my fist clenched, I extended my thumb to point upward.

Not even the most Preasi of highborns could hide the disbelief and confusion in her face.

And then my pointer finger directly a the Empress throat.

The Empress changed her expression to one of utter disappointment. Well thats one thing we can agree about Malicia.

"Your Mad" the Empress said.

"Yup", and then I pulled the trigger.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I feel like it's another case of "Fuck you Past Cat" and it's a lie. She is supposed to think Archer is there somewhere, hidden, possibly by theif, but in fact they are off attacking Empress. But because Cat is going with the plan where Archer is around, that's the one the Skien is countering. Neither side is actually aware the other is doing a different plan (easy name swap, what's written under ones Dove is written under another's swan, etc.) so it becomes harder to read.

*RanVor*

Congratulations, you've found a way to make this mess of a gambit even more incomprehensible.

*Dantalian*

Two paths and none of them involving Archer? RIP Empress.

*Redlaw*

There is something i don't understand. The body of cat is a fakery forged through winter. So doesn't that mean that her current speed ; strength ; reaction time are just limitation she put on herself and that she could easly become even stronger if she wish? After all she doesn't really have muscles or brain in the proper term.

*Byzantine*

Yes, that is correct. We are seeing her slowly realizing that.

Truth is if she was better at handling Winter she would have simply dropped the need for bones entirely. What does not exist cannot be broken. etc.

*mavant*

Probably, but she only figured out the body was totally unnecessary like ten minutes ago. Give a girl a break!

*Novice*

Oh, she already figured it out long ago. She was just in denial and was forced to embrace it last chapter. It's the reason why she was on the verge of being an alcoholic and had to swear an oath to Hakram.

*werafdsaew*

It's possible, but she's already very strong, and there has to be a limit to how strong she can make her self, so she may be already at that limit.

*Decius*

Does she think that's air she's breathing?

*lqueenofblades1*

"Akua 'Sahelia' offered me her hand."

You've misspelled her name....

....It's Ubua

*Antoninjohn*

Now Cat in order to defeat the Horned Lord you need beat him at his own games, Cat must eat him

*Yotz*

Cat takes Rat. Checkmate.

*RanVor*

Seventeen stories? That's a little disappointing. I'd go for thirty-something, at least.

The next chapter is gonna be *glorious*.

*mavant*

Perhaps Masego insisted on a prime number for obscure High Arcana reasons.

*RanVor*

Thirty-one. There you go.

*MetruX*

You must also remember they had AKUA as the touch stone. If they give too many options, she could very well screw everyone over.

*RanVor*

Including herself. Akua isn't stupid. She doesn't really hate Cat personally, and certainly wouldn't doom herself to spite her, especially when her very existence is dependent on her. When she betrays, it's going to be for a tangible benefit, not out of spite. I'd rather be worried about her not being able to keep up with that many plots.

*Yotz*

Maybe seventeen is all what Skein was able to discern. He can't read any story if he doesn't know the story is even here, and there always can be a few more layers of

meta. Like, they were planning for him, so he planned for their plans, but they knew that he would plan for their plans, and so they planned around him planning for it, but he... And so we plunge deeply into layered abstraction logic, and after the first layer it's usually not possible to determine desired outcome among the endless meta mirages.

### NZPIEFACE

Fitting for a ratling to have an Aspect about eating.

*mavant*

Akua is rapidly becoming my favorite character. I want her and the Tyrant to be best friends.

*mavant*

Unrelated to the current chapter, but has anyone mapped out the world here? Does it actually fit onto classical Europe / Mesopotamia / Asia Minor in the way that the names imply?

*RanVor*

There are links to several maps in the "Art, Maps and Other" section at the top of the page.

*Cthulhu*

I am too stupid to follow all the plots and counterplots.

At this point I figure Black shows up and reveals that he actually is the Bard and that Cat is actually the long lost daughter of the Empress, and that all Named are aliens.

Sort of a bizzare combination of The Good Place, Highlander II, and Dance in the Vampire Bund. Why the hell not?

And hey – remember when Cat simply had to survive officer training school? That was what – 2 years ago? 3?

*Nethermore*

ErraticErrata is just torturing us with how the CatXAkua ship started being baited harder than ever immediately after Cat vowed to annihilate Akua.

*Greg*

Skein seems ridiculously strong, but I guess the whole point of this arc is that the Dead King is far more powerful than even his reputation, so having a minion like this makes sense.



I am a bit surprised none of the Woe ever mention that Cat's diplomacy approach is basically Starlord dancing at the end of GotG – confusion fu designed to make their enemies discomfited and/or angry enough to make a mistake.

Still not a fan of Akua becoming a sixth ranger, as I don't think it fits Cat's (or Vivienne's) character at all, and don't particularly like Akua as a character. Isn't Cat literally oathbound to make Akua suffer in a legendary way? But I will try to suspend judgment until we see what her ultimate arc is.

### *Euodiachloris*

Akua isn't currently wearing her own face. Or height. Sure, she seems to handle it with aplomb... But, she'd never show any discomfort about that kind of thing to anybody, least of all her boss (if only because being Ms Smugness of Smarmyton-upon-Pridesforth is her whole MO).

Being exactly who she is is a major facet to our Akua, no? That rug isn't under her right now. She'll be feeling it on some level, even if she outwardly and inwardly denies it... Which makes it a form of torture, just not of the hot poker variety. Heck, getting her to change any of her original attitude over time through very rough handling, her adopting more of her own acting as core and/or enforced "education" could be said to be torturing her into becoming somebody and something she'd never have chosen to become before. \*shrugs\*

### *IDKWhoitis*

In a way this could be a different path to "Destorying Akua". Instead of destroying her entire being, she is being replaced bit by bit, until the outside and inside cannot quite be called "Akua".

### *RanVor*

Cat's idea of legendary suffering was having Akua's soul bound to her cloak for all eternity. It backfired.

### *mavant stevenneiman*

Nothing to do with anything that's going on, but I find it interesting that of the five and a half original Calamities, only one and a half aren't at least surrogate parents. Sabah had a husband and several kids, Amadeus has Cat, Hye has her apprentices, and Wekesa has Masego. I kind of doubt that Eudokia or the Assassin (whoever they are) have families, but I wouldn't have expected any of the others except Sabah would if I didn't know about them.

*Kai Wingless*

Love me some Skaven! GREAT HORNED RAT!

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## Chapter 43: Masego's Plan

*"Kings and shepherds fit in the same cook pot."*

– Orc saying

It was a difficult to describe. The power was still mine; it just wasn't shaped by my own hands. I could still feel it, span the ebb and flow and cuts, but the will behind was Akua Sahelian's. For the first thirty heartbeats it was horribly distracting, to fight while I had this... second line of thought going on in the back of my head, but soon enough I learned to ignore it. The need for control had always been the lid on the powers I'd stolen from Winter, hadn't it? It was a lesser surrender, the act of allowing Diabolist some manner of rule over it, but it was still a step towards that place I yet shied away from. Neshamah had called it apotheosis, and mused it to be the result of happenstance. I was not so certain, but I knew than if I reached the world I looked back to would be a very different place.

*Winter sunk into the sea of bones like a great tree's roots, tainting and binding and made into pattern impossibly perfect by another's will.*

My mind had brushed against the flow, and though it kept existing bereft of my attention my gaze no longer gave it clear definition. *Like watching without eyes*, I thought. It was not the kind of thought a human would understand. That I did, instinctively so, was certain to have a price down the line. I exhaled, sword in hand, and watched the Skein's muscles pull and shift. He was a dead thing, in the end, and Winter knew much of death. The Revenant was not of my own raising, but there was an... affinity there, now that I knew to look for it. Not a door into usurpation – in those eldritch struggles knowledge was always paramount, and compared to the likes of the Dead King I was a babe in the woods – but the ratling was not untouchable. Like me, he was a construct.

Those could always be broken, with the rights tools.

The muscle weaves beneath shoulder contracted, bent and though the Revenant angled his body to hide the tail I felt it shift. In, out. My breath came steady, an illusion imposed on myself for

reassurance. Pretty ritual that it was, it served its purpose. The Skein struck with inhuman swiftness, clawed hand shattering the remains like toys as it passed where I had been but moments earlier. No longer. What difference was there, between the ice I shaped and the stuff of my own body? Beneath the surface, absolutely nothing. The twin spider-like limbs that ripped out of the back of my plate and shifted to see me land on the Skein's extended arm made that bitter admission impossible to deny. Muscles shifted beneath me, the sweep of the tail abandoned as the Skein prioritized shaking me off. Lower leg inclined, and it followed that – there it went, the dip, but his very nature made me an oracle's bastard child.

Steel would do nothing against the ratling's eldritch hide and fur, but steel was just one of many tools at my fingertips. I tugged out a string of my domain, shaped it into a hook and carved into the Revenant's flesh even as he made to throw me off. It did all the work itself: the momentum had me swinging around his side, the hook of darkness slicing into his skin as I descended. The Skein let did not let out a sound. Did he even feel pain? No matter. I'd take him apart piece by piece, if that was what it took. I hung from the hook under his belly and hoisted myself up, spider legs born anew to hold me as I began climbing back up the side.

*Power reflected into itself, a hall of mirrors containing a conflagration until it came out roaring like the great beasts of the First Dawn. Claws and fangs and wings and most of all eyes that were entirely Akua Sahelian's.*

There disconnect between seeing the working unfold through Diabolist and my own body's senses hearing the thousands of bones come together with strings of shade and ice, rising a behemoth of a drake that collided against the Skein with a thunderous crash. Too many ears. Too many eyes. The spider limbs cracked and broke until I grit my teeth and forced them to shape anew.

"The whole world is the altar of the profane, both seeing and unseeing."

Hierophant's words rang loud and clear, though the undertone was made uncomfortably inhuman by the protective globe of ivory-like power protecting him. The Skein ripped through the neck of Diabolist's drake, devouring the power within, but I could feel her laugh and let loose the endless depths of Winter into his maw. I swung myself around with the limbs, landing on his lower back, and wrenched out the hook. A failure in imagination, this particular tool. Limited by my own thinking. I stole away more of my domain, gave it more useful shape. The arc of the bow was smooth, the string indistinguishable from it. The hook changed, shaped by a thought, and I anchored it somewhere hands could not reach. The Skein moved before I could loose. Abandoning the

drake, he turned and massive fangs shone in half-light. There'd been the hint of a hint in the way his muscles moved. The ice limbs dug under the punctured hide and folded into themselves then outwards, impossibly lengthened, until I hung high in the air and away from his snapping jaws. With a hard grin, I loosed my arrow.

"Under this theology of disbelief, the scales bear the weight of nothingness and the the sum of all that is, finding them equal and equivalent."

Like a spool unwinding, my domain followed in the arrow's wake. The Skein ducked, impossibly knowing of the trajectory, but a flicker of will was all it took the have the projectile tearing downwards and straight into the crook of his neck. *I have you now, Horned Lord.* I reached and grabbed the other end of the thread, night-stuff coiling around my fingers, and dismissed the limbs. He would have moved before I dropped onto his back, but the fur glistened with cold and Diabolist emerged from it in glimmering ice.

"You drank too deep," Akua Sahelian chided, smiling in that same fearless way she had when she'd pitted her madness alone against the full might of the East.

Ice formed in restraining shackles around the Skein's limbs, and though he broke through them that moment was all it took for me to land. I shifted, spread my legs and pulled even as the arrowhead became an ugly root of darkness within its flesh. He fought me for a moment, but then the Revenant bent and I crouched to forced the other end of the thread into the flesh of his lower back. It spread without hesitation, forcing the whole creature's body into a warped arc as he failed to break the strength of my domain manifest.

"My hand is the sword of truth, denying the rot of entropy: 'lo and behold, the shade of Ruin falls upon you."

A shiver went through me as sorcery filled the entire cavern. I had felt the likes of this before, once. For a quick, fleeting moment. When Black had spoken a single word and wrecked Liesse like a castle of glass, a madman's will shattering all that displeased his sight. Hierophant had stolen an aspect, or at least an aspect's cast, and now wielded it like a hammer against the Revenant that sought to break us. The Skein screamed, this time. Limbs and flesh smashed, breaking apart from the inside and through the yell the ratling hissed a word.

**"Spool."**

I frowned, what/

I stood on the bones again, Akua helping me up, but her hand left mine quickly and she turned a burning glare on the Skein. The remnants of her drake were still lying half-broken, reeking of Winter, Masego was back under his Ivory Globe and my domain was whole. So was the Revenant, not a mark on him. All our successes erased in a heartbeat.

"Again," the Skein leered. "Teach me all your tricks, crawling things."

We hadn't even managed to kill it last time. And he'd still unmade it all, easy as waving a hand. Gods, how many times could he call on that aspect? Three, ten? As many times as he wanted?

"Interesting," Hierophant said. "You did not break the march of time so much as sever causality. Prune away events from a sequence that still theoretically exists."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Let's find out how many lives a rat can have."

"Our minds were left untouched," Diabolist noted. "As was his. In broader Creation such a working would have shattered him upon the wheel, from all the cascade of innumerable events affected. The aspect was bastardized, made contingent to this place."

"It is a good cage," the Skein said. "You will not leave it."

"So we're playing shatranj," I said. "Across possibilities he can 'spool' back at any time."

"Alas," Masego said, tone amused, and the Ivory Globe winked out. "A mistake was made."

"You fail," the Skein told him. "Here? You always fail, again and again."

"You are not the only one who can learn," Hierophant said, and his glass eyes burned bright beneath the cloth. "And all you have earned from this is further **Ruin**."

I'd seen a lot of aspects over the last few years. Become familiar enough with the gifts of Named that I could be considered a discerning judge. William's Rise had been like a wellspring of harsh light from within, hollowing out his insides but removing every wound inflicted. Black's Destroy was like a bolt fired at Creation, a wilful removal of what my teacher wanted gone. Akua's Bind had been little more than an acknowledgement of her nature, the thirst for control deepened and formalized by the touch of the Gods. This was different. Masego had come into his Name standing defiant in the face of a sun that was not a sun, a godly thing that defied the laws of Creation and human comprehension, and it had shaped what he'd

become. *Usher of Mysteries, Vivisector of Miracles*. Witness had been the outgrowth of the former, perhaps, but now I was seeing the latter and it was a terrible thing to behold.

Aspects were act, not simply a word, because they were an exercise of will. A piece of you made into a blade and turned against Creation. This, then, was intimate part of Masego. Of the man he was turning into, and there was cause for worry in it. To ruin something was no small thing: it was to destroy and devastate it irreparably. The Skein had spoken five letters and wiped away all we had wrought.

Masego replied with four and the world *shattered*.

The cavern came apart at the seams. Entire chunks of it split from the rest, drifting into black nothingness as unmoored ships, and like spider webs the destruction spread across all the Revenant's realm. Akua and I stood together as the bones beneath us began to spill into nothing, incomprehensibly coming back around to fall from the ceiling in another shard. My will extended into the ice I'd used to keep the gates open, and found they were still there. We were not ruined along the rest of this, then, not necessarily. The Skein moved, and in a myriad other shards did the same. Hierophant stood alone on his pile of bones, wreathed in ribbons of sorcery so thick it was visible to the eye, his smile almost innocently joyful. Wait had, the – my eyes flicked back and with muted horror I watched the platform on which the wheels stood slowly begin to topple into a streak of dark. I would not make it in time. It was not physically possible to... I inhaled and ice bloomed.

"Diabolist," I ordered.

The moment the glimmering silhouette finished taking shape, Akua was within it, having swum there through Winter. She reached down and snatched the edge of the highest wheel. The ice that made her up began to crack under the massive weight and from the corner of my eye I saw the Skein move towards her in a dozen different shards. He couldn't kill her through the shell, so it must be the artefact he was aiming for. I could not allow that, if any part of this was to be salvaged. Diabolist's will was ruling the ice construct, but what was that to me? I seized the reins and let Winter loose: it grew and swelled, a hunched apelike thing that tossed the wheels towards me like they were feather-light. A heartbeat later the Revenant tore through my creation, but I'd already ceased paying attention. A third of the way to me the artefact moved from a shard facing me to one in the far back and I leapt through the void. Flicker. Wrong shard. I was by Masego's side.

"Hierophant," I barked. "Contain the rat."

The dark-skinned man laughed almost drunkenly and brushed back his sleeves. Hands extended, he snapped his wrists together. Two shards collided in a spray of bones that obeyed no sense in where it went and fell, but two Revenant reflections went opposite ways and the undead screamed. It would do. Flicker. I crossed into another shard, almost tripping on a massive half-buried skull, and watched the wheels continue to arc down in the opposite direction. Which meant nothing, but – I made three shells of ice, eyeballing it, yet the artefact still collided entered a fourth. The Skein snatched them before they could bounce, and with a fanged grin leant over the edge of the shard to *throw* them down into the void. I learned from my mistake, this time. I formed the silhouette directly on the surface of the artefact and broadened it with rough strokes. Akua did not need a reminder to seize it. Or instructions in how to operate the massive wings I had shaped.

That lasted until the Skein opened his maw and wisps of Winter were sucked out of the construct, leaving it no more than ice with a shade within. He could take it out as fast as I could pour it, I was pretty sure, so instead of wasting power I went for an alternative. I leapt into the void, gallantly suppressing the scream boiling out of my throat.

*Fragments spread across places and times yet linked, always linked, for Winter was a single entity and the void's touch could be bridged. A thousands hands moved.*

Akua had gone for numbers, I thought, and even as I fell into the dark I saw limbs, skeletons and even skulls move under Winter's writ, biting and grasping at the Skein. I found the wheels at last. Hurtling down into the nothing that would lead somewhere else. *My body is an illusion*, I told myself. I closed my eyes, let distractions fall away.

"My body is an illusion," I insisted.

Just glamour, and anything I had seen I could glamour. Wings or iridescent blue ripped out of my back, long and ephemeral. It was like moving a limb, if that limb had been wounded for months and I was only getting used to it moving again. Angling my fall was easy enough. I collided with the wheels, setting my feet on the middle rung, and tried to convince myself that weight was an illusion as well.

"Sulia never cared about weight," I said. *"It does not apply to me."*

The wings didn't change. But instead of slowing, my descent stopped. And then slowly, painfully, we started rising.

"**Spool**," the Skein said.

I screamed in frustration and/

I was back on the shard where I'd begun, damn him.

"Did you think it would always work?" Hierophant laughed. "There is nothing I have seen you can take from me. **Witness.**"

What was he/

I tightened my grip on the wheels, swinging them over the edge of the closest shard with a grunt. The Skein in most shards strangely looked like he'd taken to wearing armour, covered in a sea of remains that fruitlessly bit and clawed at his hide. Diabolist was trying to slow and blind him, with only mixed success. I glanced to the side, dragging the artefact further over the ledge, and froze when I saw myself standing near the gate, utterly furious. And again, in another shard, getting crushed by the Skein's clawed hands as he seized the wheels. Was I even the real one? No, the existential crisis could wait until later. I needed to get this to Masego so we could get out of here and find Malicia. I raised the wheels over my head and legged it. I couldn't even tell where this shard was related to the others, much less when: bones and void weren't exactly trail markers. I leapt across the nearest shard – flicker – and cursed as soon as I landed. The Skein was in this one, fighting... me. And our earlier work had been done anew, with the ratling bound by a string of my domain, forced into that painful stretched. The other Catherine glanced at me, then shrugged and began forming a massive spike of darkness above the Skein's head.

My own domain ebbed in answer.

Was she... *Eye on the prize, Catherine.* I made my way around the Revenant's desperate death throes and leapt. Flicker. This one was empty, save for aimlessly angry bones animated by Diabolist. My fists tightened around the artefact. I could keep this up for hours and still be lost.

"Hierophant," I called out. "Chart me a path."

A dot of blue light formed ahead of me then peeled off. Good enough. I followed as swiftly as I could, until it crossed into another shard. Flicker. Empty as well, except the Skein suddenly turned around in another shards and passed into this one. The Revenant loomed as tall as ever, though the smaller shard was forcing him to be careful where he stepped.

"I see you," the ratling hissed.

The dot of blue light wheeled to the left and crossed into another shard. Less than helpful, that, since unlike it I had to worry about the giant rat. See me, huh. Akua had seemed able to work through Winter in multiple shards, so theoretically... I sunk



into my own mind, forcing myself to consider angles, then bent Winter to my will. Across a dozen shards mirrors formed, reflecting the light from the pit into the Skein's eyes – which he was already covering, aware that with so many mirrors I'd covered near every angle he could look away to. Fucking oracles. It bought me a heartbeat where I ran for it, wheels over my head, but he swung blindly and with his size there was almost no need to aim. I managed a leap on a platform before I was swept away, but then the tail struck and even even tossing half a tower's worth of ice in the way only slowed it down. A repeat would be the end of this unfortunate magical adventure.

*Following light like a current, through as many mirrors as there could be, and weaving power into the reflections. A dozen arrows loosed.*

Akua used my work to craft her own, abandoning the undead to taint the light coming from the mirrors with concentrated cold. The Skein slowed, until he shook it off, but it was just long enough for me to manage the leap. The tail swung behind me, hitting only air. Flicker. Masego stood ahead of me, tracing runes that resonated like a gong and drove back the Skein when he attempted to cross behind me.

"Take it," I said, and tossed the wheels toward him.

It skidded across bones, and would have toppled him outright if he didn't hastily trace another rune to slow it down to a halt.

"Our entry gate," I said. "Make it lead to Malicia."

He wasted no time on backtalk, ripping away a string and tying it to the central axis as I cast a look around. The rat was trying to sneak through the back, but there would be none of that on my watch. I took the whole of my domain, ripping it away from three other Catherines trying to use it, and shaped it into a bolt that shot right at the Revenant as he leapt. It caught him in the chest, tearing through bone and flesh. Both it and the bolt fell into the void, and only then did I allow the others to play with my –our – domain again. A quick look told me Masego had tied the thread to a place on the lowest wheel, which was our signal to get the Hells out of here.

"Akua, back to me," I said, and yanked her.

I staggered at the impact, which was so much heavier than usual, but then she was at my shoulder again if looking none too pleased at the manhandling. She looked up, and her face fell.

"Catherine," she said, and her hand rose.

She shaped Winter, but it was too little and too late. The Skein fell down from above, shattering the wheels with a massive paw.

"You lose," the Revenant crowed.

The ground broke beneath our feet, and after that there was only the fall.

---

*Matthew*

How did the dead king ever kill this guy?

[Javvies](#)

Presumably there are limitations on Spool. The Dead King doubtlessly exploited them. Ie, if you can break the Skein faster than he can invoke Spool, it doesn't matter.

*Yotz*

Presumably, using **Spool** in it's original form in the space beyond localized pocket universe cut from the rest of Creation would either revert everything involved – including memories of participants – to the arbitrary savepoint, forcing the used to depend on supposed non-deterministic nature of the world's weave, or creating stable time-loop otherwise; or would compleately garble the mind of user, in essence putting him in catatonic coma *before* the Aspect was used.

So, savescumming is not an option beyond the boundaries of DK's virtual machine.

*Yotz*

Addendum

Just thought of it – the time loop in question may not be stable, but conditional – in case the **Spool** has a limited number of usages during a day. And I'm going to presume that number being 3, if only for the sake of simplification.

It would be something like that: you a going to do something and suddenly are hit with realization that your Aspect now has one less charge on the counter. Which leads to a conclusion that your next most usual course of actions would lead you to a situation where you was forced to use **Spool**.

Change to a less obvious thread is in order.

If there are two uses missing, that's a trap, and you should retreat. NOW.

If there are three uses missing – say your prayers, DK is

after your arse, and it's time to go out in the blaze of glory!

*Nafram*

Spool is, as far as Akua can tell, "contingent to that place". Essentially, that means that either the Skein can only use it there, or it comes with a drastic drawback or limitation if used elsewhere. Granted, the aspect could have been stronger when the skein was alive, but even then it probably wasn't as mind numbingly powerful as in these conditions.

Then, there's also the fact that this is Neshamah himself we're talking about. He is likely capable of far more than The Woe can currently bring to bear by himself, and it's likely that he had other revenants ready to help him if need be against Skein. Therefore, the living Skein would've been weaker than he is in this fight, and his opposition far stronger and etter prepared

*Lark*

"Our minds were left untouched," Diabolist noted. "As was his. In broader Creation such a working would have shattered him upon the wheel, from all the cascade of innumerable events affected. The aspect was bastardized, made contingent to this place."

So presumably the Skein was much more limited in life, and is now limited to affecting the Threefold Palace.

*xland44*

Spool is apparently much weaker/different in the real world, back when the dead king fought him

*stevenneiman*

Spool is massively powered up in exchange for only working inside the Threefold Reflection. At least, that's my understanding.

*Vortex*

The Skein requires a specific environment to bring out his most overpowered aspects, as I understand it.

*Miles*

He created a scenario in which the skein could not survive no matter what happened.

Probably part of the way he became king as well.

*Miles*

So no matter how many times the skein used spool, he'd end up in a scenario where he lost.

Also afaict from this chapter he can only spool back a certain amount of time at once.

*SadAdder*

Spool most likely has a limited amount of uses and the dead king probably just tired the poor guy out by switching out his revenants.

Your power wouldn't really help you anyways if you were attacked by like 5 undead heroes/villains that were ripped from their storylines.

[Javvies](#)

The Skein is hax. Even for a Named. Temporal fuckery is problem.

Also, this is definitely the Dead King pushing Cat to embrace apotheosis or die.

*Antoninjohn*

Cat is getting a lot of experience from this, how many level ups will she get

*naturalnuke*

Two, one for killing Skien, and one for the time fuckery she has to put up with.

[wyaldriddler](#)

And then Masego uses the stolen Spool. :V

*TheGamingWyvern*

I don't think he used Spool. Rather, spool tried to undo the events that happened, but Masego forced his will to informed creation that wjat he Witnessed actually happened.

[onedollargum](#)

What wyaldriddler is suggesting I think is that Masego would somehow steal Spool and use it to undo the shattering of the artifact, thus resolving the cliffhanger.

[TeK](#)

Nice to see that bullshit is not a priviulage of Heroes.

*Yotz*

Why, dear – there's a significant difference between Noble and Righteous Heroic Gifts, and profane dirty haxxs used by abominable heathens!

### Cold Cyberia

She's actually a superhero. Haven't you heard of the Spider-Cat?

*Spider-Cat!*

*Spider-Cat!*

*Does whatever a Spider-Cat does!*

*Can she kill, a ratling?*

*No she can't, it's the Skein*

*Lookout!*

*She's the Spider-Cat!*

---

Please, everybody knows she's Captain Callow, promoted or not.

*grzecho2222*

When Captain Callow throws her domaiiiiiiiiiiiiiin  
Nothing very normal and sane shall remaiiiiiiiiiiiin

*Jessica Day*

*\*slow clap\**

*Miles*

Really villains ought to have the best bullshit. That's why the Good Gods get to actively meddle.

*Someguy*

Now its Archer's Plan to come in play.

*Miles*

The shattered artifact opens up a path to malicia and archer. Archer loses her arrow. The arrow splits on the border of a portal and the halves kill malicia and the skein in 1 shot.

*WuseMajor*

I hope she can come out of this with some shreds of her morality and sanity intact. Otherwise, she'll be little more than a monster or another Fae Queen and, if her own nation doesn't rise against her, the Bard will be there with a bunch of heroes to see her destroyed. They'll likely all die in the process, but Cat's best assets in all the things she's managed is that she is quick

on the uptake, very clever about thinking outside the box, and stubbornner than a million donkeys.

Becoming the Winter Queen in truth would give her a scary level of power, but it would hobble everything that she used to get herself here. It would ruin everything she wants to achieve. And Heroes know how to deal with powerful villains with hidden weaknesses, so what was left of her would quickly be bound or destroyed.

*morrígan*

Dammit. These chapters feel way too short.

So I assume that whenever the Woe got too close to Malicia or the Skein, the ratling would just Spool and send them back to square one? I wonder what the limitations are. Why couldn't he just Spool them back to the palace when they started fighting? Or is the aspect usable like that only in this particular part of Keter? Regardless, I'm sure you can chalk this all up to 'stupid seer bullshit.'

The narrative hasn't yet abandoned the Woe (they're far too entertaining), and we see yet another example of the self-balancing scales: the Skein pulls out some nonsense, and Masego pulls a brand spanking new Aspect out of Namespace to fight back. Nothing so blatant as a perfect counter to Spool, of course, because that fuckery is the provenance of Heroes only, but a weapon nonetheless.

And, while having Akua as a sort of 'magical collar Adjutant' is nice, I can't help but feel that Catherine is damning herself more and more with every inch of leeway she offers Diabolist. (Cat deciding to take Akua's hand last chapter was definitely alarming.) She's setting a dangerous prescedent by allowing Akua to draw on Winter like she is in this chapter – and as we all know, Catherine is Winter and Winter is Catherine. Though, I suppose she really should have seen it coming when Cat made the decision to bind her soul to her cloak instead of destroying it ... or at the very least blackboxing her a la Quirrel in Significant Digits if Catherine was really keen on keeping her around.

Regardless, when it finally comes time for Cat to kill Akua as per her binding agreement with Viv – signed in spit – I'd be lying if I didn't say I would feel bad.

*Azure*

I won't feel bad. Akua is a mass murderer who thrives on manipulation. Her little sob story to Catherine about her mom forcing her to kill her friend, was calculated to press just the right buttons for sympathy. Oh boohoo it's not Akua's fault it's all her mom's and Praesi society forcing her to become who

she is. Vivienne pointed out exactly how manipulative she is. Catherine is giving Akua a very long rope, letting her think she's manipulating her way into the Woe's good graces.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter... only Regicide isn't looking the best at the moment.

*burdi*

the last one will be "Chaterine's Plan"

*lqueenofblades1*

Catherine\*

Why is it so hard to spell it right after 3 and a half books and hundreds of chapters? Cat not Chat. Catherine not freaking Chaterine.

*Yotz*

Well, as much as I'd like to defend that "Chat" thingamajig, "Chaterine" rules all believable – or probable, even – lines of Devil's advocacy on my part.

And so, I am forced to draw the inevitable conclusion – the "Chat" thing is a bait, and the person using it is a master baiter.

*lqueenofblades1*

\*applauds\* I always appreciate a good pun 😊

[esryok](#)

My will is broken. Grats, ye wicked trolls:

<https://raw.githubusercontent.com/Esryok/practical-guide/master/catherine-foundling.user.js>

*Jessica Day*

Honestly, I'm starting to come around to Chat... This may be a losing battle lol

*Jane*

You know, I'm pretty certain that most people would need a few sessions with a psychologist after a fight like this one. Or just, you know, directly take SAN damage from the nature of reality/identity/self unravelling like this. I'm pretty certain the human mind wasn't designed to cope with something like this, outside of heavy denial. Good thing she's not human anymore, right?

That said, I wonder... Was it her redefining the essence of her construct to become weightless (such as saying, "No, my body is more like air than it is lead"), or was it her negating creational law to become weightless (saying, "Gravity doesn't \*really\* apply to me")? Either is useful, but the implications diverge rather significantly.

I'd make a joke about how she used her Ruling Authority in conjunction with her Divinity Field to petition the Administrator to create a Skill to deny creational law, but it'd be needlessly impenetrable to anyone who didn't know exactly what I was joking about, and not terribly amusing to begin with.

Incidentally, Ruin seems like the kind of aspect that makes a legend of a Name, even by the standards of the Named... A Story with the kind of Villain who can shatter reality itself is either a farce where everyone is just playing around, or a "The very existence of the world is at stake, and we need all of the biggest heroes holding nothing back to stop them" kind of deal. The Woes weren't exactly minor league before, but this is the kind of scale that puts them at the center of the continent.

[daegone823](#)

Still think Hakram's ability to both put down insurgents left and right, handle all the clerical work that no one wants to deal with, and still find time to take care of Chathrine's alcohol trumps this.

Similar to how Black became more vulnerable to the Sacker's probing questions about his plan for Procer without the captain at his side to remind him of who he is, and how scribe allows him to remain informed. I believe Hakram's powers make him a much more scary opponent similar to chancellor even.

I mean warlock does have an epic name and powers that makes him a dangerous entity him, mages have always been glass cannons. Once you take the brunt of there damage or get them monologue in this universe that means a fatal mistake.

Whereas Hakram has proven to be a critical member to the woe who is integral to the general cohesion of the group's success. If they lost Masego a crucial piece on the board would be lost, but if they lost Hakram's I think Chathrine would loose herself and the band would become sidetracked similar to how the loss of Sabah mean the loss of the heart of the Calamities. Without your heart how far can you go.

*Jane*

Ah, I just meant how such Aspects must affect the Stories that surround them in a more general way – like how you wouldn't normally expect Robin Hood to show up in a story



dealing with Cthullu-esque horrors, or a team of Seraphim to be called upon to deal with some basic pickpockets.

The loss of Hakram would cause the administration of Callow to fall to pieces, true, but he and his talents wouldn't normally act as a beacon to the types of Heroes that deal in preserving the fabric of reality. Someone with an aspect like Ruin, though... Well, if the Woe weren't already facing off against Pilgrim and others like him, I would expect Heirophant to be the sort of figure they'd end up entangled with.

All Named are bigger than life, but Ruin seems big even by their standards, assuming I understand its usage correctly.

*Leveret*

Catherine's heart is an illusion. Sulia never cared about heart. It does not apply to Catherine.

[Euodiachloris](#)

What are the odds the clowder of Cats have added a little smoke and mirrors to the clockwork? In short, I think Skein may not be targeting what he thinks he's targeting.

*Snowfire1224*

While I recognize that clowder is a name for a group of Cats so is a glaring and I feel that might be more fitting.

*Big Brother*

I learned two new terms today. Thank you both.

*Big Brother*

New\*

*Jessica Day*

Or is it "mew" 😊

*Rook*

Now we start to see the real bullshit potential of the winter mantle, potentially being even worse than the elves.

She decided her body was an illusion, she's now a shapeshifter. Decided weight doesn't apply to her, creation immediately folds like a deck of cards. Dimensional shards of alternate realities and timelines? No sweat, all of them simultaneously bridged by default.

In fact I have a sneaking suspicion that the only reason Catherine wasn't able to swat the skein into paste like an insect was her understanding of her own mantle being so shallow.

If she can bridge that many realities with the mantle she shouldn't need to physically run through the shards, realistically there's very little stopping her from existing in all of them at once and shifting through them at will. Even the void between them shouldn't be immune to her influence, cold and darkness aren't anything more than absence, no different from the void.

Honestly the Queen of Moonless Nights falling into the void is almost comical. It's like the ocean falling into a lake. Get your metaphysical shit together, girl.

*RanVor*

Keep in mind that while gravity might not apply to Cat, it's not true about Masego, and letting the Hierophant fall into a bottomless pit of nothing isn't really an option right now. Therefore, Cat must fall with him, if only to find a way to rescue him somehow.

*Rook*

If it was a generic pit of spikes I'd be worried for Masego, but a quasi-magical fraying of creation between alternate realities?

I'm more scared for that poor void. I wouldn't be surprised if he managed to dissect it for his research.

*RanVor*

On a second thought, how does the gravity even exist in there? Isn't it somewhere outside the Creation?

*Argentorum*

No one else is worried that CAT THOUGHT AKUA WAS HEAVY?

Jokes about a lady's weight aside, Akua should be spun out of stardust and ice, that she has creational weight here is a red flag. Yes it could be just the situation, but given that Cat had no problem working her ice magic across multiple shards then there's no reason that the teathed should function differently. It is, because Akua is probably MORE than a soul now. In fact it wouldn't surprise me to see that the next time Neshamah has her announced her name is "Growing Splendor" or even just flat out "Splendid One."

Beyond the obvious reasons that this is worrying, there is one sinister one lurking in the wings. The Fae trade rolls, sometimes

one is the king, another a prince. And Each time Akua's \*fought\* since losing to Cat, it's been in with Cat's power, if not in her place directly.

In brief...

"All according to plan."

Yotz

Not so worried, as eager...

Adobe

Eh I just thought she was heavy because the Skein has attached himself to her and been dragged through as well.

*1queenofblades1*

Hey look it's me! Catherine-gravity-doesn't-apply-to-me-Foundling falling into a void under the force of gravity!

Yeah nope, something tells me the three other Cats have something up their sleeve, Masego uses Spool, or Cat does something with Archer. Not sure! Can't wait till Wednesday!

Also you guys realize if Catherine becomes the Dread Empress, she will be the (Dread) God-Empress? Speaking of which, if she's a goddess, what's stopping her from launching her own crusade? The 11th Crusade against the 10th Crusade sounds like an awesome fuck up.

Yotz

I'd like to just quote La Roche again and be with it, but the 11th Crusade – or, indeed, any form of holy war in Cat's name – seems unlikely at best. Even in the case of possible full apotheosis on Cat's part, to initiate such a calamity in the name of new never seen before goddess one will need a full-fledged faithful congregation and functional church to her name. And that even before we get into the legitimacy problems. There are two sets of well known and established gods in the world already, and even if they chose to remain silent, much less to openly condemn the pretender – and her declaration of divinity, which is an essential part of such holy war undertaking, would be met with widespread recognition of her arrogant insanity, and nothing more. More to that, even her own people and – more importantly – soldiers will join on that assumption. And while the Army – most of it – will follow her because she's powerful and successful general, to recruit to her cause someone at least passable as sane person would become an unachievable dream. Not to mention all-out global war with possible intervention of several world and otherworldly superpowers as a side dish of such declaration.

1queenofblades1

I was kidding...

Yotz

♥

Don't sweat it, dear.

Yotz

In case you were wondering, the quote in question wasn't going to be

in appropriately mangled form, with Queen of Many Colors and None being replaced with the Black Queen.

It'd serve as a nice refrain to your joke, but alas, I've already used it while commenting on the creation of the Order of the Broken Bells. Such is a fate ;\_;

[cheeseyme1999](#)

quick reply to this, but there are 2 types of gods in this universe. You have Gods, capital G, who made creation and who are worshiped and who you are thinking of. Then you have gods, lowercase g, whom exist on their own and are merely powerful and near-immortal. We know about 2 different lesser gods who've died in universe(the one Captain ate, and the one whose corpse the tower was built upon), and another 3 have shown up in the story(Winter King, Summer Queen, and Neshamah)

Cat, is coming to realize her status as a lesser god, not a greater God, as such your post doesn't really apply.

Yotz

Except her status as a lesser god would preclude the possibility of holy war in her name. Beside that, theological definitions is a thing of constant contention, and it is expected from a foul villain to declare his or her divinity – no one would bat an eye, but no one will want to join the possible “anti-crusade” out of religious obligations. Money, loot, patriotism – that's another matter completely, but faith... Without a church and cult nearly immortal comparatively very powerful person is just it – a powerful immortal person. Civilization with low level of culture may grant such person a status of “god” or “demigod”, but with average cultural level of Calernia pretender would be seen among general population as just a brazen cheat. Or insane, dangerous or otherwise. Now, in a dozen generations or so, the Story of the Black

Queen would grow enough to allow for creation of a cult, methinks – but that's a matter of a future.

*edrey*

so i think at this point the only way is that thief stole the artifact, put a copy at the same time and all that fight was part of the plan and cat's plan chapter is she killing malicia

*Thea*

Malicia won't die here. You don't kill her off in an arc that has nothing to do with her.

*edrey*

well, her meat puppet, you can read between lines, the point is thief saving the day, and next chapter some talk with malicia, i hope, malicia is a great character

*Decius*

Theif?

Archer. In the kitchen. With an apple.

*MetruX*

I do think Malicia is trully dying here. It can be a meat puppet, but... She was never a big player. She made herself to be, with the help of the Calamities, and she played well the game... But she was never the owner of the pieces and never had the power herself to make it work. As the ones who supported her are slowly being ground to dust, so will she fall, and this is the "better" time for her fall, the most dramatic and story heavy time.

*grzecho2222*

I think that Malicia used to be very good player, but being in the Tower is making her Stupid Evil. She acts way smarter in flashbacks and now she makes mistake after mistake (antagonizing your main potential ally for personal reasons is not very smart) and if you look at the Calamities, all of them avoid the Tower when they can. And Terribilis (who we know was one Emperor that seem normal) is also known as the guy who avoided the Tower

*RanVor*

The Tower is a trap. It lures Praesi with the hollow promises of power and greatness, keeping them focused

on their schemes and unable to recognize the causes of their failures.

*RanVor*

The chapter quoted was actually Rise, not Fall.

*grzecho2222*

Well, it was also destroyed twice and given that Fate loves Rule of Three maybe Cat will wreck it for good

*RanVor*

Except if Malicia doesn't die here, Cat is beyond fucked, so she will. Probably. Possibly. You can never know.

*AngryCactus*

Spool is five letters. /masego

*Yotz*

Not in Callowan, Zeze. /Cat

*BLH989*

Technically it consists of four letters O, L, P, and S /Aoede

[Alyxe](#)

So many amazing comments but the phrases that stood out to me?

"The Skein had spoken four letters and wiped away all we had wrought.

Masego replied the same and the world shattered."

...Cat, Cat, Cat. We have GOT to work on your spelling. Spool is FIVE letters. -g-

*Piotr Tokarski*

So is Rooin!

*Nima*

Jesus christ. How the fuck the dead king beat this rat things. Skein is like the minority report precogs ten times more powerful with ctrl+z skill

*Amoonymous*

As others have noted (and it's stated in the story by Akua), in reality it would either have to wipe everyone involved's

memories or he would be broken by Creation, the only reason it's so OP here is because of the dimensional space presumably set up by the Dead King (and perhaps by the Skein being undead).

Could have even been other limitations involving the Skein not being undead, that specific dimension instead of just any non-creation dimension, or who knows what else back when the Skein was living.

Aston

She's called Chaterine because she's loves to talk before the violence.

So which Cat fell down the hole?

grzecho2222

So Skein broke controls to the palace. Surely it won't make any mess whatsoever.

Malicia walking down corridor.

-Finally something works out. And soon I won't have to worry about this irritating girl ever again.-

Starts raining Cats from random doors.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Next Chapter: "I've fallen into the abyss... only to realize I am the abyss."

Also, here's the link to vote for the guide: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Aston

I love how Catherine's main power is self-delusion.

Power of a god.

If I pretend I'm really powerful I can beat this guy!

I'm still a normal human girl who's an orphan with great friends.

Winter? Yes, it does get chilly. Close the door.

Yotz

*Beware the Jabberwock, o Queen!*

*The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!*

*Beware the Jubjub bird, and skleen*

*The frumious Collarsnatch!*

... and that's all I got to say about the chapter in general.

[TeK](#)

There is no Spool.

*grzecho2222*

Spooooooooooooooooool

*Dimensional*

So – The revnant in the heart of the maze, just destroyed the artifact that holds the whole thing together? I can't see that being super great for anyone in the palace – cause I think this means 3 different palaces suddenly try to exist in the same space.

I predict that this is all according to someone's plan.

*Gunslinger*

Wow this is a chapter I'm going to have to read multiple times because while Cat can wrap her mind around this abstractness my human one needs more time.

I wonder if Masego's aspect is also that effective because it's being used in a localized space

*Phil zu Neide*

My shipping of Cat and Akua steadily increases ^^

*Exrot*

I wonder how long it will take for Akua to steal herself a fae title and become a princess or duchess of winter and start the cycle of titles changinh hands all over again. Heroes would hate it as you either end up with a queen of winter who is a militant nutjob or one who plays everyone like puppets and breaks everything woth magic.

*maresther23*

This needs to be a netflix series, I want to see the shear eldrichness that is this fight with my own two eyes.

*Snowfire1224*

When I first started reading the series, it struck me how I could so vividly imagine it being a series, a feeling I never got from anything else not even books that went on to make great shows and movise. Especially with dark fantasy like GOT being popular, I could see it being well recieved.



*superkeaton*

Good girl, Cat. Mortal limitations are for mortal bodies, and you haven't been human in a very long time.

Moral, limitations, on the other hand... might want to keep an eye on those.

*TameCurtsy*

"Ruin" doesn't seem to fit Masego well enough. I get the need for an offensive aspect, but Ruin suggests destruction for no purpose.

My idea: "Excarnate".

1) It's a badass word. Just like "hierophant" and "vivisector" (which I learned thanks to PGtE.)

2) It fits the vivisection idea, as the removal of organs, leaving only bones. And it was used to preserve the bones of nobles (like Christopher Columbus) so it can translate over to divine acts pretty easily.

3) In a narrative sense, potentially used similarly/more creatively than Ruin. Like in this chapter, it is less that Zeze Ruined the aspect, and more that he separated it into its elements leaving it weaker, easier for him to study, understand, manipulate, and in the future, replicate.

4) "It was to destroy and devastate irreparably". The aspect is birthed from Black's Destroy, but it sounds just too similar to me. What's the difference?

5) Nice duality with "reincarnate", a high-tier Good power.

6) Warlock has "Imbricate" which is fancy. Zeze should get to be just as fancy.

Having said all that, I fully believe that Ruin could be a puzzle piece that may not feel right at the moment, but looking back I will realize that nothing could fit better. That narrative quality is my favorite aspect of PGtE (too obvious? Couldn't help myself.)

*Dainpdf*

Well, if the aspect doesn't fit what we know it may be that what we know is incomplete.

Also, to Ruin is not to Destroy. Destroy removes something from the world. Ruin just fucks with them.

*TameCurtsy*

Thanks for the response! And yeah, I hope it's something that gets filled in later. But if/until then...

The "It was to destroy and devastate irreparably" is from Catherine's internal rumination. So when Black Destroyed the

Hellgate-gestalt, presumably it was destroyed and devastated irreparably.

I think the author is setting up Ruin as having the extra power that Destroy lacks, while also introducing more tension/Evil to Masego – both of which I'm down for – but it is not distinct enough of a verb and does not seem to entail the effect that it implies.

My second idea of the substitute aspect: Hack. Dual meanings: one is brutal destruction, the other is slightly anachronistic but complex. And it'd be funny if Masego was the Miracle Hacker.

---

> So when Black Destroyed the Hellgate-gestalt, presumably it was destroyed and devastated irreparably.

Masego was actually the one tasked with gluing it back together.

All things considered, I think this is the case where circumstances shape the Aspect, like with Discern – and like with Discern, while the Aspect is strongest in this specific situation, there's more to it than that.

A good example is Catherine after reclaiming the Name of Squire. Her prize after winning the first battle of Liesse are the Aspects of Take (three times per day allows to usurp magical powers from her opponents, like spells or even other Aspects, awakened by forcing an angel to resurrect her) and Break (once per day allows her to batter down an obstacle in her way, seemingly cannot be used directly on the opponents themselves, awakened by breaking the Pentinent's Sword), which sounds like just powers related to these particular events of the story. However, the story itself is about how she pulled the sword from the stone, and if you remember the epilogue to book two, Black says:

> For at least the first year, Catherine was likely to butcher and coerce her way through anything she perceived as an obstacle. She would do so mercilessly and without hesitation, too, because there was something utterly ruthless at the core of Catherine Foundling. Callowan defiance, perhaps, but married with something brutally pragmatic. Something that would use what it could not break and break what it could not use.

The pivot here wasn't even Catherine rejecting the Hashmallim's offer (killling everyone who trusted her and brainwashing everyone who didn't isn't exactly a fair deal). It wasn't her capitalizing on the symbol of a sword in the stone: William was the one who made it, and Cat already had

a plan of making an angel resurrect her by the right of “a kingdom, an enemy and a claim”.

What mattered was that William thought it was a story only about himself, and so killing Catherine was a sensible solution. She, on the other hand, could see the big picture, and to change it she'd need to use what she could not break and break what she could not use. The form of the Aspects was decided by the obstacles she needed to overcome with their help, but she always was going to obtain two of them that would serve a similar purpose.

*TameCurtsy*

\_\_\_\_\_, great response! You came at this from a different angle and I like. Also excellent catch on Black's foreshadowing: one of my favorite things in this story is going back to earlier chapters and seeing the hidden depth behind innocent lines.

I finally looked up the definition of Ruin, read one that goes “reduce to ruins; fall into pieces” and realized that settled most of my problems with the word choice. Rereading the section, the Aspect could even be positioned like that.

So my issue is significantly smaller: Catherine, setting herself as as an Aspect authority, describes it as “Black's Destroy but with more horsepower and a different flavor” instead of “Zeze reduces things to pieces.” I agree that the Aspect was going to be destructive and the obstacles decided it was Ruin, but I think that the two definitions have a crucial, significant difference.

This sounds nitpicky even to me, but it's one of the rare times in PGtE where something did not fit and threw me out of the flow... not including the typos :P.

For the record, I don't think Black's Destroy should be the shadow Catherine sees in this: it should be the whole journey of walking through the Dead King's shards. Much more significant to Masego personally, he is surrounded by ruins, it culminates in seeing the most influential Creation-challenging ceremony, and even if he was there for Black's destroy, he would have been upset at the waste.

I would not be surprised however if the author proves me wrong and looking back, I see this section as fitting perfectly.

(Zeze repairs the gestalt, he doesn't repair the Hellgator – which Catherine would've preferred – so Black Destroyed it and devastated it irreparably.)

Cheers!

*Dainpdf*

Well, I assume if Ruin had been used on the array, instead of the thing being utterly destroyed, it would have been warped and fractured.

Ruin actually reminds me of the demons. It's what they do, more than destroying.

*tweid*

"It is a good cage," the Skein said. "You will not leave it."

oh my god is he referencing the meme

I think he is

glorious

---

What meme? The only cage-related (and maybe fighting-related) joke I can think of at the moment is "three Named enter, a theoretically unlimited amount of identical murderfairies leave!"

*Snowfire1224*

"Despite all my rage, I'm still just a rat in a cage"

It's from a song.

*Havak*

Does anybody else think that Akua's master plan is to get Cat to climb the tower? That way she can become the Chancellor to Cat's Dread Empress? And then do the traditional Chancellor betrayal to take the throne herself which was her plan from the very beginning.

*RanVor*

If Akua really thinks Cat would ever let her be the Chancellor... Honestly, I expected better than this from her.

*Havak*

Why not? She already has one traitorous lieutenant, plus she would still have a leash on Akua so I can easily imagine Cat thinking something like "Better the devil you know and have total control over" or something.

*Phil zu Neide*

My idea is that Akua recognizes that Cat is above her in terms of power. While a free Akua would be very strong and might very well become a second Triumphant she would in the end still loose to the good guys. Cat on the other hand might be able to break the dichotomy between Good and Evil and change the rules of the game forever. Akua recognizes this and decides to support her because in the end loyalty to Cat could reward her handsomely.

*Dainpdf*

Huh. I guess that's it for Catherine. It was a good story... Oh, who am I kidding? This rat is in for a beating.

[frolamiz](#)

This combat was pure chaos, a perfect fit for Catherine's fighting style.

Chaos queen would fit her better =)

[sengachi](#)

I'm almost certain someone must have posted this in the comments before, but I found this song which is just too perfect for Cat and I have to share it: Tommee Profitt Feat. Svrcina – My Domain

*Alegio*

Cat is learning how to god, Masego undos realities and Akua gets a lot of winter to play with, while the Skein destroys the thing that keeps that dimensionall fuck up going on ...Nothing wrong can come out of this! 😊

*Aston*

Nothing bad ever happens in this story because it's all The Gods Playground.

[Tohron](#)

Every time a broken bell rings, a bastard-faerie eldritch abomination gets her wings!

Seriously, I've been wondering whether Catherine could grow wings like the other Winter fae could – seems that's just one of her many capabilities. Among other things, it could really speed up travel when she's taking gate-shortcuts by herself.

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## Chapter 44: Catherine's Plan

*"From the example of the claimant Desolate we can learn this: no scheme is so perfect that it is invulnerable to the utter idiocy of an opponent."*

-Extract from an untitled historical commentary on the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One, by the Imperial Concubine Alaya of the Green Stretch

There was only the void to keep track of now, at least. Wings burst out of my back and with a swift beat had me spinning sideways: I caught Masego by the collar, though he kept wriggling uncomfortably. If this had been freefall back in Creation, the howl of the wind would have forced me to raise my voice. No such troubles plagued our descent into nothingness, a silver lining on a situation I knew to be bad but vaguely suspected was much, much worse.

"Can you get us out of here?" I asked, wings beating behind me to keep us aloft.

Diabolist was nothing more than a shade on my back, kept there by the fact I willed it so. Whatever weight she'd had earlier, it was gone now.

"There is no here," Hierophant replied. "We are in between places that exist, within the contained entity that was the central chamber."

"And can you get us out of *that*?" I hissed.

"It is an egg, Catherine," he said. "We are within. If you want to leave..."

*Crack the shell*, I thought. Easier said than done: if that'd been on the table since the beginning, there would have been much less planning needed. Could've burst straight into the Skein's lair, seized the wheels and assassinated Malicia. Of course, we *had* eventually burst into that lair. It hadn't gone what one might call 'well', or to be honest anywhere near that neighbourhood. After the elven Revenant I'd thought that Neshamah's guardians were dangerous yet not beyond our ability to handle. I'd just been roughly disabused of that notion. Even Masego picking up his second aspect had barely managed to get the situation under control long enough for the rat to screw us over again.

"Where do I hit?" I asked Hierophant.

The heart of our working relationship, laid bare.

"Anywhere," he laughed.

I blew out a cold breath and allowed Winter to slither through my veins. Our exertions fighting the Skein had not tired it. It felt, if anything, even more eager than before. I was beginning to grasp the secret at the heart of the fae, slowly but surely: their power delighted in use, rewarded it. I'd inherited that without the tight constraints of a role in the colourful but uncompromising tapestry that had once governed the entire realm of faerie. Before the King of Winter hoodwinked me into killing and freeing him with the same sentence, anyway. Who knew what the face of Arcadia was, now that its ever-feuding courts had become one? I felt Akua's not-eyed follow the shape of the power I was shaping, but she did not take part. She had not spoken a word since my last summons, I only now noticed.

"Diabolist?" I said.

"I am reaching the limit," the shade murmured through tight lips.

I glanced back, the light of my translucent wings casting her scarlet eyes almost purple to my sight.

"Of what?" I asked.

"How much principle alienation I can take for you," Diabolist said. "My thoughts already grow... stilted. Forced down unproductive paths."

I blinked in surprise. Shit. It was true I'd been tossing around Winter like rarely before and my mind remained mostly my own, but I'd not... There'd been a lot of sweet talk about apotheosis, of late. Foolishly enough, I'd assumed that I'd somehow outgrown my old troubles. Not so, evidently. How had Akua even – ah, the chain. Had to be. This entire time, she'd been taking the plunge so I would remain mostly clear-headed. I could only admire her capacity to master her own thoughts in the face of Winter influence, if her limit was only now reached. My tongue burned with a half a dozen questions but they would have to wait for later. There were no physical markers for me to hit around here, so I didn't bother with anything too precise. Ice and shadow, woven into a spike that spun and elongated into something closer to a massive javelin. I shaped it carefully, and only when I was satisfied with the flawlessness of the working did I let it loose. For a heartbeat, I hit nothing. The javelin kept moving through nothingness unimpeded, its momentum undaunted by the distance.

Then I hit a wall, or something close to it.

Like an arrow hitting stone my working did little more than leave a mark on the surface, but there was an unmistakable notch of damage on the surface of the nothingness in front of us. Winter's span was a difficult thing to measure, for my mantle obeyed no rules but its own and sometimes not even that, but I had put much

of myself into the javelin. Enough that, with Akua no longer serving as my filter, I could feel the creep of influence at the edge of my mind. Still indistinct whispers, for now. They would grow louder, I knew, until there was no difference between them and my own thoughts. Hammering through wasn't going to work. I'd come out of here spouting monologues, if not worse, and I wouldn't catch Malicia acting like the very same people she'd arranged the deaths of for decades over a nice cup of wine. I wasn't ready to call this a wash yet, and embracing the fullness of Winter was more or less that.

"Hierophant, I need you to pry that open," I said.

Masego frowned.

"Platform," he said.

Reluctantly, I snatched another wisp of Winter and crafted one beneath him before dropping his collar. He landed on his feet, if not particularly gracefully, but that wasn't what drew my attention. I could smell the sorcery on him. I always could, really, and given the amount of protective enchantments he layered on himself whenever we went into battle this should not be a surprise. But there was something different, this time. The magic was curving beneath his skin, deep into his body. My eyes narrowed and traced the shape of them with my mind, like a blind girl trying to see the face of another with my fingers. Some of that sorcery was going straight into his heart, keeping the blood pumping steadily. More was stiffening muscles, like those of his lower back. Keeping him standing up straight. And there were two little pinpricks, going into smaller glands above his kidneys. Forcing them to keep functioning, for whatever eldritch purpose. My studies of anatomy had largely been aimed towards killing or more recreational affairs, but I could recognize the sight of a man tinkering with his own body to keep it going when it was falling apart. He'd used powerful sorceries, today. Birthed an aspect, and used another. Back when I'd been the Squire and just that, even calling on a single such power would have wiped me out. A long overdue reminder that Masego, like the rest of the Woe, was still very much human. With all the messy, unpleasant parts that involved.

I kept my mouth shut anyway as he began to trace runes.

If I'd been a better friend, a better person, I might have taken the burden off his shoulders. Valiantly declared that we would find another way, that I'd take care of it somehow. But I was just me, and it was too late for last-hour gambits. I needed Malicia dead, and I needed it done *soon*. I'd have to trust that Masego would not irreparably hurt himself, and let him bleed for my objectives. *Isn't it funny?* I thought. *How the higher you rise, the more power comes into the shape of others suffering for*



you. I was not smiling. But what was the worth of that, if I still kept silent?

"I can turn a scuffmark into a hole," Hierophant finally said. "That is, I'm afraid, the limit of what I can do. You will have to address the rest of the matter."

I nodded.

"Do it," I ordered.

He attacked the mark I'd left with what looked like twin thin needles of light, but to my senses felt more like a chisel and a hammer. One was heavier than the other, using the weaker one to pry open the wall. Masego's breath quickened, and I felt some of the spells on his body weaken. Like Diabolist, he was nearing his limit. The Woe were powerful, for our age. More than we had any right to. But if we could not hurt our enemy badly in the initial stretch of the fight, as a group we had a tendency to begin slowly losing. Too many shortcuts. Too many advances with weak foundations. We had rushed to power, and it'd made us fragile. I dismissed the thought, and sharpened my will like a blade as Hierophant finished making that final breach. A small one, less than an inch wide. But I could feel Creation behind it, and an opening was all I'd needed. I called on my domain, the night-realm within, and before it could fall over us like a curtain I wove the smallest sliver through the breach. Gave us a path into Creation.

Night followed.

My wings died behind me as I tread soft snow, the starless sky above spreading out forever. Masego stumbled and shivered as he joined me, but I guided away the worst of the cold with a thought and offered him an arm to lean on. I'd already asked too much of him today. Akua did not appear: she'd always been there. I simply had not acknowledged her presence, or so it felt like. And it was not her fae guise she wore, either. In here, I looked upon the same Diabolist I had fought in Liesse. Tall and splendid, all aristocratic arrogance and careless disdain. In here, all we had done to hide her true face fell away. Unlike Hierophant, she was not burdened by the touch of my kingdom of moonless night. She looked up at the pitch-black firmament and smiled, as if I'd taken her to a tea shop with a charming decor instead of the last remaining hold of the Winter Court. She hummed quietly, lips quirking. I knew that song.

Parts of it, anyway.

"The second is the longest, they said

You will walk under the restless dead

The hanged all crooning from the gallows –

To join them and rest in the shadows.”

Her voice was soft, and the pitch of the tune perfect.

“Diabolist,” I sharply said.

She turned to me, still smiling.

“Come, dearest heart,” Akua said, eyes alight with savage glee.  
“Let us speak to the Empress of *succession*.”

My fingers clenched. I still remembered the conversation she’d had with Thief, not so long ago. She’d thrown the argument, as Vivienne had suspected, but the girl who’d once been Heiress never spoke with a single purpose to her words. Had she known I was a wake and listening, even then? Maybe. Or perhaps she was addressing that inscrutable audience that always listened, the unseen hand of fate that always sought to curb us to its purpose. She wanted me to be Empress. She wanted, perhaps, to be my Chancellor. And she thought Malicia’s death would be the birth of that story. Damnably, she might be right. I hoped, against my better judgement, that it was the flesh simulacrum of the Empress that awaited us. I was already in too many knife-fights with fate to pick yet another.

“Follow,” I said, and tugged Masego along.

I left no trace on the snow, and neither did Akua. She had become a creature of this place, by hook and crook. It was Hierophant, sagging and increasingly drenched in cold sweat, that needed the help. I propped him up until the itch in the back of my head had grown too much to ignore. I could feel it, the... depression in this place. As if the supports beneath my domain were uneven and it had sagged. I closed my eyes and withdrew it all. A sea unleashed, slowly siphoned back into my too-small frame, until the touch of the sun was on my face and my eyes fluttered open. We were back in the Threefold Reflection, at last. Green light fell down over us like a shower from a sun pit towering high above, kept functional through all hours of the day by a cunning set of mirrors. This was a salon, by the looks of it, with long resting couches and low tables filling most the place. There were half a dozen doors out of the room, likely meant for servants more than the guests.

“The palace still seems... whole,” I said.

“I would assume the three layers to be completely separate now,” Akua replied. “This felt like Creation to you, yes? Likely this the the original Threefold Reflection that was built before the dimensional overlay was set.”

"So no more shunting," I said. "Good news. Much as I hate to ask, what plan are we on now?"

Diabolist laughed.

"I'm afraid there is none left," she said. "None that I can remember, at least. This particular sequence of events was entirely unforeseen."

Shoddy planning, that. Given how frequently we fucked it all up, not counting that as an option was just bad form on our part.

"You two are done fighting for the day," I finally said.

"I am still conscious," Masego muttered.

"Takes a little more than that to be qualified for a throw down with the Empress' finest," I replied

Assuming we even found them.

"Diabolist, I'm going to find us a way out," I said. "Try to find the others and prepare for the worst."

"I would be of use to you, when facing Malicia," the shade replied.

"You should be more careful about what songs you sing," I replied flatly.

Masego's glass eyes moved from one of us to the other, his face bemused.

"What songs?" he asked.

I met Akua's now-scarlet eyes and found a thread of amusement in there. That song... The Girl Who Climbed The Tower, Black had called it. There were still many things about it I didn't understand. I'd first heard Robber humming it, but when I'd eventually asked him about it years later he'd admitted he recalled singing an entirely different song. It was not for everyone's ears, it seemed.

"Don't worry about it," I told him, then glanced up.

I could roll the dice with trying to find a way out of the pyramid on foot, but that carried risks. There might still be traps, even without the wheels being a factor. This would do. Window was probably warded, but then I still had the traditional Foundling skeleton key of punching things really hard. Wisps of Winter coalesced behind me, translucent wings coming into being, and I shot up quick as an arrow. My fist smashed into the green glass with my full weight behind it, but I let out a yelp when it bounced off harmlessly and I hit the damned thing like a bird

hitting a window. Godsdamnit. Down below, I heard Masego cough out a pained laugh. The glass was set in that pale stone I recognized from outside, with discreet carved runes connecting them. Fine, I could work with that. Wings batting behind me unconsciously, I formed my fingers into a wedge and struck at the stone. I'd aimed well beneath the runes, so I ripped my way through without too much trouble. After that it was just a matter of digging around the boundaries, until I tossed down a stone-encircled glass pane and flew up through the opening. I landed under the noon sun of Keter, while in the distance the plume of smoke from the fires we'd set began to disperse. They'd put out the fires, then.

Look down into the pit, I saw the other two awaiting me. Akua could make her own way up, but Masego would need a little help. Another sliver of Winter had a thick rope of shadow slithering down the pit. Hierophant eyed it sceptically, until an exertion of my will had it tying around his waist. I dragged him up, hoist by hoist, careful not to go too quickly and smash him into the walls. My fingers closed around the back of his neck, and with all the gentleness I could manage I took him out and put him down. Gods, it was like trying not to hurt a baby bird. People were so fragile. The three of us stood under true Creation sunlight for the first time in too long, Akua and I pristine but Masego the picture of exhaustion. He'd lost weight, but there was quite a bit of difference between shedding the pounds – unhealthy as his manner of doing it had been – and being in good shape. We were maybe halfway up the southern slope of the pyramid, facing the Garden of Crowns and the edge of the Silent Palace. The gardens and colonnades below showed no sign of Malicia, but then I'd not expected that to be so easy.

"We have an escape route in case this all blows up in our face," I half-stated, half-asked.

My eyes were on Akua, making it clear who was meant to answer.

"That is correct," she replied. "Though it was expected that true disaster would force us to flee through Arcadia."

"Then fall back there," I said. "The others will know the way?"

"By now, all their memory blocks should have ended," she replied.

Good enough, given that I couldn't afford going around fetching everyone. Adjutant I might be able to find, but who the Hells knew where Archer was? Thief was the last out in the wilds, and to be honest there was no chance of me finding her in the city if she didn't want to be found.

"Be safe, you two," I said, and grimaced immediately.

I was painfully aware that the words being spoken in *Keter* made them even more a platitude than usual. There was no safety here, only the Dead King's whimsical sufferance.

"That seems unlikely," Masego noted. "But I shall attempt it nonetheless."

I squeezed his shoulder before sending him off. It would be slow work for him to descend the pyramid's slope, but hardly impossible. Diabolist could handle herself, and the steady look I gave her before she left made it clear she was supposed to ease his exhaustion as much as possible. All that was left now was to somehow find Malicia, crush her defences and take her life. All without breaching the unspoken rules the Dead King had set about what would constitute breaking his hospitality. I doubted Neshamah would truly mind a spot of murder even in his personal backyard, but that wasn't how this worked: I had to maintain a certain level of deniability. Which wasn't looking great, considering the closest thing I had to a plan at the moment was 'murder in broad daylight'. The Skein and the Spellblade should no longer be a part of this, at least. The Revenants would remain stuck in their little kingdoms. That left the Empress' own personal guard.

The Sentinels hardly scared me, at the end of the day. Well-trained or not, they were only soldiers. But there was a more than decent chance she'd have Wasteland mages with her, and that was a different story entirely. I'd killed more than a few of those, over the last few years, but that'd been before I'd become... this. Wards mattered to me a lot more than they used to, and I wasn't meeting a cluster of casters in the middle of a chaotic battlefield: these sorcerers would likely have been told everything the Empress knew about what I could and couldn't do, including vulnerabilities. Black had made a career out of killing enemies much stronger than him with careful planning and preparation. I did not intend to end up on the wrong side of his teachings. Power clapped in the distance, a quick spike followed by smaller workings. I cocked my head. Northern slope of the pyramid, maybe a little further. A trap? Maybe. Or a distraction. But I couldn't afford not to look, could I?

With gritted teeth, I set out for my little talk with the Dread Empress of Praes.

---

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*letouriste*

oh! i forgot to do this! thank you:)

### [DroughtBringer](#)

This chapter felt much too short, though I can't wait for the end of this arc... which might be next chapter.

*Rook*

"Catherine's Plan"

A complete lack of one, to absolutely no one's surprise

*IDKWhoitis*

I'm still betting she says "All according to plan" at the end of this. While Malica and Dead King may see through the bullshit that is, the Bastards Above and Below still love shit like that.

*Charles*

Punch things hard enough to force a hole into Reality. And really, when has any other sort of plan worked out well for her. Even as it is no longer one of her Aspects Struggle is the line by which she lives her life.

*Cicero*

Reminds me of the Order of the Stick's old fall back plan: "Run Away."

Of course, in Cat's case it's preach much the complete opposite: "Turn myself into an abomination of a half magical construct allowing myself to continue fighting when I should be dead – then punch things until they break."

### [Euodiachloris](#)

The short version: "make myself more difficult to deal with, then Falcon Punch something". 😊

*Raved Thrad*

"FOUNDLING PUNCH!" 🤪

*Raved Thrad*

What with all the talk further down the page of Catherine Climbing The Tower, I bring you the climactic scene from Foundling Densetsu: The Legend of Black Queen Catherine:

Catherine: (to Vivienne): "Vivienne Dartwick, from today forward, *you* are the Black Queen." (facing off against Malicia): "Malicia! I'm sending you to hell if I have to drag you there with me!"

Malicia: "No! I won't let my dreams die!"

Catherine: "FOUNDLING PUNCH!!"

Vivienne screams "Catherine!" as Cat's fist hits Malicia's face in a titanic impact; the resulting blast wave levels the palace.

Later, amid the rubble, miraculously undamaged, they find the Mantle of Woe...

*Jarthon 1*

The Foundling Gambit is the best gambit.

*IDKWhoitis*

Dead King : "Note to self, ward walls as well as windows. Also, replace window Catherine broke. Hmm, maybe I should consider letting Catherine go rampant for a little while longer to test Anti-Ranger protocols."

*imagesbe*

I remain somewhat confused about what all their incredibly convoluted planning actually did. I mean, they got through, but did their planning actually have anything to do with that?

And I doubt Cat will kill Malacia here. I suspect that the best she'll accomplish is to drive her out of Keter. Which does accomplish her short-term goals nicely.

*IDKWhoitis*

All the planning was chaff, to distract the Skein. The skein also seems to only be able to counter act the main plot line, either by programming (since he is a necrotic construct) or by weakness in the Aspect he uses. By throwing so much stuff at once, things slipped through, like Archer. Neither the Skein nor the Thief of Stars was able to see her, or reference her. An elemental part of the 17 plans could be that Archer does literally nothing for 3 hours and 4 minutes, thus remains invisible in the plotline (What we and other meta-actors can see).

*Jane*

Well, it forced Skein to let them into his chamber? That might not have been possible, if he could have stopped them at an

earlier juncture. Showing up without Hakram or Archer might have also made Skein take them more lightly, preventing him from, like, finding a way to shunt them into a pool of lava – directly into it, so that the lava flowed into them, not like that readily escapable trick with the spikes. Plus, we haven't seen Archer – she might have found her way to the Empress already, without the party or Skein knowing.

We don't know how things would have gone without the plans, necessarily, but it all ended up breaking the wheel that kept them from the Empress, albeit not through a means they envisioned.

*Jane*

She's pushing the side effects of Winter use off onto Akua? That's... A whole lot of different things. Brilliant? Monstrous? Strangely intimate? That's certainly one way to extend the use of her powers, though... I wonder if there are unexpected costs, though, like giving the other side a back door into your mind. And I wonder if she can do that with *anyone* stuffed in her cloak, or if they have to be a brilliant and willing mage. If there aren't any costs beyond a suitable partner, though, it must be awfully tempting to add a few dozen ghosts to her cape so that she can use Winter freely... ..Though, that sounds like the start of a Story that ends with, "and then she was torn to pieces by her own angry ghosts".

I wonder if Akua was really singing the song (which would suggest that she had heard it as well, which has interesting implications), or if, like Robber, Cat was hearing a song which Akua was not singing, which would seem to suggest that something is telling Cat that she's walking further down a certain tower-scaling path.

Idly, I kind of wonder what Vivienne's response would be to Cat *actually* becoming Empress, and what thoughts she might have regarding how a Hero ended up serving the Empress, whose predecessor she revolted against to free her homeland, which (presumably) would no longer be breaking away from the Empire.

*IDKWhoitis*

If there is no Tower at the end of this (because that thing is not surviving Cat's Takeover), I think Thief still counts this as a win.

*werafdsaew*

Akua made a serious attempt on the Tower and so I'm pretty sure she heard the real thing.

[boballab](#)



It goes back to when Cat saw those multiple paths to break the trap Akua set. During that scene only one of the paths led to Cat winning and at the end of it Cat was humming "The Girl That Climbed the Tower" and Akua was watching.

I/General Foundling/the Tolltaker/the White Knight rose, and shoved steel through her throat.

—

### Book 3 Chapter 65

In the next Chapter when Cat faces Akua, Akua lets Cat know she knows that she was forewarned and the only way to know that was to have been watching Cat. In this case the spying probably included sound and she heard Cat humming the song.

*Yotz*

Wings, getting high on power... where did I saw this...  
Ah, yes!

*Desperado*

Godsdammit Masego

*Anon*

Hmm...odds on Killian being in Malicia's cadre of mages?

I certainly wouldn't put it past the Empress.

[Javvies](#)

I thought Killian was still with the Fifteenth.  
Do you have a location for Killian leaving?

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

I'd love to see Killian as a part of winter's court.

Probably not going to happen, I suspect she has exited the story, but would have been an uptick

[Javvies](#)

Interesting.

Cat, murder in broad daylight might not be the best plan, but Archer and Hakram are still in play somewhere. Also, Malicia's mages will be operating with incomplete and out of date information.

Technically, Thief is still around too, but she's incompetent at murder, apparently, so much so that it's a running in joke for the Woe.

Huh.

Maybe it'll be Thief that takes Malicia – Keter's a helluva place for your first time.

*Aram*

The first step is hardest, they said to her.

You will have to walk through fire.

It will burn away what you once were,

And always devour whole a liar

The second is the longest, they said

You will walk under the restless dead

The hanged all crooning from the gallows –

To join them and rest in the shadows

They say the third step is the cruelest,

Walk when the moon is at her clearest:

Love ends with the kiss of the knife,

Trust is the wager that takes your life

*Yotz*

...which makes me think. About "when the moon is at her clearest" and the concept of Moonless Night.

*Antoninjohn*

Cat can always send in a ice (shadow) clone, it will even be linked by Winter with her so she will get it's memory when it dies

[TeK](#)

So, Masego out of the game, but they had succesfully destroyed the wheel.I wonder how Cat will go about the next part of the plan, which is "fail horribly and die".

*Someguy*

They looted the Wheel i think.

*Novice*

Skein destroyed the wheel at the last second.

*burdi*

maybe warlock with malicia, who know  
i don't think malicia not foresee cat approaching the dead king

*Snowfire1224*

I was wondering why Cat wasn't getting any effects of winter on her mind. That Akua is taking it for her is rather helpful of her.

And yay. The Girl who Climbed the Tower is back. I've been waiting for it to return for a while especially since Cat is trying to kill Malicia.

*Rook*

What? No. The Queen of Callow did not intend any harm toward the Praesi delegation, the intention of the visit was purely for the sake of peaceful negotiations. It is a deeply unfortunate tragedy for the Dread Empress to have tripped and fallen repeatedly onto the Queen of Callow's sword, and the people of Callow send their heartfelt condolences to those grieving the passing of the late Empress.

*Jessica Day*

Then she ran into my knife. She ran into my knife 10 times.



*Snowfire1224*

The fact that I could see that argument being made by praesi in an imperial court doesn't help her case much.

What does help is that that is pretty funny and I'd like your comment if I had an account.

[TeK](#)

Dread Empress alive and well, she's just taking a vacation, as a Dead King undead Revenant.

*NerfContessa*

Hehe he, nyeahwhen I first read this, I 2as really sure the empress. Would Die within at most 2 chapters, and she would have to fight lack and akua to avoid climbing the tower herself.

[frolamiz](#)

Now, we can think about the true question. Akua would have been Dread Empress Magnificent, first of her name. What will Catherine be?

And if they usurp the Tower, the best way to keep Thief on board would be to have her steal it. I'm sure she would do it gladly. Maybe after getting rid of the Demon, because we don't know what would happen if she where to store it with her aspect. That would also give her a perfect Pivot for a transition. Maybe Thief of Kingdoms? 😊

*Iqueenofblades1*

Clearly Cat will be Dread Empress Accidentally. Because that literally describes her story from beginning to now 😊

*Yotz*

Well, after Cat accidentally the Tower, they really wouldn't have any other choice in this department.

*Cold Cyberia*

I'm partial to Dread Empress Insolent myself, though I think Dread Empress Victorious has been floating around for a while now.

*Euodiachloris*

Dread Empress Damnation (I so didn't want this; fuck my life and fuck you guys for making it happen). ;P

*Raved Thrad*

I think "Dread Empress Fuckitall" makes for a wonderful fit 😊

*Jessica Day*

Dread Empress Vengencia, first of her name. Because you can take the queen out of Callow but you can't take the Callow out of the queen.

*John Laing*

Dread Empress Foundling. Political philosophy: "Hey, you kids! Don't make me come down there!" Appoints one of those sapient tigers as regent, to handle all the ridiculous Praesi etiquette involving parties and assassination attempts and whatever, spends a lot of time haranguing Akua and Masego into inventing a more elegant (i.e. no blood sacrifices) method for improving the long-term productivity of farmland, something that any Legion mage could learn.

*H.*

There's been a few threads in the subreddit speculating about regal names for Cat.

I like Dread Empress Victorious. But Dread Empress Callowan has a certain "fuck you" about it as well. Dread Empress Woeful is available as well, if she wants to reuse the name of her antivillainous band.

[TeK](#)

As the fandom lost it's usual ritual of guessing the Name Cat will get, now it slowly getting a new one – guessing the name Cat will get, when she'll become Empress. Given how the Name thing turned out, I'm pretty sure Cat is not the next Empress.

*Komploding*

Just out of curiosity, do we think that Cat is hearing the song internally and projecting it onto others or are the others unaware they're singing it? The difference this could make would be between the story coming from and being lead by Cat or the story coming from the outside Cats control and Cat being trapped in it.

*Jessica Day*

I was wondering that very same thing.

*burdi*

black knew this song, so its not only in cat's head and its looks like aqua know it too

so maybe everyone that had the quality to be empress or emperor heard it

its more like the tower calling them

*Komploding*

I agree with that, I think it's known to those that had the opportunity and potential to climb the tower. It's not confirmed that Akua knows the song, it could have been another instance like with Robber, also another reason she couldve known it would be that her soul is bound to winter which is essentially Cat now.

Also is it just a call or could it be a stronger pull, this could be part of the reason why villains backstab the emperor so much if the tower holds such heavy sway over them. That has less basis and is me just running with a thought though.

[TeK](#)

So some people are theorising that "Climb the Kidney, loot the Tower" is not uniquely attuned to Cat, but rather something that every claimant hears? What? It's "Girl" who climbed, not man, woman and/or undead abomination. My guess that it's some prophesy bullshit, we are long overdue to that cornerstone of fantasy tropes, in the story about tropes.

*mavant*

I still think they should have just let malicia win the bidding war.

*Yotz*

I have a suspicion that main part of Malicia's bid will be a direct threat to, if not just straight invasion of Callow. And DK will be oll klear with it, because from his point of view that would be just another strike on the bar, forging a new future for Cat in the crucible of desperate war.

*Agent J*

If they did, the Dead King would be marching on Callow as well. Her whole gambit was to sic him on her enemies, both external and internal, and she'd have sold him half of Calernia to see it done. Likely, more. Letting Malicia win the bidding war was a no go.

*Nafram*

I still can't see Malicia dying here. Her dying for real would, to be honest, have disastrous consequences for Catherine. If she were to now become Dread Empress, she would have to deal with backstabbing from the entire Praesi nobility, the entirety of the crusade, the undivided attention of all Heroes post Dead King intervention and a very pissed Warlock showing up after she personally killed his second best friend in the world. It would also wreck her relationship with Black, and if he is against her, so are the Legions, and the Orc tribes...and probably the Goblins as well.

No matter how powerful she has become, or how many Deus Ex Machina she can pull out of her ass, there is a reason why Cat had to resort to Neshamah of all people, she cannot deal with most of those issues by themselves, let alone all at the same time.

So, this is either going to be a flesh simulacrum (which would explain how the Empress got there so quickly) or Cat is going to end up sparing Malicia.

That's my take on the situation at least

[Javvies](#)

Black and Malicia have already broken.

It's most apparent/ irrevocable at Akua's Folly, when Black broke it. However, it goes back to early on book 2, Villainous Interlude: Coullisse. Malicia sided with the High Lords backing Tasia Sahelian, in their push to roll back some of the Reforms, reflecting restrictions on the Tribes and penalties for not answering the Tower's call under Nefarious.

The gears in Amadeus and his Name started turning when he couldn't talk her out of it. Malicia started going back to the old ways that keep failing – Black is basically the embodiment of the new way, he invented the new way and it works. Returning to the old ways is a betrayal of everything Black believes in and his goals.

Also, I suspect Malicia's hand behind the assassinations of Istrid Knightsbane, and the others during the battle outside Akua's Folly.

It may not be provable, but I suspect that Black had his suspicions – Scribe and Assassin probably do too.

Warlock probably isn't going to turn on Cat if she takes out Malicia. He may like Malicia, but Cat basically saved Black from the mentor sacrifice/ avenging arc he was setting himself up for. Warlock might not be exactly happy about Malicia gets taken out/replaced by Cat, but he's probably going to tolerate it.

Especially if Masego is backing Cat. Warlock and Masego are both largely indifferent to politics and Good and Evil, they care about the Magic and the Knowledge.

—

At any rate, if Cat kills a puppet, Malicia is back in Praes and can turn her forces/ the High Lords against Callow long before Cat and company can get back.

If Cat kills Malicia, then Cat can get back before Malicia's loyalists can be turned against Callow, and Praes will be headless, and devolve into a whirlwind of backstabbing as the High Lords try to climb the Tower. They'll be too busy to go after Callow.

### [Tohron](#)

That's forgetting the third possibility of Cat strong-arming Malicia into some sort of agreement. That could go as far as Cat becoming Empress with Alaya as Chancellor, or just amount to a single set of terms to give the Dead King (to avoid a bidding war) and the cessation of harassment along the Callowan border. A protracted fight would seriously hurt them both, which is an incentive to come to terms.

### [Javvies](#)

Except Malicia is not a combatant.

In an actual fight, Cat curbstomps Malicia. Malicia is a soft power expert – she's a mastermind/manipulator/influencer type. Cat's nowhere near Malicia at using soft power, but soft power is not Cat's greatest strength – applied hard power is.

When Malicia wants people dead, she gets somebody else to drop the bodies. Cat is going to create the corpses herself.

Oh, sure, there probably are other people with Malicia, plus the Sentinels, but unless there are a bunch of top quality mages or Warlock, they can't do much more than briefly slow Cat down – if they know Cat is there and have the time to act. They wouldn't have had time to get fancy with their ritual prep to deal with Cat, so they'd largely be limited to things they can do without needing a big ritual.

Malicia probably doesn't have all that many people with her – it wouldn't make a difference if the Dead King wanted to kill her, plus bringing too many people could be considered an insult, and the more people Malicia brings, the more widely known it would be that she's left the Tower.

### *MetruX*

People have already spoken to the other points, so let's see to this: there is no guarantee that she becomes the Dread Empress by killing Malicia. It has happened plenty of times before, just like when someone not Squire kills the Black Knight, when someone not the new Tyrant kills the last one. It becomes a vacancy that people kill and die so it get's filled. But, even if it did, there would be no Crusade after Dead King intervention. Crusades are not things that last forever, and all of these Heroes would be either dead or going back to deal in their own stories, so really, those are not true concerns if things go according to plan and she kill the Empress without unforeseen consequences. Obviously things are not going according to plan, but something completely out of the blue needs to happen to change these points.

### *Satan*

Catherine is like an angel of contrition for Akua

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## Chapter 45: Ambush

*"As the Bellerophans had not redrawn their war maps in over a century, their expedition against Penthes instead began with the sack of three outlying Delosi towns, one of which was walled and whose watchmen rebuffed the assault of the army. The Republic ultimately withdrew a month later after capturing a Stygian trade caravan carrying a handful Penthesian goods, announcing the unequivocal success of its punitive expedition to the great confusion of the Exarch of Penthes, who was still mustering her army over three hundred miles to the north."*

– Extract from 'A Pack of Squabbles, or, A History of Internal League Warfare' by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

If it was a distraction, then it was a good one – not that I'd expected any less from Malicia. Boots scraping against the faded stone, I crouched at the edge of the pyramid's slope and studied the silhouettes below. Twenty-one, all in all. Ten faceless and genderless soldiers in steel with masks of black wrought iron, the Tower's own personal guard. The Sentinels, I'd been taught was their name. I was unsure of how hard a fight they'd be able to give me, but they were not a young Praesi institution. If even half the the hundred Tyrants who'd once commanded them had bothered to teach them a nasty trick or two, they would not be easy meat. The silent guard formed a ring of steel, broad tower shields up as they protected the remaining delegates. Those, I thought, would be the source of the real trouble if there was trouble to be had. Of the eleven remaining strangers only two wore armour and it was clearly ceremonial. Not unlike the colourful scales I'd known Diabolist to wear before she claimed that very Name. Those two were Soninke, men and too flawless to look upon to be anything but Wasteland highborn.

I dismissed them anyway. The warlocks would be the real threat here, not swordsmen no matter their skill. And there were mages among the delegates, I could tell as much at a glance. None of the other Praesi wore a weapon heavier than a long dagger, and though their robes were an ornate riot of vivid silks the colours were not enough to hide the discreet shimmer of runes woven into the fabric. Defensive enchantments, though without Masego around I had no real way to know of their purpose. What I *did* know was that while silk was one of the fabrics most apt to imbibe magic without spoiling, there was only so much sorcery any fabric could take. Against another sorcerer, defensive enchantments were a significant advantage. Against me, it'd be trying to hold back the sea with a wooden bucket. *I'll still have to hit them hard*, I thought. *Smaller wisps of Winter will just be ignored, if I'm to strike at them it'll have to be by surprise and with overwhelming force*. Admittedly my favourite kind of fights, on the rare occasions I managed to have them.

One person stood out from the rest, and the sight of her had me tightening my grip on the pommel of my sword. The woman was Soninke and young. No more than twenty, by the looks of her, and though she was of plain appearance every other delegate around her behaved like sunflowers turning towards the sun. Her dress was tastefully understated, as was the silver jewellery adorning her neck and wrists, but there was no mistaking who that was. I wasn't Malicia in the flesh, or more accurately it was but not *her* flesh. A simulacrum, then. I felt a sharp edge of relief at the confirmation of what I'd always believed to be the most likely reality. And yet part of me was disappointed as well. There would have been chaos, in slaying the true Malicia, but opportunity as well. If I'd been able to force a war of succession on the Empire without getting embroiled myself... No point in whining about it. It was what it was, and in this case the presence of a mere flesh puppet might be a blessing. Said puppet was awake and alert, I saw, and with good reason.

It had just almost died.

I'd arrived too late to see it happen, but just from the lay of the Praesi I could get an idea of what had taken place. Just as they'd left the Threefold Reflection through the nearest gate and taken the avenue into the tall colonnade they now occupied, someone had taken a shot at the Empress. The shimmering panes of light around the flesh puppet told me exactly why it'd failed, and pointed at the most likely suspect for the attempt: Thief. It couldn't be Archer. She had arrows that'd go right through most sorceries, and even if she'd failed to make a kill at a distance she would have closed in and carved away at the Sentinels. Adjutant had not aspect that would work for a quiet ambush, and I'd just left behind the remaining two. No, it had to be Thief. The Skein had hinted, back in his lair, that she might try to kill Malicia with the same blade of moonlight she'd stolen from the Spellblade. That was my guess: she'd approached under cover of her aspect, placed her shot and immediately retreated when it failed to breach the Empress' protections. I couldn't be sure whether that failure was because the Praesi wards were particularly strong or because the tool employed had not been a good fit, and that was worrying.

They hadn't seen me, at least for now. I'd not woven glamour over myself yet, afraid some of the mages would be sensitive enough to such powers it would effectively announced my presence even if they couldn't see through it. The moment the delegation caught scent of me, my bet was that they'd turtle up behind heavy wards and make enough of a racket that the Dead King's people would have to come and take a look. If that was allowed to happen, the game was done. Pushing any further would break the unspoken boundaries Neshamah had placed on this little lark of ours. Was Thief still around? My guts said yes, but I couldn't count on it. She might still be acting according to a plan I didn't know.

Which was the point of all this, I supposed. We'd filled the Skein's sight with so many of those there'd been no telling where the rest of the Woe were or what they were up to. At the unfortunate cost of my being kept in the dark concerning those matters as well. I set aside the thoughts for now, eyes on the Praesi delegates. They were on the defensive for now, the Sentinels using the cover of the colonnade to form a decent holding position while the mages layered enchantments, but they'd get moving soon.

If I were in Malicia's shoes, right now, I'd be worrying more about Archer than Thief. The longer she remained in the open, the higher the risks she got an unexpected arrow through the throat. If I wanted to have a decent swing at the Empress, I needed to be close by the time they set out. Which left me with the task of moving unseen next to a cluster of highly-trained, professionally paranoid and recently ambushed Wastelanders. While wearing armour. In broad daylight. With no real cover to speak of the moment I left the upper reaches of the pyramid. This was not a recipe for success no matter how you looked at it, but at least I was wearing mail instead of plate. Pretty weak, as far as silver linings went, but I'd take what I could get.

Pulling the Mantle of Woe tight around me, since it was colourful but at least not actively shining under the sun, I began to make my way down. Obliquely, or as close to that as was possible. There were open grounds between the colonnade and the end of the Threefold Reflection proper, and crossing those unseen was a fool's errand. No, the longer I thought about it the more obvious it got I'd have to roll the dice on my ability to predict where the Praesi would be headed and lay my ambush there.

There were only so many places they could go, I mused as I moved from stone to stone. There was another palace up ahead, but I wouldn't put my money on them going for it. There'd be another Revenant inside, certainly, but it didn't look like the most... hospitable of places. The fluid obsidian structures were unpleasant to look at in some primal way, though it was the outlying decorations that would give the Praesi pause. Small channels had been dug into the stone in arcane symbols, lit up by what appeared to be liquid flame. The palace flicked with shifting shadows even under sunlight. If they went through there, I'd kill them all. They'd be forced to take narrow fire-walled paths with plenty of cover for me to ambush from. Unless the Revenant was already in place and ready to intervene, the outlying parts of that palace would be a perfect killing floor for me. Malicia herself wasn't a military tactician of any renown, but she was hardly a fool. It'd be one of the other two paths she took.

The first would be a gambit on her part. The colonnade and almost temple-like promenade surrounding the pyramid did have a path

going around towards the open plaza where the Hall of the Dead and a horde of minions would be awaiting. If the Empress made it there safely, she was out of the woods. I couldn't snatch her out of the Dead King's grasp without screwing all of this up. On the other hand, I was rather hoping that was the option she'd take. I was already near to the last third of the pyramid, and all it'd take was dipping out of the sight around the corner for me to slip ahead of her party in the colonnade. I'd already begun angling my descent to be a step ahead if that was the choice she made. Malicia had to know, however, that it was a mostly open space and most the Woe were still on the prowl. Forget Thief, but if Archer came across her there'd be blood on the floor. Quickest path to safety, but arguably the most dangerous.

The second path was a retreat. Not back into the Threefold Reflection – though that was possible, if exceedingly foolish – but towards the lower rungs of Keter. We were all in the highest ring at the moment, surrounded by the same rampart Athal had taken me to earlier through the secret passage. The Empress could head for those walls, and from there either count on the Dead King's soldiers being there and providing protection or journey further down and away from the area she knew the Woe was roaming. I'd had the advantage of height over her earlier, so I already knew there were no undead on the ramparts at the moment. Indeed, their absence was quite glaring. Neshamah was quite pointedly looking away, in a manner of speaking. Malicia wouldn't necessarily know that, though. The Crown of the Dead screwed badly with scrying rituals, so it wasn't like she could have a look through a bowl. If she went with that choice, she was keeping the game afoot. As long as she wasn't surrounded by undead soldiers, she remained a target no matter how far down she fled. I wasn't all that familiar with the rest of the city, though, so we'd both be going into that blind.

I'd reached one of the pyramid's four spines when the Praesi moved out. Peeking around the corner, I grinned nastily as I watched the delegation head towards the central plaza at a brisk pace. She'd bet it all on a quick resolution, then. I could work with that. I picked up the pace as well, dropping down on the ground long before they were in sight of the turn. Fingers drumming against my sheath, I eyed the spot where the ambush would have to take place: right after the turn, with a clear line of sight to the path leading to the plaza. The columns were but a few feet apart and joined by a low wall on the outer half of the colonnade, though the half facing the pyramid was without. The turn was angled too circular for me to be able to hide in the bend, sadly, but there was another detail to this construction: a ceiling. Barded with criss-crossing beams of copper, the angular stone roof was held up by the columns. The ceiling itself was filled, but there was room between the long stretch of stone supported by those same columns and the roof itself. Not much, but then for once my size might come in as actually useful. A few

years ago, the notion of hanging from a ceiling like a fucking bat to swoop down on my enemies would have struck me as absurd, especially if I was wearing armour. Now, though? It wasn't like my arms could get tired anymore.

It'd have to be around the turn, otherwise the moment the enemy approached they'd just see me hanging there. That'd turn awkward real quick, leading to questions like 'why did you think that would work?' or even worse, small talk. I wasn't emotionally prepared to make polite conversation with the Empress while murder-hanging from a ceiling. I hoisted myself up the low wall and frowned up at the column. There was distinct lack of good handholds, but using Winter would be tipping my hand and I needed to hurry before the enemy arrived. With all the grace of a one-legged squirrel, I hugged the column and shimmied my way up. It was easier up there: I caught one of the copper beams and left the column, effortlessly dragging my hole body up and spreading my legs to gain more traction from other beams. My free hand went into collection my cloak, which was now hanging like a shitty tapestry, and just kind of bunching it up over my stomach before I pulled myself close to the ceiling. There, that should do. I was kind of hoping Thief wasn't around, because if she saw me I'd never live this down. I heard the footsteps, then their words.

"The Dead King's enchantments make it impossible to use proper sensory spells," a woman's voice sighed in Mtethwa. "My apologies, Your Dread Majesty. My abilities are lacking."

"I hardly expected you to be the Hidden Horror's superior in matters of spellcraft, Lady Olinga," the flesh puppet replied. "Already your wards proved your worth by sparing me the Thief's ambush."

"She may well still be lurking about," a man warned. "And the Adjutant will have found a way out of the illusions by now. We must hurry."

"Any faster will disrupt the wards," Lady Olinga peevishly replied. "It already took me decades to train them to be able to maintain it while moving."

"The Warlock can-"

"I am not the Warlock," the Soninke cut through. "Nor even the Hierophant. Do ask miracles of me, Galadan, when you can barely use High Arcana yourself."

"We will proceed at the current pace," Not-Malicia said, and I could almost hear the soothing smile. "Peace, my friends. This interlude soon comes at an end."

Well, she wasn't wrong about that. More worryingly, I was hearing the Empress and the highborn moving but not a single Sentinel

footstep. Spelled gear, had to be. And there was no telling what calibre either. Enchanted artefacts weren't as rare in Praes as they were in Callow, but even in the Wasteland it was the petty stuff that wasn't kept within powerful families. Magic made into enchantment waned over time, so for anything to last for more than a few years it had to be an extremely powerful mage – or ritual – that had first made the artefact. The lesser stuff had to be empowered anew pretty regularly, and most mages saw that kind of repeat labour as beneath them. Which meant finding another practitioner to take care of it, certainly easier in Praes than my homeland, but artefacts only worked perfectly for the mages who'd first made them. After that, every set of hands they passed through made them a little shoddier until they broke down. Of course, then you got the stuff out of myth. Which tended to be either like the Lone Swordsman's, a feather from an angel that'd made intense eye contact with Creational laws until they backed away uncomfortably, or your average legendary stuff. Which had both been crafted by the kind of sorcerer or Named that came around once a century and been made out of materials with inherent magical properties that kept the enchantments going indefinitely. All stuff that was rare, difficult to obtain and horribly, horribly expensive. Archer's longbow was probably worth a pair of large palaces in Procer, if she ever tried to pawn it in Mercantis, and it wasn't even quite up to snuff compared to some of the stuff out there.

Now, if they were from anywhere else, I'd dismiss the thought of the Sentinels having even one piece of such gear out of hand. Personal guards or not, they wouldn't rank that kind of ridiculous expense. They were, unfortunately, from the Dread Empire of Praes. When a nation got a line of three emperors that picked *Profligate* as a reigning name, terrible monetary decisions were only to be expected. And that was without thinking of the gaggle of practitioner Tyrants that'd held the Tower with just as many Warlocks serving beneath them, few of which had ever held qualms about a little mass murder and assorted bankruptcy if it got in the way of their latest idea. Even then, there couldn't be too many of it. Enough to equip ten guards, though. Would Malicia risk that kind of precious equipment by bringing it to Keter? My guts said yes. She wasn't a mage herself, and like the Calamities she'd never shown a great deal of respect for artefacts that were relevant only on the tactical level. I could easily see her kitting out her handpicked Sentinels in the good stuff both as a show of force for the Dead King and for that little additional sliver of safety abroad.

Which meant I couldn't just ignore the soldiers, as I'd intended to previously. They might have stuff that could hurt fae – no, knowing Malicia they *definitely* had stuff that hurt fae. Still, the sorcerers remained the greater threat. Fighters, even dangerous ones, I could kill my way through. If I got stuck behind a ward, there was no getting out. I held my breath, lips

thinning when I realized my lungs never began to burn. Yet another comforting illusion that would not withstand scrutiny. Eyes wide open I waited for the Praesi to approach. Artefact-bearers or not, the Sentinels still wore those fucking stupid masks. They couldn't easily look up, and their peripheral vision was shit. I'd let them pass me before dropping down and take out as many mages as I could in the first strike. Without a sound a pair of steel-clad soldiers passed under me, and then – *shit*.

I dropped down before the streak of lightning could tear through my belly. Had that come out of an opal? Did I have to start worrying about the jewellery on people's clothes now? The Sentinels were on me before the others could so much as exclaim in surprise, swords swinging. Sorcery flared behind them, the mages taking action, and I knew without a doubt that if I got stuck in a brawl with the soldiers this was headed downhill. *Never give mages time to cast*. I breathed out, and ripped away another illusion. I stepped through the sword blows, the mist that was now my torso billowing as their blades went through. One step, two, three and then I was among the mages. Solid, I ordered my body. My blade ripped through a Taghreb's throat and the panes of light around Malicia dimmed, her eyes widening in fear and surprise. I tugged out a string of my domain, shaped it and let it loose with a flick of the wrist. The javelin of night-stuff flew perfectly, puncturing the sorcerous protection and...

Breaking an illusion.

Fuck. A ward closed around me a heartbeat later and I found myself surrounded by very displeased Praesi. With a sigh I rose from my half-crouch, adjusted my cloak and offered the delegation a winning smile. I did not get a single one in response, which might have something to do with the man bleeding out on the ground a mere foot behind me.

"Well," I muttered. "This is a little awkward."

I reached for Winter but found my will couldn't quite make it. That, I mused, was not a promising start to these negotiations.

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*james*

Thanks!

[Javvies](#)

Falling for an illusion, Cat? You're the Fae. Illusions are supposed to be your thing.

Hmmm. Cat is cut off from Winter somehow.

I think she gets out of this by realizing she doesn't need to reach out and draw Winter/Power to herself from an external source, she needs to reach within herself and pull forth internal power. External Winter/Power is a crutch that lesser beings rely on, but for those capable of Apotheosis, they are their own source of Power.

*Sylfa*

The illusion was hidden inside a ward, she has trouble with wards so it makes sense to me that she wouldn't be able to sense it's an illusion due to that.

At that point her ability to sense illusions is a downside, she knows she can tell the difference so when she doesn't sense an illusion she's more likely to not even consider it could be an illusion. Well, up until now I suppose. She'll probably be quite wary about what she sees through a ward in the future.

*Jane*

Well. Malicia might not be a tactical genius, but Cat seems to have forgotten that she does have a knack for understanding her enemies, and prefers deception over a fair fight. If she'd thought about it a bit more, she really should have known that there was a 100% chance that this was a trap.

Incidentally, while recognizing that her body is just a convenient lie is a really useful trick, I can't help but think of how that ended for another character by the name of Sayaka. In most fiction I've seen, that kind of revelation leads to depression and madness. But, well, has Cat ever flinched from the notion of self-destruction in order to achieve her goals?

*Dainpdf*

Well, in that case it was that plus alienation from friends and family, constantly risking her life (and seeing friends die), and watching her greatest desire crumble to dust. Cat is not dealing with all that. Not on the same level. Plus, she's Callowan. They're made of sterner stuff.

*Jane*

Not to mention Cat's had more than a month to process everything. She worked through the worst of the "Is all of this worth it?" emotions after Liese and repelling the Crusade, has watched some of people she cared most about be horribly mangled and walked away from others over the last couple of years, and I'm not certain I've ever seen her really care about her own life. She's had time to adapt to



the whole “Oh, right, being this important is actually *miserable*” paradigm.

That said, though, she doesn’t quite have a pet demon to eat the taint from her soul (Akua doesn’t count, she’s more of a battery), using her power is actively destructive to her mind (though it seems to wear off), and already took to drinking for a while to (badly) cope with the changes. She’s really one power overdose away at all times from proclaiming A Goddess Am I, declaring war on the moon, and monologuing at Pilgrim when he shows up to stop her.

If she ends up in a deep enough funk (maybe one of the Woe ends up dead, maybe she has to harshly put down a peasant revolution, etc.), who’s to say she won’t just say, “Fuck it, I’m not a human anyway, let’s see how Wintery I can get” in response to her problems? The desire for self-destruction can be rationalized in many different ways, and Winter is a terrible solution to a lot of problems – if she can convince herself that sacrificing her mind is a worthwhile price to pay to solve whatever her latest problem is, well... It’s like she has a loaded gun pointed at her head at all times. It’d just take reaching deep enough into her power.

I’m not saying that any of this is going to happen, mind you. Just that the shape of the story is there if the author was inclined to go in that direction, not that I notice any signs that they’re inclined to.

*Dainpdf*

Well argued. I can see it too, now. Fits with her self-sacrifice motif, as well as with how Black got into the downward spiral that almost killed him.

*naturalnuke*

Once, and then she said ‘fuck it, don’t be a baby’ and ripped the rigging keeping her soul human away.

*Jane*

...You know, when you put it like *that*, maybe she *is* a bit too eager to sacrifice herself for her dream.

Who *does* that? Okay, someone who isn’t human (any longer). But, like, who *does* that?

[\*taliesinskye\*](#)

I suppose people are afraid of change, but she’s certainly come off better in the deal. Immortality, fabulous magical powers, new senses, all sorts of perks came out of that.

And in most of the cases where she's engaged in acts of self-mutilation it was either that or die, so it wasn't much of a choice from that perspective.

*Daemion*

She also lost her sense of taste and is being influenced by foreign emotions. Hating the moon is eccentric, but being filled with a hunger that just wants to crush and destroy is a little more problematic.

*Decius*

Whether or not the gradual erosion of her self has resulted in death is debatable.

*ALKATYN*

Interestingly while she's willing to treat her body as a construct in some ways for short periods of time she still hasn't gone all the way into treating it as arbitrary. Making temporary changes like her torso becoming mist is good, but she's still thinking of herself as a human body, just with some adjustments. Even just tapping into the levels of 'normal' fae she could be ridiculously fast and strong, at a larger scale, why even bother having a single conventional human body as the locus of her power. She could summon a dozen Akua style phantoms with a thought,

*RanVor*

Please, don't. It's been over a year and I still have a trauma after PMMM.

*1queenofblades1*

First Spider-Cat, now Bat-Cat. For gods sake Catherine, pick either Marvel or DC and stick to it!

*Dainpdf*

Don't forget Deadpool-Cat, with Rise.

*Sol Invictus*

She can now go immaterial, Shadow of Mordor style

[Tohron](#)

Okay, so stalling for Hakram and Thief to show up is an obvious approach, but I'm wondering if she could also take some of the Principal Alienation back from Akua, leaving the latter free to take the mages by surprise.

*darkening*

Was half expecting "Malicia's plan"

*Dainpdf*

Might have been a good title for this, except spoilers.

*Dainpdf*

Oh my, did Cat fuck up this time. Unless there's some other plan she's unaware of in play, she's done.

Which I guess almost guarantees there is such a plan.

*Jane*

Eh, the Villains trying to box a god never ends well for the Villains, especially not if it's an evil god. I'm not worried.

*Dainpdf*

Praesi are pretty good at utilizing Sealed Evil in a Can, actually.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Well, for time, yes. But, the can always leaks. Or, in unlucky cases, bursts open.

(I don't trust most of the nasties supposedly locked into the Tower's fabric are as sealed as most people think they are: I suspect more than a few weren't actually forced or trapped in the first place.)

*Dainpdf*

Those in Wolof seemed pretty okay until used. As did Triumphant's.

[Euodiachloris](#)

How sure are you of that? Just having the cans invites 1) attempts to use them (good luck!), 2) attempts to dispose of them (good luck!) or 3) attempts to ignore them until entropy or a rival takes an interest (good luck!). 😊

*Yavandir*

well one of the demons is still 'absent'.

*Jane*

While this is true, narratively speaking, there's a difference between "lesser" Sealed Evils, such as devils and

demons, and “greater” Sealed Evils, such as gods. While it’s practically expected that a classical villain can effortlessly employ any number of lesser evils with hardly a thought, trying to reach too high always ends up with the villain sitting on top of a ticking time bomb that, half the time, will just kill them outright and be the new problem for the heroes to face, and the other half, end up breaking out a critical moment and ruin all of the villain’s plans.

If Cat were a Good deity, there’d be a chance that she’d be the end goal of some Hero’s quest, and have to wait patiently to be rescued, but as an Evil deity... Well, it’s a Chekov’s Gun issue. You don’t introduce an evil deity as something the Villain has in their pocket, and *don’t* bring them out – but since an evil god is clearly more important than whatever the villain of the week happens to be, at *best* it’ll turn out that said deity was secretly manipulating the villain the entire time.

Praes might have all manner of horrors locked up in their fortresses, but something on Cat’s level is well within the “reaching too high” range that ends up backfiring catastrophically.

(Though, I do admit that the scale is somewhat vague. Demons permanently damaging the fabric of reality would normally be the kind of thing that backfires catastrophically as well, for instance, but they’re not *that* uncommon in Praes – though, uh, I suppose they do backfire pretty often as well. For that matter, given how often being eaten (metaphorically speaking) by a Devil has brought down Dread Emperors, what’s normally a “lesser” Evil seems to have a surprisingly high mortality rate as well...)

*Dainpdf*

I’d argue demons are more of a major evil than Cat, more due to the evil than due to the major.

Thing is, Praesi have mastered making sure that the collateral damage mostly also damages their enemies.

*Metrux*

Which can’t be done with Cat, since she is making conscious choices and explicitly their enemy. Yeah, don’t seem like this ends well for them.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Enjoyable chapter, thank you!

Rex

Cat has an invisible crossbow.

*Decius*

And a history of interrupting monologues with crossbow.

*Gunslinger*

Hey everybody, if you don't already know EE has a patreon (patreon.com/user?u=3523924). Any support there would be awesome

*Gunslinger*

I wonder if the magicians can attack Cat inside the ward or would it only keep her trapped? Because delaying till the rest of the Woe appear would not be wise.

*Grey*

I can't imagine attacking a cornered and trapped God could go that well either.

[taliesinskye](#)

I'm guessing that someone on the outside doing anything that crosses the border of the ward would break it. That's the usual storybook logic of magical containment circles, anyway.

*Antoninjohn*

Cat did kill some Mages and the rest of the Woe is probably around the corner so her position isn't that bad

*jonnnney*

Catherine is pretty fucking stupid here. She assumes that no illusions are being used and she for some reason thinks the obvious person to attack is the person she should attack. She sees fear and surprise in the eyes of the fucking Dread Empress of Praes as assumes it is legitimate?

*werafdsaew*

Yeah it feels like Cat is holding the idiot ball here. She should have gone after the mages instead since they're the biggest threat.

*ALKATYN*

Possibly, but she had good reason to believe they couldn't use a lot of normal magical defenses due to the effects of being in the dead king's palace. So this is the best opportunity shes likely to get any time soon.

(Also Winter seems to push her towards direct brute force approaches to problems, so this may be a sign that her attempts to buffer the effects in the last few chapters weren't as effective as she thought. Would be an interesting twist if it turned out shed actually been changing without realizing it)

*Micke*

She's a pit-fighting thug and every time she has to get involved in making her own plans, she ends up outsmarted and having to slug it out at great cost. Why would it suddenly take Winter influence for her to stick with the only thing she knows?

In fact, Catherine's inability to learn any other approach is this story's greatest weakness. At least she's called herself out on it once or twice.

[TeK](#)

People don't change.

*Snowfire1224*

I thought that she was holding a bit of an idiot ball. The thing is though is that thief attacked first, why didn't she think this was an obvious trick either?

*Metrux*

More like, why are people thinking Malicia won't be afraid? If this doesn't go well for her, she has lost Praes, not directly, but because all her plans rely on the Dead King being her "army". Also, she is NOT a fighter or mage of any kind, as much influence and intelligence that she has, she is still a governor, and hasn't been attacked by things scarier than death before. I mean, just think what could happen if Cat would reanimate with Winter this fake body that has a connection to the original? Shenanigans ensue.

*magesbe*

Yes that is a little awkward.

On the bright side, we know she gets out of this somehow. Though not necessarily without consequences.

*Dantalian*

Maybe this is all her plan to make Malicia gloat while Archer puts an arrow through her head.

*edrey*

well, who can help here? hakram, idriani or viviana, or her name take shape, use part of her body as a trick or whatever, really awkward here, any idea of how turn around this?

*Ashen Shugar*

Cat, Cat, Cat. It's not "awkward". It's, "Now that I've got your attention, I need you to take me to Malicia to talk about how she's trying to screw me over again like when she was helping Diabolist wipe out Liese?" ; )

[taliesinskye](#)

That would have been a clever idea, but I don't blame her for not thinking of it in the moment.

[marillius](#)

I still don't get how it's this easy to beat a monarch of the fey. If it was this easy, why did she let so many of her people die? She had wizards that could do basic wards, right? And Hierophant? How did winter and summer tear apart any mortal army when this is all a mage needs to do to even their strongest?

Seems more like she's letting herself think wards matter to her the same way she's let herself think breathing mattered.

*Rook*

That went about as well as expected. Cat is about as good at being subtle as Theif is at killing things. The only way Catherine could ever manage stealth is by barreling through in a straight line while being scary enough that everyone looks the other way.

[taliesinskye](#)

Erraticerrata – the solution you've come up with here for the apparent contradiction of there can be a fair number of people who know how to make magical items but there aren't lots of magical items everywhere is really very clever. It'd be a great idea for lots of fantasy settings to use. Otherwise you have to make magical items way too difficult to create or have knowledge of them be somehow lost long ago or something, and neither of those solutions are desirable for different reasons.

*Alivaril*

"There is no surer sign you're being played than believing you've grasped your enemy's intent."

*velorien7*

That's not a terribly useful statement since it's also exactly what you'll see if you \*aren't\* being played and have correctly read your opponent.

*burdi*

high possibility is that cat already know this will happen  
If she act like she usually act then malicia beat her is inevitable..i believe she knew that much  
whatever cat do or plan...malicia can do it better..she plan diabolist's doomsday weapon behind amadeus back....despite he himself is fucking crazy legendary mastermind

so it must be chaos, that is her element, it has to be indrani

more like "your job wench, is to screw me up, so i will do something that i will never ever think about to do it"

*Metrux*

I honestly can only sigh every time I see this kind of comment on Malicia. She is not good enough to keep the tower on her own, you know? The only reason she lasted in there for so long is that no one could get a banned Name back, and Black was supporting her. Things have changed now, and thus it's alot easier for her to keep her place, but she is not even half as good as some of the best Dread Emperors/Empress. The fact is, she is great at planning and manipulation, but terrible at anything else, including Namelore, and the only reason Black didn't notice was because he never believed she could do something like this, after all, he knew there were people from Praes sending resources to Ubua.

Really, you all give too much to Malicia.

*Someguy*

>The shimmering panes of light around the flesh puppet told me exactly why it'd failed, and pointed at the most likely suspect for the attempt: Thief.

It's all right, Vivienne. No one thinks less of you for it. You're very good at other crimes.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

She's got "Attempted Murder" down pat. Now if she can just remember the follow through...

*Decius*

Her problem is that she's trying to kill her target. She should be trying to steal their life.



## ALKATYN

The little back and forth between the Praesi mages gives me a weird bit of sympathy for them. IT must be incredibly annoying to be a non-Named mage in this world, where you work for decades at perfecting your technique then some Named asshole gets a miraculous cheatcode around the problem.

Also interesting bit of worldbuilding when talking about the magical items decaying over time. Reminds me of a discussion on /r/rational a while back about a magic system that allows making artifacts, and why you wouldn't just have mages manufacture them all day instead of using mages in direct combat.

Also, symbolism of this being the first chapter in ages to not be "(names) Plan"? Did the Woe not plan this part? Also potential double meaning of ambusg, maybe Cat was the one ambushed here by Malicia who was prepared for her from the beginning

### TeK

To be fair, if they didn't get so much as a claim on the various Names, they must not be very talented.

### *Panic*

I see we are back at "Cat is a drooling retard whose ability to stand upright and open doors baffles reality and whose every action ends in her being fucked."

### *Jane*

Well, I mean. She *is* coming off an evening of having erased her memories, been dropped in the middle of a seventeen secret plans, nearly been killed goodness knows how many times in the last couple of hours, and is going through a *bit* of an existential crisis at the moment.

It might not have been the brightest move on her part, but I think it's understandable, no?

### *superkeaton*

An illusion, Cat? Really? You should be better at this. Hell, you usually are. But it's been a long night and we can't all pretend that we were never going to get another one-on-one between Cat and Malicia.

### *Daemion*

Not expecting an illusion was a mistake, she already fell for that before and should know better by now.

The biggest mistake was going melee though. They are mages, with enchanted silk robes that won't withstand a lot of damage. Why

not pepper the entire area with several javelins made from shadow and ice? Or at least freeze the floor to find out who's real and who's an illusion?

Seriously Cat, you already dealt with situations like that before, you can do better.

Personally, I would have jumped high into the air, summoned spears of ice and thrown them down at the mages. They were protecting the flesh puppet, not themselves. The Sentinels might save one or two of them, they are certainly fast enough for that but once the first mage dies, their options shrink.

Hit and run, harass them and stay mobile so they can't trap you. Cat can potentially move fast enough that she's barely visible, the Fae managed that too. Don't present a target while you hammer them from a distance and the fight will be decided in seconds. Once the mages are down and the Sentinels have revealed their capabilities it is time to move in close, but not before.

Cat fails twice here. First at the ambush and secondly at being an immortal being of unstoppable power. She got trapped by some random mage, not even by a Named with the support of the Heavens. That's not just awkward, that's embarrassing.

*Decius*

Half the mages keep blocking the spears, the other half make a ward in the air around her. Sentinels start shooting at the skeet.

*MetruX*

The chapter itself gives you the answer on why she didn't do this: This would attract attention. If she calls upon the undead guards the game is over, and your plan would absolutely do just that, no matter if she could or not eliminate Malicia before the guards arrived.

*revin*

I'm still waiting for Sheherazad's prophecy to come up As the Crown of Woe very clearly refers to Catherine.

"Who reigns up high?

A dead man's sigh

What sleeps below?

A crown of woe

That is the Tower:

Learn and cower."

– Extract from 'And So I Dreamt I Was Awake', Sherehazad the Seer

*aran*

Heh

*Dainpdf*

I am honestly surprised that no one made the “Batherine” joke.  
There, done.  
I guess lqueenofblades1 came close with Bat-Cat.

*Satan*

If the empress had the resources, there’s no reason not to send two simulacrums. Easy bait if this was the depth of Cat’s thought process.

*Joan*

I may have missed something in an earlier chapter, but I don’t understand the benefit of destroying the Empress’s flesh avatar. I don’t recall reading the Empress would die if the avatar was destroyed. Even if it disrupts the negotiations between Praes and Keter, it seems like a pretty high price to pay; an attack like this is an act of war.

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## Chapter 46: Possibly A Plan

*“To declare an assertion of the People untrue is unlawful, even if it was retroactively asserted by vote to be untrue, at which point referring to it as either true or untrue is equally unlawful.”*

– Bellerophan formal codex of laws, circa 1321 A.D.

The transparent bubble around me was solid, as I found out with a swift strike of what must have been at least my fifteenth sword of the day. I was pretty sure the one made out of goblin steel was still with the Spellblade, since I’d never actually picked it up. Over the span of a single heartbeat the Praesi delegation’s entire body language had shifted. Where before the illusion had been the centre of their attention, they now all faced the taller of the two men wearing ceremonial armour. I’d expected another illusion to break and Malicia’s flesh puppet to be revealed but then the stranger smiled and I realized I was already looking at it. Shit, she’d never said she was limited to using women as puppets had she?

“Catherine,” the Empress greeted me in a pleasant baritone.  
“You’ve made quite the entrance.”

I coughed.

"Would you believe I was just cleaning my sword and my hand slipped?" I tried.

Not so much as a twitch from anyone. Tough crowd.

"Worth a shot," I shrugged.

"So much for the cunning Black Queen," a robe-clad man sneered.

From the voice, it was the one called Galadan. His interlocutor had pointedly not used a noble title when bickering with him, so odds were he was just a talented practitioner snatched young and groomed by one of the powerful houses.

"Galadan, was it?" I said slowly, lips quirking as the name echoed with the taste of Winter. "I'll remember that."

There were days where my reputation was like a stone around my neck, making what should have been the simplest matters a brutal grind where my best intentions were turned to dross no matter what I tried. But there were days, as well, where the balance swung the other way. I was standing alone and surrounded, bound by a ward I'd wager had been crafted specifically to deal with me, and I had nothing left to bare at the man but teeth. Galadan still *flinched*. Malicia chuckled lightly at the sight.

"One does not lightly taunt a tiger, even caged," she chided her subordinate. "There is no need for uncouthness, Queen in Callow. Threats this early in the conversation strike me as in poor taste."

I should go along with the beat, of course, dance that highborn dance of manners and double-speak and bladed implications. But we'd done that for a year now, the both of us, and the more I learned about what she'd been up to all the while the more I realized how deeply I'd been played. She'd let me bleed my kingdom, my armies, my *people* against her enemies while she plotted to unleash the Dead King. I would not condemn her for desperation, not when it had driven me to the same madness, but there had been calculation behind her despair. She would let the demon out of the box only when Callow had seen the wilfulness beaten out of it by the Tenth Crusade, and not a moment before. It'd make me a hypocrite to talk about the wickedness of making pacts with the Hidden Horror, but I was not unreasonable in the fury I felt at the knowledge that she'd intended to bleed me out for her advantage.

I spat to the side.

"You know me," I grinned toothily. "Proper savage, I am. That's how they raise us in the provinces."

Malicia sighed.

"There is no need for such antagonism," she said. "You have attempted to murder me, certainly, but that is a small thing. Expected, in many ways. We had a confluence of interests at the last hour of Liesse, and may have one currently as well. It is neither of us that most benefits from this squabble."

"You funded Liesse," I replied calmly. "Enabled it. You were, to use that most damning word, *complicit*."

"And yet," the Dread Empress of Praes said, "when presented with the finished weapon you agreed with me on the necessity of its existence. Our present situation is not so different."

I had come to regret it, over the months that followed that nightmare, that I had even for a moment agreed with Malicia. That I'd been able to set aside the pile of bodies the doomsday fortress had been raised from for the golden lie of the peace it might be able to force. I'd often thought of pragmatism as the highest of all virtues, since I'd become the Squire. So many time I'd crossed blades with heroes and villains who were so wrapped up in what they might be able to make of the world that they were unwilling to face the reality of what it was. But I'd learned. It was a virtue, when properly used, but to embrace it at the exclusion of all else was to become Black. Cunning, victorious and brutally efficient. Dead inside too, though, more means than man. The kind of person that brought only ruin wherever they went.

"And so the devil complains the other devil is tricking us both," I laughed. "Quite the assertion, when you've already escalated the offer beyond what either of us can afford."

"The Principate is an existential threat to us both," the Empress said. "That is fact, not speculation. So long as Procer is not dismantled, even victory tomorrow would only result in the same war erupting anew in twenty years. You are quite aware of this, or you would not have requested signatory status with the Grand Alliance."

"Hasenbach isn't the one whose ships are burning your coasts," I pointed out. "And Levant's on the march. Bit more to this than the First Prince having a go at the East."

"Ashur will seek separate peace the moment the Grand Alliance collapses," Malicia patiently said. "It will be costly to settle, but the Empire is the wealthiest it has been in several generations. The Dominion is willing to fight under the cross, but to defend Procer? Even if they are cajoled into it and somehow manage victory, they will have no stomach for pressing with another war after turning back the Dead King."

"It's an interesting sell that you're making between the lines," I noted. "Instead of your shield protecting the western flank

with the Principate, you're trying to talk me into being the same for your western flank with the *Dead King*. What a favour you're granting me. I have to praise the audacity, if nothing else."

"Let us not quibble over details," Malicia flatly said. "You meant to release him yourself. If betrayal in the terms is your worry, I am willing to grant you the right to read the final treaties and sit at the signing."

"I meant to loose him only on the northernmost edges of Procer," I sharply replied. "Where the damage inflicted could be kept to a strict minimum and he'd have to defend narrow beachheads against the entire Tenth Crusade. You, on the other hand, are handing him almost a third of the continent's most densely populated farmland on a silver platter. I don't care how good your binding oaths are, if he manages to swallow that big a prize the rest of Calernia is fucked. Including me, including *you*. You can't possibly be so desperate you can't see that."

"There is quite the difference between recognizing someone's rights to territory and the other party being able to seize it," the Empress said. "Some principalities will fall, I expect. Not enough. And what remains of Procer will be embroiled in permanent bloody warfare to the north, a grind on the resources of both participants."

"See, I would have bought that before I saw Keter with my own eyes," I told her. "Saw the kind of tools the Dead King has at his disposal. I'm telling you, and Gods I would love it if you actually took me to my word for once, he has a fucking *legion* of monsters to unleash. He's been sitting pretty on this for millennia, Malicia, picking up every strong Named he came across and adding them to his arsenal. Procer can barely handle me, and that's with the hand of the Heavens so far up their asses you can see the fingers wiggling between the teeth. They are not capable of handling what he'll send marching."

"Evil," the Empress replied serenely, "does not win wars. That is a law of nature, true as sunrise or the moving of the tides. You have inherited Amadeus' most dangerous delusion in believing otherwise. He could empty all the Howling Hells and it would not matter one bit. The only way to eke out a victory, Catherine, is *not to fight*."

"And how's that been working out for you?" I harshly asked.

"My armies are intact," Malicia smiled. "I have avoided loss of any significant industry or resources and maintained my hold on all my core territories. Your need to war with every foe in sight, on the other hand, has broken your only host, brought several outlying regions of Callow to the brink of rebellion and left you exceedingly vulnerable to attack from every single other state on the continent."

"You know," I mused, "we usually get that speech from the west instead of the east. Oh, Callow's on fire but *my* lands are fine. You must be a bunch of blunderers. Forgetting, of course, that the only reason the princes of Procer aren't bickering over who gets the nicer parts of your fucking capital is that my people bled at the borders to drive them back."

"You expect my sympathy for the costs of defending your own lands?" the Empress said, tone mildly sardonic.

"You know," I said, "that's fair. It really is. It's not like my armies gives a damn about the Wasteland. But then you don't get to parade the success of your masterful 'strategy' either, Malicia, when the only thing that makes it work is that my kingdom's in the way of an invasion. You haven't played everyone like a fiddle. You didn't raise a godsdamned hand even when the Ashurans started sacking your cities. All you did was read a fucking map and take a bet on human nature."

She laughed in my face, an older man's rich and riotous laughter.

"Indeed, I truly am a fool for having achieved all my desired outcomes without any true cost to myself," she said. "However will I live this down?"

"No cost?" I said. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. Your little episode in Liesse cost you quite a bit, didn't it? More than half the Legions. Your finest generals, and probably the person dearest to you in the world. All of Callow, too. How's it feel, Alaya, to join the roster of empresses who pissed away a kingdom out of pride?"

The flesh puppet turned dark eyes on me.

"One of your better attempts," she noted. "Given two or three decades, you might survive a month at court without someone cleaning up behind you. Evidently, you are disinclined to cooperate even when it is to our common advantage. Let us part ways, then."

I went for Winter again. Still just out of the reach of my fingertips. The harder I set my will to it, though, the more I felt like there might be some give. Was the ward pitting willpower against willpower? There were four warlocks keeping this going that I could see, and Wasteland mages were taught from the cradle that Creation was theirs to master. That didn't breed weak wills, though sometimes brittle ones. I might be able to pull that off, given long enough, but it wasn't a certainty. And I'd be up to my neck in Sentinels before then. I shifted my stance, wrist slowly rotating as I flicked the last of the blood off my sword.

"This the part where you have your little toy soldiers try me?" I casually said. "Should be interesting to see if they can kill me."

"You are a skilled swordswoman," a Taghreb mage snorted. "Yet not so skilled as that."

"You mistake me," I smiled. "Even if your pack of silent hounds hacks me to pieces, will I actually *die*?"

That gave them pause.

"Lost half my face and torso, not even an hour ago," I said. "A Named elf did that with one of the dangerous aspects I've ever seen. You think you can swing harder than that? I'm genuinely curious, what do you have to throw at me that'll keep me down for the count?"

"Cold iron," Galadan hissed.

I snorted.

"That's cute," I said. "My own crown is made of that, you mouthy second-rater. But, Hells, give it a shot. It's not like my way to the throne hasn't been paved by the bodies of Wastelanders who just *knew* they had my number."

I straightened, gaze sweeping across the Praesi delegation.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," I said with a savage grin, "which brave soul wants to be the first example I make today?"

Silence was my answer, and when I inhaled the fear that had swelled up under their calm faces I could not be sure whether it was me or Winter that delighted in it. The spell was broken by a slow clap. Malicia's simulacrum was smiling.

"You truly do have a talent for this," she said. "Beyond even what you were taught. Still, you have ever been slow to learn. Did I not tell you, Catherine? To win, it is best not to fight at all."

The puppet glanced at her subordinates.

"The ward anchors will remain here," she said. "The rest of us will proceed to the Hall of the Dead and resume negotiation."

The man's face turned to me, and inclined Malicia inclined his head by a fraction.

"A good day to you, Black Queen," she said. "May you survive the consequences of what you have wrought."

The smiled turned mirthless.



"After all," she finished, "I still have a use for you."

Oooh, that'd been *cold*. Had to grant her the due for that, and I knew cold better than most. I gathered my will and smashed it against the ward like a hammer, but the give wasn't nearly strong enough. If she managed to get out of here, this was done. And like she'd said, Neshamah would be displeased. Or perhaps disappointed, which seemed like a much more dangerous state of affairs. I couldn't reach my mantle, and the bubble might as well have been stone. Stone before I'd gotten said mantle, anyway, it was a lot less trouble these days. I still had knives up my sleeves, thanks to Pickler's cunning little contraptions, but if my sword couldn't cut it against the bubble neither would they. The Praesi gathered to move out, the Sentinels making a protective ring around the remaining delegates and the Empress. My fingers clenched. I had no weapon, no power that would work until it was too late. Well, except my fucking 'invisible crossbow', thank you Past Catherine. Wait, yes, my invisible crossbow. I didn't physically have one – I'd checked earlier, patted myself down – but it might be a metaphor. Or maybe the sight of me making an ass of myself was a signal for Archer to start shooting, which seemed a lot more likely.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," I called out.

The Empress turned.

"And why is that?" she said.

Ah, humouring me. Nearly always a mistake.

"I'll have to kill you with my secret weapon," I replied.

"Is that so?" she said.

"Evidently," I drawled, "you are disinclined to cooperate. Let us part ways, then."

I brought up my invisible crossbow and fired it right into her throat.

At which point nothing happened.

"I was expecting the Archer to ambush us," Malicia said after a moment.

"Wards prepared?" I asked.

"Several," she replied.

"The plan had a few kinks to work out," I admitted.

If I'd been more prone to assigning sentimentality to the Empress, I would have believed her to be somewhat embarrassed on my

behalf. Well, it'd make two of us. At least years of Indrani's company had more or less made me immune to shame and public embarrassment. Mercifully, the Dread Empress of Praes set out again without taking a moment out of her day to mock me. All right then, back to forcing my way through the ward and then having a spot of diplomatic murder. I pressed my will against the bubble again, and kept the pressure up. I was gaining ground, inch by inch, but it was taking too godsdamned long.

The arrow took Galadan right in the knee.

The mage fell with a scream as my eyes widened in surprise. Had there been some sort of protective enchantment on him, like there'd been on the Exiled Prince? Why else would Archer aim for the knee? Unless...

"Oh, fucking Hells," I sighed. "She's drunk, isn't she?"

Had she seriously been so wasted she'd missed both the signal and her mark? Gods, I didn't even know Named could *get* that drunk.

"Fighting retreat," Malicia ordered, tone perfectly even.

"Archer," I yelled. "The mages around me. Ignore the Empress."

I found fear in the eye of the warlock closest to me when I met them, and redoubled my efforts to break through. Except that no other arrow came. Was this a plan of some sort? Befuddlement distracted me long enough I lost a few inches to the mages, and I threw myself back into it with gritted teeth. She and I would have a talk about this, when – the second arrow clipped the shoulder of a mage to the side of the bubble, drawing blood and a scream but nothing else. I gained back the inches I'd lost, but that was all. Gods, how drunk was she? *No, she'd have burned it out of her body by now with her Name.* Indrani might capricious, but she was also incredibly vain about her marksmanship. After missing her first shot she'd have sobered herself up. I came to the conclusion a heartbeat before the Empress announced it out loud to her escorts. This had never been Archer. This was Thief who'd stolen a bow and arrows at some point, and the shots were missing because *no one had ever taught her to use the godsdamned thing properly.*

"Thief, just stab the bastards," I yelled angrily.

Her ruse – passing for Archer – had slowed down the Praesi advance some but not nearly enough. She should have gone for the mages since the start, though charitably I'd assume she'd been trying to make time for me to break out of the bubble. I slammed my will against the ward, to no avail. This was infuriating. If I'd still had an aspect I could have ripped through that like wet parchment. But with the mantle's power had come the mantle's weaknesses. Although, I'd learned necromancy when I was still...

No, my tie to Zombie still existed but it was muted. I couldn't control her through it. Neither could I summon the arguably more dangerous dead thing at my beck and call, Akua Sahelian. It was like the bubble was shutting me out of Winter and essentially everything outside of the bubble itself. I was pretty sure I could still manipulate what was in here, but my body couldn't shift without Winter to handle the changes and, and I still had a bit of Winter in here didn't I? I glanced down at my sword. I'd gone through over a dozen of those fighting the Skein, just making another one out of ice every time the last one shattered. It'd become so natural I barely ever thought of it anymore. I grimaced. Didn't really help, though. I could make an ice javelin out of that, but that was no better than a sword and I doubted anything aside from my domain would put a hole in the ward.

Thief flickered into sight, stabbing into the back of the man whose eyes I'd met earlier, but even though she drew blood a streak of lightning caught her in the side and smashed her to the ground. An illusion broke, and a fifth spellcaster flicked her wrist as she whispered in the mage tongue. The lightning kept roiling and Vivienne screamed as she twisted on the ground.

"Flee," I hissed. "Go."

Except she couldn't, and I didn't have the tools to... My fingers clenched. I gathered my will, sent it into my sword and broke it apart. I ripped from the ice the stuff of Winter, and from it wove one of the few things that never left my body. A small dark whistle, pulsing with power not my own. Power I'd stolen from a hated foe. Bringing it to my cold lips, I blew out and the power vanished. It broke into fine powder. Not a sound had been made. It wasn't that kind of whistle. It wasn't that kind of call.

"She's summoning something," the sorceress that still poured lightning into Vivienne called out.

"We need every single one of us," the man who'd been stabbed replied in Mtethwa. "She's a monster."

The blade went through the back of his head, coming out of his mouth in a downpour of blood. Larat clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Now now, man-thing," he chided. "That's just no way to speak about your superiors."

The rest of the Wild Hunt tore out of Arcadia behind him, and with a wild scream I finally shattered the ward. Finally.

*My turn.*

---

*Someguy*

"To declare an assertion of the People untrue is unlawful, even if it was retroactively asserted by vote to be untrue, at which point referring to it as either true or untrue is equally unlawful."

– Bellerophan formal codex of laws, circa 1321 A.D.

And if you declare the assertion a monumental screw-up?

[TeK](#)

Obviously, the only thing that is untrue and true at the same time, is something that does not exist nor ever existed. Therefore, if an assertion of People was later asserted as untrue, such assertion never took place. Honestly, do you need me to spell this out for you?

*Decius*

Such an assertion is not "untrue and true". It is "not untrue and not true".

Calling it both untrue and true is doubly treason.

[TeK](#)

Not untrue is true and not true is untrue. I merely skipped unnessecary letters. Adding additional "not" may come as legit tactic at the first glance, but you forgetting that there may be infinite number of occasions that one issue is asserted by People as true, and untrue, and true again, etc. So to escape situations with "not not not not not not untrue", I left "not" out entirely.

*Dainpdf*

Eh. The principle of exclusion is debatable.

*Faiir*

One shall not just ignore the words of the People!

[Euodiachloris](#)

The voice of the People is always right! But, it is conceivable that the information the People has was... misleading. If in doubt, blame the data, then tar and feather the journalists and statisticians! ;P

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

This guy bellerophons.

Steve

Acrually, the quote does not make something true or untrue, merely allow you to state whether it is true or untrue.

Jane

I wonder, just how much intervention from the Gods has it taken to keep Bellerophon from collapsing under the weight of its absurdity? Surely it hasn't been human hands keeping it running...

Heck, it's probably been a cooperative venture from the gods both Above and Below, so that they have something to laugh at when they're not busy scheming or arguing.

...Or maybe the Gods Below have wasted all of their power on keeping their clown show going, and that's why Villains always seem like they're at a disadvantage everywhere else in the continent.

[TeK](#)

To assert that Glorious Republic of Bellerophon can't exist without metaphysical crutches is both treason and Filthy Lies of Petty Tyrants, which is also treason. Now you may argue that since you are not citizen of Bellerophon and can't possibly commit treason against it. Wrong again!

Besides, Gods Below are citizens of Bellerophon, it's just good and proper to keep their homelajd from collapsing, even if it's completely unnecessary and the other way around besides.

[onedollargum](#)

All recorded evidence of non-events go into the memory hole, I imagine, as do all un-persons who reference them.

[Jacklyn Yeh](#)

don't be so silly. they would simply make new legislation proving the exact same point, only for the original ruling to be dug up about 2 centuries later to contridict the "new" law.

Miles

You can't declare the assertion at all. Everyone who cast a vote on it is dead anyway. The first group for voting incorrectly and the second group for unlawfully contradicting the first.

*Big Brother*

Finally, the Wild Hunt rides again.

[sengachi](#)

“More means than man” is an absolutely amazing turn of phrase.

*Snowfire1224*

It reminded me of how obi wan called darth vader, “more machine than man” in New Hope.

*Miles*

You know it occurs to me that all Vader’s machine parts were crutches against the injuries that Obi-Wan himself had inflicted while trying to kill the boy.

What I’m saying is that Obi-Wan is kind of a dick.

[DroughtBringer](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Go vote!

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

And to no one’s surprise Cat’s ‘Possibly-A-Plan’ involves bashing through stuff and stabbing people.

*RoflCat*

And according to my count she’s only one arson and multiple ‘attempt’ murders only.

Where’s the rest of the flame and dead bodies promised?

*Decius*

One completed murder so far. Plus one remurder, if Skein stays down.

*Amoonymous*

I doubt the Skein is permanently gone; he should be trapped in that pocket dimension, but if we’re assuming Neshamah created that dimension in the first place then I wouldn’t be surprised if – with time – he could fix it and retrieve the Skein.

Or even if he can’t fix it, at least pull the Skein out of it.

If he can't do either of those, it'd probably say more about the power of Masego's new aspect than anything else.

*Jarthon 1*

To repeat my last comment: The Foundling Gambit is the best gambit!

*Gunslinger*

Now now Man-thing vote for the guide on topwebfiction <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Ohh and toss a few bucks to support the author <https://www.patreon.com/user/posts?u=3523924>

[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

And the Wild Hunt Returns, this shall be fun

*plantsbeans*

The wild hunt is \*really fun\*. I'm very pro-Larat.

[\*wirelessgrapes\*](#)

I love the irony of Malicia talking about the only way to win being not to play, and all about avoiding stories and shit, and she literally surrounded one person in a cage, got into a discussion with her, and then left dramatically declaring that the person in the cage still had use.

Fucking hell that's amazing. You have to genuinely put yourself at a disadvantage to win. You can't win the first round, because then you're just set up to lose the last. And Cat seems to have either embraced the chaos, or hasn't learned and is just bumbling her way through the Stories like that.

[\*wirelessgrapes\*](#)

As Malicia said, "Don't taunt the tiger in the cage"

*ATRDCI*

Given that the Empire already has had a historical problem with tigers that they caged, taught to be smart and dangerous and then had those tigers break out and betray them, that is literally the worst animal Malicia could have used in that sentence for Story purposes.

*Rook*

Technically since the wards were suppressing Cat's connection with winter, she just tried to steal the weather from said sentient tiger in the cage.

*Yavandir*

Tiger with invisible crossbow almost like invisible army XD

*werafdsaew*

I'm beginning to think that Malicia isn't actually all that good at story-fu. After all it has always been Black who's doing the killing.

[Javvies](#)

I fully agree.

Without Black and the Calamities, Malicia would never have been, far less lasted anywhere near as long.

*Jason Ipswitch*

Yep, that's my take too. Her strengths \*story-wise\* appear to have been until recently "listening to and working with Black" and, "avoiding the apparent Dread Empress-induced drive to crazytown". She's lost both those relatively recently. Maybe it was her name, maybe the decades of wrangling the metaphorical rabid velociraptors of the Wasteland nobility as acting-Chancellor while living in The Tower, or maybe just the thumb of the Heavens on the scales, but they're gone now.

Black (or even Catherine if motivated and a little lucky) could probably story-fu her back to stability, but she's not going to let them. Instead, she's going to be the consummate devious politician... who pursues flying demon-gate superweapons and makes deals with the Dead King. She's setting herself up for a climactic second act "Haha! All my machinations are working perfectly! Everyone but me is in disarray! Ahahaha!" which only ends one way in this universe.

*Rook*

That's less of an opinion, more of a fact. She just monologued at a beaten opponent, gloated about her victory, and instead of finishing them off just left them unattended for a daring rescue. It's like watching someone stab herself in the foot with her gun.

*beleester*



She's also gloating about unleashing a monster while the hero warns her that she doesn't know what she's doing, which is right up there with "consuming an energy field bigger than your head" in terms of villain fails.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

I mean, calling Cat a hero here is definitely a bit of a stretch; she doesn't have a Story backing her actions (which consist of arson, attempted murder, and arguably jaywalking into another palace against a nominal ally) so that she could make a pact with the lord of undeath. The hero card is very very far behind in this scene.

*Yavandir*

Well you are right but what catherine said was more like a hero lines and she is more fae than villain it's a difference after all in arcadia she declared herself a hero while fighting one of the fae and it kinda worked (partially but it did).

[Euodiachloris](#)

Catherine has something far worse than being a Hero on her side: she's the Underdog.

*Yavandir*

It honestly piss me off... Whenever she gets a power up there shows something ridiculous like saint of swords or skein I like the stories about the underdog but she shouldn't get any power up or be like a proper villain but nooooo Cat always is the underpowered one she is a fucking queen of winter it;s frustrating.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

It's cause she deliberately doesn't go full out on power, similar to how Black doesn't go full out on his Aspects. She knows there's power in being the underdog, and loss of power in maxing power, so she holds back on the Fae powers as much as possible, like she held back on Aspects

*Antoninjohn*

So Cat even facing her greatest weakness wards matches and slightly surpasses the best group of magic uses in will

*Ethereal*

I don't see that. I saw that even with Thief's help, she couldn't break out... until she remembered the whistle (which I personally had forgotten she had).

[marillius](#)

I still don't see how it makes sense, personally, that Cat, for all of her power, has a weakness to Wards. None of the bloody Fey seemed to have that weakness before or, if they did, none of the mages in Cat's army ever tried using it. More over it seems to be strong enough to CAGE a Fey Monarch. HOW?

---

Well, the whole point of Akua having advantage against the Fae was that diabolists and Praesi mages in general are capable of slapping together a ward on the fly. Compare that to, say, Hedge Wizard, who had knowledge of nearly all branches of magic on the level of an average non-Praesi practitioner and still told Hanno that she didn't want to risk a miscalculation while building a ward. Add to that the fact that Liesse had wards strong enough it took the Princess of High Noon to dent them, that the revolving wards made most fairies (and Cat) get stuck in a loop of hitting them and getting hit back, and you'll see that it's been established pretty well.

[marillius](#)

And yet here we are with something stronger than the Princess of High Noon and wards weaker than what the Hedge Wizard has (Named are always better than not, even if their 'story' is that they know a lot of weaker magic) but somehow, though the Winter Queen is something no one has ever seen before, they made wards perfectly suited to stopping her. Whereas the Princess of High Noon was able to take down Liesse's walls which, if I remember correctly (I may actually not, it's been a while since I've reread the story), had pretty ancient and powerful wards in their walls or at the very least wards created by another named and countless other mages (because army) and it only slowed her down in the end, or would have at any rate.

There is a clear disparity in how much the wards are affecting Cat and the question remains that if they were this strong why had the Apprentice, a powerful named mage, never created a ward to deal with them. Even if it was a transitional mage he showed himself to be the equal of Akua at almost every turn, if perhaps lacking in certain secrets her family had (though probably not as many as one would think given Warlocks desire for knowledge). If this is because Cat is still holding back somehow then that's fine, because she's basically limited herself in almost painful

ways given she's actually meant to be stronger than any of the Princes or Princesses we've seen before (We have never seen her fight at a level over the Duchess of Moonlight night save for in very specific, massive brute force workings or when Akua was piloting her so that is really the only way this works. Though you'd think fighting wards would be a matter of brute force given how they describe how she does it so even that doesn't work on close scrutiny.)

But if this is a weakness all Fey are supposed to have, even the high and mighty ones, then it's inconsistent with how Cat dealt with them in the war having the Apprentice at her disposal and yes, even how Akua dealt with them, since the supposed specialist of wards did jack all against ranks Princess and up with wards alone (she beat the princess but she didn't do it by trapping her in a ward bubble).

Given how remarkably consistent a lot of this magical world is this seems like a very strange thing to have crop up. By the reasoning the story is now presenting the apprentice could have 'caged' a bunch of tigers. Even if he was doing it to only one or two a battle then he could have still locked down Prince and Duke level fellows, at the very least, and probably the King and Queens too, since you can't tell me the apprentice wasn't a match for four random wasteland cannon fodder mages. But the apprentice, arguably Akua's equal or better in magic, and far superior than these NPC's Cat's facing right now, never even thought of it?

The only other explanation is that Cat believes wards are a bigger deal than they are and is hamstringing herself out of stupidity and a lack of care to ask Hierophant how to fight them and thus learn that she doesn't need to. Because otherwise the Apprentice, who would have totally been on board for dissecting a Fey, never once thought to capture a few of them during battles, particularly not the stronger ones, and Thiefs whole 'steal the sun' gambit wouldn't have even been necessary because apparently you can pop a ward any old place.

*werafdsaew*

Cat is not as strong as the Princess of High Noon

*Byzantine*

Cat is stronger in a sense, but can't call on that power freely.

*Necronomist*

My read was that this ward was made to exploit a weakness *unique* to Cat. She's still, to some extent, a human mind

holding Winter (that is, avoiding Principle Alienation). Normally this isn't a problem because she can just draw on more power, but unlike a normal Fae it means she can be cut off from her Mantle.

Alternately, there are tricks the other Fae have learned such as seeking weak points in wards that Cat simply lacks the magical knowledge to perform.

But my bet is on separating the Mantle being a unique weakness. Once you do that you aren't fighting the whole of Winter, just a relatively easily contained fragment of it.

*RanVor*

Have you considered that Cat is *not* the Queen of Winter in the Fae sense? She is the Queen, and she is of Winter, but as far as Fae titles go, she's still "only" Duchess of Moonless Nights. Being the last remaining noble of Winter doesn't automatically make her Hells know how powerful. She's nowhere as strong as Sulia at the height of power.

*Necronomist*

Didn't Larat address her as the Queen of Air and Darkness?

*RanVor*

What Larat says is irrelevant. Cat fights on the level of the Duchess of Moonless Nights because she *is* on the level of Duchess of Moonless Nights. She didn't suddenly become exponentially more powerful upon becoming the last noble of Winter. I'm pretty sure she would know it if she did.

*Byzantine*

Uh, Ran, that is quite literally *\*exactly\** what happened. It was stated pretty clearly that she did, in fact, become exponentially more powerful when she became the last Noble of Winter – that was why the first attempt to keep her power in check when her heart was returned failed far faster than expected.

*RanVor*

Ok, so the amount of collective power in Arcadia effectively doubled, because it's only logical for the United Fae Court to be as powerful as Winter and Summer combined, and they couldn't take Winter with them because Winter belongs to Cat. And if

they couldn't take Winter, logically they couldn't take Summer as well. That means they had to create an entirely new power from nothing.

Anyway, even if Cat actually is as powerful as the King of Winter and more, the Principle Alienation ensures she can never ever use this power in full, so she's effectively not.

[marillius](#)

1. Right, but that means we're talking about a point I covered, ie 'Cat is hamstringing herself to keep her mortal mind'. That is fine. But then how does everyone else KNOW that she's doing it, then? Why would they think someone with her power even capable of being caged by a ward?

2. We know she's stronger by a looooooot compared to what she used to be. She's done much, much harder, much more brutal and much more powerful workings on par with the Princess and even the Queen, at least in terms of raw power. With a little bit of guidance from the Hierophant she killed thousands of soldiers in a single attack. Hierophant did nothing but aim that bad boy, it was her doing it. And while she didn't use something like a Sun to do it she still did it and it took the fricking lazars of light to stop her.

We know she's not tapping into the full breadth of that power because she also explicitly says that. But how does Malicia know Cat survived the process? Or is Malicia under the mistaken belief that Cat is still a Duchess ranked fey, despite having the Wild Hunt at her service? Someone is making a mistake in judgement here for this ward prison to even be possible OR a bunch of someones made mistakes in the past when they never thought to try it.

[marillius](#)

Just realized you were being sarcastic. Thought it was strange wording but I had seen stranger so sorry there for not seeing it before.

The fact of the matter is we don't know what happened to the Fey Courts after everything. We haven't been told if they're just as strong as they used to be or not. We can probably assume they are but the fact of the matter is that we do know that Cat has all of Winter (yes, all of it,

it has been explicitly stated), and that much like Names on the mortal realm, Winter Means Something (or meant something) and because it Meant Something, the way Names like Black Knight Mean Something, it has power.

We also know that Winter Means Something in a Big Way because of what we've heard them say and what we've seen Cat do. It is explicitly shown that she is much more powerful then she was as a duchess. She didn't simply get the title Queen because she was the last noble left, she also got a looooot of power that comes with the throne. Think of it like a Name. It's not coming from no where, it's coming from a culture that used to Fear Winter for the cold nights that could kill it, still reveries it as an ever immutable fact of the world that can claim lives on a whim, still writes poetry of it for the beauty it holds on quiet moonlit nights and dark stories about monsters shrouded in shadows of moonless nights.

That is Winter. Winter is a Name with so many more Stories then a mortal Name could ever hold that those who gain that Name lose themselves in it more fully and become Something Else. Cat is Winter. Cat is all of those stories. Cat is relentless Blizzards and Cat is the single, perfect snowflake that is the first snowfall of the year. Cat is everything in between the beginning and end of Winter as well. You think there are a lot of stories of Black Knights? There are millions, if not billions, more of Winter, and Winter is hardly constrained to a few nations and cultures the way Knights are. And those stories create power the same way a culture creates power in names.

It is very likely that if the Fey Monarchs are as strong as they were then they are tapping into a new story. Perhaps something about immortal gods, like the Greek Gods, or perhaps something like the Tuatha Dé Danann, immortal sidhe lords. They were already like the latter in a way so it's not so far of a stretch to assume they're going that route. But in the end that means they're tapping into a different vein of power, a different story. Which makes sense since we explicitly know and have been told... Winter is no longer Winter. The Winter King is no longer Winter. Cat is Winter. Which means the Winter King and the Summer Queen are probably something else altogether now,

divested of their warring courts and their warring nature's.

*RanVor*

Well, except as far as we know, Cat didn't receive the title of the Queen of Winter at all, although titles kind of stop mattering when you're the only one eligible. And even if she did get the entirety of Winter at her disposal (which is leagues above the power the King of Winter used to have and would make her able to obliterate half the continent in a heartbeat, at least), this power remains inaccessible to her, and inaccessible power = no power. Also, she didn't actually do anything special at the Battle of the Camps – she just made a big gate and let the gravity do the rest.

Although I must admit, I never thought about Winter the way you described it here. Incidentally, it makes all the clamor in the comments about Cat getting a new Name somewhat ridiculous. Why would she need a new Name when she has something greater than any Name can ever hope to be?

[marillius](#)

You are not wrong about the power she has and how little it matters if she can't use it, but at the very least we know one thing. She does have the Authority to name others in Winter's domain dukes and such. We've heard it mentioned before as 'handing out titles', a nuclear option she doesn't want to resort to because it puts a huuuuge target on her back and creates a lot more wheeling and dealing Fey that could challenge her. (That second one is my guess, at least.)

She has ALL of Winter but that doesn't necessarily mean she has access to it all. The king himself never seemed diminished by the lack of the other titles so it's more likely that she can't touch them while representing Winter as Queen, accessing another the stories those titles represent. It still means she's about on par in terms of Raw Power as the King, even if she can't use it all without losing herself. As far as the Gate was concerned you might want to check every Named and their reactions to that. The 'BFG' or 'Big Fricking Gate' as I'd like it called, if I were lucky enough to make such a joke relevant, was

something even the Pilgrim had been caught off guard by and he's basically Gandalf. When you surprise Gandalf, you be crazy, and what she did was an extremely powerful working. You mistake how she did it for 'easy' when in truth she was doing something 'smart'. Rather than spend ALL of her power simply conjuring that much water she decided to just get it elsewhere.

(SPOILERS to Wheel of Time)

One of my favorite parts of the Wheel of Time books was when a character with similar magics started opening gates inside volcanos to pour on enemies.

(UNSPOILERS)

Same effect, far less energy required, allowing her to do even more and worse (Such as get up a bit later being piloted by Akua, raise an entire legion of undead and then face down some pretty powerful ass heroes). There's no doubt in my mind she has the Kings power. What she seems to lack is the ability to use it freely and the control and experience he had using it.

One final point. Giving her a new name, at least in my mind, isn't so much about giving her more power. At least for me I kind of want one for her to give her character a bit more direction and distinction. The problem with Winter is not only that it's a power unimaginable unable to be touched and earning her enemies in that weight class... But it's also vague. It's power is infinite but so defuse, spread across so many stories, that Winter Queen is really... It's cool, but squire had more flavor, Black Queen had more personal meaning and another name would allow us to see growth in a more distinct sense. She's learning to use her powers all the time in this clusterfuck of a plan but it feels way less impactful than her earning an Aspect and then learning how to use it in new ways. A title that doesn't have much, or any power, would be interesting for her to have.

*RanVor*

Just to clarify, I never said nor thought what she did at the Battle of the Camps was "easy". I only said it was an upscaled version of what she's been doing all the time up to that point. It certainly required a far greater power than opening a normal gate, but also far less power than she could have



poured into it. That she managed to do something that grand in scale with relatively little energy investment is what makes it so impressive, in my opinion.

Alas, for want of a counterpoint for your argument regarding titles, I am forced to reluctantly withdraw from my position on the matter of Cat being a titular Queen of Winter. You win. Rejoice.

I still don't believe she's as strong as the King of Winter, though.

*Aehriman*

Don't know how binding it is or how well-informed he'd be, but Neshemah at least called Cat the Sovereign of Moonless Nights.

*Death Knight*

Though many glossed over this tidbit but EE did imply Malicia is a mage.

In his comment regarding catherine learning magic way back in Book 1 he said that no matter how much Cat calls on a magical aspect she'd never be able to do what Warlock or Malicia could do on an off day.

It's entirely plausible Malicia, being Named, crafted said ward and taught and drilled her personal warlocks how to cast the spell which is why the spell wasn't binding: the pleb mages didn't have the skill and/or power to make Cat truly powerless as Malicia or Warlock would have been able to.

Or, more plausibly, Warlock taught her the ward seeing as he also has no love for Catherine and after their standoff over Nauk's body, I'd bet an aspect he has some really nasty wards in reserve for when he and Cat butt heads again.

Remember few people could derive Einstein's theory of relativity from first principles but a lot of people with a maths and physics background can use said equations so I think its reasonable to assume that the same can be said here.

[marillius](#)

This is a fascinating possibility that I actually like quite a bit. Would be exactly like the prick and he is still buddy-buddy with Malicia. A possible third theory! I love it.

grzecho2222

First step of plan always works

*MetruX*

I think you need to read again. Masego DID put several noble fae in wards, especially durable ones so he could discover from them what summer plans were. And when Thief stole the sun he had just had his ward broken, after making it on the go and STILL holding down the princess, also known for having the highest direct power from all non queen/king fae. Yes, it has been shown to be a massive weakness of this species, so much so that they couldn't bring nobles to attack inside the city when it all began, only the weaker ones could pass through, which seems to imply the stronger you are, the harder this hits. But also you must consider that, when at Arcadia, it wasn't only their own power being used, every titled fae could draw a part of reality itself to his aid, while the queen and the king could draw fully half of creation, becoming gods, if minor ones. Cat can't draw from reality around her, and more than that, there is no more Winter besides her. Even IF she is to be as strong as a Fae Queen, she is still severely limited in her power, besides the fact Winter got separated from her, something that would never happen with a true fae.

[marillius](#)

So your logic boils down to the same as the others, a matter of raw power and how much of it Cat has. I agree that it's a possibility but I disagree that Cat doesn't have access to the power of a Fey Monarch. I think it much more likely she does, if she were to relent to winter. It is very possible Cat as of now can only call upon that raw power in controlled circumstances, or with Akua's aid, but we know she can. She killed Thousands in a single stroke with only a little bit of help aiming from the Heirophant and then when Akua was driving her she flash froze a lake.

Neither of those things were possible as a duchess level fey. Even doing something a hundredth or a thousandth that size tired her out. And flash freezing a lake of that size? That takes some serious energy (I mean from a purely scientific point of view. This story doesn't hold to science but it does hold to general idea that magic

takes energy and notable magical feats are plenty and regular enough for us to divine Cat is basically a fricking nuclear bomb compared to the bip lighters that are most mages.

That she can't touch it is a possibility, not without relenting to winter or with a lot of help, but the idea that she can be separated from winter doesn't make sense either anymore. She IS winter. She is made of it. If they cut her off from it she would have ceased being. More then likely this is a result of her being split and still carrying around a mortal mind but then that begs the question of how Malicia knows that's a problem of hers and why she'd think she could contain a Monarch level Fey with four NPC mages. The story seems to hint that Malicia doesn't know Cat is the Queen of Winter with one of the idiot NPC's calling her the Black Queen, still, but how stupid does Malicia have to be to not know that given that it's been MONTHS and she's done crazy things like drop Lakes on armies? So how does Malicia know she can't tap into the full breadth of that? Or has the story been pulling one over on us, convincing us that Cat is holding back when she's actually not, and is barely more powerful then before?

The problem with the idea that Cat can be trapped by wards is that, if you are right and it did happen often enough in the story during the war, it still failed against a Princess, something Cat is at least as strong as, and was done by Apprentice, something these NPC mages are not. If she doesn't have that kind of power because she can't tap into it, fine, but how does Malicia know she doesn't and why does she think this ward would work? For all Malicia knows Cat is actually Winter incarnate pretending to be Cat ready to ride high and rip her apart for annoying her, which means this ward was a stupid trap, a desperate gamble that seems out of character for her.

For this to work Cat cannot tap into even a tenth of her true might (to be held by NPC mages instead of someone on Apprentices level), Malicia has to KNOW that Cat can't tap into that power despite evidence to the contrary (thousands dead, lake flash frozen, etc) and Cat is basically doubly crippled for not being able to throw around her power in the weight class she is actually in and also have a severe, unmitigated weakness to wards any two bit no names can throw up. (The story can say they're the Wastelands best all they want but the story also goes into great pains to detail what she's done with the Wastelands best in the past. Remember Liesse? Cat sure seems to forget how she mowed

down dozens of mages like this on her search for an entrance to Diabolists lair.)

And this is all possible but we have seen hints to the contrary for several of these things. Cat can't do much in the way of complicated Winter Workings or reality warping but she has been able to, at times, throw a punch like she's a Queen of the Fey, fight someone of a standard near, if not actually at, Ranger's level, and bend reality to her whim (slightly) by realizing there is no spoon and turning into mist for short times. Meanwhile Malicia here was more than happy to out who she was sitting inside like a meat suit before she was certain Cat wasn't really toying with her and pretending to be trapped, suggesting she was confident in the Wards as an option without testing empirically.

This could boil down to Malicia being that green when it comes to actual adventuring (she taunted the tiger, left it alive like a bond villain and is about to pay the price after all), Cat still hamstringing herself (because she can never not be her own worst enemy) and these NPC mages somehow really being good enough to stand up to something far stronger than a duke (she may not be able to match princess while holding back but she's leagues about what she was, all the same) but until the story says it these questions stand. And here is a good opportunity to get that answer. Hierophant should have probably figured it out already but he's oblivious to how ignorant Cat is sometimes where as Larat totally thinks of her as a moron, even if she is better than humans. If he's disgusted by how easily she's trapped by wards we know that it's Cat's fault for holding back and Malicia is a grade A idiot for thinking she could ward trap her without evidence. If he's not, or doesn't say anything at all, then we still have to wonder how Cat, of all the Fey Monarchs, is so easy to put into a bottle like any old pixie.

### [TeK](#)

Princess of High Noon was kept under wards by unnamed legionaire mages (while it was CRAFTED by Hierophant, the power was not drawn from him) for almost a month. Liesse wards are on the walls, and the ones Diabolist build were impregnable to Summer, until a way was found. So no, I don't believe that Cat, after two fights with bullshit op Named would have trouble breaking through a ward that was crafted for the specific purpose of keeping her in, hold by some of the most powerful Praesi practitioners. And it's not even that. The problem is not breaking through per se, it's breaking through IN TIME to kill Malicia

before she runs off. To summarise, no, I don't see a problem.

### Javvies

Well, that could have gone better. Could've gone worse, too.

Larat and the Hunt. Did not see that coming.

I wonder where Archer is. And Hakram

Hmmm. It being a fleshpuppet rather than Malicia herself is a problem. Malicia's going to have time to act against Callow/Cat/Black/et al.

I agree with Cat, Malicia's apparent plan is stupid plan. Even "Evil never wins" truly applies to the Dead King, it's unlikely to be in the way Malicia seems to think it will. Remember – Triumphant managed to take all of Calernia and hold onto it for five years. The Dead King has way more to work with than She did, and doesn't have to fight through Callow and the Vales to get at Procer.

Also, I suspect that the Dead King isn't a fan of being used, manipulated, or otherwise played, especially by lesser beings like mortals, even Named ones.

The Dead King is not going to expend anything valuable to help Malicia, certainly not enough to endanger him, even in a worst case scenario. He might make more effort to help Cat, especially since Cat is asking for far less. And, y'know, is a fellow Immortal with the potentiality, if not actuality, of Apothesis.

### *Byzantine*

Frankly I think he sees Cat as something interesting. Her existence is worth putting a little effort in, if only to see what she does. Perhaps he can use it to aid in his real goal. Malicia is only interesting because of the challenge she poses for Cat.

### *Yotz*

Well, since "Evil never wins", this pretty much guarantees Malicia a beneficial outcome. Even if that paradigm will not ensue her safety against the DK – with her being evil and such, she won't need to oppose him directly. She had read the map and made a bet on the nature of Callow and Black Queen. Resulting massacre of callowan forces, civilians, and overall loss of life has no significance to her. She makes a leap of faith, though – by believing that Callow would be able to hold DK long enough for the Karma to hit him fair and square, and – maybe – with gaining a degree of protection from being seen as the much lesser of two evils cause of the "eviler than thou" shtick associated with Hidden Horror.

Also, there is a muddled matter of invitation boundaries. Triumphant managed to take all of Calernia because she had no such limits. Whenever DK physically can't break the limiting conditions, may ignore them at will but will be forced to suffer the consequences, or does not give a flying phuck about such trivialities and only plays along because it alleviates the boredom... remains to be seen.

While I'll agree with you on the matter of DK not being a fan of being a puppet – if he knows that such attempt is being undertaken, I can see him playing along for his own amusement. Also, for classic SEIC gambit, if supposed puppeteer predictably turns out to be not very smart.

While your final point holds, there is a matter of scale and a question of knowledge. More precisely – do Malicia knows about DK's predisposition towards Cat, or does she deems his usual condescending disinterest towards any outsider being in play here? As to scale – a few millions of bone puppets and several lesser Ravenants may be of no value to the DK, but still present a threat of apocalyptic proportions to the rest of Calernia.

*Yotz*

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*lennymaster*

You are forgetting one of the major linchpins of this story. Preas is rich in valuable gems and metals, but poor in arable land, to the point where every Emperor/ress has miserably failed at managing their massive overpopulation problems with anything other than a big-ass war every few decades.

It is the story of Preas to take and Callow to be taken, at least it was until Black made the impossible happen by conquering it.

For Callow to be overrun by undead monstrosities means to lose the granary of her own Empire. You could say DK would still make and provide her with food, but why should he? All he has to do is wait for Preas to start up the old game again and bleed her of people / gain soldiers every other generation.

*Yotz*

On the contrary, I do not forget that peculiarity. I simply presumed, that due to Malicia's actions significant loss of Praesi population is in order. So, in fact, significant, that its remaining population of Praes would be able to sustain themselves with the output of the Green Stretch and blood rituals.

After the deal, she will support Callow in their struggle against DK with troops, and will withdraw said support the moment their parity would be under the threat of shifting either way.

In this scenario, Malicia is making two main assumptions, betting on the "Evil will lose" hitting DK, and Callow's stubbornness quagmiring him away from the vital regions of Praes. If – one – Callow will be burned and drained of population, but not despoiled to wasteland condition; and – two – DK would be cast down due to "natural" course of the Story; as a result Malicia will have time to repopulate Praes, and restore and reform Legions as her loyal force. After the inevitable – from Malicia's point of view – defeat of Dead King, Praes will be standing with fresh powerful armies while being again on the verge of famine, and Callow would be completely exsanguinated, and left open for the Praesi reoccupation, or vassalage at worst. And since most of the capable callowans would be by that moment purged from the land, new regime would be mostly accepted, all while Procer would be unable to do anything about that.

All this, naturally, will crash and burn spectacularly – but Malicia simply refuses to accept version of the future where she is wrong on that matter.

*Jane*

...Well, *that* went well. I'm having trouble remembering exactly the last time Cat messed things up this badly. Trapped helpless in a cage while her morality pet/best friend/crush is killed in front of her? That's a pretty colossal blunder. She really needs to work out a real way of dealing with wards – burning a rare and precious, nearly irreplaceable artifact every time just isn't sustainable. Not unless she's willing to start up a Hero Farm.

I get her reasoning, but she knows Thief just isn't a killer. Yes, she might have killed some people in the past, but she's not deft enough at it to kill the wizards trapping Cat while they're being guarded by elite soldiers, and Cat should have realized this. Invisibility is a nice cheat, but it's not unstoppable, and Thief is not Assassin.

Malicia's plan isn't terrible, except for one key flaw; it's something of a matter of faith on the continent that Evil can never win, but it's not something that can overrule basic logic. If there's a way for Good to win, then the Gods Above will play any card to make it happen within reason – but that requires a way for Good to win. They can make plenty of tailor-made Heroes to exploit any opening the Dead King gives them, but if the difference in power is great enough, they're still doomed – just like how Praes was able to defeat Callow, and how Triumphant was able to conquer half the continent before she was brought down.

Even if common wisdom *were* correct, though, and Evil was incapable of winning, that presumes the scale of the story isn't too large – that conquering all of Praes isn't the "backstory" of the Dead King's rise to power, to establish him as the threat the rest of the continent needs to deal with. Or that the "backstory" isn't how a foolish Empress let him conquer the entire continent, and the rest of the *world* needs to stop him. For most, that wouldn't be a terrible assumption, but she doesn't realize just *how* powerful the Dead King has become while out of sight.

If the Dead King were just a normal, powerful Villain, it *would* be a great way to cripple Praes and unravel the alliance. If she were dealing with the Ratlings, or a souped-up Tyrant, it would be a fine plan. But this is the equivalent of setting off a hydrogen bomb when you thought you were using TNT, and the Gods will have no room to intervene.

Though... Whether she's aware of it or not, the Dead King is probably much less of a threat to the Empire than Praes was, so his swift, decisive victory probably still works out to her advantage. The occasional raid and border skirmish is a lot less



of an existential threat than the periodic crusades. Nice job fixing it, Malicia?...

As a final, idle thought, I wonder... The last few chapters have dropped several references to how Thief isn't a killer; from Akua's conversation about how Thief's name didn't change alongside her team, to how the team teases her for being bad at murder, to the latest failures at assassination. I wonder, is this just establishing character dynamics that ran into some coincidences with the plot, or is this building up to another plot point in the near future? Normally, I'd just put out of mind, but, well, this is a web serial, so it'll be a couple of weeks before there's enough updates that I can write it off as coincidence.

[TeK](#)

Oh, there is one thing you misunderstand, I think. DK is idle against Procer because he's Evil and they are Good. There is nothing, nothing that stops him from attacking other Evil forces. Well, currently Elves and Procer stop him, but you get my point.

*Jane*

Eh, that's not quite the read I got from his conversation with Cat. If he eats Praes, he eats one of the few countries willing to give him license to act in the world. Much better to wait around until a future Dread Empress pulls him out to take Ashur, or Gigantes.

I mean, he needs "permission" to trick the Narrative into letting him take Good countries, and Evil countries are good tools for that. Why take that possibility off the board, just so that you can get a little bit of land you don't really need a couple of centuries earlier?

[TeK](#)

He needs permission to not be the story's main antagonist, but he doesn't have to have an established Evil nation for this, merely a Villain, important enough. After all, DK needs corpses and Praes has overpopulation problems. Can't you see? It's the match made in Hells!

*Jane*

Yeah, but it's a lot easier to get an established Evil nation to invite the Dead King to go after their foes than it is to hope that a prominent Villain sticks around long enough to give him an opening – and another Evil nation is also more likely to give him sufficient cover, instead of flaking out as a decoy antagonist that leaves him the main

villain. And even setting that aside, if nothing else, Praes is guaranteed to possess a villain of appropriate stature to free him at all times; even if they don't take advantage of the opportunity, isn't it better to have another opportunity than not?

The Good nations are the ones that it's narratively difficult to deal with, after all, and so it's best for him to leave as many chances to deal with them as possible. Once the last of them has been conquered, he can deal with all of the Evil nations within a year.

[TeK](#)

Really? There is only one Praesi Tyrant that was qualified to let him off the leash. That we know of, sure, but the point stands. Many tried, I guess, but Silent Palace begs to differ.

As for Good nations, you'll be surprised how easy it is to flip Evil Empire to the Good side when alternative is a eternity of slavery.

*Jane*

Well, most Dread Emperors and Empresses after Triumphant were incompetent, insane, tried to wage war on the Dead King themselves, or were preoccupied with Callow and thought they could handle it themselves – post-Triumphant and pre-Malicia, there was rarely really a reason to bring up the Dead King, even if they were willing. After all, how many of them thought the Dead King could help an them turn themselves into a giant spider, or raise an army of invisible sentient tigers? Meanwhile, asking him to help with Callow would no doubt mean offering up a slice of Callow, and Callow was always just an insect waiting to be crushed (if you asked the average Dread Emperor, just ignore all the times Callow refused to be crushed).

But all of them *could* have called upon the Dead King if they'd asked. Just the narrative weight of having the largest Evil Empire (on paper) is enough to cement their role in the Narrative, regardless of how flawed they are as a Villain. And if a Dread Empress isn't enough to reliably call on the Dead King, how many Villains who *haven't* conquered a kingdom of their own could hope to do so? Even if most Dread Empresses haven't called upon him, at least two have – which makes one more than can be said of anyone else on the continent, if we count Cat.

As for Evil going Good out of self-preservation... That's easier said than done. Most Villains we've seen so far are "Rage against the Heavens" types who are perfectly aware that they're destroying themselves, but would rather end with style or to prove a philosophical point than save their own lives. Would Akua have ever flipped, before Cat defeated her? Black? The Tyrant of Hekat? To be Named by the Gods Below seems to demand that you devote yourself to your beliefs no matter the cost.

It's theoretically possible that an Evil nation might flip if they thought it would protect them from the Dead King, but I just can't see any of them doing it. Even Cat, the Villain we've seen who's most willing to entertain the idea, never went through with it. Besides, after a few centuries of (mostly) peaceful co-existence, I have to imagine most of them would end up pretty complacent.

And lastly, the Evil nations of the world consist of, what... Praes, Callow, and a few city-states? It's a reasonable trade – more opportunities to take out any of the dozens of Good nations, in return for having to wait a bit longer for the last two. The city-states don't really count, because they'll probably be taken after war with the League as a whole.

*Novice*

I think you have written Praes when you've meant Procer several times.

*Jane*

...Yes, yes I did. I blame having had Malicia on my mind while I was writing.

A pity I can't edit it now...

*Antoninjohn*

Cat used the Call whistle on one of her Fea to eat her own fingers so she can reform the whistle

*Jane*

This is the quote I found regarding the whistle and its limitations; while it doesn't explicitly say that the power is gone once the whistle is used, that would seem to me to be a more natural reading of the text. If she could make another after using one, I would think that it would have been mentioned here.

Regarding the Fae eating her fingers –

The reference to the effects of Principle Alienation suggests to me that she simply used the “basic” powers of Winter – I didn’t see anything suggesting that she used Call, or otherwise employed a stolen Aspect to deal with the Fae.

### Cold Cyberia

Thief was kind of a dummy in this chapter. Instead of killing the mages she should’ve stolen the ward and let Catherine deal with them. We know her aspect affects magic (Sulia’s Sun, Akua’s binding on Cat) so going for a kill was just a silly move.

---

She already stole the moonlight sword from Spellblade, so given how Steal works, it might have been her only use of that Aspect for the day.

### *Novice*

Have we seen Thief use Yoink (totally the name of her aspect) multiple times in succession?

### *Azure*

It’s setting up the fact that Thief is a double agent and is still working for ‘good’. The invisible knife at Catherine’s throat. Wonder how much Bard is in effect here to get her to do this.

I really don’t want it to play out this way as I’m a big fan of Vivienne and Catherine but all signs are pointing to that. I just hope I’m wrong.

### *superkeaton*

I love everything about this chapter

### TeK

“Evil never wins wars”. Welp. It’s funny, but technically, Malicia is Evil and is at war. Also, one thing she does not account for, is the fact that Dead King is not a country, it’s a Hidden Horror. Cordelia had gone through much trouble crafting Crusade against mortal country. Against Dead King? Everyone would fight. They can’t afford not to.

Moreover, she thinks that Dead King will lose, because he’s “Evil and Evil doesn’t win wars”, but, first and foremost, in this story, it’s not Dead King’s war. He is merely a weapon. A demon in the box. And the owner is Malicia, however implausible the word owner is, given the situation. Any war with Dead King is a war

against Malicia "The-One-Who-Let-Him-Out". To put it simply, he's a weapon she's using to wage a war. She should lose then, right?

[shieldredblog](#)

Also it's just stupid to assume you know more about Evil and war than the First Abomination.  
A Evil ruler that has ruled for centuries and beat back a half dozen Crusades.

There may be rules against Evil 'Winning' wars but it seems like even a tie is good enough when your immortal. You can eke out small victories over the long term and still come ahead.

[happyhavak](#)

Also didn't evil literally just win a war like 20 years ago? The or does it not count if it's Callow?

*Snowfire1224*

Yeah and wasn't it her own underling, Black, that conquered callow? I mean I know there might be a demon of absence around but I think she'd remember that.

*Dainpdf*

She's playing a Fabian strategy where she "loses" but at no real cost.

*Dainpdf*

Did Malicia just try to get the Callowan to forgive and forget? Masterful.

*Jane*

Honestly, it feels more to me like she's deliberately provoking Cat into... Something. What, I have no idea, but I think she has a plan that relies on an angry Cat going after her once they're both back in their respective kingdoms. One part of it is probably arranging things such that she can dispose of Cat on her own terms, but I imagine there's a secondary goal as well that we're not aware of. Schemers like that *never* just have one motive.

Of course, she's going into things on the assumption that she'll have a treaty with the Dead King in place, and she won't, so... We might never see what her "real" plan was, given how her stay in Keter isn't going to end as she intended. I have to imagine that related to her original plan for Cat *somehow*.

*Dainpdf*

Might be a catch-22, too. She may have a plan for if Cat defeats her here, too.

*Nima*

What a cunt. Hope theres backlash when the simalucrum obliterate by cat

*Novice*

"Now now, man-thing," he chided. "That's just no way to speak about your superiors."

Welp, Larat just rose drastically in my list of favorites even though he's a treacherous lieutenant and kind of a one-sided character. Skaven remains to be my favorite faction in WH Fantasy.

[frolamiz](#)

So, it just occurred to me that Callow has an unlinked hellgate. I always assumed it would be used for some sort of invasion force to invade Callow (Triumphant or something similar), but if her alliance with the Dead King survive the Uncivil Wars, it could be used as a short-cut between their kingdoms since they are a little far from each other.

*grzecho2222*

Hellgate is from one Hell to another now, so most likely can be linked to anywhere.

*SpeckofStardust*

So.

Plans involving Thief killing people will always fail.

Malicia Is still going to get the smallest amount she needed out of this trip (Dead king moving)

And Cat is now openly going to move west after booting her to hostages out of her kingdom without killing them so that they can send along a message about trouble up north.

Black is about to do something Evil and unexpected

The city states is going to attack someone.

oh... If all deals with cat and 'Good' people are undone then does that mean angels are going to pop up or will that agreement be kept?

And the elves are going to continue to hide like a bunch of little bitches.

And this is the current geopolitical situation in a nutshell.

[TeK](#)

Who's Putin in that metaphor? Asking for a friend, he's my KGB curator.

*Yotz*

'Tis a silly question.  
Putin is The Truth, of course.  
Also, The Law.

*revin*

Hold on a second. Everyone is talking about Thief screwing up, but did she know about Cat agreeing to keep the super weapon? If Cat never told her about that, it seems like that kind of thing that could shake Thief's faith in Cat a great deal. The kind of thing that might make thief hesitate to help Cat when she calls for her "secret weapon" perhaps?

[Tohron](#)

So, Galadan wouldn't happen to be an adventurer, by any chance?

*LeTouriste*

"To declare an assertion of the People untrue is unlawful, even if it was retroactively asserted by vote to be untrue, at which point referring to it as either true or untrue is equally unlawful."

makes so much sense...poor belerophon

*Jane*

Hey, they can always vote to change it if they don't like it.

I mean, they'll be charged with treason, executed, and their vote revoked if they do. But it's still their right to vote.

[TeK](#)

Noone can possibly punish you for voting. Unless, of course, you are voting for a wrong thing.

*Jonnnney*

This is getting pretty stupid. I wonder what the next thing the protagonist is gonna just forget about until the last minute in order to further the plot. She could have called on the wild hunt during the whole fucking conversation, but it just didn't fucking occur to her until after the antagonist couldn't be easily attacked? That's bad writing. Entertaining, but bad.

*Faiir*

Well I thought Cat didn't call on the Hunt before to limit the mess she makes – we're still not sure how much will the Dead King tolerate, and this would change it into an open battle.

*Jane*

This really wasn't a critical point for Cat, though, at least as far as she's concerned. If she doesn't stop Malicia now... Well, there's still a chance another member of the Woe can stop her, or that she can break out after a couple more minutes. And if not... Well, then, Malicia wins the bidding war, Procer loses a few territories, and Malicia can proceed to the next stage of her plan – something which is probably bad for Cat, but which probably still has more opportunities for Cat to stop her.

Is it *really* worth losing a powerful tool over?

Losing Thief, on the other hand... That's another matter. No way is Cat going to let someone she cares about die in front of her, not if she has any reasonable chance of preventing it.

*Alivaril*

Personally, my only real complaint is how Cat didn't take the "try to kill me" and roll with it, even if only briefly – Cat IS glad it was a puppet and that's honestly an important detail.

As for the storytelling complaint... Are you familiar with the mindset of "I might need it later" for video game consumables? Once you've dismissed something as a desirable solution enough times, it effectively ceases to BE an option. You might not even remember to use it during the final boss fight out of sheer force of habit.

I will be quite unhappy if Thief dies, but that's mostly just because I like her and strongly dislike some of the heavy-handed death flags a handful of chapters ago. Well, that and Cat lapsing back into depression right when she's starting to regain some confidence in her own decisions.

*Someguy*

Well, Cat's head is only there for decorative purposes so...

[TeK](#)

Trying to save a disposable, one use only, irreproducible, powerful tool that would be just as effective "after" all other avenues are explored is unrealistic for you? God, please tell me I'm actually right at this and not turning into a fanboy.



### *Compass with Hat*

So. I'm thinking everyone in Praes, Malicia and even Black missed something.

They were so focused on the Story that they missed something.

Who is the orphaned girl from an oppressed town being brought into the service of a Knight? Who was the girl who was given lead of an Army by a leader to defeat her enemies? Who has been steadily defeating enemies while doing the "Right Thing" and making her city better?

They are so focused on their own Stories they never thought to ask, "who is the overall protagonist?"

### *Dainsleif*

Well Cat your argument is not all that good. She is right, the sole main threat for her has you in between and as a weaker forcer that could give her ground and moral with other nations. By not raising a single hand she has pretty much ensured that the Wastelands are going to prosper under her and furthermore increasing her foothold as the greatest dread empress so far. And because you are literally at the end of your option you have no way of winning against her, i guess this is it huh...

\*Larat appears out of thin air with deus ex-machina powers\*

...OF COURSE ON THE OTHER HAND!

### *aran*

Well, that's his adventuring days over then. Time to join the city guard.

### *Max Scherer*

So my bet would be that Malicia has two puppets and the other one is with the other half of her people and Archer is killing them, but then she probabaly has a third one who is alone... I really dont want to be right and want that Cat gets her way at least for once...

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## **Chapter 47: Culmination**

*"Do not call a man loyal who still draws breath."*

-Dread Emperor Terribilis II

There'd be no replacing the whistle, and I'd long ago resolved to keep it for a particularly black day, but there'd be no replacing Thief either. I stood by my decision. What had once been Akua's aspect had yanked the entirety of the Wild Hunt through Keter's wards and whatever other nasty surprises Neshamah had awaiting people trying to reach his city through otherworldly means, unharmed. I'd address the Wild Hunt in a moment, though. I had a set of scales to even first. The sorceress who'd been breaking Thief apart had hastily ended her spell when the fae came out of nothingness, then panicked when I broke the ward. The remaining three casters that'd been keeping me imprisoned staggered at the backlash, and in that moment I acted. One step, the sorceress raised a hand towards me. Two steps, her lips began to form a syllable in the mage tongue. Three steps, my fingers clasper her wrist and with a sharp squeeze I shattered every bone. Face paling, she mastered the pain and got the first word of her incantation out. Four steps, I pivoted and my elbow ploughed into her throat. The windpipe was crushed instantly, and as she choked and fell I straightened and gently set my hands against her temples.

One simple twist, and the neck broke with a crack.

"Thief, get out of here," I called out calmly. "Hear me now, Rider of the Hunt: no prisoners."

That was the kind of feast the Wild Hunt lived for, and they wasted no time digging in. Larat had hacked through the heads of two of my former jailors within a heartbeat of my finishing the order, grinning nastily, and the rest of them charged with wild hoots as they fell upon Malicia and her men. Vivienne tried to get up but her limbs were shaking too badly. I cursed under my breath – I might be able to walk off mage lightning, these days, but my companions were another story – and strode over to help her up.

"Will you be able to escape on your own?" I softly asked.

"Just give me a moment," she rasped. "I still feel like my skin is on fire."

She was burned badly, skin charred in strange patterns all over her body where the lightning had struck, and for a Named she'd always been on the fragile side of the scale. Not for the first time, I mourned that none of my powers were geared towards healing in the slightest. But Thief was wounded, not crippled, and I trusted she had the will to press on after the worst of it passed. Letting out a laboured breath, she pushed me away.

"Kill the Empress," she said. "I'll live."

She'd do more than that, if I had anything to say about it. The moment Masego had healed her back up to fighting fit, I was going

to teach her to hold her own in a fight if it was the last thing I did. For too long I'd waved the matter away, dismissed as largely unimportant since she wouldn't be fighting on the frontlines anyway. That'd been naïve, and in retrospective a very dangerous kind of arrogance. We wouldn't always get to dictate the nature of our fights with our ever-rising count of enemies. Today had been a harsh reminder that Vivienne's lack of skills with arms wasn't just fuel for verbal roughhousing, it was a dangerous liability.

"Keep out of sight," I ordered, keeping the thoughts away from my face.

The entire aside couldn't have taken more than a few moments, yet in that span the skirmish had already turned into a siege in miniature. The last of my surviving jailors was dead, his corpse impaled atop the lance of a dark-skinned fae who carried it along like some sort of gruesome trophy. Yet the Empress' people had responded to the appearance of the fae with the steady hands of veteran killers. Colourful curtains of light had been spawned, overlapping and forming a sort of six-cornered shield over the entire delegation, and still a pair of Malicia's warlocks were casting. The Hunt had not laid idle, of course. It tested the defences, but found blades and spears could not breach it, nor could the fae sorceries at their disposal. I recognized the wards, or part of them at least. Akua had used similar ones, called them 'revolving wards'. A common innovation of her and her father's, crafted to deal with the powerful but terribly direct sorceries of the Summer Court. I was less than surprised Malicia's people had gotten their hands on the ward schematics, or adapted them to her purposes. And yet I was not worried, because one fact stood above all: the Praesi were defending, but they were no longer moving. No matter how tall the walls, fortresses always fell. Larat joined me as I strode towards the front, blade dripping with blood.

"A most pleasant excursion, my queen," he mused. "Shall we give the dead a taste of our mettle as well, after these vagrants have been cleared out?"

"We're not picking a fight with the Dead King," I flatly said. "He makes sport of the kind of people that bled you when we assaulted the Proceran camp. Behave, Hunstman."

"I always do," Larat assured me with a too-wide smile. "My fellow riders are chipping away at this lovely turtle shell, one sliver at a time. Patience will deliver us the promised deaths."

"Let's see if I can quicken that," I replied.

The Empress had holed up behind a fortress, hadn't she? I could batter away at it, sure enough, but Black had always told me that the most dangerous of all siege weapons was a mule carrying gold

and a promise. I cast a look at the Empress' people, looking for a weak link. None to be found, sadly. They were all calm confidence incarnate. Didn't matter, though. The masks were pretty enough, but I could smell fear's dark stirrings beneath them. The Wild Hunt parted for me, and standing before the Praesi I cleared my throat.

"The first three to surrender get to keep their lives," I announced. "Excluding Malicia. I'll swear binding oath to it, with an agreed-upon phrasing."

None replied, but I saw eyes narrow. Yeah, that was sounding quite tempting at the moment wasn't it? Praesi loyalty was something of a contradictory term.

"An empty offer," the Empress said. "She cannot breach the wards. Regardless, there would be immediate consequences to such a decision."

The Sentinels stirred to drive the point home. She'd not accused me of lying, because she wasn't a fool: these were mostly practitioners, so they knew I had enough fae in me I couldn't break an oath even if I wanted to. As long as the phrasing held, which was on them, they'd be spared. So instead she was playing on fear and pride. For once, the battlegrounds were familiar to the both of us.

"You thought that about the last set of wards," I said. "Look behind me. There's a few corpses telling you otherwise. Sure, she could turn the Sentinels on you, but the moment the bubble is down she'll have bigger problems than you. Is she really going to attempt an execution when she's up to her neck in the likes of this guy?"

I pointed a thumb at Larat. The fae who'd once been the Prince of Nightfall idly touched the blood on his sword and brought it to his lips, licking it off with relish. As far as I knew he didn't, uh, actually drink blood so that was purely to fuck with their heads. Good show, my treacherous lieutenant.

"This is not my true body," Malicia reminded them.

She did not need elaborate on the possible consequences of betraying a still-living Empress. There was an entire hall of forever-screaming heads in the Tower that served as a constant reminder. And still, the pair of warlocks who'd been casting had stopped. Momentum was on my side.

"Sure, she rules for now," I said. "How long is that going to last? She's yet to win a battle and most her army's deserted to other banners. Spend a year or two in Mercantis, wait it out, and you can come back to the Tower to make nice with her successor able to boast you turned on her. Hells, if you've got issues with

Mercantis I'll find you something to do in Callow. I've always a need for mages, and the pay will be generous. I'm sure most of you have respect for Malicia. It's not unearned."

I paused and smiled thinly.

"Are you really willing to die defending that hill, though? Because if I have to breach this ward myself, I'll not be in the mood for easy deaths."

"I would keep a few as playthings, my queen," Larat added cheerfully. "It has been ages, since we've had proper entertainment."

I shrugged, watching the faces of the Praesi.

"My mercy has a time limit, ladies and gentlemen," I said. "Now's not the moment for hesitation."

I met Malicia's eyes calmly. There was no appreciation for what I'd done there to be found, not when it was turned against her. The Empress paid lip service to the treasured Wasteland principle of 'iron sharpens iron', but when it came down to it she never settled for anything less than a victory. No matter how long that victory took to snatch. If it was Callowans I was dealing with, one of them would have cursed and folded. But I was dealing with Praesi, a people that had turned betrayal into art back when most of Calernia still used iron. One of the curtains vanished, and a Soninke in robes ran for it. That first betrayal was the collapse of the dam, no one wanting to be the soul that didn't qualify as one of the first three, and within a heartbeat all the curtains of light save one were gone. A loyalist, how quaint.

"Kill," I ordered the Hunt.

I had no intention of offering any of them safe harbour in Callow, and they really should have extracted the oath before turning on Malicia. They'd feared the Sentinels both too much and not enough. The Empress stood tall and proud in a man's body even as it all went to the Hells around her. I advanced, slowly but surely. The Tower's personal guards held the fae back, long enough that one of the traitors turned her cloak again and began reinforcing the ward, but a silver arrow took her through the throat and that was the end of that. The Sentinels began to break. Their armour held against even fae armaments, and their blades scythed down a handful of fairies, but lances and swords and arrows found weaknesses and exploited them ruthlessly. The fleeing Praesi were ridden down mercilessly, until all that remained standing was the Empress and a single sweating mage. I suspected the Hunt could have torn through that ward easy as turning a hand, but it had been left to me by the twisted fae understanding of respect.

"I wonder," I said, looking Malicia's simulacrum in the eyes, "if I can reach you in Ater through this puppet of flesh. Shall we find out?"

She met my gaze unflinching.

"No," she replied, and the simulacrum dropped.

Ah. Well, that also worked. The last living Praesi turned fearful eyes on me.

"I surrender," she said.

Then the arrow took her in the throat. A perfect arc, one I hadn't seen coming until the last moment and that had sailed right through the last ward unhindered. She was dead before she hit the floor, the light curtain vanished.

"And once again, Archer saves the day," Indrani called out from above.

She was standing on the lower reaches of the pyramid, posing triumphantly bow in hand. Before addressing that – and Gods, was I going to address that – I walked over to Malicia's living but insensate simulacrum. My boot came down, pulping the skull, and then again over the throat since it usually paid to be thorough. I'd have to clean my boots later, I mused, or the stench would be horrible.

"Indrani, get your ass down here," I screamed.

I turned to look around for Thief, but she was nowhere in sight.

"Vivienne," I said. "Still here?"

The other Callowan winked back into sight, still looking half-dead from her hiding place behind a column.

"Good," I said. "Collect all the corpses. I don't want to risk any surprises. And strip away the Sentinel armour, please. It can take fae blades, it must be worth a fortune."

I would have felt worse about looting the dead if Praes hadn't looted Callow for two decades without a care in the world. I'd call it reparations and leave it at that. Thief weakly nodded, and I left her to the grisly work as Archer pranced her way down her perch. She saluted when she approached, using the wrong hand for a legionary's salute and the wrong angle for a Callowan formal greeting.

"Ready to report, Your Queenliness," she announced.

"Where the Hells have you been?" I asked flatly.

"Doing what you told me to," she mused. "Which was, and I quote 'take a walk and do whatever comes naturally'."

I closed my eyes, pained on a metaphysical level. So she'd been the hidden knife I remembered thinking about in one of those unlocked memories. We must have gambled that without an actual plan about her involvement, she couldn't be predicted by the Skein. Which made sense, but had pretty badly failed. *Starting the fire was two birds with one stones*, I thought. The smoke trail had been bound to get her attention and get her to come running.

"If you spent the entire time drinking and just now shot that woman, I'm docking your pay," I told her as I opened my eyes.

"Hey," she protested. "I did lots of stuff that wasn't drinking. She's my fourth kill of the day. Well, third and a half really."

"Tell me you didn't assault the Dead King's patrol," I asked.

"Nah, they never got close to me," she said. "But while you lot were busy throwing down with the giant rat, the Praesi tried to pull a fast one. At least I think so. Two Sentinels carried out some sleeping woman earlier, so I took care of it."

My brows rose.

"Was it a simulacrum?" I asked. "The woman, I mean."

"Dunno what that is," Archer cheerfully lied. "But if it was, it's double dead. Cut off the head after just to be sure, as is our crew's policy."

Damnably, I could not refute that. The brains and bone shards all over my boot made it impossible.

"I think I'm supposed to congratulate you on a job well done," I said after a moment.

"Oh, it was a labour of love," she dismissed. "But do praise me. Loudly and elaborately."

I did not reply, and allowed the silence to stretch.

"You wench," Archer accused me.

"Namecalling is beneath us," I gravely said.

She flipped me the finger and I smiled.

"You got any idea what we're supposed to do now?" she finally asked.

"I think that –" I paused when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. "Hey, you. Give Thief that corpse."

The dark-skinned fae I'd seen carrying around a dead Praesi on a lance earlier looked quite displeased at the order.

"He's not dead yet," the Rider replied.

"Then finish him off and hand him over," I patiently said.

"It was my kill," the fae protested.

"If I have to come over there to settle this, I'm going to make you *sit* on that fucking lance," I grimly replied.

With ill-grace, the fae ripped out the Praesi's throat and dropped him on Vivienne's feet. I'd have to remember to ask Larat the Rider's name later. That kind of discipline case was best nipped in the bud. I turned back to Archer, who looked rather amused.

"Right, so I think we're supposed to gather at our escape route," I said. "That's where Hierophant and Diabolist will be, anyway. Did you run into Adjutant?"

"On my way here," Archer replied. "That was also where he was headed, though I don't know what that location is."

"Neither do I," I admitted. "But Thief should. We'll move out after she's taken all the corpses."

"I love it when you talk dirty to me," Indrani said, waggling eyebrows.

Ugh, the wench.

—

Vivienne was well enough to walk at a decent pace without my support by the time we reached our 'escape route', which turned out to be the front of the Silent Palace. The fires had long been put out, but the place was still crawling with undead. Masego was having a pleasant cup of tea at an iron table, a full service having been put out for Akua and Hakram as well. Athal, to my surprise, was seated at the edge of the table as well though unlike the others he was silent. I heard snippets of conversation from the other side of the plaza, snorting when I realized they were having a very civilized debate about the influence of sorcery on the development of the early Dread Empire. Hakram was actually winning, by the sounds of it, which was just delightful in so many ways. Our advance, three Named surrounded by the honour guard of the entire Wild Hunt, hardly went unnoticed. Neshamah's armies gave us no trouble, which I took to be a good sign. We might have gotten away with murder. Well, murders



technically. But it was really the one that mattered. Although, since Archer had killed a puppet as well... I'd never really thought, growing up in Laure, that I would one day have a mental debate about whether you could kill the same person twice. Truly, villainy had expanded my horizons.

"Catherine," Masego greeted me, then glanced at my boots. "You seem to have had an eventful day."

He seemed much better than the last time I'd seen him. The sweat and pallor was gone, though the impression of frailty was not.

"We ran into the Empress," I lightly said. "She'd fallen down some stairs."

Athal's head lowered, hiding his expression.

"What an unfortunate accident," Akua mildly said.

"Indeed," Hakram agreed. "We can only hope the Dead King will be not be too affected by that tragedy to resume negotiations."

I grunted in agreement, dropping into an iron chair on the other side of the table. Vivienne and Indrani followed suit.

"Found Thief for you," I told Athal. "Sorry we didn't stick around for the guards, but I was sure I'd seen her skulking about."

The dark-haired man bowed to me, then offered me a smile.

"It was no trouble, Great Majesty" he said. "I had to interrupt the search myself, as I was given other instructions."

"Oh?" I said. "Anything interesting?"

"Ensuring no bedroom was touched by the flames," he replied. "Though I was told that should you wish for different accommodations this can be arranged."

"We'll be fine," I said.

"He would not participate in our debate," Masego said, almost complaining.

"It's always awkward to enter a conversation after it's already begun," Hakram said, immediately pushing aside the unspoken reprimand.

Unlike Hierophant, he understood the weight of our words towards the servant the Dead King had 'gifted' me. The Wild Hunt settled around us as an honour guard of sorts, valiantly ignoring the pretty salacious jokes Indrani was making about fae flexibility and its many possible applications. I'd been about to reach for a

cup of tea myself, when Athal suddenly left his chair to kneel and press his forehead against the floor. I looked to the direction he was facing and my eyes widened. A single undead was approaching, which was unusual in and of itself. But what worried me a lot more was the massive... pressure I could feel coming off what looked like a perfectly normal Keteran foot soldier.

It looked like the Dead King had come to visit.

---

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Vote! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*stevenneiman*

Hey, we're on top again! I think every webnovel worth its salt has that story about the time it topped the latest Wildbow series for a moment, but we've actually managed to hold the spot a couple of times for a decent span.

*Gibborim*

It helps that Worm2 is a distillation of all Wildbow's worst writing traits.

*Gunslinger*

I'm curious what you don't like about it?

Personally I think Ward isn't doing as well in topwebfiction.com since discussions moved away from the article comments where the voting link used to be rigorously posted to the reddit threads.

Also I'm not sure how many new readers the ranking site brings anymore. Wandering Inn for example is usually never high up but pirateba has a pretty decent patreon following.

*Dainpdf*

Pirateaba gets people from RRL though, and there TWI is pretty high up.

In any case, people don't seem to like the more... psychological bent of Ward, or the way the plot goes. I don't really know – I myself like it.

*Ben*

I'm finding it a rough slog myself. The chapter endings feel disjointed, there doesn't seem to be a lot of plot momentum, and what there is just isn't catching my interest the way that Worm did. These are obviously subjective reactions and more power to you if you feel differently. But I'm finding myself these days skimming the chapters to get information about characters I'm interested in rather than reading them with real excitement.

*bowekin*

I kind of feel the same way, but I've noticed that it's been improving lately. The last two interludes were really good. I think the best thing for wildbl原因 to do would be to bring Victoria's story to a close in the next few arcs and maybe switch perspectives.

*stevenneiman*

I think that being #1 specifically might not be a huge deal, but consistently being in the top 10 or so means that people who scroll along when they're voting for their current favorites will see it and wonder if it's any good. I'd estimate that there's probably somewhere between 1000 and 2000 active voters on TWF and there might be a decent number of lurkers who check the rankings without voting. Combined with a flashy banner, an intriguing title and a promising description, there's a very real possibility that eventually someone who's seen it hanging in upper portion of the rankings long enough will check it out, and if it's a good match you'll have another follower and possibly another voter.

Of course, this is all just speculation and a bit of extrapolating from my own experience. I might be completely off-base in any number of interesting ways.

*stevenneiman*

I'm not really sure what to think about Ward. I quite liked it for the more fleshed-out characters and the interesting where-are-they-now follow-ups, but I also had a lot of trouble motivating myself to continue reading.

It definitely has much more of a character focus and a slow-boil plot compared to Worm. Worm was mostly about setpiece fights and relentlessly rising, very direct stakes, and Ward is much more about subtle things that might have personally significant long-term consequences for a few people who might prove important later. There's also much more of a police style "do this right or our captures will walk" focus where in Worm the combination of justifying stakes and the protagonist being a villain meant that they could get away with a lot more to get what they wanted. It's probably more

realistic to have the more consequence-focused mindset of Ward but it's also harder to keep the pacing consistent and the plot exciting.

The only complaint I can really put my finger on is throwing too many plotlines at the reader at once. It was one of the problems I had with Cloud Atlas as well, how it had so much going on and you didn't have enough time to make sense of one timeline before it skipped to another. Worm pretty much just started with Skitter's one, fairly simple backstory, and the Undersiders, who had personalities but not much of a significant backstory. Ward has a larger group of main characters, and each of them brings backstories, and problems to the table which are all given roughly equal billing with the POV character's problems and an overarching plot on top of that.

I think the real challenge Ward is having isn't being bad, it's that it's not what the Worm fans looking for a second helping expected. People who liked Worm are unhappy that it's not Worm, and people who didn't like Worm never realize that there's a difference.

### *Gunslinger*

I'm curious to know if you've read Pact and Twig? The change in styles between Worm to Warm makes sense as you see the way Wildbow's changed styles for each one.

### *stevenneiman*

I read a little bit of Twig but I couldn't really get stuck into it the way did with Worm. I think it was because I was too confused about the setting. Worm was pretty standard world of superheroes stuff with some dark deconstruction thrown in that didn't make the formula harder to understand, whereas Twig (as far as I can remember anyways, I read a few pages a long time ago) was a sort of like biopunk London and I couldn't really figure out how anything works.

And I'm not saying that Wildbow's shift in writing style didn't make sense. Even if their other works hadn't been moving in that direction, I imagine anyone would get burned out on writing something in the style of Worm after writing something as long as Worm.

### *thecorinthianman*

I can understand that, Twig was definitely a culture shock at first. That said, after having read Worm, Pact, Twig, and Ward, I can say with no uncertainty that Twig is my favorite story I have ever read.

I'm not entirely sure why, but something in it resounded beautifully.

*Yotz*

Duly voted.

*SpeckofStardust*

This is where the fun begins.

*JJR*

Cat should trying spinning (a yarn) that's good trick.

*Antoninjohn*

The thing about having a a culture of traitors is that you get traitors

*Lark*

' "I think that —" I paused when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. "Hey, you. Give Thief that corpse."

The dark-skinned fae I'd seen carrying around a dead Praesi on a lance earlier looked quite displeased at the order.

"He's not dead yet," the Rider replied.

"Then finish him off and hand him over," I patiently said.

"It was my kill," the fae protested.

"If I have to come over there to settle this, I'm going to make you sit on that fucking lance," I grimly replied.

With ill-grace, the fae ripped out the Praesi's throat and dropped him on Vivienne's feet. I'd have to remember to ask Larat the Rider's name later. That kind of discipline case was best nipped in the bud.'

Oh dear lord, in the absence of other royalty the remnants of Winter are adapting to fit Catherine.

*Big Brother*

Haha, I didn't even think of this.  
Oh Gods Below, the Woeful Hunt.

*Rook*

Legends say the riders of the new hunt are as deadly as they are shit at negotiations

*stevenneiman*

If they're anything like Cat, they'll be great at negotiations. They've got the swords, now all they need is some cheap wine and they'll be set.

*Dainpdf*

Cat can't drink during negotiations anymore. Hakram got to her.

*RanVor*

But she can still *offer* drinks...

[Mental Mouse](#)

> "If I have to come over there to settle this, I'm going to make you sit on that fucking lance," I grimly replied.

"Mom voice". 😊

*Someguy*

Ah, Indrani's Plan :-

1. Step one
2. Step two
3. ????
4. PROFIT!!!

*SpeckofStardust*

Ya her plan was to be to drunk to plan and then do stuff. It clearly worked.

*Novice*

Clearly. She just appeared and lo and behold, the battle was quickly finished.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Man how many cups of wine would Black need after reading the after actiob report? Our queen is the epitome of cunning and planning here.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Enjoyable chapter, quite excited for the next (as I am always)

*edrey*

for a second i thought she would pull that eyes trick of larat and the dead king, well next time

*Metalshop*

Fantastic. Im loving the fact that Catherine's strategy at the geopolitical level is just her earlier method of breaking the table scaled up. She's not the biggest dog on the field, but damn if she can't make that irrelevant.

[onedollargum](#)

"I'd never really thought, growing up in Laure, that I would one day have a mental debate about whether you could kill the same person twice. Truly, villainy had expanded my horizons."

Everything in the chapter was great, but this was my favourite.

Cat just cashed in a trump card with that whistle. Does that mean she now has inventory space for an even more powerful artifact?  
;D

Yotz

She may already have one – if her experiments with Winter gave other results, that is. One artifact per one Aspect. Maybe, per one foe cast down...

Also, a vile act a day makes you smarter in every way!

---

You'd think the answer would be obvious to the person who was killed and resurrected before, but no. Then again, it's not like many people get second chances with her.

*Snowfire1224*

Yeah that makes sense that's what they told Archer to do. I mean Archer does whatever she wants anyway– it's what she does best.

Also, Larat and Cat playing good cop bad cop is just awesome. (I was going to make a joke about cheap wine vs getting stabbed, but I couldn't figure out how to work it in there.)

JJR

"Do not call a man loyal who still draws breath."

Not enough paranoia. The undead can also be traitorous.

*Snowfire1224*

I believe that's why they burn the bodies.

Novice

I believe that's why the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One happened.

*Dainpdf*

People keep worrying about Triumphant coming back... I worry about Traitorous. Maybe all this time he's just been playing an overlong con.

---

"Three can keep a secret, if two are dead. Unless you're a necromancer, anyway, then the world is your blasphemous undead oyster."

—Dread Emperor Sorcerous

For a man who lost an army of tigers to defection, Sorcerous has a surprisingly clearer view at the problem.

*grzecho2222*

Given that he seems to be based on Twardowski (diabolist on the moon) being both insightfull and moronic is very much in style for him

*John Laing*

He's not saying anything one way or another about whether you can trust the dead, only that you definitely can't trust the living.

*Rook*

Cat's always had the brawn, now she has brains too

All over her boot

[Javvies](#)

That went about as well as could be expected.

I wonder who the sleeper that the Sentinels were trying to sneak out was. That seems an important detail. Perhaps that was Malicia for real, though that seems risky. But who else could it have been?

*WuseMajor*

Probably a second flesh puppet. I mean, why send just one when you can ship a backup (or two) just as easily? Who knows, the Dead King might get mad at you and destroy one of them in a fit of pique.

*Dainpdf*

If that had been the real Malicia, the puppet wouldn't have lasted as long as it did.



*grzecho2222*

Unless to puppet them you have to literally move your mind to them temporally

*Insanenoodlyguy*

It makes sense and is a valid "master planner/magnificent bastard" story. Cat kills the Empress. Empress shows up while she's negotiating with Dead King, taking the pivot and complete control of the situation. If there was a good plan to kill the Empress, that's how it would have went down. Because they were winging it as much as they did, the story let Archer stumble upon her backup plan instead.

*Agent J*

Damn it, EE, you saucy wench! This is the kind of cliffhanger that makes me want to slam the fastforward button on my whole life. Just make it Friday already!

*Silverking*

The game's not over yet. Maybe Catherine broke one of the few rules the Dead King has. Maybe the fight with Malicia was all a feint while a representative of hers finalized the agreement for a large scale invasion. Maybe Neshamah is happy to be dealing with the Queen in Callow, and has announced their alliance to all the nations in the continent.

...Maybe Archer makes a bawdy joke at just the wrong time.

[tyizor](#)

something something dead king be my bone daddy

*mavant*

"Hey Skeletor, how many bones do you have in your body? Can I borrow one?"

*mavant*

"Dear diary: My teen angst bullshit has a body count."

*Shequi*

"We ran into the Empress," I lightly said. "She'd fallen down some stairs."

Lies and Violence!

[ironvale](#)

Oh that's wwhat a drunken Black , a mule,, and a boat story was about.

*Jane*

Mmm... I don't know that not teaching Thief to fight was arrogance, so much as it was playing to the strengths of an important asset. Most of her work involves *not* fighting, after all, and her talents are strongly geared to working on her own; teaching her to fight takes a lot of time away from her work, for whom there is no one who can substitute for her, to address circumstances that will rarely arise. If fighting were something that came naturally to her, that would be one thing, or if her work involved a higher chance of ending in a fight, but given her role and character, it's a large investment to address rare problems.

But, that's if she's being treated as an asset, and not a friend. As Thief, Spymistress of Callow, it's not worth the time taken. As Vivienne of the Woe, every time Cat asks her to join them, there's a chance things will go... Well, like this. Thief, Spymistress of Callow, would be a huge headache to replace, but it's possible; Vivienne, not at all. To paraphrase Warlock, members of the Woe aren't gears to be replaced, but hearts that die when you remove them. As such, a hefty investment spent keeping her alive is worth every second, no matter how unlikely fighting is supposed to be... Assuming that she *can* be taught. Some people just don't have the character for it.

I mean, looked at a different way, the problem here wasn't that Thief didn't know how to fight, but rather that she should have stayed out of sight and waited for a less direct way to intervene. Maybe not have come to Keter at all, but continued to run things back in Callow. But that would also mean, in a narrative sense, not truly being part of the Woe, but instead being a very important supporter of the Woe. Maybe that would be more suited to her talents, but... Well, she shot that arrow without needing to, and without truly being asked. She put herself in danger this time for Cat's sake, and will no doubt do so again in the future.

And, well, she *is* immortal now. Not by the Dead King's definition, but she doesn't age, and being near a "real" immortal will probably keep her from dying in conflict for a while. Even if she spends years training with Cat, it's time they can afford to spend. Maybe Callow couldn't, but they can always free it again.

*Novice*

"Well, she shot that arrow without needing to, and without truly being asked."

She was asked to do that by Cat. That was the whole point of Cat's "invisible crossbow".

*Jane*

Cat asked *Archer*, who actually knows how to use a bow, could conceivably kill an unaware *Malicia*, and who could safely get away if it all went pear-shaped. Thief, as we saw, would be near-useless in the role, and quite likely to end up dead.

If *Vivienne* had stayed hidden, she'd have a perfectly reasonable explanation to give Cat as to why she waited to try to free her.

*Novice*

No, that was Cat not knowing the full extent of their plan(s). *Indrani*'s plan consists of her taking a walk and literally do whatever she wants. No codes, no signals, nothing except a meeting place after they were done. Notice how *Skein* never mentions *Archer* back when they were fighting.

Present-Cat thought the 'invisible crossbow' was *Archer* when it was really *Thief*. I suspect they wouldn't call it a crossbow if it was really *Archer* since *Archer* does not use a crossbow.

*Alivaril*

You know, I was initially really worried about a third puppet, but I think *Hakram* took care of that one just fine. Now I just hope the seeming harshness toward *Thief* doesn't brew any irritating misunderstandings.

Anyway, that was a fun chapter. *Brain bit* seemed a little unnecessary gorey, just like the time she crushed *Lone Swordsman*'s skull, but that's about it. Mildly concerned the "lying about surrender" bit will come back to bite her, but that doesn't seem to be as harsh a flag as I'd initially thought it would be. After all, *Black* is still alive and walking around after murdering *Akua*'s father.

...I'm, uh, not actually sure Cat planned for the possibility of an outright praesi invasion from her rear. Sure, it'd be the height of stupidity right now, but the empress seems to be going full Dumb Villain these days and it'll take weeks to months for Cat to return.

My reaction to the arch-heretic announcement remains "Wellllll, they aren't exactly wrong."

*Jane*

Eh, Cat just broke an irreplaceable artifact to save her life. That kind of thing speaks louder than words, in their circles.

Personally, I'd be more concerned about Vivienne's feelings of self-worth after this fiasco. "They already joke about how I can't kill anything, my moonlight blade failed to assassinate a *fake* Malicia, and now I forced Cat to blow a powerful weapon to save my life when I couldn't stand up to an *unnamed* sorceress." That's the kind of thing that can hurt more than a sustained lightning spell.

It's also the kind of thing that could be used to tarnish a moral compass, but in this story, I'd more expect a plot point like that to end up subverted than played straight.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I doubt it will effect much of anything, it wasn't a lie about surrender, it was a "I kept to the letter of our agreement exactly. I am after all a man/woman of my word." while smiling and absolutely violating the spirit of said agreement. The "Exact wording" troupe is a classic villain move and a classic magical creature (fae) move alike, and used against other villains rarely backfires.

Cat was willing to make an oath for safety for those surrendering, but nobody actually took her up on it. It would have been hard for them to do so and survive long enough to get her to keep to it, admittedly, but that was moot since they just dropped the shield instead. Maybe if she hadn't said the second part, and just said "The first three to surrender get to keep their lives", but she's fine with how she did it.

*Foxfire710*

Suprised cats "plan" didn't blow up in her face with all those moving parts. I'm also wondering why people keep trying to ward her with cold iron and not just straight up stabbing her with it to see if it stops her regeneration. Hopefully this success didn't just burn up all of cats luck.

[Tohron](#)

My guess at what Nemeshah has to say: that since Malicia is no longer around to negotiate, he regards her current terms as her final offer, and Catherine still has to figure out a way to beat them.

My guess on that subject is that Cat will echo what she did with the fae with an arrangement to help strong-arm Cordelia into marrying Nemeshah, without giving him any territorial concessions.

## *Berder*

"Nah, they never got close to me," she said. "But while you lot were busy throwing down with the giant rat, the Praesi tried to pull a fast one. At least I think so. Two Sentinels carried out some sleeping woman earlier, so I took care of it."

Without Archer, the plan would have definitely failed. Who could the sleeping woman have been except another simulacrum? I would not be surprised, though, if Empress had a number of simulacra going in different directions and Archers only killed one of them.

But what stops the Dead King from continuing negotiations with Empress via scrying? Aside from the security risk. But if anyone could secure scrying, the Dead King could.

Or the Dead King could simply wait for Empress to send another party. After all the Dead King is in no hurry to sign a deal, a few more months or years are nothing to him. It's only Catherine that has a deadline.

## *John Laing*

The Dead King wants to negotiate in person. Even if he did have a way to scry across all that distance and through mountains, narratively it would bring him dangerously out of the role of "hidden horror," and politically it would mean treating Malicia nearly as an equal instead of a petitioner at his door.

Malicia doesn't have an unlimited supply of sentinels and simulacra. As cat pointed out, that armor can't be cheap. The Woe just showed they're willing and able to murder an entire Praesi diplomatic delegation, and the Dead King probably doesn't care, so what's to stop them from doing it again and again? Hells, if the Dread Empress keeps throwing good money after bad, and the Woe keeps grinding, Cat might even conceivably be able to afford to walk away from Keter without cutting any sort of regrettable deal, simply solve her strategic problems by auctioning off the top-shelf plunder for cash to fix Callow's economy and hire mercenaries.

Malicia doesn't have fae gates for high-speed travel, either, so just getting the next group to Keter will probably take months, during which time the Crusade is, at minimum, continuing to sack her port cities.

## *Jane*

The problem is availability rather than money; all of the mercenary companies are already hired up, and there's probably issues with the Arch-Heretic of the East hiring most companies anyways.

That said... Outfitting an elite company with that kind of gear would also be a pretty neat opportunity. The Narrative means that such companies are doomed to failure at a crucial moment, but they'd be pretty useful until that point, and they're free anyway, so why not? It's almost unfortunate they don't have the time for that kind of game.

(That said, the real issue is that the Dead King really would prefer to deal with Cat, and was just setting this whole "Kill Malicia first" as a test, with a nice consolation bonus for himself if Cat failed. "Oh, gosh, now I, the obscenely powerful master necromancer, can't find a way to negotiate with a fellow expert practitioner of the arts" is just a pretense, after all.)

[crysjal](#)

Following comments regarding The Thief of Stars earlier I'm interested to see what this future training might mean for Thief.

Could this result in a transition into a specialisation? Perhaps Thief of Blades. She has already set a precedent by stealing the Revenant Elf's moonlight blade. A character that fights by stealing the opponent's sword and using it against them might be entertaining at least.

Incidentally, That moonlight blade is definitely going to be used on Cat at some point.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

"So heyyyy, Vivienne I did vow I'd take Akua out someday, but I may need to make out with her a few times in the present?"

\*sighhh\* "Whelp, can't say I didn't see this coming." \*STAB STAB STAB\*

[daegone823](#)

Okay I finally get it the dead king put Catherine against the Skein or rather had Malicia guarded by the Skein seeing how he could have had her guarded by the knight or thief or any number of other names to expand her mind.

By continually having her face god like enemies(Spell Blade and Skein) that should have been able to destroy other named with ease, he expanded what she thought she was capable of. The Skein's ability unlimited time reversal aspect allowed her a punching bag that was big enough to punch back and survive. Thus she learned how to use winter in more ways that previously thought. She now sees herself for what she truly is, a higher being on a different plane of power. Where she previously limited herself she now is able to grasp how powerful she really is. It

seems that she is the last to know as Dead King, Malicia, Black, Masego, and even Akua saw her potential and saw her flaw in limiting herself.

Not only is she a godlike being, but she is crafty enough to almost instinctual manipulate stories in that she is always the underdog ensuring hero like dramatic saves while harboring the immortality of a villain. A villain who has been able to garner the favor of a former kingdom and is slowly influencing it seeping its ideals in the very fiber of the culture. This paired with her godlike power and her now expanded mindset to use those godlike power she is truly a terror to behold and there is no way of stopping her, based on the Dead King's stamp of approval.

The even crazier notion is that this was all planned by the Black Knight who in order to break creation he managed to craft a blunt instrument/weapon that would be a plague to creation itself.

[triphthisway](#)

I really wish after the fight finished, that Catherine would have brought Vivienne over for a hug first. I feel like that's exactly what Viv needed, and wasn't completely out of the realm of what Cat might do.

I feel like it would have been the kind of move that Malicia was described as doing way earlier, where she says something, and months later, the person who it was said to finally understands the double meaning. But instead of Viv not getting it right away, it would be Archer and The Hunt who initially would see it as sentimental and weak, but long after would be like "oh shit. She did that because that's exactly what her minion needed right then. It was aimed at both comforting but also ensuring continued longstanding loyalty."

But, I only just read to that part, so idk what happens after.

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## **Interlude: Empires**

*"Spring brings southern weddings and northern burials."*  
– Lycaonese saying

"I am grieved to hear of your disappointment," Athal said, inclining his head.

The smile on the Black Queen's face was a rueful one, tinted with self-mockery. There were times when the ruler of Callow could be

difficult to read, such as when she was in the throes of Winter, but under the noonday sun she was an open book.

"Negotiations can fail," the dark-haired woman replied. "I knew it was one of the possible outcomes even before I learned there'd be opposition."

Athal found dismay, in the cast of her face, yet relief as well. The notion of striking bargain in Keter had never sat well with her, had it? Her defeat also brought solace: the knowledge she had toiled greatly to secure alliance, even though she had come short, and that none of the consequences of this day would be lain at her feet in years to come.

"I am sure accommodations will be reached eventually," the dark-haired man said. "No matter is ever set in stone."

"Now you sound like him," the Black Queen said, rolling her eyes. "I can realize when I've been outbid. Malicia was always going to be willing to go that extra mile I'd balk at. We'll see in a year whether the Dead King feels like riding a different horse."

The Crown had hinted at later arrangements, then. Interesting, considering the depth of the treaties involved. It would have been useful to learn more, but it was not Athal's place to inquire. He was only a servant, after all.

"As you say, Great Majesty," he agreed. "Might I inquire as to when we will depart?"

The Black Queen's brow rose.

"We?" she echoed.

Athal inclined his head again.

"I was gifted to you upon your arrival to the city," he gently reminded her. "It is only natural, as your property, that you would now dispose of my days as you see fit."

She did not quite succeed at hiding the flicker of anger and disgust that crossed her face. The Callowan had a deep and abiding distaste for slavery, as most of Calernia professed to share. It was largely a pretence, of course. Ashurans worked foreign prisoners to death in their mines and fields, having 'bought the span of the sentence' from other nations. Half the Free Cities either practiced slavery openly or through a very thin veil, and across large swaths of Procer the sacred rights of commoners as championed by the House of Light were more aspiration than fact. As for Praes, well, the hatred for the practice learned at Miezana hands had rarely given pause to Tyrants who needed greenskin 'tribute labour' to carry out their grand enterprises. Even the old Kingdom of Callow had not been



above occasionally clapping chains on captured legionaries and putting them to work. It was a genuine thing in the Black Queen, however, a charming sort of naiveté for one who had risen to wear a crown.

"I'm freeing you as of right now," the young woman said, and clapped his shoulder gently. "That should be within my rights, I think. And you're certainly welcome to tag along, if you want."

Athal allowed hesitation to touch his face.

"And where would we be headed, Great Majesty?" he asked.

"Callow," she said. "Back home."

That'd been a lie, he thought. The tells were there, though much harder to pick up on than before. There must have been more to her short conversation with the herald of the Crown than a mere dismissal.

"It would be my honour to follow you," Athal said, fear and reluctance trembling artfully.

The Black Queen sighed.

"I'm not going to make you, Athal," she said patiently. "I genuinely think you'll be better off with us, but I can see why you wouldn't want to leave and I'm not going to force you. I meant it, when I said you're free. You can decide for yourself."

The dark-haired man looked away and towards the floor, pose submissive. Following her would be disastrous and he had no intention whatsoever of doing so, yet it would be impolite to outright dismiss her good intentions without the pretence of silent debate. After a few moments, he met her eyes.

"This is my world, Great Majesty," Athal admitted. "I would not leave it."

The dark-haired woman looked saddened but not surprised.

"I guessed that'd be your answer," she said. "You were a kind and pleasant host, Athal. I hope you'll be treated as you deserve here."

The dark-haired man smiled.

"Of this, I have no doubt," he said.

Her answering smile was slightly stiff, for she clearly thought him a slave in all but name.

"Then this is farewell, Athal the Host," Catherine Foundling said, cool dark eyes taking him in. "May we meet as friends, one day."

"Peace be on you, Great Majesty," Athal quietly replied.

She did not linger after that last goodbye, cleanly cutting ties. Not so prone to attachments as she'd once been believed to be, then. Rule of Callow might very well have fostered that in her: once could not meet a hundred different faces a day and remain caring of all of them. Athal was a good host and a polite servant, and so remained standing until she'd mounted her dead horse and began leading her party towards the gates of Keter. A handful of the Splendid cast lingering gazes at his form, yet none acted or spoke a word. The Black Queen had disciplined them into at least the semblance of civility and obedience, though it would only ever be that. The likes of them could not change their nature, sooner or later it would tell. Even after the last of them was gone from sight, Athal remained standing there in silence. Quietly observed by a thousand dead eyes.

Then, calmly, Dread Empress Malicia emerged from the bundle in her mind that was her impersonation of a Keteran servant and became herself again.

"Quite the interesting day," she murmured, adjusting the white robes her simulacrum had been provided.

The Empress had never enjoyed wearing a man's body, nor would she grow used to it. The flesh construct was much less sensitive than a true human would be, of course – Nefarious had discovered early in his research that to build the receptacle otherwise would make the experience quite overwhelming – but the overall sensation was still quite alienating. Malicia usually wore a woman not merely to draw the eye away from the fact that gender was no consideration to the ritual. Shifting from her true body to another several consecutive times had been quite exhausting, but it should not be of dramatic import. The negotiations with the Dead King were at an end, after all, with only formalities remaining. Having come out the victor out of her little tussle with Catherine had proved her to be the worthiest interlocutor for the Hidden Horror. The Empress cast a haughty glance at an approaching undead, allowing it to kneel before her without comment.

"Your Dread Majesty," it said. "The Crown is now ready to receive you."

"That would be agreeable," Malicia said. "You may escort me."

The Dread Empress used the length of the walk to put herself in order. There would be need, over the coming days, to reconsider the events of the day with Ime and her finest practitioners in

attendance. Much had been revealed in the way Catherine attempted her assassination, likely more than the younger woman had intended to offer. For one, Malicia now had a much clearer account of the combat capacity of the Woe. The Adjutant was no great threat on his own and the Thief almost laughably easy to handle, yet the Hierophant needed reassessment. In sheer amount of destructive power at his disposal, he was leagues above what Wekesa had been able to unleash at the same age. He was also much less well-rounded than a young Warlock, and quite easier to exhaust. It was useful to know what the young man could likely be captured if it proved necessary even if Wekesa did not deign to intervene. Killing him had never been on the table, as Warlock would never forgive her for it. Enough of Malicia's attention remained on her surroundings that she did not need a reminder to emerge from her thoughts when she neared the throne room of the Hall of the Dead. Acknowledging her escort's introduction with a simple glance, she strode forward.

"Elegantly done," the Dead King said, eschewing greetings for praise.

The Hidden Horror lounged on his throne nonchalantly, radiating power without needing to move a single finger. Malicia had never been cowed by the display: she had lived in the Tower for decades now. She slept a mere handful of floors from centuries of the worst of her people's madness contained by wards and steel.

"I was allowed the opportunity to weave as I would," the Empress replied with a smile.

It had still been too close to her liking. Malicia had not expected for her contingency body to be found as well, Archer of the Woe having been marauding about the city instead of joining her companions in fighting the Dead King's guardians. Still, she'd been granted advantages. A guise that would make her adjacent to her opponent's deepest council, liberty to prepare however she deemed necessary for months before Catherine's arrival. Crafting the personality of 'Athal' had been the work of long hours enabled only by the Hidden Horror's willingness to allow her to interrogate his Hosts.

"She's still young," the Dead King mused. "In need of greater tempering. She should have killed every living soul in the city just to be certain. It will be a good lesson for her."

"As you say," Malicia smiled.

She believed the old monster had not ever meant for Catherine to succeed here. The point of the exercise, she suspected, had been to mould the young woman through conflict. Handpicked opponents in very specific locales to bring about a certain... enlightenment. It had not escaped Malicia's notice that Catherine could not turn to mist as she wished. The capacity had always been there, of

course, but the *mentality* had not. The Black Queen was being guided towards a path. Though the Empress would make alliance with the Dead King today, she knew better than to think it any sort of friendship. It was quite likely that even as they made pact, the Hidden Horror had lit a sharper and tossed back into Callow. Measures would need to be taken, beyond even those she had already set in motion. It was rather worrying that the other woman would not be immediately returning to Callow, as Malicia had predicted she would. The Black Queen still believe she had cards to play.

"Shall we deal with the formalities?" the Dead King offered.

"Let us," the Empress agreed.

Before the day was done, she would have an alliance signed in blood.

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"By all means," Cordelia Hasenbach said with frigid politeness, "do explain to me how sixteen thousand vagabonds succeeded in sacking the largest cities of Cantal, *including the capital*. I await what will no doubt be an enlightening answer."

The First Prince knew she should moderate her tone when speaking to the handful of men and women who'd been commanding the defence of the Principate's heartlands. Anger was rarely constructive, only to be used as a demonstration of displeasure when facing a soft position. If anger bared could not change the decision being made, there was no purpose in displaying it. Yet, looking at the five officers before her, the blonde ruler could not bring herself to lessen the ice in her voice. These fools had, while assuring her every step of the way that the legions under the Black Knight were being herded and encircled, somehow allowed a foreign army to burn a swath of destruction through every Cantalese region of logistical import unimpeded.

"Your Most Serene Highness, I will not deny we have failed you," the oldest among the officers admitted.

Diego Altraste, a highly-recommended captain from Valencis she'd granted the command of all available hosts in the heartlands to. Moustachioed, eloquent and boisterous, as Arlesite men so often were, yet he now sat subdued.

"The recognition of that is noted, yet no the reason for this council," Cordelia said, forcing a semblance of clam into her tone. "Cantal has been crippled for a decade, my captains, by a force I was told was quite contained. How did this come to be?"

"We cannot be blamed," a young woman protested. "The easterners are resorting to impious powers, it is not properly conducted warfare."

Captain Lehmer was, to the First Prince's private disappointment, Lycaonese by birth. She should have known better than to expect *properly conducted warfare* from the Enemy.

"I wonder then, captain," Cordelia replied softly, "where the blame should be laid?"

There was heavy silence at that. Altraste cleared his throat.

"We failed to anticipate the change in their operational tempo," the Valencian said. "Overnight and without warning, they began to cover three day's marching distance in a single night. We'd planned the movement of our forces according to the previous order, and so were caught flat-footed."

"And have we found the reason for this sudden change?" Cordelia asked.

"Nothing concrete," an old man with a heavy Alamans accent said. "We lack eyes within the legions. But I have a theory. The Black Knight ceased participating in fighting engagements after they sped up, so I believe it to be an aspect of his Damnation. Using it this much likely exhausts the man extraordinarily."

Alphonse de Saliverne had been commander of the Salian garrison for over forty years now, and though he was only a passable field commander Cordelia held his learning in great esteem. His words had weight.

"They're also listening in on everything the mages send by scrying," Altraste added reluctantly, as wary of her reaction. "The Order has become something of a liability, Your Highness, even when speaking in coded languages. They've danced too neatly around our delaying forces for it to be coincidence."

The Order of the Red Lion had been Cordelia's own notion, and raised by her own decree. The man was being cautious not to offend even while trying to point out a crippling weakness. She could appreciate his discretion in the matter.

"Keep using them," the First Prince said. "As a red herring. If we must resume instructions sent by horse, so be it. They cannot be allowed to continue their march."

"That will be difficult," Captain Alphonse replied. "As of the last report, they are headed towards Iserre. The southern reinforcements from Levant could be sent to meet them, but if they break cities at the pace they have so far most of northern Iserre will be lost before battle can be given."

"Prince Amadis stripped the principality clean of soldiers and weapons," Altraste added. "There are too few fighting men to raise a proper levy, much less arm it."

"Iserre cannot be allowed to burn," Cordelia said, tone forcefully even.

It would be a disaster, and not only because one of the few principalities left largely untouched by the Proceran civil war would be put to the torch. The Carrion Lord was wielding his army as a political knife, it'd become clear. Bayeux had been spared the kind of destruction visited on Cantal, and she knew very well why. The Black Knight was, for the eyes of all Procer, brutalizing the lands of her opposition in the Highest Assembly. Worse, he was doing so after her own uncle had allowed him to march without pursuit. The ploy was obvious, of course. There were few in the Principate that would truly believe her to be in collusion with the likes of the Carrion Lord. It was, however, a very good excuse for any prince and princess wishing to turn on her to do so. Amadis Milenan had been lionized a martyr for his voluntary exile in Callow, and if his lands were put to the torch in his absence... Cordelia's popularity had reached an apex, after the declaration of the Tenth Crusade, but it was now melting like snow in the sun. That she would be forced to abdicate remained unlikely, but it was no longer a possibility she could outright dismiss. A servant in her line's own livery and not the palace's came to stand behind her, presence announced without a word. The First Prince angled her head towards him in an unspoken invitation.

"The evening is upon us, Your Most Serene Highness," the man murmured.

The Lycaonese's eyes flicked to the tall panes of glass overlooking Salia that led to her council room's balcony. The sun was beginning to set, and she had appointment to keep. The First Prince turned her gaze to her assembled captains.

"I will require that a plan for the defence of Iserre be formulated," she ordered. "A particular eye being cast on the need to preserve as much of the principality as feasible. Do not hesitate to request any manner of men or resources. You will have the full weight of my authority behind you."

It galled her that she might have to trade favours and dent the treasury in the defence of the ancestral holdings of Amadis Milenan, yet beyond the ugly political requirements she had a duty to the Iserrans. They were her subjects, like any other, and not to be held at fault for the plotting of their anointed ruler. The First Prince spent longer than strictly required to take her leave with courtesy, carefully soothing any feathers her earlier anger might have ruffled. Already she regretted the loss of control. Her handmaidens undressed her and then helped her into

her formal regalia as she perused the latest word out of Callow. The Black Queen and the Woe had left the kingdom, that much had been confirmed. Where they had headed, however, was still a guessing game. Cordelia had previously suspected that she would join up with the Black Knight and use the man as a way to damage the Principate while preserving her own forces, yet it had not come to pass. Most likely, she had gone to treat with the League of Free Cities. The First Prince could not be certain, as the Tyrant of Helike had thoroughly purged most of her spies and paid informants in the upper rungs of the region, yet there were few other alliances left for her to seek. Agnes had been quite clear that doom was gathering south, and the League's intentions were damnably opaque.

Three hours after sunset, Cordelia sat in the hidden room she'd had arranged for this sole purpose. Behind her seat the trinket sent by the Black Queen awaited the touch of the warlord's eldritch power to take them both into that world of shadows. The First Prince found her centre, allowing calm to take hold of her, and waited until the holy artefacts provided by the House of Light began to burn. Night fell over the room easy as the snap of fingers, suddenly and entirely. It took a moment for the First Prince to reorient herself in this dismaying realm, eyes falling on the Black Queen facing her. The coolness of this place had her glad regal wear in even southern Procer preferred long sleeves. Catherine Foundling was not beautiful, she'd always thought. Some might call her striking, but Cordelia found her features too sharp and sullen for it. It was her eyes that softened her mien, surprisingly expressive brown orbs set in a tanned face. As always, the would-be Queen of Callow disdained the trappings of the title she claimed to wear unremarkable plate.

"Hasenbach," the Black Queen said. "We need to talk."

The First Prince considered her opposite with cool eyes. This lack of courtesy should not go unremarked upon. Though this was an informal conference, Cordelia disliked the pretence of friendship between them that would allow such language.

"Have your courtesies left you entirely?" the First Prince asked.

A smile flickered across the other woman's face, gone in a heartbeat. The Lycaonese had read no fewer than seven assessments of Catherine Foundling gathered from hearsay, observation and old acquaintances. They had been of little use in understanding the Black Queen's personality. The girl she'd been before becoming the Squire had been smothered swiftly by the Black Knight's tutelage, and the callous warlord that'd fought in the Liesse Rebellion and Akua's Folly had never sat across from Cordelia either. The Doom of Liesse had cast a deep shadow on the other woman, Cordelia felt, and changed in sundry ways. Still, some similarities remained. Foundling respected strength above all,

like most warlords, though unlike most of those she responded well to confrontation. She enjoyed 'spirit', even in her foes. Her temper was also quite easy to provoke, which had allowed Cordelia to prod her along desired paths in the past.

"I've had a long few days," the Black Queen said. "So let's just pretend I danced the dance and move on, because this is me doing you a favour and I'm done smiling all pretty."

The First Prince forced her face to remain perfectly still. Revealing irritation would serve no purpose, at the moment.

"A favour," she said instead. "You make a strange foe, it must be said."

"You're amused," Foundling shrugged, misreading her entirely. "That's about to go away real quick. Congratulations, First Prince: the Dead King's about to invade."

Cordelia's blood went cold. She studied the Callowan carefully, looking for signs of dishonesty. She found none.

"You have made a pact with the Hidden Horror," the First Prince said, voice cold and cutting.

"Not me," the Black Queen replied. "Malicia."

The Empress? It was possible, Cordelia thought, the Tower was certainly desperate enough, yet-

"Well, I suppose we're done here," Foundling casually said. "We're still at war, after all. Good luck, try not to screw it up for all of us."

The warlord raised her hand, as if to dismiss the darkness, and the blonde woman's fingers tightened against the arms of her chair until they turned white.

"Wait," she said.

The utterance had been much too desperate for her tastes, yet she couldn't simply let Foundling end it there. She needed to know more or thousand would die. The Black Queen eyed her the way a wolf eyes a limping deer.

"You know, I was trying to think of a reason for it earlier," Foundling said. "To give you more than a warning, I mean. Then I realized I genuinely *couldn't*. I'm not rejoicing at the loss of lives, mind you, but at the end of the day you're trying to fucking invade me even as we speak."

"A victorious Dead King would turn his eyes on you," Cordelia said, regaining her calm.



As long as the conversation continued, she could convince the other woman.

"Your eyes are on me *right now*, Cordelia," the Black Queen noted. "You expect me to lend a hand to people trying to conquer my homeland? Good night."

Her hand rose again but the First Prince knew that for the tactic it was. Foundling was attempting a bargain, now that there was another enemy on the field.

"Are you truly willing to mother the slaughter of thousands out of petty arrogance?" Cordelia accused.

The other woman's eyes went cold.

"There is more at stake," she replied softly, "than you know."

The irony was sharp, her own word thrown back at her. The Lycaonese drew back in fury, but something in the Black Queen's eyes gave her pause. For all that Catherine Foundling ruled with Wasteland methods, in that moment Cordelia was not looking at the Black Knight's pupil or Malicia's mistake. She was looking at raw Callowan spite, coursing deep and dark. *For small slight, long prices.*

"He will devour all of us," the First Prince said.

"Aye, maybe he will," the Black Queen said. "So we'll speak again, after your people do some of the bleeding for a change."

"This will not be forgot," Cordelia said coldly.

"I would hope not," Catherine Foundling replied with a hard smile. "A last word of warning, Your Most Serene Highness. If your uncle's army is still digging at the end of the month, there will be consequences. I've yet to run out of lakes to drop."

The darkness went away, and the First Prince of Procer was left with nothing but fury and fear. *Doom to the north*, Agnes had said.

She was never wrong.

—

Neshamah's foot scuffed the stone.

Such a slight sound, barely more than a whisper. He'd not heard it in a very, very long time. Obsidian hummed behind him as the Dead King tread Creation once more. He inhaled, though this body hardly had need for it. Sorceries millennia old lent him sense of smell, or close enough. The scent of cool stone and dust was a pleasing thing. Hearing had been much easier to reproduce, a

staple of undeath even in his lifetime, and his was sharper than a mortal's. The sound of a bottle being uncorked drifted to his ear, and he turned towards it without the slightest hint of surprise. This was more than expected. It had been *awaited*.

"Going for a walk, old friend?" the Intercessor grinned, toasting him with a bottle.

He paid no heed to her current guise. She had worn many a face, over the centuries. Enough he could no longer remember them all, or the names paired with them. It made no difference. She was as he was, more essence than form.

"It has been too long," he said, voice pensive. "The Serenity remains a lacking imitation. There is a... taste to Creation. A skilled pupil I may be, yet a pupil still."

She drank deep, as had always been her game. He'd caught her, once, back when the upstarts Miezans had still fancied themselves more than guests on the shores. Carved her open, ever careful to avoid even the semblance of fatality, to see what lay inside. She'd mocked him even as the tongs kept open her ribcage and he studied her organs, perplexed by their lifelikeness. He had learned little from the study, never even confirming whether she truly grew drunk. If her body was a construct, it was so perfect one there was no telling the difference.

"You have your games even from your hiding hole," the Intercessor laughed. "Quite the entertainment, this time."

Neshamah strode forward, enjoying the pressure of a word he could not simply shape as he wished. There was resistance here. A will more paramount than his own.

"Were you watching?" he teased.

A little jest, just between the two of them. She was always watching.

"It was oddly nostalgic," the Intercessor mused. "You know, watching you meddle with forces beyond your comprehension. You haven't been that reckless since... your fourth century, I'd say? That delightful scuffle with the rats."

"I was young," Neshamah fondly remembered. "And still believed plagues to be valid method. You were quite severe in chiding me, I recall."

"Lines had to be drawn, we were still establishing the rules," the Intercessor smiled. "Both of us played rougher back then."

"You certainly were not shy in setting the elves after me," Neshamah said. "That was rather unwarranted."

"You were being greedy," the Intercessor said, wagging a finger. "Two Hells? I don't think so. Besides, that was as much about that old mule in the Bloom as it was about you. He needed a sharp lesson about who not to trifle with, and your taking his only son got the point across."

"The Spellblade has been a delightful diversion, admittedly," Neshamah conceded.

"You even set him on dear Cat," she said. "Thoughtful of you."

She drank again, under the Dead King's yellow gaze. Ah, she was miffed. She would be.

"I did look into her," he said. "She's no work of yours, which I found fascinating."

"We don't all work with ponds, Neshamah," the Intercessor said. "There's a lot more moving parts out here than in your little walled garden."

"And yet you have not snuffed her out," he mused. "Oh, you made attempts. Yet I know your work. It was not her throat you truly sought to cut."

"Flipped the story on her several times," she said. "She takes to it like a fish. I'm impressed. She's no great thinker, mind you, but her instincts are sharp. It'd be more trouble than it's worth to rid myself of her. She's the kind you let burn out on their own."

The thing shaped like a woman paused, ever theatrical.

"Or at least so I thought. You're making me reconsider."

"I wonder," Neshamah murmured. "It this meant to tempt me to invest more only to then yank the rug, or is this trickery to make me abandon an opening?"

The Intercessor grinned wide and sharp over the bottle's rim.

"Wanna roll the dice?" she offered. "I promise not to cheat this time."

"You say that every time," the Dead King reminded her laughingly. "No, old friend, you will not goad more out of me. I have allowed her to glimpse the threshold. She will rise or fall of her own merit."

"You've been so wary, since Triumphant," the Intercessor complained.

"And yet here I am," Neshamah replied easily. "Returned to Creation. Let us not pretend you did not nudge that story along."

"What can I say?" she shrugged. "I've been missing your company."

"Such a sentimental creature," the Dead King sighed, then his eyes turned sharp. "S what am I to be this time, Intercessor? The hammer or the anvil?"

She drank deep, throat bobbing as the red wine ran down her chin. She dropped the bottle afterwards, let it bounce off the stone and spill the rest.

"All right," she said cheerfully, "so stop me if you've heard this one before, but there's a joke from Levant I just love. So three princes – one Arlesite, one Alamans and one Lycaonese – and the Dead King walk into a tavern, looking for a hot meal. So the tavern keeper apologizes, says he's out and his last bowl of stew went to the woman in the corner with her baby, maybe they can get it off of her. So the Arlesite prince, he walks up to her, and says 'Good woman, I will duel you for this stew'. She refuses, because really fuck Arlesites. So then the Alamans prince walks up to her and says 'Good woman, as your rightful liege I deserve this stew more than you, hand it over'. She refuses, because she paid her taxes so she doesn't owe shit to no one. So then the Lycaonese prince walks over, looks at the Dead King – that's you! – and goes all grim. He says 'I'm fine with starving, so long as the Dead King doesn't get the stew'. Then the Dead King walks up and says 'You guys can fight over the stew, I'll just-'"

"Eat the baby," Neshamah finished, purely for the pleasure of denying her the climax.

The ancient monster pouted.

"So you *do* know it," she said. "Should have told me at the start, I got way into it."

"I assume," the Dead King said, "that this atrocity – and I do not use this word lightly, believe me – of a story had a purpose?"

The Intercessor grinned.

"Of course," she said, wine red as blood trickling down her chin. "*Eat the baby*, King of Death. Just this once, I'll allow it."

---

Charles

Oh dear...

### tizzio caio

Eat the baby!

I thought the bard was a foreigner(that maybe lost a war outside of Calernia and came here to play the long con--and for a chapter back there t i though the bard may actually be Akua that in some fucked up magic experiment ended back in time with all those shards of history in Arcadia and just wants to fuck up all the world now)

So basically the bard says to Dead king to massacre the Procer/Lycaones/Heroes and weaken the Calernia continent imho

I am still waiting when the story will actually move from this backyard puddle that is just Callow in this Lore that we had in last 200(?) chapters and see more from all the promised other Continents, and if not them at least Dark Elfs/Dwarfes/Gnomes to make a big entrance int he story as moving plot already

### *Anon*

Kinda guessed Athal would be end up being a bigger player (though I'm not quite sure of the logic of having him be placed among Cat's retinue), but I'm kinda really disappointed in skipping out on Cat's talk with the Dead King. It reeks of the conversation with Black that was purposefully withheld in the last book, and while I get that the Dead King probably just told Catherine she lost, it feels....pretty odd to skip over.

Otherwise, interesting to see that the Bard is giving the Dead King free rein (presumably with which to hang himself), and the bard recognizes that Catherine may be becoming a bigger problem.

Meanwhile, Cordelia is absolutely boned, now. She may get her holy war, but she has now completely lost control of the crusade.

### *Someguy*

But what if the Dead King would prefer starving to letting Bard have the stew? Would Bard eat the baby then?

### *Dainsleif*

I personally dont think the bard is woman in that metaphor, since she herself says that she is letting him "eat the baby" and in the joke theone that says that will eat the baby is the Dead King himself, which strikes me as the bard simply telling the story, shes not the woman with the baby she's the narrator.

I could be wrong on that but my take is that the woman might be actually catherine and the baby is callow. Correct me if im wrong.

## [boballab](#)

Two things about the Bard at the end there:

1. Notice "She" is letting him eat the baby. Hmm sounds like she is forgetting that she answers to higher powers...almost like a villain in fact.

2. She could also be running a colossal bluff because the last time we saw her, her plans weren't exactly working out her way and she had to make a hasty retreat. It might be the case that the reason "She" is letting the Dead King eat the baby, is because she can't stop him but doesn't want him to know it.

### *Komploding*

I seem to remember it being said that the bard was not truly on the side of Above, and that before Neshamah came along she was balanced for both sides equally, since he came along tho she's had to be on the side of Above to play counterweight to him I think.

### *ZorbaTHut*

\*Does\* she answer to higher powers?

One recurring theme of this story is that things are always bigger in scale than you think they are. Remember that in this story containing horrible eldritch abominations and literally hundreds of hells and demons ripped from nightmare dimensions, there's also gnomes, who apparently tootle around the stratosphere in invincible airships and straight-up wreck civilizations for laughs. Where Cat is a one-woman army, a single elf requires an entire team to take down, and we don't even know how the elves rank against the gnomes.

So we've been told for the entire story that the Gods Above and Gods Below are at war, but aren't willing to interfere directly. Then comes along the Wandering Bard, who seems absolutely happy to interfere, isn't obviously on either the side of Above or Below, and is herself a horrifying monstrous abomination of a construct that is not and perhaps never has been human.

I am not at all convinced the Wandering Bard fits into the structure of the world that we've been given. She might be entirely separate from the Above/Below dichotomy.

## [crysjal](#)

It was established earlier that The Bard was once human and became perhaps the first empowered human, to get revenge of some sort. Then she slowly lost her humanity over centuries performing her task.

The task appears to be maintenance of the world for the God's debate/argument regarding free will for humanity. But considering her recent actions she may be operating according to a different agenda entirely.

[TeK](#)

What conversation?

*greathogo*

I think the bard is Conflict personified. She doesn't want Callow to attain peace because as Cat has been saying forever, Callow is where the conflicts take place. This makes sense with why she wanted the Black Knight out of the way and why she supports heroes at the moment. Wouldn't surprise me if she has gotten Villains involved previously when Callow was too peaceful.

I just really enjoy Catherine's story. She is a great protagonist and this entire fiction has gotten me to reconsider parts of the novel I am writing because... Villains are pretty interesting characters too, aren't they?

*Styn*

Not just the talk with Black. Captains death was similarly left to 'our imaginations'. Whenever ErraticErrata does off screen the story suffers IMO.

*MetruX*

That is specifically to keep US, the readers, in the dark. It simply makes sense to increase the tension and make us guess while new chapters come out.

*Clint*

I'm starting to wonder if the author does that because they are confident in writing the scenes.

They have skipped too many at this point

*Zopilote 506*

Have always hated bard, still hate her. When we will get to see best boi Anaxares?

*SpeckofStardust*

Eh.

1. Fuck

2. I think Cat knew.

## *Gunslinger*

If she knew she only had to kill Athal and she'd have negotiation rights. Maybe a suspicion but one she wouldn't be able to test without offending the dead king were she wrong

## *Death Knight*

Malicia had too many back ups in place and the Dead King NEVER planned to negotiate with her. The game was over before she even started playing.

## *Jonnnnz*

Or, maybe the talks with the Dead King started with him accepting Malicia's offer, and what he and Cat talked about was what happens after. Malicia thought the trick with Athal worked, but Cat was just playing along, showing her what she wanted to see.

## *Dainsleif*

I like that theory. The dead king has been in this game for too long to be a piece in either Cat's or Malicia's board, so it would make complete sense hes the one running the game instead of them and has planned to use both.

## [Javvies](#)

Did not see Athal being a flesjpuppet of Malicia coming. And months to prepare? Totally a test on the Dead King's part. Not sure Cat passed with flying colors, but I don't think she failed miserably, either. As far as the Dead King is concerned, I think it's a minor pass on Cat's part. As far as Malicia is concerned, it's a loss for Cat – possibly the start of a Pattern between them.

—

Sucks to be you, Hasenbach. Might actually be kind of a good thing you and Grey Pilgrim overreached and failed in negotiating with Cat – otherwise, everything and everybody would be moving on Praes right now, not mostly in Procer.

Wonder if Cat is going to stop by Black and try to extract him and the Legions with him. Hearing Malicia is making deals with the Dead King might well be the last straw for him.

—

Hmmm. Not sure who or what the baby Bard wants the Dead King is supposed to be. But Bard is apparently seriously pissed at someone or about



something someone has done.

And they both have way more than just Names going for them, it seems.

*IDKWhoitis*

Yeah Liesse being turned into a Flying Fortress broke him.

Dead King negotiation will probably flip him onto Cats Side.

And it makes sense that Catherine is going to go to black, right as Procer starts moving to purge black, he will just just disappear.

*Mike E.*

Maybe Cat showing up and gating Black's army around is why they suddenly moved so fast? And Black just stayed out of the fight because he wasn't really needed and to make it look like he can't do both at the same time?

Though the whole time passage thing when going through Arcadia sort of nullifies my theory.

*Death Knight*

Black did not know Malicia was dealing with the Dead King. His goal at the moment is to destroy all of Cordelia's political support. Cordelia is royally screwed because she can't allocate men to deal with Black. She needs those men to man the border with the Dead King now. Meanwhile, Black has free reign to burn her backyard to cinders.

It would have been better if Cat had not warned Cordelia at all. The sudden advance by the Dead King would have caught the Procerans flatfooted. With the bulk of their army digging in another country, and Black already showing he can outmaneuver and wreck an armed Proceran city, there would be no stopping the Dead King and the entire Principate would burn.

Catherine gained nothing by warning Cordelia here and it would have been more spiteful to not warn Cordelia at all.

*Cicero*

Well, unless Cat (correctly in my opinion) views the Dead King as the more dangerous enemy. In that case warning Procer serves the purpose of blunting the Dead King's attack, while Procer and the Tenth Crusade will still be bled white by the fight.

In other words, better a crippled Procer on her border than sharing a border with the Dead King.

*Dainsleif*

Theres more to that. Remember her original plan, she never intended to let the Dead King roam free in procer, she also never intended for procer to become a slaughter house. Yes she wants cordelia out of the picture and the tenth crusade over but she doesnt want procer to be massacrated, the civilians of procer were supposed to live the aftermath of the Dead King in her plan, makes sense shes warning Cordelia about it.

*Misting*

Cat has not gone full-Black just yet; she still has some qualms about mass-slaughtering of the innocent, especially after Second Llesse. Moreover, she doesn't want the Dead King to win either. She wants him to lose after pulling Procereran forces away from Callow. By warning Cordelia, she expedites the later and minimizes the former. You are correct, it would have been more spiteful to not warn her, but it also would have been a worse move for Callow and her remaining conscience.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

I think this might be an application of his aspect Lead.

*Big Brother*

This was great, from beginning to end.

*IDKWhoitis*

So is Cat the Baby or is Procer?

Also, I want to see how pissed off Grey is going to be.

*Novice*

Maybe the Hierarch? She was after all, banished from the Free Cities. That's a not insignificant chunk of Calernia that she doesn't get to play with.

*Dainsleif*

Holy shit i forgot that hahahahaha, she is literally unable to control a BIG part of calernia. It actually makes her actions a lot more sense, shes desperate, she doesnt have more control and so she needs a big move to get control back.

*SMHF*

Cat's the one running the fuck away while they're arguing; with the baby in one hand, and the stew in the other! :p

*Decius*

Procer is the soup. Cat is the Lycaonese prince, saying she doesn't want Procer but the Dead King can't have it. The baby is everyone living on the continent.

*Someguy*

Eh. Cat would be stabbing the innkeeper and burning down the inn.

*RanVor*

With goblinfire.

*Yotz*

That depends on attractiveness of the child's mother. Given Cat's preferences, she may opt in favour of eating her, if you catch my flu...

*AVR*

The baby might just be Praes...

*Dainsleif*

That is an extremely ugly baby with some family diseases that i dont think even the Dead King wants.

*Tutitutitut*

You know, the tyrant is destined to die soon i think. The sound at the crypt said something along those lines?

*RanVor*

According to the thing in the crypt, he should have died years ago. Not the most reliable source of information, if you ask me.

*Someguy*

Anyone thinks Tyrant may be the Hero of the piece since he managed to shape Hierach under Bard's nose and have her thrown out of the League by proxy?

*Vortex*

The whole thing that made him the tyrant was when the day of his death came to be and instead of dying, he killed the ruler and took up his name. That is how he ascended, by breaking all the rules and imposing his own will instead.

*Dainsleif*

Kinda of awesome when you think about it. Black had to make war with his own country and the rest of calernia in order to learn how to defy the gos law. Cat learned through him and gained experience thanks to the Fae and her aquired knoledge on aspects to do tge same. The tyrant stabbed the previous ruler (cat would be proud) and "said fuck you gods i win" at the age of what? 9?

[Liliet](#)

12

same thing really ♥

*Soronel Haetir*

I am somewhat surprised the Bard can show up in Keter, I would have expected the Serenity to be shaped by Neshamah's will enough that she simply couldn't appear. Ranger getting in is an entirely different thing as she overcomes all the obstacles but WB simply ghosts past them.

*Anon*

The Dead King is noted to be in creation again when he meets the bard – not Keter.

*Agent J*

There's the Kingdom of the Dead, then there's the capital city of that Kingdom called Keter, then there's Tower with the Demon Eye hovering over it at the center of the city, and then there's the Greater Gate at the deepest level of that Tower, lastly, there's the Hell that gate leads to that is inhabited by the Dead King's living subjects. He calls his corner of Hell Serenity.

Neshamah, to my understanding just stepped through his gate, finally leaving Serenity for the first time and entering Keter, that is, entering Creation. Bard came to greet her old friend in his tower, at the heart of his old city, outside the Hellgate.

She did not, in fact, enter Serenity. More to the point Keter != Serenity.

*Amoonymous*

For what it's worth, as far as I can tell the Serenity is Neshamah's personal Hell.

Keter itself is still in creation, it just houses the portal to the Serenity.

So Bard met the Dead King in Keter and not the Serenity.

[Paollo Passoline](#)

God damn this is like crack, cant wait for the next one. Amazing story and world building. Love it. Trully. Wonder if it will ever be translated to portuguese, so i can parade this book around

*RanVor*

If the Guide was released in my native language, I'd buy several copies for the sole purpose of forcing people to read it. Currently, I can't, because not a single one of my friends knows English to a sufficient degree. It's incredibly frustrating.

I don't envy whoever would have to translate this book, though.

*Zartan229*

Same for me, but i really hope that someday i will be able to get a hard copy of this beautifull series.

*Eduardo*

Well, eu falo português e estou lendo.  
Apparently I am not the only speaker of portuguese around.  
By the way, brazilian.

*Dainsleif*

Hello friend, to por aqui tbm, você não esta sosinho.

*Anon*

So...what does the bard get out of the dead king going ape on Procer?

A sufficiently strong response from the gods above, maybe, but while the gods above may want that, it's still going to depend on if the Dead King really gets hardcore with all his nastiness – of which the presumed Proceran 'hero band' is going to have to go against – only the pilgrim is stuck with Cat for the time being.

And in the greater scheme of things, if Malicia's got an agreement with the Dead King, depending on the terms, the Dead King could be used as a bludgeon against Cat at any later time.

*FactualInsanity*

Technically, he's not stuck with her.  
She got... excommunicated? I forgot the exact term used, but the Crusader part of the House of Light declared all deals with her non-binding. It remains to be seen what the people that made

those deals with her (namely Milenan and the Grey Pilgrim) think about that.

*Jonnnney*

I somehow doubt an oath made by a hero to a Villain/Fae can be broken by something as mundane as interfaith political maneuvering.

*Jane*

Oh, an oath to a Fae can be broken very easily. Very easily indeed. Why, it's practically expected, in all the old stories.

It's just, that's the kind of thing that usually ends with the oathbreaker dead/dancing in Arcadia for millennia/their children stolen as payment/all of their dreams made ash while the Fae laughs at their misery/etc.

I don't know what kind of influence Fae oaths "really" have in the Guideverse, but from a narrative perspective, there might be no faster way of losing this crusade than ignoring those oaths. As you say, I doubt the Gods Above have the authority to break them.

*werafdsaew*

They didn't swear an oath; that's why Amadis is staying behind as hostage.

*Jago*

Technically, their lives are forfeit. They are hostages that guaranteed a truce, the truce was broken, the other side has the right to kill the hostages.

If we accept the Church of Light decree that the truce "never existed" as Cat is an abomination, they are prisoners in the hands of an abomination, so as good as dead.

They are further screwed as they are Heroes that offered themselves to martyrdom to save their men. Those usually die if the other side doesn't break the bargain.

[boballab](#)

Or it could be that she can't stop the Dead King and is trying to con him, remember that her plans failed in the Free Cities and she had to flee. She might be trying to make the Dead King think that she can stop him at anytime and thus make him hold back from going all in.

*Oshi*

Or she is doing exactly what she needs to kill off the board and start over.

### *Dimensional*

I'm assuming She's backing the Grey Pilgrims – Redemption play. If The Dead king is all burning up Procer, How long can Cat stay on the side of Evil and let it go. CAllow may hate Procer, but I imagine that what remains of the house of light will want some response to the invasion. and once she joins with the hero's, the redemption story is one more step along the road to Cat sacrificing herself.

### *IDKWhoitis*

Which can hilariously backfire. Because Cats not so opposed to burning herself at the stake, as long as everyone else is on the same ride. Like no Hero left standing at the end type of thing.

While The Bard may be willing to pay that price, we can't be sure all of the heroes will be willing to pay that price. Especially Grey, since his fight is with the Dead King not Cat. He sees Cat as a side note in a larger conflict. This can turn some Heroes dark.

### *TideofKhatanga*

Cat is the Queen of Winter. She can Let it Go as much as she wants.

### *Novice*

I am actually very glad that the Woe's atrocity of a plan didn't succeed. I would have been disappointed since the story was doing so well in crafting plots and schemes, both political and tactical. I'm also glad Malicia hasn't lost her edge.

Thanks for the chapter!

### *Matthew*

This. Malicia is better at this than cat.

Also, what happens if Black goes against the Dead King?

Like give him Procer's resources gathered for the Crusade and let him eat the Dead King.

If there is one guy who can deal with all of Dead King's overpowered shenanigans... It's Black.

### *Novice*

In this hypothetical scenario, I think Black would have been able to hold his own. But in the end, he will fail since Bard/Intercessor is gunning for him and she's quite content with DK's current situation. Two ancient, scheming immortals against Black wouldn't be a fair fight.

*RanVor*

Ah, but Black does have one not-so-ancient, not-so-scheming immortal on his side...

*IDKWhoitis*

I would compare this to Catherine throwing the necrotic goats filled of goblin fire at the Fortress.

And suddenly the moment the goats arrived at The Fortress, the whole thing just disappears into a small Arcadian portal that no one saw coming.

Black planning the moves and Catherine executing anything violently, I think they can hammer out a strategy to take out the DK, Malica, and intercessor.

*Anon*

I think the most interesting part is that the Bard (seemingly) confirms that Cat isn't a piece of the bard's own creation, and that the Bard has instead 'only' been playing damage control.

Like...that would mean that either Black got insanely lucky with his 'create an anti-story story' narrative for Cat to be shaped into, and/or someone else has been pulling the strings who is just as good as Bard, if not better.

Also kind of interesting in that she thought that Cat would, if given enough time, eventually 'settle down' like the Dead King did, and mellow out – she really misunderstands Callowan ideology if that's the case.

Meanwhile, though, Cat's gonna have her hands full trying to appease the Empress now, in that she 'knows' that Malicia is likely willing to unleash the dead king on her at any moment, for having tried to assassinate her – Cat broke the 'illusion' of cooperation, and if Procer clears out, Malicia has no reason to believe Cat will fall back into any sort of deference.

*Jane*

Luck isn't *that* unlikely here, no? I mean, there's been thousands of years for this kind of thing to happen – and there have already been many near-misses like her, who "burned themselves out". All that has to happen is Cat to survive long enough to burn Bard, and the world is her frozen oyster.



*werafdsaew*

Why is there a need to appease anybody? The Dead King can't reach Callow without going through Procer first, and Cat's army beat Malicia's.

*Novice*

Does she though? Malicia is still in control of half of the entire Legions of Terror and she has Wolof's sorceries to back it up. Malicia has the forges of Foramen which means better weapons and armor. The only advantages Cat's army has over Malicia's are the Woe and her general. And her general being better than the remaining generals in the Legions is debatable.

Although, you can argue that Cat being the underdog in this universe gives her all the advantages she needs.

*matesbe*

She doesn't have half the Legions of terror. Cat said earlier that Praes proper was so badly defended at this point that Callow could conceivably invade, though not hold it. Malacia is approaching the Dead King partially because she doesn't have a lot of military cards to play, so she gets someone else to play for her.

*Novice*

Huh, you're right. For some dumb reason, I have it in my head that the Praes heartlands still has half of the Legions as a substantial garrison.

Welp, Praes is utterly fucked in this crusade. Time to let loose all the horrors locked in the basements, I guess.

*werafdsaew*

Yes, read chapter 23

*John Laing*

Cat has knights, whereas the Legions of Terror have never had access to proper heavy cavalry. Playing defensive, she also has favorable terrain, a loyal populace, and the Observatory to counter infiltration.

*Novice*

Eh, the Knights have been completely defeated before. I'm sure whatever tactics Black has employed in the Fields would have been taught in their war academy/college for the past two decades. And the current Knights are scrapped

from the bottom of the barrel, quite unlike before the Conquest. I admit the Observatory would have been effective.

*Someguy*

If Cat could get the current Knights education expanded to include Legion doctrine (which they still refuse to due to regarding it as "for peasants") Juniper will have in her hands the most seasoned phalanx and finest heavy cavalry on Calernia. The hammer and the anvil able to crush any armed forces short of Named.

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient\\_Macedonian\\_army](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Macedonian_army)

*Novice*

I just got shivers imagining Juniper with all the military toys that she wants. If only the Crusade got delayed for another five years...

*Jago*

The legions are way more like Roman legions from Caesar time than the phalange.

*IDKWhoitis*

You do forget that Catherine and the FAE are Major Force multipliers that the previous knights did not have. Also the knights may have learned from their graphic defeat and will know to just kind of avoid direct confrontation like they did previously. Calvary as a force for flanking and force recon that can move quickly are still potent.

*Cicero*

I don't think it was luck. I think it was very careful and deliberate on the part of Black.

Go back and reread Cat's first meeting with Black. It has all the earmarks of the start of a hero's story, not a villain. Then it takes a swerve towards being an anti-hero, but still typically heroic. Yet despite all the heroic markers Cat ends up a villain.

She got a hero's story but as a villain. And I think that was a deliberate choice on the part of Black. Which then explains why she flips stories so easily.

*1queenofblades1*

Malicia pisses me off with how good she is 😞

Kill her and take her head Cat

*Raved Thrad*

That might result in a Dark Quickening, and then we'd have Malicia in Cat's construct-body, with full control of Winter.



*mavant*

And then in the sequel we find out they're actually alien criminals exiled to this world?

*Raved Thrad*

Still a better love story than Twishite. 😊

*Jane*

Well. I have to say, I did not see Malicia being in Athal, because it did not occur to me that the game would be *that* rigged. Nice training for her, though, and she'll get her diversion either way – assuming she can get around what Malicia has planned.

Though, I wonder what that is, exactly. It's obvious the Empress was lying about her plan, and she's deliberately acted to provoke Cat multiple times – but for what reason? Luring her into a trap of Malicia's making to dispose of her would be the most obvious answer, but the timing's all wrong for it. I suspect she's trying to solve one problem with another, either such that they eradicate each other or create a set of circumstances such that she can bind Cat to herself, but I can't see how launching a missile at herself plays into that. Well, I suppose it's only reasonable that we don't have enough clues for that yet, given the characters involved...

I also wonder what the Dead King told Cat, but I expect that we'll be finding that out next chapter. I'm reasonably certain he told Cat that Athal was Malicia, but there's more to it than that – she seemed to hint that she came to *some* agreement with the Dead King, which suggests that he's double-crossing her. Either to take up her offer now, while publicly framing Malicia for it, or to turn on Malicia when she uses the Dead King against Cat – I can't see anything else that would be big enough for Cat to call on the Dead King's help again, either this year or the next. Unless she was just trying to making Malicia paranoid.

Something tells me the Black Knight isn't actually using an Aspect to move, but instead some manner of unconventional tactics. Reckless constant use of an Aspect doesn't seem like his style. He has to be using an Aspect for the sieges, though, since he doesn't have any equipment for it, but *does* have one that can

break through walls at will. Nice touch spying on the enemy's scrying, though. I wonder what his escape plan is, however?

Nice to see the Council of Immortals being all schemey and vague as usual, though. I wonder if either of them actually have any plans here, or if they're both just bluffing each other for the heck of it so that they can both claim they planned the whole thing a century from now when it bites one of them. ...Not criticizing the writing, to be clear, they're just both playing out an archetype I enjoy mocking.

*Someguy*

Black isn't using an Aspect to move the Legions. That's just a modern infantry on a fast march while Procer move their levies like a herd of sheep. The feudal idiots never experienced an actual standing army with modern training before.

*Jane*

I don't think it's just a difference in quality – the commander said their estimates were based on their observations of Black's previous pace. This suggests that either Black had deliberately been reducing his speed, possibly to concentrate the enemy forces as they attempt to encircle him in order to reduce the chances of an accidental interception later, or that he's suddenly moving more quickly. This could be accomplished by use of an Aspect, as the commander theorized, but innovating new tactics for rapid movement is a pretty common trope in military-focused fiction.

*Someguy*

That's what I meant, Black and the Legion's previous marching speed was done "conventionally" to lull the Proceran commanders into an intellectual trap. The sudden speed increase is probably only mid-pace. A well trained infantry battallion can outpace a horse in an overnight march and still go into battle afterwards. Black and Grem have not yet shown all their non-magical cards.

*werafdsaew*

Cordelia do have an effectively spy network; it's hard to think that they don't know what legion marching speed is.

*Cicero*

Are we sure?

Black does have the Aspect "Command" which might allow him to speed up his army marches.

We do know that all of his Aspects tend to support leading an army instead of individual combat.

### Javvies

Black's Aspects are "Lead", "Conquer", and "Destroy". If he's using an Aspect to speed his Legions, it's probably an application of Lead or Conquer.

If he's not using an Aspect, then I see a three basic options – one, stepping up the marching pace, two, extending the time spent marching, or three, some combination of stepping up the pace and extending the time spent marching.

### *Cicero*

Most likely "Lead", that was the one I was thinking of and misremembered as "Command"

### *Novice*

Also: "Neshamah finished, purely for the pleasure of denying her the climax."

I believe someone in the comments called him bone daddy last chapter? (◡ ◡)

### DroughtBringer

Vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Also, I'm thinking that, in this case, Cat is the Baby She's new to the game, and so young compared to the others.

### *Gunslinger*

Personally i think its likely she just means Procer. The tale plays on the evils and dangers of the Dead King and the Bard is asking him to go all in

### *Oshi*

She meant Calernia. Everything in the story has been carefully shaped so that a Crusade is called and a threat produced. This is about wiping the slate. The Bard wants her enemies dead, her pieces strengthened and things set the way SHE wants them. As far as I can see this IS her plan.

### *Antoninjohn*

Cat is mentioned to be going to pick up Black if he get in trouble. I wonder what she is doing before going back to Callow is it the Dark elves, the Mighty Skaven Empire or the Golden Bloom

*Novice*

"Cat is mentioned to be going to pick up Black if he get in trouble." Where was this mentioned?

*haihappen*

In a discussion inside the Woe, it is discussed if she should Gate to Black and save him before he is captured/killed, but not before, as they do not know what his plans are, because he always has plans. But saving him was insited upon by Masego, and Cat would do it for him.

*Novice*

She'd do it only because Zeze told her to. Totally not because she still loves the man as a father figure in her frozen, lightless, decorative heart. Yep. Definitely.

*Rook*

It's wonderful to see that the proceran crusade is starting to become as much of a clusterfuck as the real crusades.

*Someguy*

Fighting over the spoils of battle before the battle is even fought or won tends to do that.

*lqueenofblades1*

Nowhere near as much as the real life Fourth Crusade though. Yet. I honestly kinda hope it does lol. I'd love to see Salia sacked and Procer split apart into various successor states with a Latin Empire analogies (similar to what happened to the Byzantine Empire)

*Jane*

If memory serves, though, Mercantis hasn't had its fleet contracted to take the Crusaders anywhere, so there's little opportunity to suggest looting their hosts in lieu of repayment... Though I guess a variant could still work if someone "forgot" to pay their mercenaries?

[Euodiachloris](#)

History: ramming home the most important message again and again – "makes bloody certain to keep your guards/ mercenaries/ army/ contractors/ eunuchs/ tax collectors/ civil servants happy". Nothing but Bad Things™ happen if you don't.

*GuidingMoonlight*

Umm, did I miss chapter?

Where is the ending of the arc? The climax. Where is Cat realization that she've been played? Or is cat allowed to lose only off screen? I mean really what the hell.

How did Cat figured out that dead king about to invaded, anyway? She walked away before Malicia revealed herself. Or she is faerie-precog now?

Speaking of precogs, Augur continue to be useless. We know squat about her power but black and cat continue to surprise hasenbah time and time again. She didn't even know that Woe to the north was dead fucking king. You know, biggest evil on a continent? Ring any bell?

I adore the setting, but common, you can do better.

*lennymaster*

Nooo, you did not miss a chapter. Not showing Cat's conversation with the Dead King was a means to build suspense for the reader, as has been done several times in Guide. Like at the end of the last book, in Liese. Were Malicia told Cat to preserve the doomsday weapon, despite Black beeing adamant about destroying it.

That Malicia was gonna make a deal without Cat around to try and outbid her was clear and Cat knowing about having lost was clearly implied in the first few paragraphs.

Augur is just not COMPLETELY overpowered, only mildly so. After all, she is the only reason why Hasenbach has not been ended by a tragic but hilarious accident due to Assassin.

*GuidingMoonlight*

"...was a means to build suspense for the reader,"

suspense of what? its like cutting out punchline of a joke skipping straight to crowd laughing. its annoying, to say the least.

"...That Malicia was gonna make a deal without Cat around to try and outbid her was clear and Cat knowing about having lost was clearly implied in the first few paragraphs."

It was not. It said that Malicia suspected that DK hinted about it to Cat. In anyway i rather read negotiations myself, thanks.

"Augur is just not COMPLETELY overpowered,"

If by "Augur not completely overpowered" you mean "hasnt done a thing since the start of crusade" than sure.you are right. Black continue to outmaneuvre everyone because..? He is so random? Last arc showed that Precogs(Skein) dont care about it. And if he somehow knows how to counter Augur. than why he

didn't tell this trick to Assassin? As I see it right now Augur only role(heh) in the story is to explain why Assassin didn't kill Hassy 10 years ago.

*RanVor*

It seems to me you baselessly assume there is only one kind of precogs in this universe.

*GuidingMoonlight*

It seems to me that Augur practically (heh) pose zero threat to Black despite Black extensive collection of death flags (which in this setting has much more weight) and Augur (clearly overhyped) reputation and backstory...

---

Now I want Amadeus to make a Mantle of Calamity for himself to stitch the avoided death flags on.

*Silverking*

Why would the Bard give the Dead King permission to go hogwild with Procer (assuming that's the baby in this scenario)? I can think of one or two potential reasons.

1. Paying for Future Victory. I'm reminded of the Bard's scheme to turn the Calamities's murder-by-diverted-trap of the Ashen Priestess to a fatal attack to leave an opening to kill Sabah, and there was some theorizing by Cat about how the Heavens can't create a truly overpowered Hero because that would mean that the Hells would have "permission" to balance things out. I'm thinking that the Bard is predicting that a grave threat to the forces of Good is coming, greater than ANY of the players we've met. So, she's allowing the Dead King to get a bunch of "Evil wins" on the playing field, so that when the time comes the Heavens will have "permission" to put their whole fist on the scales. The main caveat is that the Bard's promising that the axe will be coming down...but not on the Dead King.

2. Punishment for Cordelia. Now, the Heavens love an excuse to kill Evil just as much as the next guy, but this crusade has been disappointing in a few ways. Calling down the righteous fury of the Heavens is not a mere tool for your political games, Cordelia. This is supposed to be building the hype for the forces of Good, but declaring Cat an Archvillain aside, this is barely more noteworthy than a border dispute. Where's the nationwide call to prayer? Where are the zealots who would have fought to the last man rather than accept terms with the Black Queen? Crusades are not footnotes in history, dangit! Well, they're going to remember this one. They will learn the cost of taking the threat of Evil lightly. They will remember that their



salvation comes not from petty tactics and schemes, but devotion and submission to Good and Heroes. They will learn for generations to hate Cordelia's name as much as they fear Triumphant's (May she never return). And the next time some smartass First Prince thinks about how to maintain power, they'll think twice about taking the name of the Heavens in vain.

*haihappen*

The Intercessor's motivation is the real problem here when trying to figure out what it does next.

1) Reestablishment of the status quo? With Praes back into old ways, Callow the field where the conflict of Good/Evil regularly produces graveyards worth of casualties in way to resolve the conflict. With the side goal of undoing the "Grand Alliance" thingy. Eternal Strive so neither Good or Evil Wins (And end the game of Creation). Then the obvious goal would be to break Malaica and Cathrine, and dethrone Hasenbach to end her Grand Alliance scheme.

2) Breaking of the Dead King? Unlikely, but it could be goading the Dead king to venture farther from his "save" hell as possible, for some scheme to take him down, forever. Because that is its END OF THE GAME, YOU WIN moment. And she craves the end?

3) Removal of all pieces on the board that she had no hand in creating. Meaning remove Cathrine from Creation, or being able to control her. This would be a motivation of a control-obsessed psycho-/sociopath. The current state of events may have a not insignificant change of spiraling completely out of Its control, so order, or chaos in this case, must be restored.

4) Prevent Cat to win and thus "flip the table" on the Gods. Lesser variant of (1). The chain of events could lead to an equilibrium of Good and Evil, triggering a Stalemate in the Game of Creation. Or it is the opposite, and unleashing the Dead King may facilitate Cats rise to the Top, then being able to enforce the Accords, building equilibrium over time, ending Creation, and with it, the Intercessor.

A lot of speculation hinges on the unanswered (or unanswerable) question "Does the Intercessor want to end its own existence, or does she enjoy it?".

The tiny bit of the Bard's PoV cannot be used to solve this, I think, as the Bard may as well be an Unreliable Narrator.

My personal speculation grows towards the Bard/Intercessor as a God, self-stripped of most of its powers, nudging stories to stack the deck to its side's favor.

*magesbe*

I got the feeling that she was once just as mortal as The Dead King was, it would explain her talking about how she now

she “knew better” than before. Gods don’t change, they’re eternal; mortals? They learn and evolve.

*RanVor*

Hot. Damn. That’s about everything I can think of at the moment.

*Vagrant*

Oh my God. What an amazing chapter!! I’m in awe and gonna read it 2 more times now. Then maybe re-read the whole arc. I sure hope I am a Patreon already cuz it’d feel criminal to not act on the gratitude I’m feeling right now. I wanna write 3 pages of praise, seeing as I am neither particularly precise in observation nor in expressing myself I will not. It’d be a waste of anyones time. Still I couldn’t resist the urge to at least get my intention across. Maybe it makes you smile! 😊

*Raved Thrad*

Ahh, raw Callowan spite: there is no nectar sweeter to savor. Where is your haughtiness now, Cordelia Hasenbach? I can’t wait to see her have to wade through the blood of her slaughtered people. “...And down here in the mud, oh look! Another dead Proceran!”

*Yotz*

Two titbits:

First – there is a certain probability that DK made a separate pact with Cat, and – maybe – nudged her to leak his plans for imminent invasion;  
and second – it seems, Malicia is in dark about the Sixth.

Oh, and one more thing – our dear droog seems to be aiming for a particular brand of ultra-violence – to remind everyone hopped on fancy new stuff like “moral ambivalence” how *real* Evil looks like.

Or maybe she finally pulled a spring, and just wants to see the world in flames...

---

Didn’t “Athar” see the “Shade of Splendour” discuss politics with the Woe and attend the eeting with the Dead King? I think she just disregards Akua as a tool of hers that had been used to build the murderfortress and then was lost to Catherine, but has no independent influence.

*Yotz*

That’s the thing, though – “Shade of Splendour” would be “a ghost of faerie” in non-purple. From Malicia’s point of view, Akua – indeed – had outlived her usefulness. That doesn’t

mean she wouldn't use her if there'll be an opening, or wouldn't use a fact of Butcher of Liesse being semi-pardoned against Cat.

But, as you mentioned – “Athal” saw a “Shade of Splendour”. And so I'm inclined to make a jump in conclusions – Malicia saw a Shade of a Faerie, and the options for her is to make connections with necromantic fallout of the Liesse Machine, where some Faeries could've been turned to Shades among the others, and now is bound by Winter; or conclude that Hierophant is tinkering with LM to reproduce the effects; and either way that problem would be resolved upon the imminent betrayal of the Splendid.

What Malicia doesn't know, is that the Prisoner of the Mantle is now in active status, willingly serving the Black Queen, and the identity of Shade in question, probably mistaking her for a random Fae.

If this is so, that may be a wildcard for the Cat's straight flush against Malicia's full house.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

Ten bucks on Cat saying hello to the drow in Everdark. They worship Tenets of Night and she's got the whole Sovereign of Moonless Nights thing going on. It's a match made in heaven.

### *kagelupus*

Just an FYI, this chapter was not showing up on the side bar list of chapters. Had to go to Ch. 47: Culmination and then click on the next chapter link from there.

### *NotQuiteHere*

I get the feeling we're all about to be blindsided by the Tyrant.

### *RanVor*

Even after all of this, it still strikes me how immensely arrogant the First Prince really is. Even as she stands on the brink, she still has the gall to *demand* from the person she intended to kill mere *minutes* ago to save her sorry ass from the mess she has brought on herself. Even when she tries to destroy Callow, she remains convinced that Callowans have a sacred duty to die in defence of Procer. Because *obviously* Proceran lives are the only ones that matter. Even Malicia isn't as full of herself as this woman.

### *Cicero*

It's not arrogance. It's just a natural human self-centered tribal instinct.

Naturally the leader of Procer is going to view things from the perspective of how they benefit Procer.

Friends of Procer will help her when she is in trouble.

Enemies will attack her when Procer is in trouble.

It's a natural thing, just as Cat is biased to see things from the Callow point of view.

It's just that the First Prince of Procer has to carry the burden of all the sins of every previous First Prince, which tends to make her position look hypocritical. But that really isn't Cordelia's fault, any more than it's Malicia's fault for every evil every Praes Tyrant before her committed.

*RanVor*

I'm not saying she shouldn't care about Proceran lives or anything like that. But one does not simply demand an unconditional help from the sworn enemy without being more than a little stuck-up. Note that she didn't even imply she intends to stop ravaging Callow in the wake of Dead King's invasion. It's pretty clear she counted on bleeding the Army of Callow out against Neshamah and finishing it off when the threat is over. The entire argumentation she presented to Cat can be summarized as "You **must** help me because I'm better than you". She basically told Cat Callow doesn't matter; the only one important around is Cordelia Hasenbach and it's everyone's duty to save her from trouble even when it's detrimental to them.

Bonus points for appealing to humanity she doesn't even believe Cat has.

*Death Knight*

I sincerely hope the Dead King will not take the Bard up on her offer to invade Procer.

That would be stupid.

Sure, he will win alright and the Principate will enter a 1000 years of Darkness (because the culmination of this Story is long overdue) but that would bare his neck. Because the Hero rising up to defeat the Ultimate Evil and break the thousand years of darkness is a story as old as time. He himself mentions this outcome in his conversation with Catherine.

So why would he leave his Hell now, knowing full well it would will not end well for him?

If he needs to send in his armies, why can't he do that from Keter? It is mentioned in the story that while he himself never

takes the field that often, there have been skirmishes between his troops and the Procerans manning his border. So it has been proven that he can command his forces at a distance...

So, why leave at all?

*RanVor*

Maybe his Command Undead ability has a range limit.

*superkeaton*

Oh Bard, you're delicious. And yes, Malicia, thank you for helping teach Cat a lesson. And thank you, Cat, for teaching Cordelia a lesson.

One big circle of happy learning, this is. With a side of baby eating.

Also, side note, but typos are way funnier when they're Cordelia's line.

[ironvale](#)

I guess, this chapter confirms that the gem that glowed in the last book's epilogue was the Emperess contacting the Dead king.

*Club*

Is it just me, or is Cordelia remarkably self-centered? Seemingly incapable of thinking it's not about her?

[crysjal](#)

Everyone is the protagonist of their own story. Cordelia is only now finding out that hers is a tragedy.

*Someguy*

Cordelia's in the wrong story. Cat's the "Orphan Queen" leading a "ragtag bunch of misfits" to repel the forces of Foreign Invasion. She now has the Role of "Smug Ruler of the Invaders" about to have the rug under her feet yanked.

*Shequi*

One extremely subtle, but important thing:

'Agnes had been quite clear that doom was gathering south, and the League's intentions were damnably opaque.'

But then later:

'Doom to the north, Agnes had said.

She was never wrong.'

Do the Augur's prophecies rewrite themselves in everyone's mind to ensure retrospectively that she was always right?

*grzecho2222*

"Woe, Cordelia," the Augur said. "Woe to the north and to the south. Sit and listen, before it is too late."

*Goodpie2*

Hang on. I'm confused. Which one is the baby, Procer or Callow? Or a third party?

*Captain Amazing*

I think the Bard is trying to kill herself. Her Name and powerset have changed over the years, and we know that her current abilities are painful to her. If she's not actively doing what she should be then she's shunted out into the void until she's needed again. The gods torture her to ensure she does what they want. I think the Bard's trying to sneak herself into a villain role so she can die.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"The capacity had always been there, of course, but the mentality had not. The Black Queen was being guided towards a path."

Apotheosis. Always, fucking, apotheosis.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

A pupil? We know the Dead King is more akin to God than Man, yet he says the Intercessor is similar to him.

Hmmm.

*Salty*

Ah, yes, bullshit writer intervention. The quality is dropping. 4 books in I really think that pulling a "but she was there and planning all along" is bullshit.

Especially after such a long arc, winning or losing is fine. But this reveal just pushed the last 10 or so chapters into total irrelevance. By pulling this stuff the weight behind them disappears. It's especially grating as this isn't the first time either. It would also be far less grating if the whole running around trying to kill Malicia thing hadn't been the length of a small book.

I love the premise and I think that with some major editing this could be an amazing book or 2, but it quickly going towards the meg pile.

Max Scherer

yeah this story is torture to read. The world and story is sooo intersting, but that Cat doesnt get one fucking important victories is frustrating as fuck...

Jago

This chapter and the one where the WB and DK meet in the shards of the past make me question how much of the "this is story-driven universe" we see is dictated by the gods and how much by the preferences of the WB. In the past the Blessed where freer, while now they are Named and more strictly bound to the shape of the tales.

[cowlute](#)

Are there no more spellcheck threads, or did someone miss "clam"?

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## Chapter 48: Shadows

*"A passable plan done in a day will nearly always beat an exquisite scheme requiring a month."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II

Truth be told, I'd never been enamoured with the thought of travelling. Even if I'd never become Black's apprentice I would have left Laure eventually – I'd has plans to attend the War College, what felt like half a lifetime ago – but unlike some of the other girls at the orphanage my heartbeat had never quickened at the notion of journeying across Calernia. There'd been this girl I'd shared a room with, Gods, what'd been her name? Emily, maybe. Something that sounded like that. She'd found work at a street stall near the market just so she could buy a rough map of the continent and plan her travels when she came of age. She'd stolen the only volume of Anabas the Ashuran's travelogues the orphanage had and read it so often the pages had been worn out. That'd never been for me. Having a gander at the most beautiful parts of southern Callow had been appealing, and I'd had vague plans to visit the Duchy of Daoine for as long as I could remember, but my interest in foreign vistas had always been limited.

And yet here I was now, camping with a few companions by the shore of a lake I doubted any human had seen in centuries. Few Praesi maps gave name to the body of water to the northeast of

the Kingdom of the Dead, but the Procerans called it the Chalice. There was likely a story there, but not one I knew. It was beautiful, I had to admit. The poisonous fumes that hung over the Dead King's lands did not reach this far north, leaving me with unimpeded sight of a misty lake with sapphire-blue waters. The beach was pebbles of pale and grey, with the rare splash of colour breaking the mould. The winds were restless, here, and the dawning evening pleasantly cool. Even at noon, when the day was warmest most of the Woe wore cloaks. Unlike me they did not welcome to the touch of the cold. I palmed a stone and sent it skidding across the waters, the final plop surprisingly loud to my ears.

Hakram had dug a fire pit earlier and Indrani was now making some sort of sordid stew out of the fish she'd caught with her bare hands, standing hip-deep in the waters. It felt oddly domestic to watch them bicker around the flames, arguing about how much salt should go in a meal. Vivienne was napping right through it, huddled inside a pile of blankets close enough to the fire to feel the warmth of the flames. The last two had less carefree matters to attend to. I'd asked Masego to reach out to the Observatory the moment my little chat with Cordelia Hasenbach came to an end, but even with Akua as a helper the preparations had taken some time. He'd warned me the ritual had high chances of failure. Though the Whitecaps weren't in the way, up here, the distance was massive. It'd taken three attempts before he succeeded mid-afternoon. Fadila had been there, luckily enough, though what she'd had to tell us had taken the wind right out of me. She only knew so much, though, so I'd ordered the Observatory to serve as a relay for another ritual at dusk. Juniper would know more.

I glanced at the tall tower of ice I'd formed to speak with the First Prince, which now served as the seat of Hierophant's rituals. I could feel the ebb and flow of sorcery within, though it'd not reached that palpable crescendo of active scrying. I tossed another stone and let the sound of Indrani slapping Hakram with a ladle – clearly stolen from the royal kitchens by Vivienne, as it was pure silver and there was a suspicious hole where the Fairfax heraldry would be – until he submitted to her demands of another pinch of salt. It was calming. I was in great need of that, right now. The sun was dipping into the lake with a riot of red and gold, when Akua came for me. She said nothing, scarlet eyes hooded. She'd grown better at reading my moods, when idle talk would grate on my nerves instead of provide appreciated distraction. I passed the others on the way to the ice, waving a hand when Indrani called out, and found Masego crouched on the ground.

"Catherine," he said without turning. "I believe we've stabilized the formula properly. There should be no more troubles."



"Good work," I said.

"They'll be able to feel that as far south as Keter, at least, if they are keeping an eye out," he reminded me.

"Let them," I grunted. "Scry, Masego."

He did not comment any further, tracing a few runes out of light that set the entire array glowing. I ran my fingers across the back of the seat I'd carved myself out of ice before sitting down. A look was enough to dismiss Akua, though Masego remained close. If the ritual had issues, I expected him to intervene. At the centre of the array lay a dark wooden bowl filled with dark waters taken from the Observatory's own pools. A sympathetic connection, I thought, and silently praised myself for remembering the fancy terms. We'd improved somewhat on the usual spell, Hierophant having me weave Winter as he required. When Fadila's face appeared in the bowl, it did in the mirrors surrounding me as well.

"Your Majesty," she said, bowing.

"Mbafeno," I mildly replied. "Any issues on your end?"

"Marshal Juniper awaits you," she replied. "Shall I proceed?"

"By all means," I said.

Her face rippled, then vanished, and a heartbeat later I was facing the Hellhound's tired gaze. Juniper looked like she'd been put through a ringer. If half of what Fadila had said, that might very well be the case.

"Juniper," I said. "Been a while."

"Foundling," she gravelled. "I have a dozen fires to put out, so let's skip the courtesies."

I almost replied with a sardonic *lovely to see you too*, but if the situation was as serious as I believed it was no time for banter.

"I had a talk with Fadila Mbafeno earlier today," I said. "But she's constrained to the palace, so most of it was hearsay. I'll need a full report."

The orc nodded.

"The Empire just fucked us hard," Juniper bluntly said. "I can't actually prove it's them, but it has that Wasteland reek."

I grimaced. That'd been Fadila's opinion as well, but I'd hoped she might be wrong.

"How bad was it?" I asked.

"Every member of the King's Council is dead," she said. "Around a third of your court officials. It was a godsdamned massacre."

My fingers clenched.

"Ratface?" I quietly asked.

She shook her head mutely.

"Knife to the back of the neck," she said. "He wouldn't have felt a thing."

I closed my eyes. There was a cold, measured part of me that was furious I'd been robbed of a skilled Lord Treasurer for who I had no real replacement. The rest of me grieved the death of a boy I'd known since we were seventeen, children playing war games in the Tower's shadow. Ratface had been with me since the beginning, since Rat Company. He'd been a friend, one of the few I had left. I inhaled, place the tempest of grief and wrath in a box and set it aside. I opened my eyes, calmed.

"Anne Kendall?" I asked.

"First to go," Juniper said. "We think she was one of the primary targets."

And there went the woman I'd considered my most likely successor to the queenship of Callow. I was slightly appalled that my first thought at hearing the death of Baroness Anne confirmed was how it'd complicate the line of succession, but I would not shy away from the facts. Anne Kendall had been a kind soul, a skilled ruler and if not a friend someone I had deep respect for. A patriot, of that rare breed that put the needs of her people above her own. And she'd been, informally, the closest thing to an acceptable successor I had at my court. Malicia – and this was her work, of that I had no doubt, for it'd been a crippling blow to Callow in too many ways not to be – had ordered her killed just to weaken my position. Fury flared, but I mastered myself. *Anger is the death of reason. You need a lucid mind to survive, now.*

"Merciless Gods," I finally said. "Who holds Laure?"

"The got the legate I sent to command the garrison and all his staff," Juniper said. "The highest-ranking officer in the city was a Senior Tribune by the name of Abigail. At a guess, they missed her because she was on leave. She's been on the rolls since the Arcadian Campaign, fought under Nauk at the Battle of the Camps."

I frowned.

"I know of her," I said. "She used to serve under Hune, has a Summerholm accent. She's got a handle on the situation?"

"People went to the streets after your court declared martial law," Juniper replied. "So she had the palace cellars emptied and every winesink in the city do the same on the crown's coin."

"She got rioters *drunk*?" I hissed.

"Drunk enough they weren't able to riot," the Hellhound said. "She didn't have the men to enforce the decree, Catherine, and spilling blood would have been like lighting a sharper. She made the best possible decision, even if she overstepped her authority. I'll state that for the record, if I have to."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Fuck it, as long as it worked," I finally said. "How quick can you have a senior officer in the city?"

"At least a month," Juniper said. "We're camped close to Ankou, at the moment, in talks with General Sacker's legion."

I drummed my fingers pensively.

"Promote her to legate, then," I said. "Field promotion, to be confirmed at a later date. She's in charge of Laure until I can send one of the Woe to take over."

"I'll pass it along," the orc said.

Good. It'd been an unorthodox method, but then that was the kind of thinking the Army of Callow encouraged. If she had the mettle for higher rank, she'd get to keep it. Gods knew I was always in desperate need of fresh talent.

"Did they manage to assassinate within the army?" I asked.

"They tried," Juniper said. "Had agents in the ranks, one made it as high as tribune. The Jacks caught most of them. The rest got knifed before they could do any real damage. Lord Black sends his regards."

I chewed on that, split between relief at my teacher still being on my corner and displeasure as the fact he'd infiltrated the Army of Callow deeply enough his people were comfortable fighting Eyes of the Empire.

"You got his people?" I asked.

"They're under arrest," Juniper said. "None resisted, so I used a light touch. Only soft interrogations."

"Try to get anything they know about Malicia's people," I said. "I'll authorize release back to Black if they work with us."

The orc nodded.

"Ranker has expressed willingness to work with us," she told me.

The first bit of good news today, that.

"Her legion got mauled at the Vales," I said.

"She's got more than half in fighting fit," Juniper replied. "More importantly, she's willing to trade goblin munitions for supplies. Including goblinfire."

"Get your hands on anything you can," I ordered. "Had she said anything about the Empress?"

"Said politics don't concern her, since she's part of an Imperial expedition army under the direct command of the Black Knight," my Marshal grunted. "She'd got no intention of heading east, and she'd publicly turned away messengers from the Tower."

"Malicia's still sending diplomats through Callow?" I frowned.

"Not anymore," Juniper said. "It got bloody, Catherine. When word about Laure got out, fresh off that proclamation from Salia? They butchered any Praesi they could get their hands on. We lost legionaries that were on leave."

Fuck. The last thing I needed was Callowans taking swings at the Army of Callow.

"The Tower hasn't formally declared war, has it?" I asked.

"Not a word from the Empress," she said. "But we're having Praesi troubles anyway."

"The High Lords can't possibly be fools enough to pick a fight now," I said.

"Worse," the orc replied. "We have refugees coming through the Blessed Isle. Ashur's torching the coast and the sack of Nok displaced thousands. The Wasteland's already rationing, so they're moving west where the food is."

"How many?" I grimly asked.

"Two, three thousand for now," the Marshal of Callow said. "Mostly families. There'll Eyes and assassins among them though, that's a certainty. Farmers have been forcing them to remain near the Isle, by force if need be."

So Malicia was dumping her refugee troubles on me. I supposed from her perspective there was no loss to be had. Either I slaughtered them and became even more reviled in Praes, or I allowed them to stay and had to divert time and resources to force order onto the mess.

"We can't allow them to go deeper into Callow," I said.

"If we don't get them out soon, the numbers will keep growing," Juniper said. "And it's only a matter of time until they get hungry and desperate enough to steal from farmers who won't stand for it. When steel comes out it'll get ugly *fast*."

"Our only host close enough is the Summerholm garrison," I said. "And that's the key to our entire eastern defence. If she's baiting it out to ambush it..."

"I know," the Hellhound growled. "Her belly's unprotected, but so is ours. She's short on legions, but she could order the High Lords of the interior to send their household troops."

The worst part was that I knew exactly what Malicia was doing, but there was no easy solution. She'd shaken Callow just as the Dead King got loose to prevent me from intervening in the war with Procer, and now she was trying to tie down my forces with the least possible effort on her part. If she'd sent an army into Callow, she'd had to feed and fund it. To commit men. Instead she'd mutilated the administration of the kingdom, then dropped a mess at the border on my lap. If I wanted to retaliate, I'd have to venture into the Wasteland. Where every major city was a fortress heavily warded and filled with horrors and it was impossible to live off the land. Hells, she could probably raid my godsdamned supply lines to fill her own granaries. I would have called it utter idiocy to provoke the Kingdom of Callow when she was already fighting a losing war with the Thalassocracy, but I knew my army was in no state for a protracted eastern campaign. I needed it elsewhere, and I needed it to be making up for the losses of the Battle of the Camps. If I acted, I risked incurring a major loss for no real gain. If I did not act, on the other hand, I would keep paying for it.

I was too furious to be admiring.

"Pull back all the people in the Fields to Summerholm," I finally said. "Have them bring every bag of grain and herd of cattle back with them while they do. The refugees won't keep coming if there's nothing to be had."

"And if they head towards Summerholm?" Juniper asked.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," I said. "They're refugees, not a legion marching column. It'll take months."

"That's a stopgap," she said. "Not a fix."

"A stopgap is what we need, right now," I said. "I'll send Thief back to Callow to take control of the situation."

Juniper's broad face grimaced.

"You're not coming back?" she asked.

"We need an army," I said. "The Dead King dealt with Malicia instead, so I'm getting us another."

"The drow," the Hellhound said.

"The drow," I agreed softly. "We're out of alternatives, Juniper. The Principate is about to be hit hard from the north, which at least will buy us time. I need Callow stable, and the army in fighting fit. That falls on you and Thief. I'll return as swiftly as possible with reinforcements."

"There's good news on that front, at least," Juniper announced. "We're drowning in volunteers."

I blinked.

"Even after I was named Arch-heretic of the East?" I said.

"That's what got it started," the orc said. "Half of Ankou's been to our camp to enrol, Catherine. And after the assassinations in Laure it was like a damned fire was lit. There's formed Royal Guard coming from as far as Holden to enrol, and there's entire convoys on the roads coming towards training camps. Half a year, Warlord. Give me half a year and I'll have you an army that'll shake this fucking continent."

I exhaled softly. They'd cornered us, hadn't they? The Procerans and the Praesi. And the harder they struck, the harder my countrymen would dig their heels.

"Good," I said. "I don't care if you have to empty every treasure vault in Callow, Juniper, I want them armed and trained. The fights around the corner are going to be like nothing we've seen before."

The orc grinned toothily.

"It'll be my pleasure," she said. "That would have been pleasant note to end on, but I have two more messes to pass you."

I sighed.

"I'm listening," I said. "Wait, shit, Prince Amadis and the Pilgrim. Are they..."

"No assassin went after them," Juniper said. "But the Pilgrim's a third mess, looked at a certain way. He legged it and left the prince behind. We haven't seen sign of him since the killings."

Shit. Yeah, it made sense. I wasn't there for him to work on, and when we'd last spoken it had been with harsh words. The old man wouldn't sit pretty in Laure while the Dead King was on the move. Even if he was so inclined, the Heavens wouldn't let him.

"That's a breach of our truce terms," I said.

"The Hells can we do about it?" the Hellhound said. "Kill Milenan? It gets us nothing."

Much as it irritated me, she was right. The northern crusaders were out of the passage and they'd likely be headed upwards to delay the Dead King. I did not want to do anything that might affect that decision, not right now anyway.

"Keep him under our thumb," I finally said. "We'll settle accounts with the Peregrine another day. What's the first disaster?"

"Don't know if it's that," Juniper said. "But diplomacy's not my wheelhouse. The Snake Eater Tribe sent volunteers to enrol, but there was an envoy with them. She says she's coming on the behalf of the Council of Matrons."

Well, shit. It wasn't the first time the ruthless old bats made discreet overtures to me. Back before we'd purged the worst of the Regals they matron-attendants that rule the Snake Eater Tribe had interrogated Pickler about what intention I might have for Praes, if I ended up on the winning side of a war with the Empire. There'd been no offer, back then. Malicia had yet to bleed enough the Matrons would consider her easy meat. I suspected that with the Ashurans running rampant across the coast and Black strolling around the Principate with half the Legions of Terror, that'd begun to change.

"What do they want?" I warily asked.

"She wouldn't tell me everything," Juniper replied. "Said she'd deal only with you. But I was given a taste, probably to bring you to the table. The Council of Matrons is offering to begin negotiations over the sale of goblin munitions to the Kingdom of Callow."

My fingers clenched. That was very, very dangerous talk. The Tribes were bound by treaty to sell those only to the Tower, and it wasn't the kind of clause that got a slap on the wrist when broken: it'd be called rebellion, if it got out. Even possession of goblin munitions was illegal in Praes. *Highborn* would have

their entire direct family executed if they were caught with a stash.

"Fuck me," I said quietly. "They're preparing to rebel, aren't they?"

"Who the Hells ever knows, with goblins?" the orc grunted. "Does look like it, though. We both know it's been a long time coming."

"And they won't talk with anyone other than me?" I pressed.

"That's what the envoy told me," Juniper said.

Godsdamnit. I couldn't afford to head to Callow right now, no matter how sweet the prize.

"I'll give Thief full authority to negotiate in my name," I said. "If that's not enough, they'll have to wait."

The orc nodded.

"The second thing," she said. "It's the Warlock."

"He's in Callow?" I said, eyed widening.

"He was," Juniper replied. "Long gone by now. He left a message for Hierophant."

"And what would that be?" I flatly asked.

"To head to Thalassina immediately," the orc said. "There's a situation coming to head, and he wants his son there yesterday."

The string of curses I let out at that was foul enough even the Hellhound winced.

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*Max Scherer*

I hope Malicia dies at the end of this story.... She is just worse as Akua. Akua at least knew she was an evil villain and did stuff herself, but MALicia just only seems to plan and scheme and dont really seem to do anything herself. If she at least would lose at some point, but now everything seems to work out for her... I seriously want Amadeus to put the Blade threw her heart just to see her betrayed face.

*Misza Mojczysz Schmidt*



She was so hyped up as manipulator, that no wonder that she got a big manipulative win. Otherwise it would feel as over-exaggeration.

Joan

Sad that Ratface was killed. But I have to say this is totally on Cat. She attempted to assassinate Malicia; even though she didn't seem to take it personally, she couldn't just let that go without a response.

SolaEclipse75

Ratface 😞

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## Chapter 49: Wrangle

*"Forty-two: should a disagreement lead one of the party to leave, you should expect combat within the week as you will either be captured to be rescued by the departed or the opposite. Let it happen, as a common enemy will heal all internal disputes and you can share a good laugh over the corpse of your nemesis' dead lieutenant."*

– Two Hundred Heroic Axioms, author unknown

We were pretending it was a spirited debate. It wasn't. These were the bitterest arguments I'd had with the Woe so far, and currently I wasn't winning either of them. Figured. War on two fronts was never a good idea, but it didn't look like I was going to have a choice about it.

"It's a trap, Masego," I said. "You know that as well as I do."

"My father would not harm me," the blind man replied evenly.

"I'm not saying he'll knife you," I said. "I'm saying that if you set foot in the Empire, there's no fucking way Malicia's letting you leave regardless of what Warlock says. Assuming he doesn't agree with her in the first place. He and I aren't exactly bosom friends, Zeze: we came a heartbeat away from drawing on each other last year."

"Were I still the Apprentice, your objection would have merit," Masego said. "That is no longer the case. Nothing short of my father's full wrath would stop me, and he will not go that far even for the Empress."

My fingers clenched. Then my flank got hit while I was still engaged.

"I'm not going," Vivienne flatly said. "You need me here, especially if you're going into the Everdark."

I shot her a glare.

"We'll continue that conversation in a moment," I told her.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Because you're going to lose your argument with Hierophant, and when you do you'll dig your heels in about this. You hate to lose, Catherine. We settle this now, when you're still reasonable."

"There's nothing to argue about, Thief," I said with forced calm. "It has to be you."

"I am a spymistress," Vivienne replied. "Not a ruler. Send Adjutant instead, it is clearly the appropriate response."

"No," Hakram quietly said, looming tall at my back. "It can't be me. Vivienne, think about this for a moment. Whoever is sent back will need the highest authority possible to settle affairs without trouble. You know what that means."

The dark-haired woman frowned.

"That's irrelevant," she said. "Hakram, I admit without qualms that in matters of rule you are my superior. I will not achieve half as much as you given the same mandate."

"It's not irrelevant," I darkly said. "It's unpleasant to talk about and it's unfair, but it's true anyway: If I appoint an orc regent of Callow in my absence, there will be riots. Maybe even rebellions."

Indrani didn't want anything to do with this mess, thank the Gods, and I wasn't giving Diabolist this close a look into the inner workings of the Woe so I'd sent her to keep Archer entertained. This would have been much, much worse if there'd been an audience.

"Hakram is broadly known to be your second in command," Vivienne said. "And respected by many. His authority would be observed even without the regency. Your court has been butchered, Catherine, it needs to be rebuilt before the chaos spreads any further. That is not my wheelhouse, it's *his*."

"You know whoever I send needs the fucking title, Thief," I hissed. "Stop being obtuse. I've been away from the kingdom for months, the person taking charge needs the legitimacy behind them or it'll start coming apart at the seams."

"Then appoint him Governor-General," Vivienne said. "It carries enough power that-"

"That would make the highest authorities in matters both civil and military greenskins," Hakram broke in calmly. "We are not dealing with a blank slate or arithmetic empty of emotion. I may be an organizer of some skill, but that is immaterial. The amount of resistance I would face would be much larger than yours. Your argument is only correct if stripped of context."

"I can't handle all the balls you have up in the air, Catherine," Vivienne said, voice rising. "You need the entire kingdom's granaries reorganized, you need to get massive amounts of steel to arm all those soldiers the Hellhound is recruiting, you need someone to steady the treasury and rebuild the King's Council and – Gods, do I need to go on? I can't handle all of this, not while also running the Jacks. Hakram could. His entire Role is about taking care of loose ends."

The thing was, she had a point. I knew she'd been very careful not to use the reason she was being so aggressive about this, of course. She didn't want me around Diabolist without her keeping an eye on it. Not, I suspected, because she thought I would suddenly forgive Akua Sahelian for her sins. She knew me better than that. But she saw Diabolist as a weed, and thought it was her duty to burn out any attempt to grow roots. I forced myself to set that aside, and address what she'd actually been saying. Which, unfortunately, wasn't untrue. I trusted Vivienne to run the Jacks and to undertake some other discreet matters, but it was a fact I'd never dropped so much responsibility in her lap before. She'd had the education of a minor noble as a child, even though her family no longer formally held title, but that would only take her so far. What she did remember, she would be out of practice at. *And we don't have forever*, I thought.

Procer would be occupied with the Dead King for the foreseeable future, but there was no guarantee part of the crusader host would not try Callowan borders again if it saw weakness. The Dominion still had two armies on the field, and the League's intentions were opaque to me. My instinct had been that the Tyrant of Helike and his madman of a Hierarch would be taking a swing at the Principate, but that'd been while it was still the dominant force on the board. With Keter on the march, the League might be feeling adventurous enough to aim for other territories. And that was without even considering Malicia, who sure as Hells wouldn't let me bind the wounds of Callow in peace. If Warlock was in Thalassina and cooking up something dangerous enough he wanted Masego to lend a hand, then the Ashurans were about to get a very nasty surprise. That left me the only direct threat at the Wasteland's gated: the Empress wasn't going to stop after a few assassinations. She was only getting started. *And the only person I trust to lead the Jacks in hampering her plans is Thief.*

Vivienne was leagues above Hakram, when it came to shadow games. My second was skilled at sifting through what our informants brought us and digging out the nuggets most important, but he didn't quite have the knack when it came to actually using the Jacks for more than spying. I needed someone to start a knife fight, and Adjutant wasn't the man for the job. But Vivienne wasn't the woman for the rest of it, was she? She wasn't wrong about that. If I forced too many duties upon her, she'd only end up failing at what she was actually good at. Which left me only one way through the mess. I knew what I needed to do was poor tactics, but it still needed to be done.

"You're right," I admitted, and there was a glint of triumph in Vivienne's eyes. "Hakram will go with you. For the sake of appearances you'll still be named Regent."

And there went the glint.

"No," they said, more or less at the same time.

I cast a look at Masego, who seemed mildly irritated our own chat was left unfinished but unwilling to press the matter. He would be. Knowing him, he was probably mentally organizing his arguments without listening to a word of what went on between the rest of us.

"Catherine, you can't go into the Everdark with so weak an escort," Hakram gravelled. "This is madness. The drow are infamously violent and treacherous."

I kept my face blank. He'd never... There was a first time for everything, I told myself. It didn't matter. I had an argument to win and getting emotional about it wasn't going to help.

"I'll have Archer and Diabolist," I said. "It's enough. I'm not going to war with them, I'm going to secure an alliance."

"And who will handle the diplomacy, then?" Vivienne harshly said. "Indrani? You? Or will you allow the butcher of Liesse to speak in Callow's name?"

"Better we dispense with the drow entirely than risk you going into their realm with so light a force," the orc said. "They would be a useful addition, but they are not crucial and results are uncertain. Not worth the dangers."

"It was one thing to put all our coin on the Army of Callow when we had the leash on the Dead King, however laughably feeble that leash was," I replied. "It's another when Malicia's the one who let him out, on unknown terms. There will be battles, Hakram, and there's only so many Callowans of fighting fit. Only so many we can *afford to lose*. We need someone to share the casualties with, or it won't matter that we have good farmland: there won't be

enough people left to till it. If you have another candidate for alliance, I'm all ears."

"You did not answer me," Vivienne said.

"Because what you said was pointless, Thief," I said. "I would prefer Diabolist to serve as an adviser, but if I need to let her do the talking then that's what going to happen. I know you don't like it. I don't either. But there's no point in letting her out of the box if we don't actually *use* her."

"There's a difference between using and trusting," Thief hissed.

"*Enough*," I said, voice rippling with power.

Not Speaking, no, I was not that far gone. I hoped I would never be. Vivienne flinched, and Hakram looked chastened for reasons beyond the obvious. He usually brought his objections to me in private, and I thought he might already be regretting this. He should have known it would sting he'd side openly with Thief in an argument, even if he disagreed with me.

"Callow was just crippled," I said. "You can both argue all you want, that is a godsdamned fact. And we all know the Empress is far from done. Now, the two of you can disagree with me heading into the Everdark with only Archer and a mass-murdering spectre for company, but at the end of the day I have to be the one to go and someone needs to fix the mess back home. Vivienne, you argued you couldn't do it alone. You're right. Hakram goes too."

"He could-" Thief began, but I raised my hand.

"No, he can't," I said. "I've heard your issues with this plan. I have answered them and made a decision. Unless you have something new to add, the only question left is whether or not you'll obey when I make this an order."

Hakram stirred uneasily.

"You're the one who gave me the speech about needing to assert authority," I told him. "I just have. I won't deny the risks. But you can't deny that Callow needs the two of you to get back on its feet, either."

The orc licked his chops.

"The drow are a gambit," he said. "Promise me you will treat them as one. Do not carry your anger over the failure in Keter into this, Catherine. We can survive without them. If the situation spins out of control..."

"Hakram," Vivienne cried out, sounding betrayed. "You know she won't listen if it's just me. Gods Above, stick the damned course."

"There is no perfect solution," the orc said, turning to her. "We take the risks we have to. It's not the choice I would have made, but I'm not the one making the choices. Neither are you."

"I won't bet it all on a long shot," I told Adjutant. "There's a limit to how long I'm willing to stay there as well. But I believe it's worth trying."

He nodded, though his discomfort was still plain on his face. I turned to Vivienne, who was worrying her lip.

"I could refuse to go, even if you make it an order," she said.

She could. The Woe were not sworn to me, save for Hakram, and his oath was not one between queen and subject. It was a deeply personal thing, and not one I would sully by equating with simple obedience. There were few things I still considered sacred, but what the two of us had said on that hill beneath moonlight was one of them. No, for all that I was Queen of Callow I would not call Thief my subject. She was, like most the Woe, my companion. When she deferred to me, it was out of trust and respect. Not because a sister from the House of Light had put a chunk of metal on my head and spoken a few dusty words. Forcing her hand here would shatter the fragile trust the two of us had built since we'd made our pact in Laure. I would have to convince her.

"You're making this about me," I said. "That is beneath us both."

"This is about your decision," Vivienne replied, frowning. "Not your character."

"My decision shouldn't matter to you," I told her. "The question you should be asking is this: is it better for Callow if I accompany Catherine or if I return?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"You are the queen of said kingdom, in case you forgot," she said.

"I'm a warlord who got oil smeared on her forehead," I replied bluntly. "I'm useful to the kingdom, it's true. There would be consequences if I died. If I'm not exactly easy to kill these days, Vivienne. And while it's *possible* my heading into the Everdark without you will end up biting our home in the ass, it's a *certainty* that if you don't return some of our people will bleed for it. Hakram will have too many duties on his plate, as you pointed out. He won't be able to use the Jacks like you would."

"You can't leverage Callow against me, Catherine," Vivienne said, sounding resentful.

"You didn't join up because you liked the look of me," I said quietly. "There was a reason, and you were quite blunt about it. I'm not using a damned thing, Viv. I'm reminding you what we're actually about. It's easy to forget, in the thick of it. I know that well."

The expression on her face was an ugly one, but she did not contradict me. She spat to the side, after a moment.

"Fine," she said. "Damn you, but fine. I'll go. Don't make me regret it."

I let out a relieved breath. If that hadn't worked, I wouldn't have had anything else to trot out. Tired in a way that was nothing physical, I turned my eyes to Masego.

"You two can leave us," I said without turning.

"Catherine," Hakram tried.

"It's been a while," I mildly said, "since I've had to repeat myself so often."

His fangs clicked together, but he didn't say anything more. Hierophant had been sitting silent this whole time, growing increasingly impatient.

"Quite finished?" he said.

"Yes," I replied without a hint of apology.

I gathered myself together for another verbal brawl.

"I spent most of your squabbling mustering arguments," Masego admitted frankly. "I have several, some grounded in fact others in my personal opinion. It took me some time before I realized it was unnecessary to do so. I do not need your permission to go."

"You need my gate, if you want to get there before the year's over," I replied.

"If necessary I will summon and bind a fae of sufficient rank to serve as a gate-maker," he said without hesitation. "Though I would be disappointed by the pettiness of your choice."

I grimaced. He'd be right to be. It was easy to simply think of the Woe as my companions, my closest friends, and leave it at that. The truth was a little more complex. The ties binding them to me were different for all, and though that'd never brought conflict until now I could admit that'd been mostly luck on my part. It'd been going to happen sooner or later. Masego and Indrani were not invested in my fight the way the other two were. For the latter it was an entertaining enough diversion, and she liked me enough to carouse away the 'boring' parts, but for all

that Archer was arguably the least tightly bound to me she also had few other calls on her time. She wanted to travel, one day, but she was in no hurry. Masego had first joined the Fifteenth because he believed it would allow him to witness sights nothing else would, and in this we had delivered. He truly liked us, I was sure of that. Even Vivienne, who'd come late to the band. But his first and paramount love would always be sorcery. After that came family, and though some days I suspected we were half-that in his eyes his fathers had been entrenched in that position for much longer.

If Warlock sent for him, as the man had, Masego would go. Because even after that sting of that betrayal revealed by the echoes of the fall of Keter, he loved the man deeply. I'd almost considered not passing along the message, truth be told. He might not have heard it when I spoke with Juniper, as he'd not been so close. But that would be a betrayal, what was left of my principles had whispered. But he would learn eventually, and it would cost you, a colder part of me had noted.

"I won't withhold a gate no matter your choice," I sighed. "I didn't mean that, and I apologize for implying it."

"Apology accepted," he said, nodding politely. "Though the choice has already been made. This a formality I will entertain until you have made your peace with that."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"For future reference," I said. "When you're humouring people to avoid hurting their feelings, it's best to avoid telling them that."

The dark-skinned man frowned.

"That's rather backwards," he noted. "Would their feelings not be more likely to be hurt if they believed at the start they had a real chance of success?"

"That's – you know what, we can finish that conversation at another time," I sighed. "Masego, I know you have reasons to want to go."

"I do not care in the slightest for the fate of Thalassina," Hierophant said. "Some ritual components of use come from the city, but none irreplaceable. It is my understanding that the Ashurans are your enemy as well, however, so out of politeness I will kill as many as I can before taking my leave."

"And that's appreciated, believe me," I said. "But I need you with me, not on the other side of the continent. If half of what I've heard about the drow is true, your presence would make talks go a lot more smoothly."



Having a mage capable of flattening a mountain in attendance tended to make people a great deal more civil.

"You are quite skilled at terrifying people into obedience," Masego said, and he sounded like he believed it was a compliment. "My presence seems like it would be helpful, but necessary is overstating the case."

"The grand total of what I know about the drow is four pages from Surley's first volume of *Realms of Calernia*," I told him. "I'd be going in blind, without you."

"There is little I have read on the subject that Diabolist has not," he said. "And much of the reverse that is true."

This wasn't going to work. I needed a different angle.

"You won't be safe in Praes," I said. "I'm essentially at war with the Empress and you're my most dangerous sorcerous asset."

"Malicia cannot lay a hand on me without incurring my father's enmity," Masego said. "Which I do not believe she wishes to happen, as he would kill her brutally."

"She could still--"

"Catherine," Masego said gently. "I know you would prefer I remain at your side. I am not displeased by this. Yet there is nothing down your current path that matters more to me than getting answers from my fathers. We are not debating. I am awaiting your final silence."

And there it was. I wondered if this should feel like a betrayal, because it didn't. Hakram siding with Vivienne had, and it was still a pebble in my metaphorical boot to remember it, but this... It would be like getting angry at a fish for swimming. Masego would always do what he wanted. It was the way he'd been raised: essentially untouchable in a nest of scheming and murder, people bending over backwards to curry his favour or accommodate him. In a way, he was no less highborn than Diabolist. He'd had all the privileges of the old blood with none of the duties, and still the heart of him was pure Wasteland. His desires would always come first, and it was unthinkable to him that they would not. I passed a tired hand through my hair.

---

Antoninjohn

It's a trap! Mango

## *Metalshop*

Well this is an interesting change in the group's emotional character, especially hot off the heels of the Woe's display of unity and strength over the course of the Amneisia Plan.

Also the trio of Akua, Cat, and Indrani is amazing to think about the dynamics of. I don't think we've seen Indrani interact with Akua much.

## *OutspanFoster*

I predict a threesome

*Jane*

...Well, uh, I suppose both of them *have* expressed interest in Cat in the past, but...

*mavant*

It would help with the "Archer has no strong ties to the woe" issue if she were at least getting laid, I suppose.

## *onedollargum*

Conversely, I think it more likely that Archer would lose interest in the chase, once having tagged her quarry. Not much narrative tension left on that string, once the sexual tension has been loosened.

*ishner*

It would mirror the dalliance between black and ranger. There is narrative weight there.

## *Cheerless Mirth*

The narrative weight of ranger and black knight was the once the black knight finished the conquest, ranger fucked off to her personal abode and frolicking gaggle of named.

*Jane*

If memory serves, when last we saw them interact, Archer proposed using her as target practice. Not because she was irritated, but just because it seemed like fun.

...I don't think they work on terribly similar wavelengths, and I get the feeling that a full book featuring the two of them forced to work together would end with one of them killing the other out of frustration, followed quickly by the other when they suffered the consequences of whatever was forcing them to work together.

As it stands... I expect a lot of awkwardness, where Cat's the only one really speaking to either of them – complicated by the fact that Cat's much more in the mood to brood, rather than deal with Indrani's Indrani-ness, or Akua's constant scheming. But I may be off my mark.

*Someguy*

Masego is actually right about this. Just get it over with and pick up temporary companions on the way to the Drow.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Yup compared to the Calmities our party so far has zero experience in solo, whereas Black only gather the companions when there is need of them.

*Stormblessed*

This chapter feels like it ended a little abruptly. Like in the middle of a scene or something. I'm not expecting another half to show up, but it really does feel there should've been at least Catherine saying some variation of "I'll open you the gate."

*Agent J*

A lack of closure sometimes illicit the best emotional responses. Besides,

"I am awaiting your final silence."

After a line like that, there's nothing of real value that can be said. Personally, I'd have preferred if she walked away after tiredly brushing her hair, but eh, first point still stands.

*Cir\_C*

I'm glad that there was some personal conflict within Cat's merry band of murderers. Let's see how she does with the Woe fractured in a fairly well realized manner.

*Jane*

Huh, it's been a long, long time since Cat is going into significant danger (by mortal standards, not Cat standards) without either the Woe or an army at her back. I mean, she does technically have Archer, but that's like having a really sharp sword at your side, compared to the tricks that Hierophant or Thief can offer. Diabolist as well, but that's like having a cursed tome at your hands.

Speaking of Akua, you just know she's already plotting how to make use of being Cat's *only* confidant for the duration of her

trip. No idea as to whether she'll get actually some "roots" in, to reference the chapter, but she's certainly going to try. Well, honestly, I suspect she already has more of an "in" than either Cat or Vivienne realize, though it's still pretty shallow. Though... Her plans might actually benefit more from being with the full Woe than alone with Cat; she already has plenty of alone time with Cat by virtue of being in her cloak, while few of the Woe would be willing to talk to her without cause. Meanwhile, if she suddenly comes back BFFs with Cat, the others are definitely going to talk Cat out of it – if Akua doesn't improve her bonds with the party as a whole at roughly the same pace, it's going to cause deeper tensions than it's worth.

Speaking of Vivienne, she really has had a rough week, hasn't she.

*Death Knight*

Dissidence in the ranks, the wretched Woe...

*1queenofblades1*

Well that ended quickly. Was there a mistake in posting the chapter?

*nimelennar*

I'm sure splitting the party will end well. It usually does.

*Alivaril*

Well, it doesn't ALWAYS end poorly. There are sometimes story arcs where characters handle themselves just fine. Usually to illustrate that, while they're most dangerous as part of a team, they still shouldn't be underestimated while solo. That being said, the chosen chapter quote makes that rather more unlikely.

(Also, joining the people saying the end of the chapter felt abrupt.)

[happyhavak](#)

Heroes survive splitting the ranks. Villains get picked off one by one.

*Someguy*

For a Dungeon Crawl sure, but this is a kingdom-building campaign like Pathfinder: Kingmaker so it's a matter of Personnel Assignment.

*mavant*

Nah, it's a Shonen manga. Splitting up for a few months is just what they need to level up!

*BroadAxe*

Don't you know? You never split the party!  
Clerics in the back to keep those fighters hale and hearty,  
The wizard in the middle, where he can shed some light,  
And you never let that damn thief out of sight

*ArkhCthuul*

Woefully lacking in unity and support :p

*Cicero*

Seemed to end rather abruptly. I sort of expect Cat to accede and then ask Masego to deliver a message to Black via Warlock that if he needs a gate all he needs to do is ask.

[DroughtBringer](#)

I'm late! Sorry!  
Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*maresther23*

We are only 500 votes behind of Ward... in the annual rank!

*lqueenofblades1*

So...Masego gets captured and the Woe rescue him? Or Catherine gets captured and the Woe rescue her? Hmm...

*grzecho2222*

Time for "Protagonist gets captured and forced to fight in gladiatorial games"

[Tohron](#)

... which Catherine eventually reveals to have been part of the plan all along in order to get within striking distance of the Night Priestess.

*grzecho2222*

Drow probably handle succession that way  
Also I'm still waiting for the moment when two fighting villain pull out "Ha ha it was first part of my plan at the same moment", because what even is the result of this

*IDKWhoitis*

The damned Demon of Absence ate the rest of the chapter.

### DroughtBringer

Shorter chapter, yes, but does provide some interesting information.

The Woe have lose threads forming, that are pulling them around, and tying them up, and getting them annoyed with each other. If Akua catches wind of this, which she will, she may be able to Alienate Cat from Thief, and move her closer to the tower.

### *Silverking*

Cat, you keep viewing your party splitting up as a bad thing. Don't you know anything about anime timeskips? When your party has had a rough time with their latest opponents, and then everyone goes in a different direction for a while, they all come back with their next power upgrades! Masego gets sorcery training from Daddy Warlock, Thief works with the Jacks to get the combat training she so desperately needs, Hakram's Adjutant Name evolves to Captain (or possibly the Callow equivalent of Chancellor).

Oh, just had a thought: Catherine's biggest limiter in regards to Winter has not been drawing on enough power, but keeping her mind to going Stupid Evil. This is because this leaves her open against the machinations of Good and Practical Evil (like Malicia and the Dead King)...but what if "Classic Evil" with the power to back it up is exactly how to get the drow to like her?

### Javvies

If there's a Callowan equivalent to Chancellor, it's probably something along the lines of Castellan or Steward. At least, for the nominal administrative role/aspects involved; Chancellors often promoted themselves to Dread Emperor/Empress over the corpse of their predecessor, which probably doesn't have an equivalent Name role in Callow. That said, I'm not convinced that there is a Callowan equivalent. Remember, the Callowan crown only came with a Name about half the time, per EE. Sure, some probably got their Names before wearing the crown, and would've had it while being Crown Prince(ss), but ...

### *Allafterme*

I'd like to speculate about the Drow but all we now is they experienced societal collapse somewhere in past & they are backwards to boot...

### *MetruX*

Just a problem: Hakram's Name is not transitional. He is the Adjutant, and this won't change as long as Cat is alive and

kicking. Also, Thief should train with him, not the Jack's, because the whole of the Jack's wouldn't stop a single other member of the woe, and she would be fighting people capable of giving them pause 😊

*Someguy*

I have this image in my head of Masego meeting Warlock and just transmitting a memory packet into his head the Essay "What I learned on my Field Trip to Keter".

*Snowfire1224*

That's the second time Cat has had to pressure Thief into something, the first being the consideration of the Dead King as an ally. I get the feeling that having to pressure her more than once is going to come back to bite her at some point.

[Javvies](#)

Splitting the party for doing things is a classic mistake. On the other hand ... it's not like they've got a decent alternative. Masego going to talk/yell at his fathers is inevitable. Somebody has to pick up the pieces in Callow, and realistically, unless they're aborting the attempt to deal with the Drow altogether and Cat goes to Callow, the best way to do that is the dual team of Hakram and Thief.

That said ... really not sure that the Drow are worth it.

Still not sure why Cat hasn't notified Black that Malicia made a deal to let the Dead King loose. Even if she doesn't want to step on his toes, or base a plan on him and the Legions with him ... giving Black a heads up is the least she can do – she warned Hasenbach, after all. Though warning Hasenbach will probably end up diverting at least some attention from Black.

Wonder where, and how far, Warlock is going to go. And who he'll ultimately side with.

Wait, what happened to the Wild Hunt? Did they just wander off after leaving the city of Keter?  
Or did Cat send them somewhere?

*mavant*

I'm guessing Larat is with Black.

[Euodiachloris](#)

That's a reality-warping degree of cynicism for one location to fail at supporting... o.o I really doubt it: Creation still appears to be more or less in one piece. 😊

*Ezreon*

They are in Arcadia probably, wasting time. She can't scry him over all the distance, mountains and such. Hasenbach has her artefact to establish connection, Black does not

[Javvies](#)

Except Black is somewhere in Procer – he just finished dancing everything that mattered in Cantal, and is heading to do the same to Iserre.

Cat and company are, at the moment, on the same side of the mountains as Black, with nothing in the way but distance. And technically the curvature of the planet. They're on the shore of the lake between the Kingdom of the Dead and the Everdark. Depending on positioning, there could well be mountains in the way of scrying the Observatory in Callow.

—

On the other hand, it has just occurred to me that Cat could intentionally (consciously or subconsciously) be leaving Black in the dark/ not contacting him so as to avoid putting him in a position where he'd be forced to choose sides between Cat and Malicia.

*mavant*

I agree with the above commenters that the ending of this chapter needed, like, one more sentence. It could just be

"Okay."

Or

Final silence it was.

*delspai*

Don't you know you never split the party? Clerics in the back to keep the fighters hale and hardy? You keep the Warlock in the middle to shed a little light, and you never let that damn Thief out of sight!

*ArkCthuul*

Love the callback. Kudos.

*Whale*

I actually like it incredibly that the characters are fleshed out so well that this split, despite not being the best decision for them as a group, felt inevitable.



It really creates a feeling the characters are the one making the story and the author is just here for the ride.

Plus, as someone already said, they need time alone for future character developments and it tends to be put aside when they're with Catherine as she overshadows them with her personality and the scope of her struggles both in their world and in reader's eyes.

### *Iconochasm*

Exactly. There is a price to being the plot-driver in an adventuring party, and that price is that when someone gets snagged by a personal plotline hook, you have to let it happen. Ideally, actively support it.

### *RanVor*

I doubt Masego is in any kind of danger while in Thalassina. Wekesa would never hurt his son, nor would he allow anyone to do so.

Keeping him away and occupied while the Empress deals with Cat, on the other hand...

### [TeK](#)

Didn't expect to see such hypocrisy in Cat, both in her actions and her thoughts. I'm profoundly dissatisfied. Calling Masego selfish while forcing him to choose between his friends and family just cause he's useful? Feeling betrayed that Hakram had an opinion?

### [TeK](#)

Twisting Vivienne into accepting something, again, cause she is tired of arguing, and not even trying to mend the fences after that? Fuck, treating friends like tools and subordinates? And she calls Masego selfish?

Also there's stuff from previous chapter with putting grief and anger in the box and whatnot. Cat has made some character growth, but I doubt it's in the good direction. Also, really unexpected, to be fair. Or maybe I'm just thick, but such conflict (as it implied) needs to be properly foreshadowed, otherwise it feels kinda empty. Like forced drama.

### *Hellspirit*

the Author seems to have a tendency to build everything up at the start of their book and then once Catherine is on top; start pulling out the rugs, making the next situation one step worse than the previous one, only to have Cathrine (her side at least) turn all (everything) around at the end in a power trip.

Considering these, it seems we're pretty close of not at "Rock Bottom" for Cat.

### *Gunslinger*

Opening quote is quite a bit of foreshadowing though one has to consider if hero axioms would apply to the Woe.

Wohoo now we get to see the Drow, always up for more sightseeing though I'm not sure how they fit into the overall picture. I suspect Cat will fail there again before having to rely on Black or something.

*grzecho2222*

All of them are heroes in their own ways,  
"Born under cursed stars...You most of all, Catherine Foundling.  
The five of you would be woe unto all you behold"  
Orphan trying to save her people  
Wizard trying to save the reality  
Thief trying to steal back what was taken  
Warrior trying to make things right  
Former slave trying to be the most free that she can be

### *Amoonymous*

I mean, it's been a mildly large plot point acknowledged in the story itself that Catherine in particular (and by extension the Woe as a whole) are villains playing heroic roles.

I'm pretty sure we've already seen traditionally heroic tropes used in the Woe's favor, so to me the opening quote is such blatant foreshadowing that it's like being hit by a brick (not that that's a bad thing). My thoughts are the "captured" will be Masego since he's going both solo and in enemy territory; whether the captor will be his father or Malicia to use against his father who knows. It is worth noting Warlock could be considered Malicia's lieutenant in context of the preface quote.

It could also just be a setup to subvert that foreshadowing though, but it feels like that'll be less likely.

*grzecho2222*

The lieutenants that I think are left are: Iron Prince to Cordelia, Lady Ime to Malicia, this one general to Kairos, Hakram to Cat and Champion to White Knight

### *RanVor*

And Grem One-eye to Black. Gotta remember this one.

*grzecho2222*

Come to think about it only Hierarch doesn't have lieutenant

*Mike E.*

""Catherine," Masego said gently. "I know you would prefer I remain at your side. I am not displeased by this. Yet there is nothing down your current path that matters more to me than getting answers from my fathers. We are not debating. I am awaiting your final silence.""

Gods I love Zeze.

*Letouriste*

That's probably the most interesting way to go with that. Congratz EE, you found it. The impossible trio deep in the dark forest, the duo not completely trusting each other but complementing each other really well and fitting the problem at hand and finally masego stop being there for safety and easy jokes=> forcing you to explore Archer character more and helping the development of cat-akua strange relationship. I just realized this book really developed Thief and Archer as main characters, they were always in the background before. Same for akua somehow. On another note, I start to hope cat will someday visit some hell and find people she know there;)

*Azure*

I'm with Vivienne here and don't want to see anymore Akua being let off the leash. She's just too good at manipulation and Catherine is just too dumb for her. Splitting the party was necessary here, and yes Catherine had no choice, but she needs to acknowledge that she needs more safeguards against Akua. She needs to put her back in the box and never let her out again, unless either Hakram or Vivienne are around. Catherine cannot handle Akua and will let that leash slip inch by inch. That's the irritating thing about Catherine at the moment. She isn't acknowledging the fact that she isn't capable of handling Akua alone and is instead putting her head into the tiger's mouth.

*RanVor*

You know, Cat didn't get where she is now by playing safe. If she put avoiding risks over getting the job done, she would never achieve anything. There are currently too many messes needing to be taken care of immediately and only so many people to take care of them. This was bound to happen sooner or later. Sure, depending on Akua is dangerous, but in this situation, not depending on her is a game over. This may not be the smart solution, but it's the *only* solution.

*superkeaton*

Don't you know, you never split the party

[Isaac Martinez](#)

Do you remember when Cat let free William and went against her Squire Name?

Could it happen to the Adjutant?

*Snowfire1224*

Theoretically, although I would think for him name damage would occur in a situation where he actively disobeys Cathrine.

*Someguy*

"And so Subira of the Sahelians slew Maleficent and said: 'Emperor am I now, Sinister of name and deed. Let this be the truth of our empire, that iron ever sharpens iron 'til the last cut is made.'"

—Extract from the Scroll of Thrones, second of the Secret Histories of Praes

Someone make Black a sword named "Last Cut".

*grzecho2222*

Dual blades called Long Prices for Cat?

[Euodiachloris](#)

A dagger called "Slights" and a bastard sword called "Prices"...

*unLuckerII*

EE could you update character list? Possibly put update char. list into spoiler button?

*Maginot*

I think I have made an error of confusion.

Is Masego going to the Thalassocracy of Ashur (the country/island to the south) or to Thalassinia (the city in Praes)? With the Augurs prophecy of woe to the south, I thought it the country. Masego's reference to killing Ashurans on the way out strengthened that idea. So too did the comment about Warlock cooking up something the Ashurans would regret.

But the concerns about Malicia and no one to protect Masego seem to indicate the City.

Attacking the Country had seemed brilliant. It had seemed like the coming of a great pincer movement. The Helike Tyrant about to

attack Ashur while the fleets were far away. And the Woe/Warlock creating their own mischief.

Unless the Ashuran fleets have continued bombardments and move closer in, even to the city, then I cannot decide which is which.

*Olisch*

Those axioms were written by the bard, weren't they?

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## Chapter 50: Partings

*"There is no poison more potent than hatred made silent."*

– Arlesite saying

I twisted my boot sharply, feeling fingers breaking under the steel. The fae cried out in pain, though I was less than impressed by how whiny she was being: I got broken fingers all the time, I could tell when someone was being overly dramatic about it.

"So Larat tells me you go by Lughlyn, these days," I conversationally said. "And that you were the Lady of Bright Meadows once. That's Summer, isn't it?"

The thing that was once the Prince of Nightfall was looking at us with a lazy smile, sitting on an overturned stone. The rest of the Wild Hunt was watching us with varying degrees of interest, and more than a few vicious smirks. Just because hey rode together didn't mean they were particularly affectionate.

"It was indeed of Summer, Sovereign," one of the fae called out. "As proud a knight of the Court as there ever was."

Good, they were getting involved. Public torture and humiliation had a way of drawing them in, admittedly, even when it was one of theirs doing the screaming. I'd had more than taking a firm stance with a discipline case in mind when I'd begun this, so their attention was more than welcome. I dug my heel into her palm and there was another sickening snap followed by a hoarse scream.

"So, would anyone care to tell me why Lughlyn is currently on the ground?" I said, opening the proceedings to the gallery.

I glanced at the dark-skinned fae wriggling on the stony shore. She'd come to my attention more than once, of late. First by

picking a fight with Vivienne when she'd been on corpse-scavenging duty, and more recently when she'd decided to open her mouth after being given orders.

"She protested her sworn duties," another fae called out.

"That's right," I said, smiling thinly.

"I would *never*," Lughlyn gasped. "Sovereign, I was merely--"

"Are we now goatherds, to ferry your mortal cattle?" Larat quoted softly. "Ah, Lughlyn. So much pride, so little sense. It was always a guilty pleasure to flay that off of you one layer at a time."

The one-eyed prince of the fae might be first among equals of the Hunt, but he was no caring warden of their welfare. He delighted in pouring oil over the flames whenever he could, and today he'd been handed an opportunity to indulge his darker leanings.

"Now, our good friend is beneath my boot because she happened to be loudest hen in the henhouse," I casually continued. "So she's going to have a bad day, because of that. But we're long overdue another conversation, aren't we?"

Larat laughed, bright and merry and utterly unrepentant.

"Stand tall, Riders of the Hunt," he called out. "We must now be called to account for our many sins. Our queen is a demanding one."

"My fashionably treacherous lieutenant has it right," I said, grinding down on Lughlyn's hand for punctuation. "Any of you remember the Battle of the Camps?"

"We fought under your banner that day, and slew many," one of the fae said.

"So you did," I mused. "When I woke up. Until then you just... watched. As those in my service died."

Keeping the Hunt in line required a very careful mixture of violence and patience, with a sprinkle of unpredictability added to the brew at the last moment. I'd been lax in making them drink it, after the campaign up north began, and my men had ended up paying for that during the parts of the battle where I was dreaming of death. I'd added a little more violence than usual to make it more bitter a draught this time, as they very much deserved it.

"We were given no orders by your Hellhound," one of the fae said.

Ah, finally one whose name I knew.

"Because the lot of you remained out of sight, Seldred," I said. "Now, would any of you care to guess if I'm pleased by that?"

Heel. Lughlyn screamed.

"You would have us shepherd mortals," another fae said, her voice lilting with distaste.

"From now on, in my absence, you will answer to others," I said smilingly. "Thief, first, and if she is not there it will be to Marshal Juniper."

"No oaths bind us to mortal writ," Seldred said, fingers stroking his beard.

I took my boot off the dark-skinned fae's hand.

"Lughlyn, would you care to earn a modicum of mercy?" I said.

"By your will, Sovereign," she croaked out.

"Kill Seldred," I ordered.

The other fae's eyes widened. A heartbeat later and they were already going at each other like rabid hounds. Lughlyn was wounded, but she was also desperate and Seldred had been taken aback by the sudden turn. It evened out. Silver blades sounded against each other in furious fighting, until one of them slumped headless to the ground. Lughlyn stood panting and bloodied, a long wound scarring her torso where the other fae's blade had gone through her mail. I strode up to her, feeling the eyes of every fae on me, and laid a hand on the laceration. Winter flowed through my veins and poured into her, the blood freezing with a snap and the wound slowly closing as my will was ordering to.

"Now, I don't consider this a case of me disciplining you," I told the Hunt. "The dead are dead, and you're useful enough I won't take your heads on a whim. This is a warning, my lovelies. About the dangers of toeing the line with me."

I patted Lughlyn's belly gently.

"You can be on my good side," I said, then jutted a thumb at Seldred's corpse. "Or you can join him. There is no middle ground, and I have no use for defective instruments."

"So spoke the Queen of the Hunt," Larat said, voice carrying without ever rising. "So we shall remember."

I inclined my head towards the one-eyed fae as the others echoes him softly.

"You have your orders," I told Larat.

"They will be obeyed," he promised with a sharp grin, "most carefully."

I cast a last look at the Hunt. A simple public execution would not have cowed them, not in the same way this had. Death they were no stranger to. But being made a spectacle of, so casually? Oh, that would cut pride as well as flesh and those kind of wounds were much more dangerous to fae. They were creatures that feared humiliation more than pain, in many ways.

"Don't look so pleased, One-Eye," I said. "I'm holding you responsible for whatever they get up to, when I'm not there to take a look."

If anything, that broadened his smile.

"You are taking delightfully well to cruelty, my queen," he said. "This lark has been even more entertaining than anticipated."

Well, that was the Larat for you: never more disconcerting than when he doled out praise. I kept my face calm.

"Open the gate," I said. "I have farewells to make."

He rose and bowed with feline grace. It was a short stroll from the beach to the Woe's camp, and I noted with approval that while I'd been sorting out the Hunt the three leaving had finished packing up all their affairs. Indrani was poking at the fire with a piece of driftwood, and shot me a wounded look when I joined them.

"Did you just have a fairy pit fight without me, Cat?" she said. "Because that would be *extremely* inconsiderate, and I expected better from you."

"I was just making a point," I dismissed, then threw her a bone. "I promise if I ever arrange some kind of sordid Arcadian death tournament you'll get an invitation."

The brown-skinned woman looked thoughtful.

"Maybe next year?" she mused. "I mean, they'll start being more trouble than use at some point and if you *have* to get rid of them..."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," I muttered.

The others looked on in amusement, at least most of them. Much as I hated seeing them leave, there was no point in delaying any longer. I reached Hakram first, the tall orc towering over me in his burnt plate.

"Cat," he gravelled. "About yesterday-"



I shook my head.

"Water under the bridge," I said. "I already felt under siege, so I took deeper offence than I should have."

"No," Hakram said, shaking his head. "You were right to be displeased. We debate in private, when we differ. One front."

I clasped his forearm, in the legionary's salute, and after a moment he did the same.

"I won't part with you on bad terms," I told him gently. "Bad enough I won't see you for months. It'd done and buried, let's leave it at that."

He let out a sigh that sounded closer to a kettle's whistle.

"Done and buried," he echoed.

I squeezed his arm.

"I'm leaving you with the roughest work again," I said. "I'm sorry, Hakram. It always seems to end up that way."

He offered a flash of ivory fangs in response.

"At least this way I won't have to decipher that war crime you call cursive before passing instructions along," he teased. "Silver lining, Cat."

I chuckled, already missing him before he'd even left my sight.

"Don't slack on your training," I said. "You won't have Indrani and I to keep you sharp anymore."

"My bones are deeply grateful for it," he snorted, and pulled me into a hug.

My chin still didn't reach his shoulder, but I'd learned where to place my head over the years. The embrace loosened after too short a while. From the corner of my eye I caught Indrani tugging at Masego's robes and messing up his braids, fingers looking for every excuse to linger. Hakram's gaze joined mine, and he let out a thoughtful rumble.

"I didn't think that would last," I admitted quietly.

"She gets bored easily," the orc agreed. "But she was stubborn even before she started rubbing elbows with Callowans."

"Have you..." I said, trailing off.

*Talked with either of them about it, I left unspoken.*

"Last time I tried she defenestrated me and called it awareness training," he muttered. "That one's all yours, Cat."

Well, it'd been a while since I'd last strolled across a field full of buried munitions. I was due another fool's errand.

"Fair travels, Hakram of the Howling Wolves," I said.

"May victory slight your foes, Catherine Foundling," he replied softly.

We broke away, and Vivienne filled the gap within moments. Her face was hard to read, but her heartbeat was steady. If she was angry still, it was an anger mastered.

"Vivienne," I said, hesitant. "I know you're not happy about this."

For a long moment, she stayed silent.

"I know the end of that story," she finally said, discretely glancing at Akua. "You gave an oath. I worry of the journey there, but I'll make my peace with the path knowing the destination is certain."

"It's going to get better, you know," I said. "Sooner or later we'll reach daylight."

She smiled ruefully.

"Will we?" she said. "It doesn't matter. I can be angry with Catherine Foundling but see the sense in what the Queen of Callow has said. They are different people, in the end."

"I don't want to split with things unspoken," I insisted. "Leaving to fester-"

"Enough, Catherine," the dark-haired woman said. "You got your way. I've spoken my piece, and you heard what I did not speak. Keep it in mind, before threading fingers with the Folly's own architect. Necessity is a fickle mistress, and we've learned the dangers of swift gains that sow far losses."

I bit down on my answer. This was as good as it was going to get, and opening the wound again would only make it worse. It left a bitter taste in the mouth, but what part of ruling didn't?

"Be careful," I told her instead. "And be wary."

"I always am," Vivienne Dartwick smiled. "Try not to slip up in the Everdark, would you? Fighting fire with fire tends to end up burn everything down."

"You know me," I lightly said. "A diplomat without peer, I am."

"Well phrased," she noted, amusement bleeding through. "Until next time, Cat."

I nodded back. Indrani had finally let Masego go free, so I caught him by the arm as Thief and Archer fell into the ritual of insults and petty slights that was their way of saying goodbye.

"Zeze," I said.

"Catherine," he said, sounding bemused. "Please don't touch the braids."

My fingers twitched. It was an almost physical need to screw with them now that he'd told me not to.

"As a sign of my deep and abiding love for you," I said. "This once I won't."

"What a merciful queen you are," he drily said.

"That's what they say," I agreed without missing a beat. "I know I've already told you, but don't forget--"

"Trust no one in Praes," Masego said patiently. "Not even Father. We've had this conversation before."

"I guess we have," I sighed.

Asking him to stay one last time would change nothing and sour the farewell, so I forced down the urge.

"Be careful not to provoke anyone you are not capable of killing," he instructed me gently. "And if you can get your hands on any arcane tomes..."

"I'll see what I can do," I smiled.

"Good," he said, visibly pleased.

He sobered a heartbeat later.

"Take care of Indrani," he said. "I believe she might be upset."

*She knows you're heading into the tiger's den, I thought. And without any guarantees, this time, or one of us to watch your back.*

"I will," I said, searching his face for any sign that he might suspect...

Well, I wasn't sure what exactly. I wouldn't know until I got her drunk enough to talk. But it was a sharper with a lit fuse, and the lack of awareness I got from him was probably the only thing that'd kept it from blowing so far.

"I'll leave messages with the Observatory as soon as feasible," he promised. "Stay alive, Catherine. I would be cross if you failed in this."

"Well, you've always been a soft touch," I smiled.

When I pulled him close he stayed stiff for only a moment before gingerly putting his hands on my shoulders. Gods, he was so horribly awkward at times. That thought should not be as fond as it was. We withdrew and I left him to pick up his bags, joining the other two where they awaited. All three of them headed towards the Hunt, already mounted, and I met Larat's eyes before he opened the gate. He inclined his head. We had an understanding, he and I, about the kind of ugly things I would do if any of them were hurt on his watch. Indrani sidled up to me and we watched them pass into Arcadia, standing there in silence until the gate closed and the last wisp of power was gone.

"So," Archer said. "What now?"

"We set out tomorrow," I said. "Tonight, though? I distinctly remember you saying something about a drink called Atalantian baptismal you stole a bottle of."

Indrani grinned.

"Now there's exemplary leadership at work," she said.

Duty could wait until tomorrow, for once.

—

I dropped the bowl in the pile of dishes we'd have to wash in the lake later, having scraped off the last of the stew. I tossed the spoon after it.

"I didn't think you'd be this good a cook," I admitted.

Indrani snorted, sprawled against a stone she'd covered with blankets.

"You're such a city girl," she said. "You think I had people to cook for me, back in Refuge? Ranger passed along camp recipes, but she wasn't the one who tended the pots. There was a pecking order."

"I was under the impression it had grown into a respectable settlement," Akua said, sounding mildly surprised.

She was on the other side of the fire, scarlet eyes luminous in the darkness. Diabolist hadn't touched the stew herself: she was capable of touch, nowadays, but she required nothing to eat. Neither did I, but on occasion it was a pleasant distraction.

"Sure, by numbers," Indrani said, pouring herself a drink of the Dead King's finest rotgut. "But it's not a village, Sahelian. It's just a large camp that exists because the Lady killed the beasts that used to live there. We get traders, now and then, and the dwarves peddle things but it's everyone for themselves."

"Yeah, she didn't strike me as the ruling kind of woman," I muttered. "Not a lot of patience there."

"Good thing, too," Indrani said, handing me a cup. "Otherwise who'd cook, you? You're shit with a pot and everyone knows Callowan food is disgusting."

"I've seen you tear into apple bread like it murdered your parents," I drily replied.

"Well, desserts are fine," she conceded. "But your beer is basically dirt water and there's not a single inn in the kingdom that can do mutton right."

"It's true," Akua noted. "Callowans are infamous for being ignorant of spices and drowning their plates in that horrible Laurean sauce."

"I'm not taking culinary trash talk from a drunken vagrant and a woman whose people think poison is actual seasoning," I replied defensively.

"That fucking sauce is basically poison too, let's be honest," Indrani muttered.

Best avoid getting too deep into that fight, I decided. Both of them were much better travelled than me, so they had depth of argument I couldn't match. Not that there was anything wrong with solden sauce, unless you were some kind of fancy noble. Thankfully, it was easy to distract half of my opposition: I raised my cup and with a cheer Indrani met my toast. The baptismal went down like a cup of goblinfire, and that was coming from someone who could barely get drunk anymore. Indrani had to be burning out some of the effects with her Name, *no one* had that good of a liver.

"Oh, that's the good stuff," Indrani rasped out. "You sure you don't want a cup, Ghost of Bad Decisions?"

"It would not affect me," Akua replied, unruffled by the latest mildly insulting nickname she'd been given. "Truth be told, even before my... current state of affairs, I rarely drank. Enough to prove I'd obtained the correct antidote, but it was never my sin of choice."

"Ugh, nothing worse than a villain that won't drink," Indrani complained. "I thought Praesi were all about living it up. I bet you were all chaste and demure, too."

"Hardly," the shade replied, sounding amused. "I had my own affairs, though given my station they required a degree of discretion."

Indrani topped up my cup and I the way I felt light-headed had nothing to do with the drink. Not yet, anyway. Gods, did she intend to gossip with *Akua Sahelian*? This was surreal even by my standards, and I'd turned into fucking mist this week.

"Come on," she goaded. "Don't hold out on us now, Murder Bitch. We're just getting to the juicy stuff."

"I actually spent the night with Fasili, not long before the battle at Liesse," Akua shrugged.

"Fasili Mirembe?" I said, brow rising. "Hells, you have terrible taste."

"He was not unskilled, if that is your worry," the shade smirked.

Ugh. He'd had a permanent sneer on his face. Not bad looking, since he'd been highborn and the Wasteland did breed for looks, but the notion of him naked was enough to have me wince. Also, now that I thought of it...

"We killed him, didn't we?" I frowned.

"Robber shot him in the back," Indrani agreed. "He still has the skull. We used it when re-enacting Valerian Betrayed, just before the Battle of the Camps heated up. Sappers make a terrible chorus, for the record. Can't reach a proper low note for the life of them."

Well, if Robber's bunch were badly running plays then at least they weren't running illegal scorpion fights. Probably. I hoped.

"Woe to the defeated, as always," Akua said, tone sardonic.

She didn't seem all that broken up about it, but then this was Diabolist. The only person I'd ever seen her care a whit about was her father, and we'd shot him too. I drank from my cup, and watched as Indrani began working on her fourth. We'd reach drunk waters soon enough, by my reckoning. That stuff hit damnably fast.

"Akua, begin the watch," I said, flicking a glance at her.

Indrani laughed.

"She can stay," she said. "I know what you want to rake me over coals about. Surprised it took you this long, to be honest. Besides, Collar Fairy's part of the crew now isn't she?"

"In a manner of speaking," I said. "We have an understanding."

"A slightly longer leash, as long as I behave and prove of use," Akua said, rather matter-of-fact. "Not an unusual arrangement, by my people's standards."

"You sure?" I pressed Archer.

She waved my objection away carelessly.

"Please, Cat," she said. "Her whole thing is reading people. You think she hasn't figured it out if *you* picked up on it?"

I sighed. She wasn't wrong about that, I'd concede.

"Your affections for Lord Masego," the shade calmly said. "I did not believe the matter to be a secretive one, I must admit."

"Hey," Indrani said mulishly. "Let's not get all... formal about this. It's just a thing. That is there."

"It's not a crime," I said. "To have, uh, feelings."

"I can't believe the killer ghost is handling this better than you are," she said, sounding amused.

"I don't really get it," I admitted. "But I don't have to. I just don't want you to get hurt trying to get something I'm not sure can be had."

"I know he's not interested in bedplay, Cat," Indrani snorted. "Come on. Last time he saw me shirtless he asked if I needed healing."

I winced. Yeah, that sounded like him all right. Part of it was that had had a hard time reading cues, but I was pretty sure that when he got close enough to people he started just dismissing the possibility of the cue being there at all. He'd been raised in Praes, so he could at least pretend to be better at social things than he was with strangers, but in closed company he tended to drop the pretence and outright admit when he wasn't sure about something. Which was heart warming, in a way, because it meant he trusted us. It also meant he could get a little rough around the edges since he didn't bother to hold back.

"He has no interest in men either, if it is any comfort," Akua said. "I tried to place such agents in his bed after he joined the Fifteenth, to no avail."

I was not surprised in the slightest that she'd tried to honeypot the Woe, to be honest. I was lucky that back then it'd been Masego and Hakram she could go after, and neither was really the seducible type. Well, Hakram was apparently *really* easy to seduce, but not to get to stick around afterwards. Juniper kept calling him a word in Kharsum I was pretty sure meant 'easy' in a highly unflattering way after she had a few drinks.

"Huh," Indrani mused. "I mean, I assumed, but that's nice to know."

"So you're not unaware that it's not his wheelhouse," I delicately said. "And still?"

"Never really met anyone like him before," she admitted. "Dangerous but without the edges. It's soothing. And he's earnest, Cat. How many people do you know are willing to just be like that? I just..."

*Really like him*, I completed for her. Yeah, I'd been there once or twice. Usually to my disappointment when I got to know the person in question better, but she'd gone about this the other way around. I put an arm around her, tugged her a little closer. She immediately leaned in and bit my neck, because even while venting she remained a wild animal, and I had to slap her belly several times to get her to stop. She laughed quietly after withdrawing.

"I'm not in love, you tart, so don't get all worried about this," Indrani said. "It won't be trouble. I don't even think he's noticed."

*At least a little, he has*, I thought. He wouldn't have asked me to take care of her if he hadn't.

"Of course, I'm not the only one who's lusting stupidly," she mused.

"Let's not go there," I said, frowning.

"Come on," Indrani grinned. "I have a running bet with Hakram about how many times a day you'll give Vivi the eye."

Hakram, that gossipy bitch. If I found out there was a betting pool, there would be *dire* consequences.

"It's just been a while," I said. "Don't read into it."

Indrani leaned back against her stone.

"Right, you've had an empty bed since you called it quits with your redhead," she said. "We'll find you something back in Callow, don't worry about it. Or maybe some drow will fit the bill. Winter Leftovers, what do drow look like?"



"Grey-skinned," Akua said. "Humanoid. Usually of thin frame, even the women, though there is much larger appearance variance between genders than for ogres or elves."

"I honestly couldn't tell whether or not the Spellblade was a man or a woman," I admitted, eager to latch on to the change of subject.

"There is no relation between drow and elves, mind you," the shade noted. "I've read the former take the sobriquet of 'dark elves' quite badly, given that of the two they are the race truly native to Calernia."

Indrani was warm against my side, and pleasant now that she'd stopped biting like a rabid badger. We'd just scratched the surface with our little talk, I was well aware of that. I wasn't the only one who'd been keeping an empty bed for the last year, and it was a much larger change for her than I. But now was not the time to press, so I allowed the chatter about the people I would seek out to wash over me. I was still uncertain of how we'd find the drow in the first place, much less plumb the depths of the Everdark, a niggling worry in the back of my head. We only had so much time to spare. As it happened, it was an empty worry.

It was them who found us.

---

### Javvies

So... example made out of mouthy Fae.  
Heh. Archer, never change.

I foresee a "Take me to your leader" moment coming up.  
Possibly punctuated with violence.

*JJR*

A half dozen drow emerged from the trees silently. Weapons drawn they considered our little group with what appeared to be weariness.

"Hello!" I offered in as friendly a tone I could manage. "Which of you is in charge?"

For a heartbeat they froze. And then they exploded into violence. Not against us, but each other. It was over before any of us could ready our own weapons. 4 of the Drow lay dead. Of the remaining 2, one was bleeding severely from a head wound and had thrown itself to the ground and was clearly

surrendering, even though it spoke a language I did not understand.

The last stood tall and fixed us with a gaze.

"I am the leader of this group."

[onedollargum](#)

That is a fantastic concept and I am totally stealing it for the next time I run drow in DND.

*Aston W*

Yes. That is brilliant. The perfect Cat plan.

[poignardazur](#)

You just made my day.

*Mike E.*

That sir (or maam) was awesome.

*Rup*

Truly Awesome...would love to see a meme of this..."i-am-the-leader"

*Jane*

...Archer, Akua, and Cat engaging in girl talk. That... Is not what I was expecting, I have to admit, though I have no complaints.

*1queenofblades1*

Honestly after this, I don't think the people speculating about a threesome are insane anymore.

Indrani and Cat 'comfort' each other over how unattainable their crushes are, and Akua joins them because why the hell's not? She's already pretty much a part of Cat

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

OTOH, 1st impression of the Drow on the Callow delegate is 3 drunken lady talking about bed stories, truly diplomats without peer.

*RoflCat*

Well, if anything I feel that Archer x Masego would end up being a no-sex romance.

As for the idea of threesome....kinda doubt it. (a foursome with Vivi added though...)  
Although a more plausible idea is the 3 journeying together after everything's over.

Archer leave because everything's boring now.  
Cat goes with her because her job's done, and she leave so people will learn to be independent from her.  
Akua goes along because she's part of Cat and because that'd be one way to ensure Akua 'never come back'

*Jane*

Archer x Masego reminds me of another romance I once read, in *The Feelings We All Must Endure*... In that case, the author deliberately modeled each of the main character's personalities to emphasize one of the seven deadly sins. The character meant to emphasize Lust was romantically involved with the character designed to emphasize Sloth (names omitted because it's been a while since I read the series)...

It was one of the relationships that didn't survive the series; midway through, the two just... Kind of unofficially broke up, and never got back together again. They liked each other well enough, but Sloth was never really interested in providing what Lust desired, and Lust... Well, she liked Sloth, but wasn't going to let having a girlfriend get in the way of her needs. Maybe the two could have made it work, but they weren't able to communicate well enough to find out.

Of course, communication is unlikely to be an issue for Indrani and Masego – they're both quite able to talk, when they know they need to. They both want fairly different things, though, both out of a relationship, and out of life. I can see the two being involved romantically, but I can't see it lasting, though I imagine the friendship and the feelings could quite well survive the inevitable "This just isn't going to work".

But, well, it's not as though I've read ahead in the story – perhaps I'll be surprised in the future.

*Drd*

It would be interesting to see masego's reaction to discovering sexuality after being jumped by indrani. Kind of wonder if it would be an eureka moment, although knowing him it would something magical! 😊

*Flameburst*

Fuck me, he'd discover tantric magic wouldn't he?

### Mental Mouse

> knowing him it would be something magical!

"Did the earth move for you too?"

<looks around at wreckage> "I think the earth moved for everybody!" 😊

### Azure

Lol it was unexpected but in a good way. And I guess Catherine's lusting after Vivienne must be as obvious as Indrani and Masego. Vivienne is not as oblivious as Masego either, so she's either politely ignoring the elephant in the room, or she just thinks that Catherine lusts after every single pretty face and it means nothing. She did join the Woe after Catherine called it quits with Killian so she hasn't seen Catherine in a relationship.

No hug for Catherine from Vivienne though my poor shipper heart.

### Aston W

Viv doesn't actually like girls.

Remember?

Cat is bi.

### TheAtomicOption

Cat has been presented as bi, but we've yet to see her do anything with men except call them good looking. From a romantic perspective this has been a very very lesbian only story so far.

### Jane

It probably doesn't help that, of the men she's been closest to, one of them is her father figure, one of them seems to be ace, and the last is an orc. The women around her have been a lot more approachable.

Of the men, I *could* see a relationship with Hakram, but it would give a lot of people pause.

(Of course, she doesn't *have* to look at people she's close to, but... She's not exactly had a lot of time for something more casual, and anyone she dates is likely to be in a lot of danger, so...)

grzecho2222

"Of the men, I could see a relationship with Hakram, but it would give a lot of people pause."

It would be glorious

*Jane*

Eh... Hakram might be the kind of boyfriend that I'd prefer, but I think Cat x Vivienne or Cat x Akua would be more interesting to read about.

Hakram's calming and reliable, but Vivienne feels like she's slowly undressing some kind of mystery, while Akua feels like a constant fight – and both Vivienne and Akua have some neat "falling deeper into Evil" undertones to them.

*Froggy*

That has been something that has bugged me a bit. I mean when she went out of her way to say that she was bisexual that seemed to be setting up her having actual partners of both sexes at some point, like after Kilian the next person would be a guy or something like that. Instead almost every single time has been her being attracted to girls with the occasional mention that "sure. That guy looks good I suppose" or something along those lines. So it is a whole lot of TELLING us a character trait that we never actually see in practice.

[crowlute](#)

That's not exactly an uncommon experience with bi women, at least as far as I've heard from the bi women in my life. It's not like bisexuality is a pendulum lol

*Azure*

That's Catherine's assumption and she has proven herself to be a unreliable narrator before. Until Vivienne flat out rejects her by saying she's not into girls, I think it leaves the door open on Vivienne's sexuality. Also her assumption that Vivienne isn't in to her, also makes it safe on some level for Catherine to lust after her, as she's unattainable. It would be interesting to see what she would actually do if Vivienne reciprocated. I imagine it would involve major panic attacks and running away from having to deal with her own feelings. Falling in love for Catherine is probably more terrifying than facing the DK.

*Drd*

Good point. And there has been a bit of a barrier between them in the way they've argued the last few chapters, maybe it's been intentional on Thief's part..?

*Rup*

Archer..Akua..Cat walk into a bar...(let your imagination go wild)

*Metalshop*

Lots of really good character moments in this chapter. EE has got some real skill with portraying very satisfying and believable moments of domesticity and comfortable familiarity.

Also love the little world building tidbits. Drow not actually being related to elves is an interesting variation and answers some questions I've been posing myself about them ever since we found out how bullshit elves really are.

[donforrester456](#)

Partings are such sweet sorrow.

*Big Brother*

This was the best. How can I get more of the Murderous Trio in my life?

*Drd*

Get in line!

*1queenofblades1*

>"Not that there was anything wrong with solden sauce, unless you were some kind of fancy noble."

You ARE a fancy noble Cat....

*Jane*

Heyheyhey, her crown is made of *iron*, not *gold*, so she's not the *fancy* kind of Queen.

She's the kind who gets called a murderous warlord who's little better than a bandit, and can't really deny it.

*1queenofblades1*

She's still a Queen ain't she?

Crown of Iron or Crown of Gold,  
A Queen is a Queen...

...No matter how lesbian or murderhappy she is

*Jane*

Hey, I'm just saying, some Queens get swan, other Queens get whatever they "foraged" from farms they passed while on campaign.

*1queenofblades1*

Fortunately Cat is nether of those. She gets her spoils from the skulls of her foes, the death cries of Callowan enemies, and the Woe she brings to all

*Theoreticalhuman*

She did stole a comfy chair from arcadia once

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Drow ≠ Elves

That has been bugging me for so long. Thank God that's been resolved.

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread

Just because hey rode together  
Change hey to they

And many more after that

*QTesseract*

"About the dangers of toeing the line with me."

Toeing the line is actually a good thing, cat should want them to toe the line. It's from locations like military and many schools, where they expect you to line up for inspection. Toeing the line is when the person obeys instructions and does so.

*RanVor*

It wouldn't be the first time Cat used a phrase she didn't know the meaning of...

*Trebar*

It also has a connotation of going right up to the line to see how you can get without crossing it. I imagine Cat is using it similarly to the idea of pushing boundaries to see what they can get away with.

Someguy

I really want to see the Sappers' production of "The Many Deaths of Traitorous" in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan.

WuseMajor

You have my exploding goat.

mavant

AND MY AXE

RanVor

And my vuvuzela.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Do NOT hand the samplers vuvuzelas. I shudder to think what they'd do with them... \*cough\*blunderbuss\*cough\*

[Euodiachloris](#)

...Come off it, autocorrect. "Sapper" is a perfectly cromulent word. \*sigh\*

RanVor

Great. Now you got me thinking about weaponizing vuvuzelas.

d\_o\_l

I want to see it performed by an all Elcor cast.

Strin

Heck these cliffhangers

[OutspanFoster](#)

I know I joked about a threesome in the previous thread, but this chapter is really leading me on. Heh heh heh 😊😏

[DroughtBringer](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

maresther23

Don't forget to vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

lqueenofblades1



Erraticerrata The Chapters are out of order in the side bar.

It goes:

Chapter 48

Chapter 50

Chapter 49

*thecount*

curses! i was ninjaed!!!!

*JJR*

Perhaps it's foreshadowing the release of a Time Demon?

*SpeckofStardust*

Conversation chapter.

A good one to.

And while a threesome isn't going to happen, I honestly could see a cuddlefest.

*thecount*

Thanks for the chapter!

its nice, reading about moments like these...

on another note and another typo: in the sidebar i see chapter 50 is between chapter 48 and 49 and not after 49....

*WuseMajor*

Given that Killian was apparently planning to go off and turn herself into a minor fae, more or less, and Cat turned herself into a bloody Fae Queen, I've always felt like she should pop back up again at some point. If only to help Cat get a better handle on what she is now or become the first vassal of Winter who isn't a rider of the Hunt.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Personally, I think clapping a fae title (and domain) on a half-, quarter- or eighth-fae would be a non-blood-sacrifice way to give them their wings. Unfortunately, they would truly be fae at that point, since you'd effectively be sacrificing their human side to do it. However, that is also what they effectively do with the whole blood magic route, anyway. <\_<

*Drd*

I still wonder if killian could have been one of akua's plants.

*Yotz*

>My fingers twitched. It was an almost physical need to screw with them now that he'd told me not to.

...Oh, how I grok thee, dearest...

*RanVor*

It's adorable.

The torture, I mean.

*RanVor*

On a more serious note, seems like Akua is aware how thin is the ice she's walking on. This is both good and bad.

Good, because it greatly reduces the chances of her doing something stupid which would bite the Woe in the ass.

Bad, because it greatly reduces the chances of her doing something stupid which would serve as an excuse to get rid of her.

Also, the Collar Fairy is canon, yay!

*mavant*

I feel like even your "bad" point there is a good point.

*RanVor*

That depends on how much you want Akua gone.

*mavant*

Zero percent. She's the best.

*Drd*

I'm starting to want her to stick around, at least for a bit. Her character is developing and... not quite softening things, but maybe teaching Cat a lil sophistication, that there are ways to be badass without always headbutting everything.

Of course she can't be trusted even as far as Robber could throw her mind, but she is a very good insight into Preas high born, which Cat will have to face in more detail at some point.

*grzecho2222*

It's another time that Robber artistic side has been mentioned. Still thinking that artistic duels are one thing that Bard can't escape from.

---

I still hope that Hierarch will challenge her to a rock-off.

*Gunslinger*

I'm surprised no one has commented yet on Indrani's delicious nicknames for Ubua. Murder Bitch was my favorite. It has elegant simplicity.

Loved the chapter. Fireside alcohol induced gossip chapters are the best chapters. Also Akua and Fasili... Have to agree with Cat, eww

*d0m1n1c*

"plumb the depths of the Everdark"

Quite the vivid euphemism there, Cat.

[David Rosenberg](#)

I was thinking on this recently, does anyone have a list of all the banners Cat has sewn into her cloak?

Related: did she ever get a banner sewn into her cloak from the 10th crusade, or was that considered a draw?

*Xinci*

I find it strange people are assuming Masengo and Archer could not have a romance. While it might not be conventional I have no doubt they could do wonderful things together that keep their relationship intact(ie.I doubt sex would be the focus but more exploring the various bits of reality to become more). While Masengo may not seem to acknowledge her feelings, far as I can tell he already has. At least partially, just depends on future actions. They both desire to understand and become more than they were in the word. Their goals are similar in truth, just not in origin, so I don't doubt they could travel together on their respective journeys for greatness/understanding. I do suppose though that if it happens it won't happen til later when Indrani goes off to find her limits, Masengo and her going off on adventures into the cosmos/other dimensions/unknown places etc. together makes sense to me as the place where their relationship as it were could flourish. Though that depends on what Cat may make in the end, or if she even succeeds in making anything worthwhile/that will last til the end.

*Jane*

Personally, my doubts regarding the viability of their relationship is rooted in how they have such different lifestyles; Masengo wants to hole up in a tower for years at a

time dissecting reality in precise detail and writing down the results, while Indrani wants to sample the wares of every tavern in the capital, before picking a few fights and wandering off in search of new experiences.

It's not the hardest obstacle to overcome, but it's a pretty big one – and beyond that, they don't really have much tying them together, beyond their common experiences and the fact that they enjoy each other's company.

Of course, Masego isn't exactly dying for companionship, and Indrani would probably like *some* place she can call something like a home; the relationship could work perfectly well with her disappearing for years at a time before coming back to tell Masego all about her travels, spending a few months together before she sets out again. It *can* work; I just don't really see them in a "traditional" relationship, and I could just as easily see the two of them deciding it's not really worth it.

[\*happyhavak\*](#)

Another point to consider is that Masego is well versed enough in incubus summoning that I'm sure even Archer wouldn't get bored.

*mavant*

That feels a bit too much like an Elektra situation.

*Drd*

You're right I think. But it could work while they're tied together as Woe, especially as the party splits up and comes together again, as they miss each others companionship. Could in a way tie them together more.

*Xinci*

Neh, I never really thought of their relationship being traditional. Their roles and goals aren't that different in truth, Archer wants to be BIG, in the narrative/existential sense. She is in the role of a explorer, attempting to become more through her journeys, her carousing is just part of that not really the totality of her character, though it has been in more focus recently. Compared to her mentor, who is the hunter of the strongest, Archer is kind of like her mentor in wanting to find the strongest, bestest, flashiest things. To become greater she seeks to understand the world through experiencing all it has to offer. she tries to integrate the experiences into her character in any way that will make her "bigger" in the narrative sense. Thus her plethora of knowledge on various subjects from various cultures, magic, fauna, etc. She will most likely move on to

new story structures, cultures, and realities the moment she gets a opportunity to do so.  
The thing is Masengo would/will probably do the same thing if they get a opportunity (that won't break their bond with Cat). Masengo wants to understand the world (understanding in this case is to understand, the totality of intricacies, control, mingling, relationships, and becoming, for that part of the world, so he could create a new world/ parts of reality/ realities or bridge parts of that understanding with other parts of creation ). The world in this case is literally everything, his research is not limited to any plane beyond the Woe, his family in the Calamities and perspective/perception gotten from particular spots like the observatory. An example being he only stayed in the observatory because it could let him see across the planes while he was stuck in Callow while Cat was organizing and regulating things. As long as he can find parts of the world to understand, Masengo will go literally anywhere. So I don't doubt Masengo would travel to her if he could learn things in a adventurous other realm with new stories. Archer would go to such places to grow her legend before she dies. There's a fair amount of variables in what kind of stories they would go for together though.  
To reiterate, their roles as characters are to become greater in the scales of reality, the timings of their methodologies are different but they often intersect as their goals are the same in many ways.  
May be a difference in perspective on what romance would mean for such people. Unsure if sex would be the biggest thing with so many potential options for intimacy in different manners.

*mavant*

Well, now I really want to know how drow and elves are different / alike. I wish Masengo were around to expound!

*superkeaton*

Does Cat fucking Akua count as masturbation, or S&M?

[Euodiachloris](#)

\*shrugs\* When it comes to fae and dark eldar, do such distinctions matter?

*Aston W*

Red Letter and Black Letter the Praesi.

And could the Dark Elves be another failed experiment of storytelling?

Immortal but mortality hits them.

*Barrendur*

I'm a little dismayed that Cat just visited torture and murder, respectively, on two insubordinate members of the Wild Hunt... and she did it without reservation, consideration or hesitation. Cat seems to have now dispensed with even a token soul-searching; no thoughts of dismay and no revulsion for her acts as she tortures one Fae and has another slain...

Cat had more of a sympathetic/empathetic response when she hanged the corrupt governor of Callow, and \*he\* had it coming.

[Tohron](#)

Admittedly, few militaries are lenient to people who effectively desert in the middle of a battle – in this setting, I expect most of them would have the deserters executed. Her lack of empathy can partly be attributed to them being fae, and thus inclined to torture others for simple amusement. That said, she does seem to be getting more comfortable using some of the nastier tools at her disposal.

*BLH989*

Fae come back so does it really matter if they die?

*Rup*

Not sure...but i think they don't if killed outside Arcadia..and even in Arcadia the cycle may have broken as Summer-Winter merged??

[Mental Mouse](#)

She treated them according to their own standards, which she understands a lot better since she essentially became one of them.

*Kaz Adewuyi*

I say Archer and Misago would work quite well. I mean it might not be sex based although considering how much Misago cares about learning stuff and studying I think it be weird if he never had sex eventually especially given his parents. But really they both want similar things. Archer wants to the explore the world and see new things plus gain experiences while spreading her legend. Misago wants to study the rules of magic which kinda means he has to explore to find new magical phenomena and explore realms. And on the intellectual level Archer is the only one who can talk to Misago about magic. Really what the relationship needs to work is Misago being able to have in DnD parlance the Magnificent Mansion so he can move his lab with him. I mean we know you can make

pocket dimensions and portals so it should be doable enough. Honestly, I posit Misago is not entirely human his origin story is he doesn't remember anything besides growing up in a pocket dimension so I guess he is half Human and half Demon. The demon side is suppressed and it would explain how he miraculously seems to dodge demonic corruption.

### Mental Mouse

I don't think that sort of crossbreeding quite makes sense in the Guide universe, given different orders of Creation. The Wiki says Masego is adopted, but I forget where that's discussed. (Probably back in Book I or II.) On the other hand, I could easily see the fathers giving him a bit of extra protection.

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## Chapter 51: First Impressions

*"All serve, by whip or by writ."*

– Inscription carved above the entrance to Stygia's Magisterium

The game made no sense, and I definitely wasn't saying that just because I was losing. I fanned my face with my cards, trading hard stares with Indrani and Akua. Sadly, though the former was already drunk she was also drunk enough she misremembered her cards half the time. That made trying to read her an exercise in pointlessness. I'd already lost two laundry chores to her because she'd been under the impression that a set of four cards in the same suit was actually a bad hand. My eyes narrowed as I studied her stupidly grinning face. Unless that was what she wanted me to think. Was she faking being drunker than she was?

"Your values will not grow from staring at Archer," Diabolist mildly said.

I scoffed at her. The wily ass had just tricked me out of two firewood chores after letting Indrani raise the bid through the roof when she had the most horrible hand we'd seen all night. I was beginning to suspect I was being had by the both of them complicitly.

"This is a stupid game," I said. "No wonder it's from the Wasteland."

"Oooh, she's got no trumps then," Indrani drawled. "She only gets that ornery when she knows she's going to lose the round."

I raised my chin haughtily, above the petty squabbles of the lesser folk around me. I would win or lose as a dignified Queen of Callow. Probably lose, I admitted to myself, since I had two Knaves but no same-suit card to match them, making them worth a pittance of ten points even paired. The Three of Cups stared back back at my face mockingly, promising I would be washing the dishes of these traitorous wenches until the end of days.

"No draw," I said, eager to get my beating over with instead of worsening the costs. "Settle."

"Shit," Indrani said, and slapped her five cards down onto the stone.

Two from the suit of Swords, but only a four and six, and no matches which meant I'd so far managed to pull a surprise upset. Diabolist gracefully added her own to the pile. The Knaves of Cups and Coins, with... shit, equivalent values for the rest. This was going to get ugly. I hastily slapped down my own hand then withdrew by half an inch.

"Succession," I said, and tried to slap my fingers back on the pile of cards before anyone else could.

Akua's fingers almost slid under mine in time, but at the last moment she stopped and a wondrous wonderland of no longer having to traipse around this fucking godforsaken countryside for dead wood presented itself to my eyes. Then Indrani's knife went through my hand, technically touching the cards first and winning succession. There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Archer," I said patiently. "Is there a knife through my hand?"

She mused over that, then met my eyes.

"No," she told me. "'tis but an illusion."

Naturally, I decked her in the face. Not full strength, but hard enough she went flying with a deeply satisfying yelp. Sighing, I drew the knife out of my hand and allowed Winter to knit the flesh back together. Holding it by the tip I pointed it accusingly at Diabolist.

"You could have said something," I complained.

"I debated saying 'watch out, she has a knife'," Akua acknowledged. "But really, that could apply to any of us."

I kind of missed the days when the shade of my hated enemy had stuck to creepy intimate endearments instead of outright sassing me. Horrifying as the thought was, the Woe might have been a bad influence on Diabolist.

"That's going to bruise, you know," Archer called out.



"Be grateful I didn't aim for the spire, you wanton savage," I yelled back.

We'd crossed the Chalice, that quiet lake to the northeast of Keter, and yesterday arrived near what could be considered the outskirts of the Everdark. The tall snow-capped peaks shared their name with the realm of the drow, though in truth their kind occupied only parts of it and all of those underground. This was one of the few parts of Calernia where digging too deep wouldn't unleash a sea of angry dwarves, though drow could hardly be considered a better outcome. There were not gates into the Everdark anymore, Indrani had told me. Millennia ago there had been, massive always-open panes of bronze that led into a hollowed out mountain at the heart of drow holdings, but those were long abandoned and Ranger had allegedly found the inside of the mountain collapsed when she'd tried her luck there. We'd have to try our hand with the Warrens instead. A pretty name, that, for what was a much less glorious reality: the Warrens were no great structure, only a sprawling mess of dank tunnels leading underground. Many were collapsed or leading to dead ends, and there were no surface markers indicating their presence. The only people who knew their locations for sure were the drow who still used them, sending roving bands of raiders and slavers to the surface.

Those enterprising souls were not known for having a lot of success in those depredations. Ages ago, before the Golden Bloom had been seized by the elves, the now-broken kingdom of the Deoraithe had occasionally been troubled by them. Now, though? The surface paths led them into three dead ends: the Kingdom of the Dead, the Golden Bloom and the Chain of Hunger. None of these were known to be welcoming locales to outsiders. Once every few decades it was said a cunning and careful warband managed to slip through dwarven tunnels or other secret paths to reach northern Procer – or much more rarely, northern Callow – but even fewer of those who made it there succeeding at returning home. What little was known of the Everdark these days was learned through exiles, which were rare and tended to settle in Mercantis exclusively. Diabolist had hired a few of them as mercenaries, when she'd gone on her mass-murdering spree, and told me since she'd been rather unimpressed by the quality of their soldiery. Regardless, this was now the second day we were on the hunt for any path into the Warrens and we had nothing to show for it. Indrani had been told of a way down by Lady Ranger, and we'd begun there yesterday, but unsurprisingly it'd been brought down.

It was also marked with blood-red runes, that from what Akua could piece together were a warning about 'the Destroyer' having hunted there. Ranger had evidently proved as charming as one would expect. Dusting herself off, Indrani rose to her feet and shook away the bits of stone stuck everywhere in her clothes. She strolled back to the fire easily, maintaining the pretence

nothing had happened with an admirable amount of conceit. She plopped herself back down and stretched like a lazing cat.

"Next round, then," she said. "I believe I won the succession, so Cat didn't get shit. Hand me my knife, would you?"

I eyed her sceptically.

"Do you promise not to stab me again?" I said.

"And I as well," Akua smoothly tacked on.

We both ignored her.

"I mean," Indrani hedged. "Define stab."

"Archer," I firmly said.

"It's not like it doesn't grow back," she quibbled. "Also, I know you got all pissy last time, but you know I'm right about the mystery stew. Technically, since anything we cut would grow back, if we used it—"

"We're not going to cut off my fingers and put them into the stew so you don't have to hunt rabbits anymore, Archer," I hissed. "It's not happening."

"Ironical," Akua mused, "that cannibalism only became matter of debate *after* the Adjutant departed."

"A good queen would be willing to bleed for her people," Indrani solemnly said. "I'm disappointed in you, Catherine."

"I know you're doing this just to rile me up," I said, eyes narrowing. "You know what? Fine. I bet you wouldn't even do it. If I cut off my thumb *right now*, 'Drani, you going to eat it?"

There was a beat of silence.

"Two firewood chores she doesn't," Diabolist announced.

Those were mine. That utter wretch.

"I'm a little full right now," Archer said.

I let out a mocking humph.

"So let's go with a little finger instead," she finished.

I spun her knife around, catching it by the hilt.

"You wouldn't," I said.

"Hey, use your own," she protested. "I don't want to get fae stuff all over it."

"You *just* stabbed me, you ass," I yelled.

"I mean, you can't prove that," Indrani mused. "Akua's more or less dead, so in Callow she can't be a witness in a trial. It's your word against mine."

"I'm going to break your knife," I told her bluntly.

"Don't, it has great sentimental value," she objected. "I think I killed a guy for it."

"To clarify," Diabolist said. "Did you kill him because you wanted the knife, or did you kill him and *then* want the knife?"

Indrani stroked her chin thoughtfully.

"Yes," she replied.

I laid a delicate finger on the tip of the blade, still holding the hilt, and made eye contact with my rebellious minion.

"I will send you back to Laure in chunks," Indrani seriously promised.

"At least they won't be used in stew," I replied just as seriously.

I caught her wrist when she tried to wrestle me down, but she half-leapt at me and we went tumbling into the rocks. I dropped the knife to free my hand, but she slammed her arse into my belly before I could push down her shoulder. I flipped us around, and tumbling towards a slope we went. In between having a faceful of Indrani's clothes in my face, I glimpsed Akua discreetly pawing through the deck of cards. I repressed a sigh. She was stacking it, wasn't she? A hard bump against the ground jostled me out of my despair, and I wiggled so Indrani wouldn't manage to tie my wrists together with her scarf. She was a fair hand at brawling, but then so was I did have the advantage of being able to lift her with a single hand if I needed to. I tugged at her leg and elbowed her in the stomach, climbing on top and forcing her into a bed of pebbles. Rustle, rustle. No footsteps, but grass parting under feet.

"Oh, I get it," Indrani smirked. "Give me a moment."

She tugged down the neckline of her shirt and thrust out her admittedly shapely tits.

"I'm ready," Indrani announced theatrically. "Ravish me, Black Queen. I am powerless before your might."

"Archer, now is-" I began.

"I get it," she winked. "Hey, Shady Business! Go for a walk or something. My legendary charms have finally overwhelmed her."

"That's not what I meant," I said, almost as irritated by the pun as the interruption.

Her brow rose, a salacious grin splitting her face.

"Good news, Fae Maiden," she announced. "You're back in the game. Lose the top first, I've been pretty curious."

"We're about to have company," I spoke in Kharsum, offering Indrani a flirtatious smile to keep up the pretence for watching eyes.

"Yeah we are," Indrani said, wiggling her eyebrows, but the moment I loosened my grip she began reaching for one of the sundry knives always on her.

They were creeping through the stones now. The slope to the left, leading to a narrow ledge skirting the flank of a rock spire. There'd been a stretch of sparse grass beneath it, I remembered. *Not much green, though. They have to be more than a few if they made that much noise going sneaking through.* I inhaled, yet there was no fear in the wind. I could almost discern heartbeats, but they were too muted to tell apart. Sorcery, or some natural trait? I got up, turning my back to where they were approaching from, and offered a hand to Archer.

"We doing this or what?" she grinned.

"Go easy on me," I said. "My back's still aching."

The sound of a cord being pulled taut was the opening salvo of the dance. I tore away from Archer, blade already half-formed in my hand, and sped forward without missing a beat. I did not need to speak orders to the others. Both Akua and Indrani had been in enough scrapes, either at my side or not, to need no instructions when blades came out. My first drow sighting was little more than a glimpse of silvery eyes set in an angular grey face flanked by strips of obsidian: a heartbeat later the enemy had vanished, pressing itself against the dead angle of the slope. An arrow went flying from above, arced perfectly towards Akua's silhouette by the fire, but when it went through her chest all that happened was the shattering of ice. She was long gone.

"Archer, handle above," I called out. "I want prisoners."

"Spoilsport," she yelled back, landing in a roll that scattered her beddings as she grabbed her longbow.

I'd keep the ones down here busy, trying to limit the damage. I could hear faint heartbeats down the slope, just out of my sight,

and they had quickened. They were waiting for me, to spring attacks in that moment where my eyes would be seeking them out and they would have me right in their sights. If I'd still been the Squire, that might have scored them a wound. Now, though? With a flick of the wrist I formed four monoliths of ice in the air above where they should be lying in wait and allowed them to drop. There were murmured sentences in a language I did not know, but it seemed they had no parry. The working flushed them out, seven of them scrambling away from the falling ice. Warriors, one and all, or at least drow in good shape wearing armour. The sight if it was strange to me, after fighting the soldiery of the west. No steel there, no plate or mail: small strips of obsidian fell down to their knees in a thick layer, kept together by barely visible strips of leather. My eyes were sharp enough to find the discreet runes carved onto the pieces, though I knew not their meaning or purpose. There were few differences among them. None looked terribly older than the others – were they human, I would have believed none older than their late twenties – and I could hardly even tell them apart. The helms, though, had some slight variations. All of them were thin incomplete circles of obsidian closely keeping to the frame of their faces, keeping hair out and going all the way down to the beginning of angular chins. From that dark glass, caps of leather descended towards the back of their necks, set with small round stones, save for one drow. The lower part of that one's cap had a line of long dark feathers tickling down to its back.

Well, the one with the fancy hat tended to be the one in charge. It would do.

While I'd been sifting through the sight of them, they'd recovered from the surprise. Before the ice even hit the ground one of them tossed an iron-tipped javelin at me, though from the corner of my eye I caught another danger. The archer had come out and fired another arrow. I could hear Archer pulling at her own bow, though, so I instead I focused my attention on the javelin. It was well-thrown, aimed right at the centre of my chest. It was also laughably slow to my senses after the kind of fights I'd picked of late. I snatched it out of the air by the shaft and pivoted, throwing it back at the same drow twice as fast. To my surprise, it did not duck. Instead its entire body flickered, shadows swallowing it whole, and it fell into a pool of darkness that stretched and slithered across the stony ground only to reform a dozen feet to the side into the same person. Well, that was a new trick.

"Surrender," I called out.

I realized just after that I'd forgotten about the arrow, musing it wouldn't exactly set the right tone if the moment after demanding surrender I got shot. As it happened, Archer pulled through.

"Trick shot," she crowed.

Her own arrow tore through the fletching of the one the drow had fired, sending it spinning away from me, and it continued at a sharp angle upwards. The sound of obsidian shattering and a pained grunt followed. The one with the fancy hat spoke something in drow tongue, and they all scattered into the shadows. Literally. Lines of darkness spread out, too many for me to follow them all. They had not, unfortunately for them, accounted for Diabolist. The scent of blooming ice filled the air as she formed a construct right to the side of a fleeing drow, fingers of frost ripping the warrior out of the shadowy tendril by the throat. To my approval, she'd gone for Fancy Hat.

"We have your leader," I called out. "Drop your weapons or she'll snap his neck."

Fancy Hat tried to flicker away again, but I wasn't having any of that. I flicked my wrist and a band of shadow tightened around its throat, keeping him in Akua's tender embrace as the flicker... failed, for lack of a better word. A javelin punched through the warrior's chest a heartbeat later, tearing at Diabolist's construct behind it. Right, drow. Infamously not the most loyal of companions. If that'd been the only one that could speak Lower Miezan, I was going to be *pissed*.

"All right, the hard way it is," I grunted.

The kickback from my running start shattered the ground beneath it, and a heartbeat later I was in the midst of them. One pooled into shadows, but an arrow nailed it and it flickered back into drow form with a leg pierced through, hissing in pain. I handled the rest as gently as I could. Spikes of shadow nailed one to the ground, another was sent to think about what he'd done in a bubble of ice and I shaped my sword into a spear for the third, throwing it straight through its foot when it tried to flicker away. There'd been eight in whole, and with one dead and two clipped by Archer that left... two. One was legging it back towards the grass. I let it run – might learn the way into the Warrens from it, assuming that was how they'd all come to the surface. The last stared at me with wide eyes and dropped its curved obsidian blade, slowly kneeling and putting its hands behind its neck.

"Diabolist, containment," I ordered.

An exertion of will had wings coming out of my back and I rose up, following behind the runner. It saw me, and flickered. Clicking my tongue disapprovingly against the roof of my mouth, I went down into a dive. No more running, then. Too much a risk of losing it if it stuck to that form. I wasn't even halfway caught up when the drow emerged from the dark tendril, grey skin gone pale, and began to run away on foot. *So it's exhausting to remain*

*like that*, I thought. I wasn't surprised. There was no such thing as power without a cost. I swooped down like a hawk, boots landing on its shoulders, and it folded without a fight. A bit too much, actually. Its head hit a stone at a bad angle, and with a sharp breath I knelt by its side to check if it was still alive. My fingers went to the jugular, but there was no heartbeat to found there. Drow were only so similar to humans, then. I formed a flat piece of ice and put it before its mouth, tension leaving my shoulders when the surface fogged. Its forehead was bleeding and its eyes closed, but it wasn't dead yet. I swung the body over my shoulder and walked back to the skirmish field, finding the others had gathered the drow together in my absence. Most were bleeding, though we'd avoided outright lethal wounds. Even a lesser one could kill if you bled long enough, though, so the offer of wounds tended might be leverage we could use. I dropped the unconscious drow to the side of the others.

"All accounted for," Diabolist said.

I nodded. Archer rested her elbow on my shoulder, eyeing our prisoners with a deeply unimpressed look on her face.

"Was that trick really all they had?" she said. "I'm feeling a little shafted, not gonna lie."

"You can't use the kind of opponents we've had recently as measuring stick," I said. "We've been scrapping with some of the scariest people on the continent."

"They could have brought a mage, at least," she complained.

"Night's young," I replied, shrugging her elbow off me. "There could be others."

None of the drow were speaking, or even meeting my eyes. They remained kneeling and looking down, what little I could see of their faces resigned. *They think we're going to kill or enslave them*, I realized.

"Do any of you understand this language?" I asked in Lower Miezan.

No answer.

"Do you speak Mtethwa?" I tried in the eponymous tongue.

"Why would *anyone* want to speak that if they didn't have to?" Indrani mused.

I glanced at Diabolist.

"You wouldn't happen to..."

"Speak Crepuscular?" she finished. "I do not. For much the same reason I do not speak cockroach."

"I'm disappointed in your tutors, Akua," I informed her.

"Indeed," Diabolist drily replied. "How dare they fail to teach me a language spoken only by a race that has not been seen in the Empire for centuries, whose influence in the broader continent is so insignificant some scholars do not mention them in the latest histories at all."

"Yes," I agreed without missing a beat. "It was very inconsiderate of all of you."

"Hey, disappointments," Indrani called out in passable Chantant. "Do any of you understand me enough to be shamed by my scorn?"

Three of them stiffened. I grinned, and not pleasantly.

"Would you look at that," I murmured in the same language. "It's finally paid off. All of you who understand me, get up. We're going to have a nice, civilized chat."

Indrani choked on her tongue at that, which did not reassure them in the slightest.

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### [erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, and so Extra Chapter in the corresponding tab. Continuation of the last Cordelia POV, titled Fatalism II.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

More Cordelia?

Now we see how bad she fucked up.

*Agent J*

I'd have preferred to see her reaction in the aftermath rather than her bumbling attempts to prevent what we already know comes to pass.

That said, I'm happy to see she merely failed to stop it. I was under the impression she was blindsided entirely. Cordelia is one of my favourite antagonists thus far.

[TeK](#)



It's important, probably because it will reveal the one who planned this affair. I hope to see Cordelia meeting WB for an alledgedly first time.

*Drd*

The one planned it? The Pilgrim. Can you think of one other reason he left Callow so in time with this? One reason he no longer needs to honour his word, is if all of Callow is now evil, retroactively of course. And what more respected 'Chosen' is there with ties to the house of light?

[Javvies](#)

Not Pilgrim.

He left Callow/disappeared only after Malicia's assassinations, which took place after the news about the result of the Conclave broke in Callow.

In addition, the timing, distances, and travel times dictate that the Conclave was being arranged before the Crusade first suffered defeats.

Pilgrim had neither the motive nor the opportunity. Remember, he had been trying to set Cat up for a redemption arc. Her being declared Arch-heretic basically makes that impossible, or, at the very least, a whole lot harder to pull off.

I'm pretty sure that Bard is the one who set the Conclave up.

[Javvies](#)

Ah yes, being underwhelmed because random drow mooks aren't up to your standards, Archer.

Rejoice, for those standing before you aren't blatantly overpowered assholes.

Though that Akua was unimpressed by the quality of the Drow she hired as mercenaries is likely a bad sign.

*Someguy*

I thought this was a "fuck you" to a certain dual-scimitar wielding drow ranger?

*Raved Thrad*

Dammit, now I want to see an Everdark drow dual-wielding two hand crossbows, with a Kimba-the-White-Lion ripoff as a pet.

Unfortunately, even if Tzzird, above, were a mini-boss Archer would probably spike him and Abmik with two arrows. Or maybe two kills, one arrow, with a trick shot.

Hmm... I wonder if Catherine could then raise them both as undead abominations.

[TeK](#)

Eh. Remember how dwarven mercs are usually middling malcontents? I'd imagine any drow exiled from Everdark had just failed their Backstabbing 101.

*Naeddyr*

But are these exiles or, I think this is probably more likely, guards and scouts? They are just at the door step, there's a uniform thing going on.

*grzecho2222*

"No Malekith, no you stab with other end... Nooo, no even remotely close!"

*FactualInsanity*

I don't expect them to showcase elven levels of overpoweredness, but the ones merc-ing it up in Mercantis *\*are\** the castoffs and exiles. Time will ultimately tell, but it's not unreasonable their core troops are decently threatening. After all, they *\*have\** survived as neighbors of the Chain of Hunger without a continent spanning wall.

*Forrest*

How is she going to go with the typical Foundling diplomacy if she has no cheap wine and only a dagger?

*ATRDCI*

Eh, if fingers can be stew meat, blood can serve as cheap wine

*mavant*

Do you want messianic religions? Because that's how you get messianic religions!

---

Oh, yeah, she's basically a prophet of the Tenets of the Night, to them.

[Javvies](#)

It was an analogy, not a literal description. Though, to be fair, she might literally do that to somebody at some point. Translated, the essence of Foundling diplomacy is giving you the option between accepting whatever deal she offers you, however poor you think it might be, or violence being applied in your direction, and then pointing out that even a lousy deal is better than being stabbed.  
Or something along those lines.

*stevenneiman*

I think Indrani's jokes and a shard of ice can do the same job.

*Big Brother*

Man, Indrani is certainly getting bold with her flirtations towards Cat.  
But I'm still hoping Cat x Vivienne happens.

*medailyfun*

yep, actually Cat can easily form the male body parts to fit the straight girl

*RanVor*

I'm pretty sure Vivienne would find it creepy. I know I would.

*Raved Thrad*

Well, Cat liking Vivienne is now canon, so ViviCat might just happen. Or maybe IndraViviCat, with Masego commenting from the sidelines.

*Metrux*

Hell no. No. Just no. He would never study such depravity xD

*mavant*

I'm pretty sure there will never be Masego / Vivienne, but I propose that we refer to the pairing as ViviSection.

*mavant*

Ack, no, I should have just said "the only vivi for Hierophant is Vivisection."

*Raved Thrad*

"If I understand what I'm seeing, then what, exactly, do women need men for?"

*Drd*

With Mesago and Akua on the sidelines making commentary and comparing notes.

Yotz

And now chapter 49 is placed before chapter 48 in the chapter list...

[DroughtBringer](#)

Vote!!

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Yotz

CompletelyProbably on the other side thematically, but as a direct consequence of the epigraph.

*Gunslinger*

And the Archer Cat shipping tease continues...

This was quite a fun chapter though the slow opening after the ending of the last was a bit surprising..

I wonder if the Drow have Names. Would make for interesting battles and potential allies for the Woe.

*Darkening*

Their culture, such as it is, hasn't been systematically destroyed like the orcs was, so I'd imagine they get the occasional one like everyone else. We'll have to see more of what they're actually like rather than just second or thirdhand rumors before we can really get any ideas on what sorts of names besides, 'probably schemers'.

*SpacyRicochet*

Spellblade, for one.

....

Spellblade was a gilded vale elf I believe

*RanVor*

Son of the Forever King. The Bard "gifted" him to the Dead King in order to discourage the Elves from interfering into her plots.

Yotz

And to discourage the Dead King from claiming another Hell as a part of his pocket universe by siccing Forever King on him.

[TeK](#)

I wonder, does a stew from Cat taste differently from a regular human soup? Does Named soup taste differently? Very important question, I wonder why Hierophant never brought it up.

*Yavandir*

I wonder if stew from Cat can even be boiled after all her body is construct made from winter's power.

[TeK](#)

She's a construct, she can be whatever she wishes. She could be human, or a mist, or ice. Or ham... Or beef. Or cabbage.

*Antoninjohn*

Now we will finally see what Cat's power can do, after all it was mentioned that she can hollow people by implanting them with her darkness and break their will to follow her orders.

*Novice*

I thought she can only do that to the dead?

*Miles*

That's not really an obstacle.

*mavant*

It is if you want to fight the Dead King with them.

*nick012000*

So, given the comments about why enchanted gear isn't common among the people of Praes in the previous chapters, the fact that they're armed with enchanted obsidian armor as standard equipment implies that the Drow have a \*shitload\* of mages. More mages than Praes does, and Praes is the only other force on Calernia with enough mages to have them join the army as a standard unit.

*Naeddyr*

Here's my guess: the Drow are not elves, but they might have a similar kind of longevity, so they're few in number but they're really long-lived. Small numbers of people who live long enough to generate a ton of magical gear might explain why they have the stuff.

These might even be elites.

*nick012000*

I don't think that sort of thing would work, though, since one of the reasons why Praes doesn't equip its soldiers with magical gear is because it requires regular maintenance by mages to remain functional, otherwise it runs out of power and stops working eventually.

*Clmineith*

Each drow might have some basic mage training. They might enchant their own gear, but not be able of much more.

*ALKATYN*

Having them all be low level mages would be an interesting change from the other species we've seen so far. Might explain how they could all do that shadow jumping thing, and how they survive underground

*Morgenstern*

Well, the runes on their armor could just be that. Instead of actual working magical runes...

*Micke*

Indeed, heraldry was my first thought.

*Yotz*

Eh, if heraldic crest can two-time as a magical rune, then why not?

[Barthumphries](#)

Maybe obsidian retains its magical charge longer. It makes for crap easily shattered stuff on the surface, but if you can melt into shadows whenever you're attacked then the enchantment is the important part, not how easily it might be shattered.

So they have gone gone with armor that's not really good as armor but it's great for caring around enchantments.

*lqueenofblades1*

My favorite chapter in the entire series without a doubt lol.

If Archer ever achieves Apotheosis, she'll doubtless proclaim herself the Goddess of Tits and Wine. And finger stew.

Yotz

...yearning to add "and Zoidberg" rises...

Nihilant

spelling/grammar suggested corrections:

but then so was I did have the advantage – but then so was I. I did have the advantage

Indrani smirked. "Give a moment." – Indrani smirked. "Give me a moment."

been a stretchof sparse – been a stretch of sparse

sheer\_falacy

I really do wonder why Cat is going to the Drow for help. Sure, she needs bodies badly, but she has nothing to offer them (besides I guess fae gates to a source of slaves but she and Callow have been very anti-slave) and they seem like dreadful allies – incredibly traitorous (and she already has Larat and the wild hunt ready to betray her) and kind of pathetic as a military force to the point that people are forgetting they exist. Plus not at all unified so she can't make just one deal, she has to do it over and over.

Plus her amazing diplomatic skill, which I guess at least might work on the Drow.

[Euodiachloris](#)

When it comes to left field surprises, they suddenly joining in the merry war above ground would certainly class as one of those.

And, from the sound of it... The drow may need to jump on the opportunity start doing something different: they seem to be lagging behind the rest of the world in a number of areas. 😞

Jason Ipswitch

My guess is that Cat is going to be a sort of Maud'Dib to the drow. She'll somehow click with their cultural psyche, and will offer them an exit from the Everdark. In return, they'll be her fanatics. Heck, maybe she'll just offer them a chunk of Callow somewhere that doesn't really have local Callowans to be angry at them. Recent wars have put a big dent in her population base, and they wouldn't be a bad balance to the goblins she's probably going to be giving a greenlight.,

WuseMajor

I am now accpting bets on the Black Queen becoming the new ruler of the Drow.

Yotz

And accepting her new name "Cacth".

*mavant*

And then she'll cover herself in a suit made of tiyy drow and transform into a giant monster.

*Percula1869*

The humor in this chapter was amazing. I was quietly chuckling to myself the whole time. I also love all the badass moves Cat has now, and the mental image of her cracking the ground when she takes off was super impressive.

*lennymaster*

This chapter gives a whole new meaning to the term "finger food".

*RanVor*

"All serve, by whip or by writ".

Valar dohaeris?

*Raved Thrad*

Well, with Cat, they can die first, and then serve. 😊

*Satan*

I figured they would speak ancient Keteran.

*Anatomy-Criticizer*

On a re-read now.

Man, EE, I love your writing, but please get your facts straight! Assuming humans on Calernia have the same anatomy as humans on Earth, checking for a pulse on the jugular, which is famously a vein and thus has no pulse, would be known to Cat to be useless.

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## Chapter 52: Finesse

*"No, see, you'll profit as well. All you need is to convince five others of contributing coin and when they do you'll get a part of their own contribution. It'll all work out, I promise."*



– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful, convincing High Lords to invest in the construction of ritual pyramid outside Ater

Even after having done arguably worse things, I'd never warmed to torture. I'd once had an interesting conversation with Black about it, where he'd been somewhat equivocal but overall inclined to agree with me. Torture, he'd noted, tended to be unreliable. Some people folded the moment you pulled out their fingernails, sure, but those with a little more staying power would need a great deal of violence before they started talking. And at that point, how could you tell whether they were saying something because they thought you wanted to hear it or because it was actually true? Some heroes side-stepped the whole issue by having truth-telling abilities, but that was bullshit divine intervention – you couldn't reproduce those results with spells, not with any degree of reliability. I tended to get by on my increased senses, since fae eyes and fae ears were much harder to trick than their human equivalent, as I now suspected the Lone Swordsman once had. William hadn't gotten a pat on the back from Above and glaring lights appearing whenever someone fibbed at him, he'd had to rely on Name senses to read the opposition. He'd been quite good at it, in retrospective.

I'd had to mutilate my own soul to get better at that trick than he was, so for once good ol' Willy had me beat from the grave.

I stared down at the drow kneeling in front me, frowning. There'd been three who'd stiffened when Indrani had spoken in Chantant, and we'd separated those from the rest of the prisoners immediately. I'd then shaped Winter into a thick spire of ice hollow on the inside and ordered the first prisoner brought in. Akua was at my side, as she likely had more experience at this kind of thing than any of us. Indrani had been curious but I wanted someone keeping an eye on the rest of the drow. A flick of the wrist shaped a rough bench of frost and I sat down, eyes never leaving the still-silent prisoner. Diabolist had stripped it of its helmet, revealing bone-white hair cut so short I could almost see the skin beneath. I would have preferred the obsidian armour off as well, but there were no obvious clasps to it: I suspected it was like a mail shirt, put on with another person's help.

"We know you understand us," I said.

The drow did not react. Denial? Possibly. Or resignation.

"Akua, raise its head," I ordered.

Diabolist knelt by the prisoner's side, forcing the chin upwards so the drow would have to meet my eyes. It resisted, but only half-heartedly. The eyes were not as silvery as I'd thought. The sclera was white as a human's would be, though noticeably larger,

but it was the iris that caught my attention. It was not entirely silver: there were strands of the colour to be found, more visible than the rest, but the base was a dull brown. Some sort of sorcerous blowback? The black pupil at the centre was uncomfortably shaped, more oval than circle, and I'd yet to see a single drow blink. In a way, it was more troubling to look at their kind than a fae – the fairies were inhuman, with only the barest varnish of similarity, but the drow was close enough to human that the discomfort was felt more steeply.

"What's your name?" I asked.

Silence. There was fear in the air now. I drummed my fingers against my leg, then sighed.

"Answer me," I Spoke.

The prisoner's face twitched into a pained rictus. It was fighting the command, proving to have stronger will than most. It was not enough.

"No one," it hissed, voice dim. "Nothing."

Diabolist rose to her feet and the drow stubbornly went back to looking down.

"Blind it," Akua suggested evenly. "Rip out the eyes and toss it back out bleeding in sight of the others."

"There's no need for that," I said.

This one looked unwilling to provide useful answers even when its arm was being twisted, so we'd try the others before seeing if it was necessary to resume the proceedings a little more sharply. Diabolist wasn't wrong that a dollop of fear would be useful, but she was also proving that even as a shade she had that horrid Wasteland disregard for people. I would not resort to knives without exhausting every other possibility first. I'd gotten an idea of the drow's voice, from that unwilling reply, enough for glamour. Illusions did not come naturally to me, as even now they required more focus than I was typically able to spare when in a fight, but I had the time to weave it properly tonight. A small sphere of shining light formed over my open palm and the drow breathed in sharply when a decent approximation of its voice began screaming hoarsely into the night. I kept the glamour going for thirty heartbeats, then ended it with a harsh snap. Akua's scarlet eyes followed me as I dismissed the sphere and spun glamour again, resting a hand atop the drow's head: a heartbeat later half its face appeared brutally scorched to the naked eye, nose cut off and one eye left a bloody empty socket.

"Sleep," I ordered, and forced a sliver of Winter into its shaken mind.

It dropped without a sound.

"Drag it outside," I ordered Diabolist. "In sight of the others. Then get me another."

"By your will," the shade said, and smoothly bowed.

I flicked my wrist and shaped one last glamour. An eye, this one, though since I'd never actually seen a drow eye out of an eye socket I had to improvise to an extent. Akua came back quicker than I'd expected, the fresh prisoner moving gracefully into the room. I was *pretty* sure I recognized this one. It'd been the one who actually surrendered when things went to shit for their warband. Still, it wouldn't do to leave the point half-made. I popped the glamoured eye into my mouth and chewed, smiling pleasantly at the new arrival. Its lips thinned, darkening to a deeper bloodless grey.

"That will not be necessary," the drow said in perfect Chantant.

I swallowed. So did the prisoner.

"Well, this is promising," I mused. "Diabolist, make our friend a seat."

Ice bloomed and a block spun into existence. It was, I noted, with mild amusement, closer to the ground than my own seat. Praesi, huh. The drow's silvery eyes lingered on the sorcery before it took a seat. The silver strands were much deeper, in this one. I could see almost nothing of the original green. They were also... less vivid than those of the previous prisoner. Interesting.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Ivah," it replied. "Of no sigil."

"I'm Catherine Foundling," I said. "Lately Queen of Callow, though I've picked up a few other titles over the years."

"I greet you humbly, Lately Queen," Ivah said.

I resisted the urge to close my eyes. I was going to let that one go, for the sake of avoiding the awkwardness of a correction this early into the talk.

"Just to make sure I'm addressing you properly," I said. "Would you happen to be a boy drow or a girl drow?"

Ivah blinked, silver fluttering behind long lashes. Not because it needed to, I suspected. It was a conscious expression of surprise.

"I am no longer Mighty," it replied.

"That, uh, was not the question," I said.

"If you were human," Diabolist said. "Which gender would you consider yourself to be?"

Ivah looked a little uncomfortable.

"Cattle has no gender," it said, sounding apologetic.

"As a Callowan, I can tell you that's frankly terrible way to approach animal husbandry," I noted. "But let's keep moving. You were... Mighty, is that right?"

"When still named Dimas, I was third under Zapohar and a rylleh in my own right," Ivah said. "What stands beyond you was toppled and disgraced, harvested of all but a sip of Night and sent to die in the Burning Lands as final mockery."

My eyes narrowed. I lacked context for most of that, but there was one part I had guesses about. I tapped the side of my eye.

"The silver," I said. "Yours is dulled. It's this Night that caused it in the first place?"

"That is so," Ivah sadly agreed.

"Your people are said to pay obeisance to the Tenets of Night," Diabolist said, standing at my back. "The matter is linked, I take it."

"All is one," Ivah gravely said, touching its lips with two fingers. "All is strife. The worthy will rise."

"I don't like the sound of that," I told Akua in Kharsum. "It's one thing for them to have some sort of cult paying dues to Below, but that silver in its eyes is no illusion."

"The drow mercenaries I hired were not capable of the shadow flicker," Akua noted in the same. "Perhaps the power ebbs away from the Everdark?"

"That lot outside is bottom-feeders, Diabolist," I murmured. "And still they were capable of a trick most Named wouldn't sneer at. There's something wrong here. If their lower ranks are this strong there's no way they'd be a ruin of an empire as they supposedly are."

"Unless," Akua said calmly, "that very power is the cause of ruin."

My brow rose. That was possible, yes. Were they all fighting of this Night so ferociously they'd broken their own realm?

"Ivah," I said. "The other drow outside, were they also Mighty once?"

The prisoner smiled thinly.

"None of us are drow, Lately Queen," it said. "Had we returned in glory, perhaps once more, but this is disgrace heaped upon disgrace."

So that was just going to keep happening, huh. Lovely.

"I thought Mighty was a gender," I said.

"Mighty *are*," Ivah stiffly said. "We are not, no longer. Most of them never were. They fought under no sigils, nor knew the favour of cabals. Meat for harvest."

"Mighty are people," Akua suggested in Kharsum. "And so those not Mighty, by definition, are not. Natural nobility, it would seem. Power earned or lost blade in hand."

"It's madness, Akua," I grunted. "If the only way people can ever amount to anything in a society is by killing, that's all they'll ever..."

I trailed off. Well. Yeah, I supposed that *would* collapse an empire. There would be a need to dig deeper into that nightmare of a culture later, but first there were immediate matters to be addressed.

"Do you know a way into the Warrens?" I asked the prisoner.

"The path we took was also meant for our return," Ivah warily said. "The marks on our feathers allow for passage through the Gloom, twice."

"Your feathers," I repeated carefully, then leant forward to flick a finger on one of the strips of obsidian making up its armour. "Those?"

"It is so," the drow agreed.

"What is the Gloom?" Akua probed.

"The gate into the realm of the Mighty," Ivah said. "Only those marked may leave, or enter."

"Indrani told us that when Ranger tried to get into the Everdark she got stuck in the tunnels," I told Akua in Kharsum. "Some kind of warded labyrinth, sounds like."

"We've enough at hand to salvage keys for ourselves," Diabolist said. "Though I would suggest we keep one guide to learn how to use it."

"I'm not going to just execute prisoners, Akua," I peevishly said.

"Those unable to speak Chantant are useless to us," she pointed out.

"It's not a question of usefulness," I said. "*We don't execute prisoners.*"

"Dearest, I understand that mercy is a useful tool," she assured me. "I do not dismiss it. Yet for it to have worth in the eyes of the enemy, there need be a cultural value assigned to it. There is no indication it is so with the drow."

"This isn't about the drow, Akua," I said. "It's about us not putting holes in people who've surrendered. I've got no issue with killing on the field, and I've made my peace with assassinations when there's no other way to avoid making a mess. This is different. They're no real threat to us."

"They are blades we must then keep an eye on," Diabolist said. "Perhaps you and I are proof to such slights, but Archer is not. Nothing we have seen leads me to believe they will honour their surrender the moment the threat of death is lifted."

"If they break that understanding, after being made aware it exists, then they can be killed," I patiently told her. "That's how keeping prisoners of war works, Akua."

"The warband sought to slay or enslave us, and gave no warning before striking," the shade reminded me. "They have not earned such treatment. This is an unnecessary risk."

"It'd be easier to kill everyone, Diabolist," I said steadily. "It always is. But when you behave like that, you end up living in the fucking Wasteland. Is this the simplest way to do things? No. But it's how we do it, because if we don't act civilized then people don't act civilized with us."

Scarlet eyes flicked to the prisoner facing me. Ivah's eyes were watching us carefully, unable to understand the words but not beyond following the tones.

"Will they?" she wondered. "Act civilized, even if we offer them such civility."

"It was always one of your worst habits," I coldly said, "to burn bridges without ever trying to cross them. It may not work. We'll never know unless we *try*."

Diabolist languidly shrugged.

"I offer only perspective," she said. "The decision was always yours."

"It's been made," I flatly said.

I turned away from the shade, and cleared my throat.

"Ivah," I said. "I want you to guide us through the Warrens."

The drow's face fell.

"The passage leads to the holdings of the Kodrog," it said carefully. "The Mighty of that sigil are said to be among the strongest of the outer rings."

"Stronger than the sigil you used to fight under?" I asked.

"The Zapohar once ruled a whole district of Great Parun," Ivah proudly said. "Our Mighty claimed seats on no less than five cabals. The Kodrog would have been broken in an hour's passing, facing our wrath."

It grimaced.

"Their wrath, now," the prisoner corrected sadly.

"Parun was one of the great cities of the drow, before their empire broke apart," Akua told me in Kharsum. "Though not the capital, which I recall to be named Tvarigu."

"I'd guess the more powerful tribes – sigils, I suppose – live in the old cities," I replied. "Not sure what the cabals are, though. Some sort of alliance? Their Mighty seem to be able to belong to both at the same time."

"Warrior lodges, perhaps," the shade mused. "Or an association of influential aristocrats. It is hardly unprecedented."

I'd ask our songbird later.

"We can handle the Kodrog," I told Ivah. "I'd rather avoid a fight if I can, but if I can't I assure you they're not going to stop us. We're looking to speak to, uh, your most powerful sigils. The people that make the real decisions for the Everdark."

"You speak of the entire realm of the Mighty," Ivah said questioningly.

I nodded.

"There is no such thing, Lately Queen," Ivah told me. "No cabal has ever claimed to influence more than two cities, and the Hour of Twilight was massacred by its rivals a century past."

"All right, let me put it another way," I said. "Is there anyone at all that if they speak, everyone in the Everdark will listen?"

"Sve of Night," the drow said in a hushed whisper, touching its lips again.

"The Priestess of Night," Akua said, chancing a guess at the unfamiliar Crepuscular term.

"That is cattle-term," Ivah reproachfully said. "The Sve is Mighty."

Ah. That shed light, in a manner of speaking. So a Mighty was not male or female or anything else, they were *just* Mighty. Priestess was a female term, in Chantant, so the implication would be insulting to the drow. I'd keep that in mind for future reference. No need to give insult to the people I'd come to bargain with.

"And if the Sve gives an order, the Mighty will obey?" I pressed.

"The Sve has already given order," Ivah. "It is the truth of us, embraced."

"If the Sve says the drow are going to war," I patiently tried. "Would people listen?"

Ivah's face creased, folds in the skin appearing that no human could mimic.

"It may be so," the prisoner said. "The Sve does not speak, yet if the silence was broken all would hear of it."

"Then that's where we're headed," I said. "To have a chat with the Sve."

The drow shivered.

"Holy Tvarigu is forbidden," it told us. "Ancient and powerful sigils guard the paths to it."

"I can be convincing. I'm known as a diplomat of great skill, on the surface," I lied.

Akua was too self-controlled to snort, but the way she folded her arms together told me everything she thought about that mild reframing of that slight exaggeration.

"It would be better to be slain," Ivah softly said. "There are things worse than death."

Well, I hadn't expected the locals to be friendly from the start. Gods, when had anyone ever been?

"Tell you what," I said. "Get us into the realm of the Mighty, past the Gloom, and when we're there we'll change guides for the next stretch of the journey. You'll be free to go."



The drow's strange eyes narrowed.

"You would speak oath to this?" it asked.

"I would," I said. "And there are forces beyond your understanding that make me keep to those, when I care to give them."

Ivah hesitated.

"I would be slain, even free," it admitted. "I return bereft of Night, failing the terms of my exile."

Diabolist leaned forward.

"Tell me, Ivah," she said. "You spoke of the Night being harvested. From the living, as was done to you, but can this also be done to the dead?"

"That is so," the drow said.

"We have a corpse," she told me in Kharsum.

The one she'd held, who'd been killed by his own warriors. An easy enough concession.

"Do you need to have killed the person yourself to do the harvest?" I asked.

Ivah shook its head.

"Due can be bestowed," the drow said. "It is rare, yet not unknown."

"There was a warrior with feathers on their helmet," I said. "If you harvested them, would that fix your problem?"

"Tiarom was first in power among the warband," Ivah said, sounding rather eager. "There would be enough to no longer walk as meat, though it would leave me well short of Mighty."

"That sounds like a yes," I said.

I offered my hand.

"Ivah of no sigil," I said. "Should you take us past the Gloom and into the Everdark, I swear to return your freedom to you. We will part ways there without enmity or demand."

The drow looked at my hand curiously, then back at my eyes.

"You're supposed to clasp it," I informed it.

"Strange ways," the drow murmured, but without further fumbling we shook on it.

I rose to my feet, stretching out.

"All right, let's get this done," I said. "Akua, see to the rest of the warband."

"Healing is no power of Winter," she reminded me.

"You're telling me tending wounds wasn't something your tutors went over?" I replied, eyebrow raised.

"I will do what I can, if that is your wish," she conceded. "Though I promise no miracles."

"Never considered those to be in your wheelhouse," I drily replied. "Come, Ivah. I'm getting curious as to this harvest of yours."

The silver-eyed warrior followed without a word. Indrani was carving away at a piece of wood, when I came out, sitting on a stone and watching the others.

"Fruitful talks?" she called out.

"You might say that," I replied. "Wanna see something I assume will be highly gruesome?"

"Do I ever," she enthusiastically replied.

"Come with me, then," I said. "Where'd you leave the corpse?"

She blinked.

"Was I supposed to pick that up?" she asked.

"Where it died, then," I snorted.

It was a short stroll down the slope to where Fancy Hat – Tiarom, apparently – had found himself on the bad end of drow politics. The body was drenched with half-melted ice from Akua's construct, but otherwise untouched.

"Are we corpse-robbing?" Inrdani mused. "I thought we had, like, moral objections to that."

"I'm putting this under religious exemption," I told her. "Ivah, it's all yours."

"Many thanks, Lately Queen," the drow murmured, bowing.

It dragged the body further away from the wetness even as I felt Archer stiffen.

"Did they just-"

"Don't you say a fucking word," I hissed.

"Oh, that's making it into my next chat with Hakram for *sure*," Indrani crowed.

I valiantly ignored her, instead putting the full weight of my attention on Ivah and its 'harvest'. Kneeling at the dead body's side, the drow closed the corpse's eyes before leaning over. I could barely make out whispers in Crepuscular, low and rhythmic. Then the dead drow... shivered. Liquid tendrils of darkness ripped out of the body, leaving bloody holes behind, and they slithered up Ivah's arm beneath the armour. The living drow exhaled. *You are what you take*, a woman's voice whispered in my ear, in no tongue I knew.

Ivah's eyes shone deep silver before dimming again, and I learned that this magical adventure was going to be a little more complicated than I'd like.

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### [DroughtBringer](#)

I've been bad at posting this link, I apologize to all those who get their hopes up each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, just to be able to go vote for the guide, but then do not see the link as the first comment and thusly do not vote. I have made a grave sin, and for that I apologize and will try to be better.

Now, back to your regularly scheduled yell:

GO VOTE!!!!!! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

### [TeK](#)

You disappoint us all. Shame.

*Daniel*

Shame

*Gunslinger*

Once more and you shall be considered Mighty no more, merely meat

*Someguy*

"No, see, you'll profit as well. All you need is to convince five others of contributing coin and when they do you'll get a part of their own contribution. It'll all work out, I promise."

– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful, convincing High

Lords to invest in the construction of ritual pyramid outside Ater

The Bastard! He introduced the pyramid scheme!

*ATRDCI*

He introduced the pyramid scheme in order to build a pyramid.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

If I had a WordPress account I would have liked this.

Is Irritant's real name Ponzi?

[boballab](#)

What? You didn't know that one of his titles was founder of Amway?

*Gunslinger*

Irritating but oddly successful is such a succinct description of Amway

*GreenSunLuminary*

This was absolutely inspired by the LoadingReadyRun Kroglist Pyramid crapshot IMO.

[erraticerrata](#)

No idea what any of that is.

*Jane*

You know, I've always wondered (where "always" is defined as "A year ago at most") whether that's Dread Emperor Irritant (who was unexpectedly successful, despite expectations) or Dread Emperor Irritant (who defined success in unusual ways).

With so *many* of his successes, it could be either way, really...

*Milpool*

The fact that it's both is just yet another example of how oddly successful he is.

Definitely my favourite Dread Emperor

*Dainpdf*

I still prefer Traitorous. He's such a meme.

*Dainpdf*

We prefer the term "Multilevel Sorcery" these days, thank you very much.

*Metalshop*

Oh boy. This is gonna have some wild fucking implications for surface politics if Cat can actually get them on her side.

*Allafterme*

I thought conning the high lords in a ponzi scheme was among Traitorous' wheelhouse 😊

*Someguy*

Being in Irritant's wheelhouse means it will definitely work since it's the first part of his plan.

[donforrester456](#)

Well, you have to admit that 'Irritant' describes Ponzi schemes nicely.

*Dainpdf*

Seems to me like Traitorous is more likely to convince you to start a ponzi scheme, profit from it, then have you arrested for starting a ponzi scheme.

[Euodiachloris](#)

And then you discover he was working in the mailroom all along as an intern. ;P

*Dainpdf*

And then for the ultimate surprise you're actually him, too! He had the real you killed weeks ago and used liberal amounts of self hypnosis.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Huh, interesting chapter.

interesting Drow culture that is being built up here, it does seem that Exiled Drow are kept alive, though. In The Forgotten Realms they were generally put to death, so it \*may\* be a slightly better culture than that of Drizzt Do'Urden, Hmm, I wonder if Cat will be able to do something similar to that of the Drow, and gather power from the dead.

Fair warning, tons of speculation:

"You are what you take"

Cat has taken a lot, over the story.

The Name of the Squire, she took over the other Claimants, then

took it back from (The Goblin who's name I can't remember)  
She took Rise  
She took the mantle of Duchess of Moonless Nights  
She took pieces of Summer's power  
She took on the full mantle of Winter  
She took on the title Queen of Callow  
She took the Dead King up on his deal to visit.

Drow society, however creepy, may be a reflection of Cat.  
Beyond that, it almost seems like Cat's (old) aspects might lead  
up to what we have here, The Drow Take power from the dead, and  
use it till either the power, or the Drow themselves Break, and  
then they Fall from grace, into Exile. Could prove interesting.

[donforrester456](#)

>>She took the

One of those was not like the others...

*mavant*

Little bit of an arson, murder, jaywalking list there.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

The goblin's name was Chider. Took me a hot minute to remember.

*RoflCat*

I'm hoping we'll get a Sve of Moonless Night by the end of  
this. After all, if the moon still get out, is it really  
EVERDARK?

Also, it's about time she get proper worshipers, not in just  
popularity sense but as in deity sense.

And the Drow society is a lot like the 'concept' of Winter,  
constantly taking until it consumes itself.

*Azure*

Hah seems like the drow are all necromongers from chronicles of  
Riddick. Keeping what you kill. You are what you take. Same  
difference.

*burguulkodar*

Aha, so THAT is why the quote sounded so familiar to me,  
though I couldn't recall why. My thanks.

*beleester*

I think the Forgotten Realms drow are slightly more functional.  
IIRC in the Drizzt books they have rules about attacking each

other (well, rules about not getting caught, at least), which keeps the backstabbing down to a dull roar. And they have some actually functional institutions, like schools for fighters, wizards and clerics, so they believe it's possible to become stronger without murdering someone.

*Yotz*

That's what always irked me in the depictions of FR drow society. Authors always recited litanies of cruel drow whose society was built on the unbridled lust for power with betrayal as a chief virtue – well, except for this school. And that institution. And also that immensely powerful ancient noble family. And basically everyone other except for fringe groups and outcasts. In the end, any other society described in those books looked more like stereotypical drow society than drow society itself.

I may be biased, of course – but if you need an example of functioning, more or less, drow-like society, that would be The Dark City of Commorragh.

*RanVor*

Commorragh only works because the Supreme Overlord is unbackstabable. If he died, the city would tear itself apart in no time.

*lqueenofblades1*

Azdrubael did die. And the conflicts stopped because the Nobles wondered if they were next if even Azdrubael himself could be killed.

“With every Incubi bodyguard within Commorragh deployed to stem the tide of Daemons, long-stifled rivalries between the Dark City's elites erupt into bloodshed. Assassinations become commonplace, and the threat of civil war looms ever closer. Yet right when the denizens of Commorragh seem set to tear themselves and their city to shreds, the impossible happens. Asdrubael Vect himself is murdered, cut down by Mandrakes in service to an unknown master. Furthermore, every receptacle that contains a fragment of the Supreme Overlord's essence is destroyed simultaneously, ensuring that he cannot be regrown by the Haemonculi. The internecine conflicts that have ravaged the Dark City are quickly replaced by an uneasy stillness as every Commorrite assesses their alliances. If Vect can be killed, then who amongst the Drukhari can be assured of their own survival?”

They'll eventually get around to fighting but not before attending his funeral to gloat. At which point every

person loyal to Vect who died got resurrected, his enemies killed and as their blood split in great rivers, in a 'Just as Planned' moment the Praesi Highlords can only dream of, he was resurrected using their life force at which point he resurrected some of them as twisted and mutated slaves to his command.

This guy is a 11/10 on the badassery scale. He's like the unholy result of Cat, Akua and Malicia's souls merging into one and being put into an Asuryan body.

*Iqueenofblades1*

For this echo are still confused:

He killed himself to draw his enemies into the open, slaughtered them, used their life force to resurrect himself and his loyal servants, and then resurrected some of his enemies as barely sapient slaves to be murderfucked like Dark Eldar like to do.

*RanVor*

I meant if he died *for real*. Like, permanently.

*Iqueenofblades1*

To be fair, they did think he had died permanently. And they stopped fighting

*RanVor*

They *temporarily* stopped fighting in order to assess the situation. And before they could get back to murdering each other, Vect came back and murdered them first.

[Javvies](#)

Let's be fair here.

While you can technically backstab Cat, it is both unlikely to take and likely to result in her stabbing you in the face.

As such, it seems a distinct possibility that Cat could maybe make the drow work for her. She'd probably have to make some examples out of some of them before that, though. But hey, if the speculation that Cat is going to end up stealing some of the power of Night for herself is correct, each example made would simply make her stronger.

*Dylan Tullos*

Javvies:



I'm not sure that recruiting an entire "army" of backstabbing murderhobos is actually worth it. Even if they're too scared to fight Catherine, their civilization has collapsed because they constantly murder each other.

*Decius*

You don't "recruit" such an army. You use them against your enemies. It's a little bit easier if you provide their supply lines and consider expending them completely to be a desirable outcome.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I'd suggest she disinfect, fumigate and quarantine Night for three months, first. I suspect that is the real eldritch pyramid scheme going on here. 🤔

*Yotz*

I'll disagree.

True powers behind the continuing survival of the Dark City are Haemonculi Covens and Sculptor of Torments in particular, however insane he may be. Commorragh is like a dark reflection of the City of Doors in that regard, true. It's just that Vect is of no consequence in the big picture.

If Vect ever truly dies, Lady Malys will inherit his Mantle, so to say. And in that verse of minuscule probability where they would take each other out – or someone else would take them (which seems even less probable so far), the new Overlord will emerge from the roil and toil of Lower Commorragh streets. Yes, the Dark City will bleed for this, but then again – it constantly bleeds.

Now, if someone would manage to remove all the Heamonculi from the existence...

*RanVor*

The Haemonculi keep the dark eldar from starving, but not from backstabbing themselves into extinction. It's the iron fist of Vect that keeps the violence down to manageable levels.

*Yotz*

And before Vect there were ancient Aristos who managed to do exactly that.

But then Vect's random Salamanders' strike cruiser with ensuing rescue party eliminated most of them, clearing path to Vect's ascension.

And now Cabals and Cults rule the City, dancing on the Covens' strings like marionettes they are.

Vect knows, and is OK with this. Kinda-sorta. It's complicated(C).

Second point – Haemonculi don't feed the populace for free – or at all. Well, food for bodies – maybe, if there are no Cabals ready to overtake that area.

Sustenance of the other kind – that's a coin with which Cults and Cabals acquire Covens' services. Haemonculi don't produce that. Their chief function in context of civilization is population growth. Without their cloning vats Dark Eldari would die out long time ago, Vect's iron rule or not. Yes, they leave tedium of actual ruling to the Archons – but they also need a civilization around to sustain their style of life. And so, civilization exists.

*RanVor*

Ok, firstly, the Haemonculus Covens are actually completely self-sufficient. They have more than enough servants to survive with no help from the Kabals. They trade with Archons simply because it's more convenient this way. Even if the Dark City descended into all-out civil war, they wouldn't lift a finger to save it, because they don't care. The entire Dark Eldar society is a commodity they can survive without. But there is one person who cares and actually makes an effort to keep the society of Commorragh from collapsing. His name is Asdrubael Vect.

Secondly, read my original comment again. I didn't say Vect is unbackstabable. I said the Supreme Overlord is. For Commorragh to survive, this must be seen as a fact for anybody who holds the position, be it Vect, Malys or anyone else. The major factor in the continued survival of Vect is that most Archons effectively gave up on trying to depose him. Even if he died, his successor would have no choice but to uphold his legacy, to the point of making the identity of the ruler essentially irrelevant.

*Yotz*

Firstly, Covens are definitely *not* self-sustainable.

They are in dire need of the same thing Drukhari need in general.

Souls.

Without large amounts of poacher they will die out. Without them to preserve population numbers, tech, and culture – Dark Eldars would not be able to harvest enough souls to stave off continuous assault of Hungry Bitch, and will promptly be devoured.

Secondly – if you'll read my comment/response, I never said Supreme Overlord is of no consequence – only that Vect is. (*re-reads thread*) Umm... At least I meant that, using his position as a substitute for his name. One Overlord or several Aristor like it was before Vect, but Drukhari need a chokehold power above them to survive. So on this we are in complete accord.

*RanVor*

Exactly. If there was no Overlord, or if he/she was weak and easily replaced, the Dark Eldar would swiftly meet the same end as the Drow, with or without the Haemonculi.

Of course, the strict “no backstabbing while on the raid” policy also helps.

*Yotz*

Eh, I remain of the opinion that in case of weak Overlord either new more powerful one will arise on a relatively short time-scale, or Covens will create one because of all the hubbub the absence of such figure is causing.

My point here is – Covens keep culture and knowledge intact, more or less. This means that even in the hypothetical case of total civilizational collapse, Haemunculi would be able to recreate it from scratch simply because they can't be bothered with menial tasks like harvesting the souls beyond their specific and quite limited obsession-driven antics like Theft of Lethidia. Remove Overlord/s – and a replacement often is already here, ready to be drafted from the pool. Remove Covens – and there will be no pool to draft replacement from.

*RanVor*

Also, I believe we have strayed from the original topic of the discussion, which was why the Dark City didn't suffer a societal collapse like the Drow Empire. And the reason for that is that Commoragh has

someone strong enough to keep everyone else more or less in check. Someone so powerful the very idea of messing with him is insane. Asdrubael Vect.

The notion that the Drow Empire collapsed because it didn't have Haemonculus Covens is simply not true.

Yotz

Well, since we don't know about Drow Empire structure, I have no comment on its collapse with regard to Haemunculi. My comments were about Commorragh, and its dependence on them.

*lqueenofblades1*

>Vect dying is of no consequence

U wat m8?

Vect dying is a very, very big thing for the Dark Eldar. He's 14,000 years old and spent 8,000 years of bloody intrigue and murder, clawing himself up from a lowborn slave to the Supreme Ruler and then spent 6,000 years actually ruling the Dark City which is probably more impressive considering everyone is after his blood.

Yotz

And that's precisely why his death is of no consequence in *big* picture. As I said, Lady Malys is more than capable of going toe to toe with him, and can replace him with ease. Yes, Vect is impressive – more than impressive. He more that earned his recent kinda-sorta-ascension. Yes, Vect's true death will shake the Dark City to the roots – but all the Archons Vect was killing for being too ambitious will be able to realize their ambitions. Sooner or later, new Overlord will arise. If he/she/it will prove their merits, they will surpass Vect, otherwise – new Overlord will climb the Tower.

Yes, there – probably – will be another no one even comparable to Vect in a few (hundreds) of years.

But I was talking about *big* picture.

The kind of picture, say, Urien Rakarth lives in. You know – one who was old when Old Eldari Empire was still around. One who *allows* Vect to rule simply because he can't be bothered with such mundane things (and also because he's insane). One who outclasses Vect as much as Vect outclasses everyone else sans Malys. One who

actually can break few laws of Commorragh without any repercussions – not in the last because he *wrote* most of them. *That* Urien Rakarth.

So, yes – with true death of Vect, Dark City *will* bleed.

But it bleeds always.

And soon(\*) there will be new Supreme Overlord.

(\*)terms and conditions apply.

### Javvies

Well that's interesting. In a creepy sort of way.

I foresee these negotiations with the Sve of Night going poorly and ultimately ending with Cat stealing its power.

Especially since Cat heard the "You are what you take" bit.

She might end up being a messianic figure to the drow, and shouldn't that just terrify everybody who is still remotely mortal.

So these aren't just mooks, they're outcast, underpowered mooks who are too weak to be allowed to live back home. Archer should be pleased. And Ranger might get irked, because she apparently couldn't get into the Everdark when she wanted to go hunting drow. But the knowledge on how to get into the Everdark might be useful to trade Ranger for something.

But drow culture, from what we can see of it is nuts.

*fbt*

i have to say, this makes more sense than I would like to admit! E may go a dif direction for several reasons, but your argument seems exceedingly plausible, authorial considerations aside.

*SilentWatcher*

NO! Silence your tongue fool! EE will read your post and decide to do something different! dont mention possible cool twists of the storie, or else EE will do something else just to surprise us.

*papermache7*

Am I the only one who feel this whole thing is truly is absolutely perfect for Cath particular skills? No need for fancy diplomacy, just devour strong people and amass enough Night to dictate what's gonna happen to everybody else.

She'll come back with an army at back and some new party tricks like the Warlord she is.

*Rook*

Absolutely, this is as fitting for Catherine as it could possibly get.

The drow are all about darkness and taking from each other. Catherine is wielding the full might of a winter mantle that holds domain over darkness and taking power. The 'queen of moonless nights' literally walking into a realm of permanent moonless night.

Even before donning the mantle she had fucking – take – as an aspect, which is supposed to be reflective of the core essence of the person in question.

If she can't find any success with the drow, she might as well retire and become an immortal farmer. It'd be like channeling the spirit of Michael Phelps and drowning in a bathtub, you just don't live that down.

*Someguy*

The Tenets of Night is a shitty pyramid scheme based on killing and harvesting Night from corpses and everyone harvesting each other for it...Good luck trying to adhere them to the Rules of War or even basic regimental discipline Cat.

*Just a potato*

That sounds an awful lot like the Wild Hunt to me... The only difference being that they do it for the joy and maybe the story.

*ATRDCI*

Ah, but who better than to reform those Tenets than the Duchess of Moonless Nights?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Cat tries to be civil. She should stop trying.

*Someguy*

It is the Uncivil Wars after all.

[Wizgrot](#)

What is this bullshit about not killing people who have surrendered? A few chapters ago, she killed a mage that cried for surrender after being abandoned by Malicia and did the same with her colleagues, when they tried to surrender.

I can get behind the justifications she might have got at the time, about how less witness=better, as the Dead King might see fit to interview them. But if you do approve the killing of prisoners or people who try to surrender if it meets your goals, you have no right to go grandly announcing principles afterwards.

[J.spring](#)

I believe her behavior in the fight with Malicia was influenced by winter. She did push herself quite far.

[Walter](#)

Cat kills people who surrender all the time, just doesn't like to admit it to Evil Collar Fairy. Lies and violence, yeah?

*Polite Cultist*

Cat has executed her opponent by various means and for various reasons, but never immediately after capturing them. She doesn't casually execute people, is what she's saying here. These Drow are practically harmless compared to a wizard of Malicia's personal guard.

*FactualInsanity*

This will veer into semantics, but there's a distinction between "people who try to surrender" and "people whose surrender has been accepted".

Back in Keter "take no prisoners, kill all witnesses" may well have been part of the plan. By definition that would make all those kills kills in battle, which Cat has limited qualms about.

Here it would be the murder of people (beings?) that have already surrendered and been taken prisoner, simply for having exhausted their usefulness as tools. Cat's not nice, but she has been making efforts to be merely ruthless, not an outright monster.

*medailyfun*

probably she never accepts Praesi as proper prisoners

[Euodiachloris](#)

Praesi do have a tendency towards pulling an [I Surrender, Suckers](#) or two just about every time... So, that always has to be kept in mind. 🙄

*Decius*

Sometimes it's unsafe to accept a surrender. Wastelanders feign surrender as a matter of policy, which means that any

"surrender" from one of them is unsafe, particularly when it takes a form other than the form that you told them to use.

*superkeaton*

Ah, so the drow are much like their D&D counterparts, sans female dominance. Might makes, all else is nothing. And they seem very deeply tied to their source of power.

*Andrei*

The big question now is what exactly is this Night does the power of Winter relate to it in any way, I'm getting the feeling that Cat might bestow her first title in this arc since the powers are interchangeable to some degree, thats how she'll get the drow on her side, the promise of returning them to what they once were.

*Cicero*

Yeah... is it strange that my response to all these revelations is that this is going to be another bad idea, and will turn out worse than Keter did?

Good thing they didn't bring Thief along, she's much too vulnerable for the backstabbing murderfest that is the Everdark. Even Archer is going to have to step up her game.

*Cayle*

Didn't she crucify a bunch of praesi prisoners? That whole conversation felt weird.

[TeK](#)

Nah, she punished war criminals and rebels and mass murderers. She would've made them into her advisors, free to sass and flirt, but alas, the narrative has limited place.

*Decius*

To be fair, Cat did kill the war criminal that she ended up making an advisor, too.

[Walter](#)

Yeah, and left their corpses out on the road. Surrender has NEVER protected anyone from Cat. I dunno what she is on today.

[taliesinskye](#)

Those prisoners were war criminals. She executed them for being party to the mass murder of an entire city.

*Decius*



The crucifixions were the result of a judicial action.  
Executing a war criminal that you captured in battle is  
different from executing a soldier captured in battle.

[TeK](#)

I can't put my finger on it, but I think that Sve is dead. She didn't talk since proclaiming the Tenets, it seems, so it just may be that she was murdered a long time ago, say because she actually decided to take Tenets back and some ancient and powerful cabals hadn't liked it..

*Clmineith*

I was thinking exactly the same. And, also, that the Important-Person-of-Moonless-Nights might become the Sve of Night. If drow's powers are bound to Everdark, she might make it bound to the Moonless Nights instead, allowing them to leave...

*nick012000*

I doubt it. I get the impression she might actually be a drow Villain that ascended to "divinity".

*Drd*

Descended into godhead you mean (divinity doesn't seem to fit the ones downstairs)?

*pyrohawk21*

Okay, so anyone else betting that Catherine Foundling, the Duchess of Moonless Nights is going to end up either taking the majority of Night from the Drow, or claiming the title as Mightiest of Mighty/Sve/Queen/Empress/something like that?

Because seriously, I think it highly unlikely that the fact that Cat is the Duchess of Moonless Night of all things is not going to play a major role in this. Especially when we've just had an entire arc about how Cat's body is something that is not set, but rather an artifice of magic and power... And that the power thing for the Drow is called Night and causes their eyes to become silver, which is strongly associated with the Moon...

*Thecount*

Didnt she become QUEEN of moonless night by default since she is the last winter fae?

*gloomyMoron*

She is de facto Queen, but her power is still only that of a Duchess. She has yet to come into the full power of Winter.

## *ALKATYN*

She's queen of winter (by default, being the last winter noble) and duchess of moonless nights separately. Like how the British royals were kings and queens of England and Scotland, but also Dukes of Normandy

## *Morgenstern*

Actually, that thought (body = magic construct) is rather worrying me. As in "the drow might try to siphon that construct's power away" and "what would happen if they succeed (at least to some degree)"??

## *Unorginal*

Things go very very badly for the Drow as they try to draw upon a well that never ends filled full of the sweetest poison.

## *Grey*

Cats gonna put the night into duchess of moonless nights where it belongs

## *Silverking*

"Catherine doesn't hesitate, she exhibits no restraint, she takes, and she takes and she takes..."

One key question: is the Night explicitly a function of Evil that Procer and the heroes we've met are used to, or is it a separate evil-ish force like Winter? Because if Cat can harness another force that doesn't have traditional weaknesses against Good, that could be a very useful tool. I can almost imagine the Bard working to make that society destroy itself to take them off the board...and then got frustrated when the elves created the Golden Bloom and effectively took themselves off the board.

I hope another thing that sticks with Cat is an increased understanding of how evil cultures can function, or rather, how they fail. The Wasteland's constant backstabbing and hare-brained schemes got them stuck in a rut until Malicia came along. Winter is a slave to its own nature, to the point that even when it wins, it will perish from its own excess. The Dead King survives, but only by effectively being a kingdom of one individual, with the rest being mindless undead, bound Named, and content slaves. Hopefully, by seeing the successes and failures of people who have taken the Evil ball and run with it, Cat will find useful patterns she can exploit so she can eventually beat the Bard at her own game...or at the very least, figure out how to handle a Callow that is slowly turning to Evil.

## Javvies

Well, if memory serves, the drow have been said to be a failed culture that is aligned with Evil.

However, they're so failed and the only drow that anyone other than the Dead King, Wandering Bard, and perhaps some of the dwarves, have ever seen are apparently exiled losers who are too weak to live among other drow, I suspect that the Mighty will be an unpleasant surprise to most of Calernia, since at least some among them were at some point considered by Ranger to be worthy of hunting.

Countermeasures to their powers, other than general ones, are likely to be known/ practiced by few, if any.

I think it distinctly possible that in the process of getting the drow, or most of them, to serve her, Cat will end up claiming access to the sort of power they use – the Night, whatever that is.

While the Night likely has weaknesses, especially to the Light/ Hero powers, specific counters have likely been all but forgotten.

Claiming the power of Night, especially in quantity, will give Cat something else to work with the next time she gets hit with anti-Fae wards/Fae-suppressing magic/Aspects and forgets that she is Winter.

Away any rate ... I think that the Night is something different. It probably is not a completely separated system from the Good and Evil mechanics of Creation.

Winter and Fae powers are fully separated because in Arcadia Good and Evil do not exist.

There is, at present, no indication that the drow or the Night originated outside of Creation and the framework of Good and Evil.

However, the Night, since it appears to be something transferable in a way we haven't seen or heard of before, might very well not be something the drow originally had, and instead somehow created it or stole it from someone, something, or somewhere else. That might explain how they had an empire, only to lose it – gaining access to the Night could have caused a collapse.

## Euodiachloris

I dunno. I'm getting symbiote/parasite vibes from this whole Night dealie. Something Lovecraftian/ Bloodborne this way comes?

I suspect it might even be what is left of the Sve. In part.  
\*shrugs\*

*mavant*

Jesus, that chapter quote nearly killed me.

*mavant*

This read like an Abbott and Costello skit. I can only imagine the next chapter is the establishment of an all Drow baseball team with the other prisoners, whose names turn out to be Who, What, I Don't Know, Today, Tomorrow, and I Don't Give A Darn.

*WuseMajor*

I suspect the last order the Sve gave was "You are what you take."

*lqueenofblades1*

I like how this chapter is called "Finesse" and it involved Cat chewing on a (glamoured) eyeball. At least it wasn't her own tongue...again.

All hail Catherine Foundling, the Black Queen, the Duchess of Moonless Nights and Sole Sovereign of Winter, Queen of the Wild Hunt, Mightiest of the Drow, Arch-Heretic of the East, First of the Woe and the Lately Queen of Callow.

—

You know what I really want though? An interlude from someone at her orphanage. Maybe the Matron or one of the girls who picked on her or whatever. Maybe one of the guys who groped her while she worked at the tavern in Laure, someone she fought in the pits, Booker, the girl she rescued in chapter 1, or her employer/his son at that tavern, maybe even that Praesi Lieutenant she used to gossip with. I want to see what they think of that tiny slip of a girl now being a walking legend and the greatest warlord since maybe Triumphant (because she's certainly eclipsed Black by now and no one else as far as we know has come close to what Cat did, other than Triumphant).

Generations from now, for all you know instead of Dread Empress Triumphant being the boogeyman, it'd be "The Black Queen – May she never return", and all the while Cat is fucking around, maybe in Keter, maybe with Neshamah 😊 (Yes I ship Cat and the Dead King).

[OutspanFoster](#)

My prediction is Cat will have a severe advantage with the Drow that she might learn or grow into at some point during this arc. It will be based on her being of Winter and its ties with whatever Night is. I mean, her Winter power can bring on total darkness. There has to be some sort of tie with Night. Hopefully,

this gives her a much needed power up and she gains some awkward and funny by way of murder allies out of the Drow.

*Drd*

I wonder whether she might find them more of challenge than expected and finally be pushed into the realisation of what she can become when she chooses to fully let go of the the confines of her physical construct and become the very fabric of Winter itself.

Now THAT might make them stop in their back-stabbing murder-fest and take notice.

After all, for the Duchess of Moonless Nights, darkness means nothing, and it would seem that the Night is at least partially tied to darkness (themetically maybe), as the power they have shown allowed them to step through shadow, and what is darkness if not the deepest of shadows?

*Novice*

"We don't execute prisoners."

Careful, Cat. Your hypocrisy is showing.

*Polite Cultist*

Executing war criminals after a trial is NOT the same as killing a harmless prisoner. She doesn't mean that her prisoners are untouchable, she means she doesn't kill without reason. These people are basically harmless to her, and they haven't committed mass murder in a Callowan City, or anything of that sort.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

"You are what you take, a woman's voice whispered in my ear, in no tongue I knew."

So the solution is simple if not easy: Take the Sve's life. Become the Sve. All the drow are now yours to command.

*Drd*

Now, the voice that spoke that couldn't possibly belong to the Wondering Bard... could it?

[Javvies](#)

I doubt it is Bard or connected to her.

I suspect the voice saying "You are what you take" is connected to the Night in some manner, if it is not part of the Night itself. Followup guess would be something to do with Cat's Fae/Winter titles/ powers. Third option is a reaction with her Name/Aspects, or what's left of it, or the

parts of her that contributed to her gaining Take as an Aspect. Alternatively, it is connected to her potential for apotheosis.

Or possibly some combination/interaction between the above possibilities.

It being in Cat's ear and in no language she knows, despite her understanding it dictates a far more metaphysical source than Bard showing up and literally whispering into her ear.

[onedollargum](#)

"You are what you take"

and you keep what you kill.

*Morgenstern*

>> Ah. That shed light, in a manner of speaking. So a Mighty was not male or female or anything else, they were just Mighty. Priestess was a female term, in Chantant, so the implication would be insulting to the drow. I'd keep that in mind for future reference. No need to give insult to the people I'd come to bargain with. <<

Uhm. What?? Above, it was stated that he LOST being of any gender when he BECAME cattle. Gender cannot be the thing about this term that makes it cattle-term, Cat. At least I presume this was an in-character mistake and not one by the author...? When in doubt, think about in-world-explanations first. Thus, I guess, he takes offence at a term of "priesthood" as being a thing for cattle. Guess "Sve" is more like a god/dess...

*Morgenstern*

Or an avatar maybe. Some \*actually\* direct channel to the G/gods.

Or something else entirely...

Anyway, making gender only apply to the Mighty and then claiming gender does NOT apply to the Mighty, but offends them is rather... paradoxical.

*Decius*

Gender does not apply to cattle.

Gender does not apply to mighty.

Clearly, gender only applies to outsiders.

*Drd*

Exactly.

*RanVor*

Why the drow empire collapsed is obvious. What I'm wondering is how they'd come to have an empire in the first place.

*Gunslinger*

Possible their tenets changed after a point.

*Allafterme*

The Wandering Bard said the Twilight Sages of Drow consider death the only sin to Dead king before his ascension so something must be horridly gone wrong in the last few millennia...

[erraticerrata](#)

Was wondering if someone would remember that. Drow society undertook some pretty drastic changes after the introduction of the Tenets of Night, few of them for the better.

*Allafterme*

Even the name of Drow language implies associates them with Twilight but they either they shifted or corrupted to Night long time ago. Huh, very interesting. I'm looking forward to this arc and what will you make of it EE.

*werafdsaew*

Maybe their way of life is sustainable as long as there's an external outlet for their killing (Deoraithe Kingdom).

*Letouriste*

Interesting...I would bet cat will get some of that darkness...or even kill that mighty priestess and take over her place, leading the drows at war. Can you become an honorary drow?

*1queenofblades1*

Yes.

Lung: You are now Asian.

Sve: You are now Drew.

*1queenofblades1*

Drow\*

Bloody autocorrect

*Unorginal*

Nicaraguan is a type of Asain AmIRight?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Follow ancestral lines back about 40,000 years... the answer would be "yes" for just about everybody in Nicaragua, considering the vast bulk of us with Eurasian origins have South East and East Asian cave shelters of the various Ice Ages in our genes. 😊

No exceptions.

Africa just about gets a pass (but, Eurasian genes have trickled back there in spurts fairly regularly).

Yeah: we all have Africa and Eurasia in us. It's called "being a human primate" (the first primates came from polar rainforests mostly in what we'd now term as Eurasia – they quickly made it all around the north pole thanks to even early primate shapes being good for swimming between island chains, and then spread south as things cooled). 😊

### *Dylan Tullos*

I'm unsure why Catherine would want to recruit an entire species of backstabbing monsters who view Callowans (and all mortals) as cattle. It's not like they would make good soldiers; for all their cool powers, they lack basic discipline and they're more interested in cannibalizing each other than fighting the enemy.

The drow are basically made out of Stupid Evil to the point that they destroyed their own civilization. Even if Catherine can make them march to war, she can't make them magically stop being completely awful and mostly useless.

### *Someguy*

One can only pray that they are a useful distraction for "heroes" deep in enemy territory by dumping them there via a variant of Bonfire.

### *Dylan Tullos*

Someguy:

"Useful distraction" seems to be all the drow are good for. Even if their Mighty are an order of magnitude more dangerous than the exiles we saw, they spend so much time murdering each other that they're not exactly a threat to anyone else.

Catherine wanted an alliance with the Dead King. Instead, she's having to try to get help from a failed civilization of Chaotic Evil murderhobos. They're certainly less dangerous than the "original abomination", but they're also not that



powerful. Her only other possible ally is the Tyrant, who had an alliance with Black before he betrayed him for fun.

### Javvies

Nah. The Mighty are likely to be on par with Named, if not greater.

Remember – according to Archer, Ranger tried to hunt some of them but had issues finding her way into the Everdark proper. So at least some of them are or were considered “worthy” ... which means they’re good in a fight, if only on an individual level.

These exiles, while they got curbstomped by the trio of Cat, Archer, and Akua, aren’t actually pushovers relative to normal people – and they’re the ones considered too weak to be allowed to live among other drow.

Besides ... the most likely target for them is Praes, meaning Malicia and her High Lord allies, because the Crusade, the Grand Alliance, and the Heroes are probably going to be preoccupied with the Dead King.

And whatever the Augur’s prediction of “Woe to the south” was referring to. Probably not Black, but likely connected to the Tyrant of Helike/the League.

### *Dylan Tullos*

Javvies:

The problem is that the Mighty would be equivalent to Villainous Named, including all of their traditional weaknesses. This is an entire civilization based on backstabbing and infighting, and they’d be going up against a Dread Empress who specializes in social manipulation. Malicia would have them murdering each other in about five minutes.

### *Moginheden*

“Woe to the south” was explained in the interlude 2 chapters ago. A conclave the House of Light is being convened to the south of where Cordelia rules from. (I think in Orne.)

This is a problem for Cordelia because it will unite all of Callow’s desperate factions against her, and possibly remove the Ashuran’s fleets that are attacking Praes freeing up Malicia to run wild even more. (As the Dread Empress is no longer the Arch-Heretic.)

Cordelia NEEDS to beat Callow to stay in power. That’s now both highly unlikely, and more required.

## Javvies

No. The Conclave is being held in Salia, in the palace itself, per Fatalism 1.

Orne is, I believe, one of the Principalities bordering the Vales and is Southeast of Salia.

Fatalism 2 says that the Lanterns (the Levantine delegation) almost caused a diplomatic incident when they passed through Orense – the Principality bordering the Dominion.

The Ashuran fleets are not going to stop going after Praes just because Malicia is no longer the Arch-heretic. For one thing, while not completely landlocked, Callow might as well be. For another, Praes is still a target of the Crusade.

It is a problem for Cordelia because it kills any possibility of a deal with Callow short of complete and total military victory with an extended occupation of all of Callow, including somehow taking Cat (and thus the rest of the Woe) all the way out, and also means that there is no practical way to have Callow return to its pre-Conquest Role. It'll be worse than after the Fourth Crusade when the Principate tried to occupy Callow.

Furthermore, it means that, especially with the Dead King moving, Procer and the Crusade are facing a war on at least two fronts for sure, plus the waiting "Woe to the south", which is probably connected to the League and the Tyrant of Helike, which would likely be a third front.

## erraticerrata

The conclave is taking in place in Salia, which is where Cordelia rules from as First Prince. Both Black's legions and the League are to the south of it.

## *Moginheden*

Also the power level of the drow is not what makes them a terrible army. Their lack of discipline and likelihood of killing allies does.

Take 5000 drow that are likely to back-stab each-other and kill any allied army you put them near, and pit them against 5000 slightly-trained peasants who have each-other's backs and have been through multiple wars in recent history.

Sure each drow is way more powerful than your peasants, but by the time the battle starts you only have 300 drow

left as the rest murdered each other, and you lost any non-drow that were marching anywhere near them. That's presuming you were able to maintain control over the drow long enough to get them to the battlefield at all.

*Drd*

I find it interesting that it mentions the Hour of Twilight (that were massacred) and Sve of Night. Is there also a Dawn and Day, or are they yet to come? And I have to wonder at what the Bard said about "death being the only sin" to the Drow. Could the silver eyes and Night they have be something to do with life and/or power? They have been drained of all but the smallest of amounts, but as death is sin for drow, they can't be killed but are exiled. That could be why humans are "cattle", that it is not a sin to suck their life dry to feed the Night within the drow? And these exiles could only go back if they attained "glory", which would explain the "slavers" that occasionally go on hunting trips, if they were actually desperate groups of exiles looking to find "cattle" to gain enough power to go home again.

*Decius*

Give them enough outside enemies to form temporary alliances against, and they will form temporary alliances that last until the outside enemy is almost defeated.

Let the Drow almost defeat Procer and the Dead King and the Empress, before killing themselves over who gets to rule when the enemy is finally defeated. Once they have almost defeated all of your enemies (including themselves), clean up the mess they made.

The problem with escalating by letting the Dead King out was that afterwards there would be a more powerful Dead King to deal with. The Drow will clean themselves up.

*RanVor*

Because cannon fodder. Somebody has to take losses the Army of Callow can't afford, and the Drow just happen to be the only ones available.

*Luis*

I want Catherine to wipe them out.  
If you can take from one you can take from the many or all.

The drow are backstabbing savages that cannot be made into useful troops. At least not legion standard troops. More people like the

wild hunt.

Powerful, but not committed to the idea of helping her, and treacherous at the worst.

Best to kill them off and turn them into at least useful cannon fodder and a power up.

*the verbiage ecstatic*

I'm getting increasingly confused by this Drow arc. I get that Cat wants another army and is pretty desperate, but this seems like it's miles past long-shot territory and deep into the "totally illogical, only happening for plot reasons" zone.

Negotiating with the Dead King was a Hail Mary play: making an alliance with a ancient horror that is probably playing you (as in fact he was) is a gambit of last resort. But at least Cat had reason to think that she might have negotiating leverage, since the Dead King was the one who invited her to the table.

The Drow as potential allies have all the same downsides that the Dead King did (reputation damage, likelihood of betrayal, pure evil who would happily slaughter all the Callowans, unknown and vast reserves of power that could be turned on her if negotiations sour). But unlike with the Dead King, Cat has no reason to believe she has anything they want in the slightest, or that they care at all about events outside their own borders.

I was assuming Cat had something up her sleeve here, but this chapter makes it clear that she doesn't have the faintest understanding of Drow culture or goals.

And even assuming the Drow do have goals that could be furthered by invading her enemies, and that they are willing to potentially negotiate with non-Drow, what does she think that Callow, a beleaguered minor power that is already militarily committed, doesn't share a border with the Drow, and is practically bankrupt, possibly offer the Drow from a geopolitical perspective?

With the Dead King, EE at least gave the handwavy explanation that he might require an invitation to leave his realm, thus giving him an incentive to talk to Malicia and Cat. A little thin, but okay, sure. With the Drow, we've got nothing.

The elaborate parting of the Woe chapter made clear that this is a costly, high-risk expedition for Cat. Presumably, not being a complete idiot, she thinks that there's a probabilistic reward that makes this a better play than returning to fortify Callow and hoping the Dead King and Procer keep each other busy long enough for Cat to deal with Malicia. But I really don't see it. Am I missing something?

*the verbiage ecstatic*

Also, I don't totally get why Malicia outbidding Cat with the Dead King is so much of a setback for Cat that a second desperation play is needed. The biggest outcome of the negotiations is the same either way: the Dead King invades Procer. Cat wanted to give Procer better odds and minimize collateral damage, because she's not a total monster, but from a Machiavellian perspective it's not clear that Cat's worse off with the Dead King having more freedom.

Yes, it increases the probability that he crushes Procer completely and becomes a threat to Callow, but that was a risk anyway. Cat was planning to stab the Dead King in the back by warning Procer, which might have prompted retaliation; at least this way, Cat doesn't have any commitments to the Dead King that she needs to fulfill or betray. And it makes the flip side of that risk – that the Dead King isn't enough to derail the Crusade – less likely.

Other than Cat's humiliation at being outplayed by Malicia, it seems as though Cat got most of what she wanted from her excursion: the Crusade is now fighting a two-front war. It's unclear why Cat thinks that adding yet another volatile element to the situation would improve her strategic position enough to offset the continued weakening of Callow that her absence is causing.

### Javvies

Cat needs to take on Malicia and the High Lords, and win. She also needs to cover the Vales and the Stairway with sufficient force to hold them against the Crusaders or the Dead King, at least long enough to reinforce them. She also needs to have sufficient forces left after beating Malicia, the High Lords, and everything that they're willing to pull out against her, which will likely include devils and possibly demons, that she can either attain outright military victory or be strong enough to force a negotiated settlement with either the Crusaders or the Dead King, without a pyrrhic victory that would endanger her hold over Praes and Callow.

### Jane

This is easiest answered with another question; why did *Malicia* feel a need to outbid Cat? After all, she could have just let Cat make the deal, if this was just about attacking Procer.

It's more likely than not that Malicia's deal involves some delayed unpleasantness for Cat, and having another ally at hand when it comes will put her in a better position. She can't be certain what, exactly, she's planning for, but she knows she can't readily face it alone.

## *Decius*

Cat wanted to use Dead King against Procer, to force a diplomatic solution and actually end the war.

Malicia wants to use the Dead King against Cat, and possibly Black as well.

## Javvies

More to the point, the impression that I have is that Malicia opened negotiations with the Dead King and he decided to allow Cat the opportunity to make an offer and to test her at the same time.

If Cat had made a deal with the Dead King, especially under her original reasoning, behind the Dead King's motivations, it is unlikely that she would have needed to be overly concerned about him attacking Callow or otherwise betraying or acting against her interests, and she could have focused more attention on Malicia and Praes.

Cat did not want Malicia making a deal with the Dead King, especially one so expansive in scope.

With Malicia having made the deal with the Dead King and the scope of what she offered ... Cat has to heavily fortify the Vales and the Stairway, plus improvement patrols all along the mountains, because an army of the dead has limited need for logistical support, and can cross far rougher terrain than once burdened with supply wagons for food.

That drastically reduces the number of troops Cat can deploy against Praes and on the border with Praes, and Cat had been, and still is, short on trained troops.

## *John*

Cat needs to keep Malicia busy for six months, as cheaply as possible, while the Hellhound rebuilds Callow's army. Malicia is overwhelmingly better at political maneuvering, has more money, more magical resources (especially now that Heiropant is unavailable), and is no slouch at spycraft. What Malicia doesn't have, at the moment, is legions to spare or a Black Knight to lead them. So, Cat needs to present an immediate military threat to the Wasteland, using non-Callowan troops. Something that can't be bought off with cash or deflected with political intrigue.

Drow culture is completely unknown to the outside world, so there's no remotely plausible way Malicia has agents in place, or any other established lever for influence. If the drow are solely interested in personal glory and mystic cannibalism,

they won't accept ordinary bribes. From the Dread Empress's perspective, at least in the short term, drow invasion would be an almost context-breaking problem. Big distraction, then there's the time and cost of actually dealing with it, and any time and energy spent on that is taken out of the budget for undermining Callow.

*TheCatLord*

Am I the only one slightly interested in Cat returning to the orphanage and the bar, interacting with others from before she took on a name?

*Jessica Day*

I can't help but assume Cat will be taking some of that night power and conquering the Drow while she's at it. Another step on her way to godhood 🤔

[\*ahd\*](#)

Uh. Guys?

What if they recruit drow who are willing to learn new ways, and power them up with the corpses of those who aren't?

The followers of the Tenets of Winter can come live in Callow; it can't be any worse than goblins, orcs, or ogres.

*Drd*

A very good point, as I believe the Everdark is cut off by the Dead King and the chain of hunger (I think...). Moving to Callow via Cat's fae portals to help guard either the Procer or Preasi borders would be easy living compared to current neighbours.

[\*hampchas\*](#)

hampchas a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/Yu14U0LTjPNiLgu7Zxq->

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## Chapter 53: Gloom

*"I am ever amused to hear men speak of senseless violence. What is violence, if not the failure of reason? One might as well bemoan the wetness of water."*

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"So what are we doing with the spares?" Indrani asked.

It was bluntly put, as was her wont, but she wasn't wrong to ask the question. Ivah, after being further questioned, had been pretty clear: the only way for someone to pass through the Gloom was with the obsidian 'feathers' the drow were wearing. We'd had a corpse already, so one of us was covered. Two more prisoners had to be stripped of their armour to make sure we'd pass without trouble, though, and that left the issue of what we'd now be doing with them.

"We can't take them into the Gloom," I said. "Ivah was vague – I think it doesn't actually know a lot on the subject – but the implication was that we'd just 'lose' them the way Ranger got lost."

It was still night, though now dawn was a great deal closer. While Akua saw to the wounded, I'd told Indrani she should catch a nap. We'd be moving out as soon as she was rested, since I saw no point in idling around the surface any longer now that we had a guide. I softly inhaled the lingering scent coming from the cup of tea in my hand. Actually drinking it was nothing to write home about, but the smell was strangely pleasant. I'd though nothing of it, at first, but now that it'd become a habit I was realizing I'd seen something like this before. The fae in Skade had taken delight in small, ephemeral things too. A lot more than in the physical pleasures I'd once preferred.

"So that'd be releasing them, pretty much," Indrani mused. "I take it we have some issues with that."

"They came to the surface to slave and kill," I said. "It'd be irresponsible to simply let them loose after capturing them."

My friend shrugged, hazelnut eyes tinted with indifference. She'd yet to slip on her leather coat, or even her mail, wearing instead thick grey cloth cut close to her form. The only touch of panache to the drab attire was the dark linen scarf hanging from her neck, some kind of weave allegedly particular to Mercantis. It was certainly finer than anything I'd seen come out of Callowan weaver shops, and I knew it could be used to breathe through noxious fumes if she needed it to. It was one of the few possessions I'd ever seen Indrani care for, save for her bow. I'd gathered from idle talk that both were gifts from Ranger.

"So kill them," she said. "We never flinched at that before. Crucified a bunch of Praesi after Second Liesse, didn't you? Those you didn't make into your most expendable soldiers."

"They were all complicit in mass slaughter," I told her. "And it was the mages I had crucified, those who had a direct hand in the killing of innocents. This is different."



Killing Malicia's minion who'd tried to surrender came much closer to the line, in my eyes, but it'd been a trick played on an enemy. It felt like a step closer to becoming someone I cared little for to have played it in the first place, but I could swallow my discomfort.

"They're slavers, Cat," Indrani mildly said. "Kill them all, let the Gods sort it out."

"Their entire civilization practices slavery, as I understand it," I reminded her. "Should I murder my way through the whole lot?"

"Their entire civilization didn't pull blades on us," she said. "They did."

"Then we're killing them for pulling blades, not being slavers," I pointed out.

"Sure," Indrani said. "Let's kill them for that, then. I'll do it myself, if you're feeling contrary."

"My point was that we *don't* do that," I said.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she muttered. "Cat, what else can we do? You don't want to release them and we can't keep them. There's not a lot left, is there?"

No, I grimly thought. There wasn't.

"Let them settle it the drow way, then," Indrani suddenly said. "You're being all lawful, so let them follow their own damned laws."

"They don't *have* laws, Archer," I replied in a low voice. "They seem to murder each other at the drop of a hat."

She met my eyes, the deep tan of her skin seeming even deeper under cover of dark.

"You need to make a decision," Indrani said, "about why we're going into the Everdark. Because if you're going down there to murder bigwigs until their people are terrified into playing nice, I'm on board. They have it coming, let them choke on it. But if you're just going down there for an army, Catherine, there's going to be darker lines to cross than this."

I grimaced, then looked away. Once more, she was not wrong. I'd known going in that this would be ugly business. My conversation with Ivah had only lent weight to the notion. It was an odd thing to hear a person seeming otherwise perfectly reasonable to dismiss the rest of the continent as cattle and preach the virtues of cold-blooded murder without a hint of irony. Even the Praesi kept a veil over that, twisting the act into some kind of

wicked art. The drow had spoke of killing without reason as if there was no need for pretext or justification, and I suspected it had not been one of the stronger Mighty. Those at the top of the pyramid would have swum through a sea of blood to get there, and it was them I'd need to make pacts with. Them and the Priestess of Night, who was the very architect of this bloody misery.

"I can't fix an entire empire," I admitted tiredly. "I can barely even handle Callow, and that's with a second born for the work."

"Then we don't pretend," Indrani said calmly. "We don't go in half-baked, posturing like we're liberators. Because that's how we lose, Catherine – by straying from what we're actually after. Don't swing for the toes if you want to cut a throat."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Even letting them settle it by their laws," I said quietly. "It's just posturing, isn't it? Foisting the dirty work onto them. The blood would still be on my hands, only with cowardice added to it."

"Responsibility's a bed of thorns," Indrani said. "You keep lying down and then getting surprised at the bleeding. It's not on you to save every stranger you meet. Especially if they don't *want* to be saved."

"Is it really too much to ask," I murmured, "that we get to behave like decent souls, for once?"

"There's a lot of those, at the feet of Above," my friend said. "They don't tend to stick around long down here."

Maybe I was a coward, because when I gave the order it was for drow to settle it among themselves. The fought, until two were dead. The most heavily wounded, though they might have survived if they'd not been slain. Their Night was harvested by their killers as I watched in silence.

But we put on the dead men's armour, and went into deeps.

—

I'd not been sure what to expect when we entered the Warrens. The Everdark was supposed to be a wreck, nowadays, its people fighting over faded glories they no longer knew how to restore. On the other hand, a lot of those tunnels should date back to when the drow had been more than a pack of backstabbers living in ruins of their own making. There wasn't a lot known about the days when the drow had been a power to reckon with: what records dated to when the era was theorized to have taken place were sparse and didn't tend to extend much further than whatever

nascent city they'd been written in. In the echo Masego and I had eavesdropped on, the Wandering Bard had mentioned something called the Twilight Sages. That they'd 'considered death the only sin'. That didn't exactly sound like pacifism, but it was a long way from the drow encountered now. The territory of the Everdark on the surface was smaller than Callow's, and nearly all of it mountainous, but then that didn't mean much: they were a subterranean people, like the dwarves and once upon a time the goblins. Their holdings would have been measured in depth more than in length or breadth.

The Warrens ended up being tunnels. Just that. Not particularly well-maintained ones, damp and cold and occasionally half-collapsed, but they weren't strewn with bones or filled with packs of monsters. I kept pace with Ivah, at the head of our little band, and the drow led us forward unerringly from tunnel to tunnel. It'd already been a few hours and I could honestly see no difference between the paths we'd taken at the occasional crossroads and those we had not. We were going deeper, that much I'd felt. But there were no markers, no signs our guide could be drawing on.

"How long before we enter the Gloom?" I asked.

Ivah flicked a silver glance at me.

"We already have," it replied.

My brow rose. I'd not felt so much as a speck of power. I was particularly sensitive to wards, nowadays, so the passing of a threshold should have been noticeable.

"I can see no difference between when we first entered and now," I admitted.

"Nor will you, Queen," it said. "We bear feathers. There is no Gloom for us."

"So if we didn't have the feathers," I said. "We... wouldn't have seen the tunnels?"

"We would see others," Ivah said. "Leading nowhere."

That didn't sound like a ward. More like a domain, honestly, though it was a terrifying thought there could be an entity out there powerful enough to keep a domain going for centuries.

"It seems too easy to cross," I said.

"The *nerezim* have pierced through before," Ivah said. "Never for long. They rip ore from the stone and leave, do not linger."

"You mean the dwarves," I said.

"That is so," Ivah agreed. "They have slain Mighty with great machines of steel. They are not cattle."

"Because they killed drow," I frowned.

My guide shook its head, rueful smile baring sharp white canines.

"Because to them, it is us who are cattle," Ivah said. "One does not fight *nerezim*. One survives them, hiding until their purpose is fulfilled and they leave once more."

Well, it was almost heartening to know the Kingdom Under had everyone as terrified underground as they did on the surface. I'd begun to suspect that the Gloom had been placed to make sure the madness of the Everdark remained contained, but now another candidate had emerged: it might just be a sorcerous moat to keep the dwarves at bay. The Kingdom Under was not known to tolerate rivals underground, as the ancient exodus of the goblins tribes to the surface had made abundantly clear. I let the conversation lapse after that, though boredom saw me speak again when the journey through the tunnels continued to stretch on.

"You said you used to be a rylleh," I said. "What is that, exactly?"

"Dimas was rylleh," Ivah replied. "What you look upon never was."

"And what did it mean, when Dimas was rylleh?" I asked.

"To earn this honour, one must know twelve Secrets and slay another rylleh," Ivah said. "Even then, it is worthier to hold than to claim. Many do not last long."

I hummed.

"And Dimas?" I probed. "How long did they last?"

"A hundred years and three," Ivah proudly said. "Many tried to claim its Secrets, for Dimas knew the three glorious arts of killing."

My eyes narrowed. First at the revelation that my guide was over a century old. Scholars argued about how long drow could physically live, but most ascribed them a lifespan no longer than a human's. Apparently that was incorrect. More importantly, there'd been an implication to what Ivah said.

"Dimas knew these arts," I slowly said. "Ivah does not?"

The drow eyed me with surprise.

"Night was taken from Dimas, save the last sip," it said. "Tiarom knew no Secrets, and so none were learned from the harvest."

"You make it sound like there is more to the Night than the shadow tricks," I said.

"That is so," Ivah said, then touched its lips. "Shapeless and shaped, encompassing all. The worthy take. The worthy rise."

*It's knowledge too*, I realized.

"Those three glorious arts of killing, what are they?" I asked.

"Spear and blade and bow," Ivah said. "Dimas harvested many, to learn them whole. It was great accomplishment."

I breathed in sharply. So by killing someone who knew one of those Secrets they could just become a master swordsman instantly? That was *insane*. You couldn't just create knowledge out of nothing, that wasn't the way Creation worked. *Unless it's the same knowledge*, I thought. *Passed from killer to killer, since times immemorial*. Were they just passing around the same few learnings, one corpse at a time?

"Ivah," I quietly said. "Can someone add to the Night?"

"That is poor choice," the drow amusedly said. "What worth is there in empowering Mighty by one's death?"

"If a drow learned to make steel," I said. "And someone killed and harvested them. Would *they* know how to make steel?"

"Weapon-making is a powerful Secret," Ivah acknowledged. "The Ysengral hoard it mercilessly, and Ysengral itself hunts for the finest whispers."

So anytime someone learned anything useful they were murdered for it. Gods. No wonder they lived in ruins. If someone tried to restore them they'd probably get stabbed for the knowledge of how they wanted to do it.

"Is Ysengral a sigil or a Mighty?" I asked, slightly confused.

"A sigil is a Mighty," Ivah told me, tone implying I was a little slow.

"So Dimas' old sigil, Zapohar..." I prodded.

"Zapohar is Mighty, of great influence in the cabal of the Silent Song," the drow said. "Though forced out of Great Perun, the Zapohar are first of the inner ring. Many fear them."

"And was that how Dimas ended?" I asked. "Fighting for the Zapohar?"

"Dimas grew fat and lazy," Ivah bitterly said. "Forgot that many coveted its Secrets. That which broke it was worthier to hold them, and now stands second under Zapohar."

So backstabbed by an ambitious colleague, not beaten by an outsider. And still it seemed to feel some sort of pride for the Zapohar, instead of hatred towards the sigil that had seen it laid low. That smacked of Wasteland morals to me, the way Praesi highborn claimed that hatred and enmity were unrelated matters. It seemed a touchy subject, regardless, so I didn't press any further. There'd been something else I was curious about, anyway.

"Tell me about the Kodrog," I said. "We're heading into their territory, right?"

"They lurk near the Gloom, unfit for the strife of the inner ring," Ivah said with open disdain. "Kodrog's Night was thinned by the Mighty Soln, three hundred years past. It fled to the outer rings and has not returned."

"Soln didn't kill it?" I asked.

"Kodrog is said to know whispers from the Secret of Many Lives," the drow informed me. "A single death was not enough, though it lost much Night in defeat."

"I thought you said the Kodrog were strong," I pointed out.

"To meat," Ivah said. "To drow. To the least of the Mighty. Not to great sigils. It will crush you like an insect, Queen, but that is different matter."

"I wouldn't count on it," I mildly said. "Is it the Kodrog that gave you all your feathers?"

The drow shook its head.

"I journeyed to Great Mokosh under brand of disgrace, to be granted this last chance," Ivah said. "There the Sukkla discharge holy duty, having been granted sigil from the Sve of Night itself. Any can claim feathers, if they know the tongues of the Burning Lands and despair enough to try striding them."

"So it's a holy duty, to try the Burning Lands," I said. "Why?"

Ivah touched its lips once more.

"It serves the purpose of the Night," it said.

Oh, that did not sound all that pleasant.

"Killing cattle," I said. "Taking it. What does it do for you?"

"The Night grows," Ivah smiled. "To do such sacred act would redeem any disgrace."

"I want to be perfectly clear, here," I said. "If you kill humans, or any other race. It grows the Night?"

"That is so," the drow reverently said. "All is one. All is strife. The worthy rise."

I sucked at my lip.

"Killing undead," I said. "Would it also grow the Night?"

The drow paled.

"Speak not of the Hidden Horror," Ivah whispered. "For its crown is dawn, and that pale light is the end of all things. Only the mad would enter the eye of the Host of Death."

"It does, doesn't it," I said. "The necromancy that keeps its army walking, you can claim it for the Night."

"I say no more," Ivah insisted. "It sees all. It hears all."

Well, Neshamah had clearly paid these people a visit at some point after his ritual. The drow were a murderous bunch, they shouldn't be so scared unless the Dead King had spanked them roughly after being provoked. I honestly wasn't sure to root for there. Still, I was pleased to have learned that. If the undead had been of no worth to the drow's societal murder pyramid it would have been much, much harder to gain any ground there. Ivah had been pretty high up the ladder at some point, by the sound of it, but he'd still been someone's minion. The people on the notch above might be less terrified at the idea of a fight with Keter, if they were offered the right incentives. I had a few notions about what those might be, though the offer I knew would be most tempting was one I very much wanted to avoid.

"Let's talk about the Kodrog, then," I said. "I'm looking for practical information. Number of Mighty, which is known for what. How many fighters to they have, what are their defences like?"

I'd come with the intent to negotiate, but I might have actually found a place where my propensity to stab before making an offer would be considered reasonable. If I could get through without killing, I would. But if blades came out, well, it wouldn't be the first time I walked over a few corpses to get where I needed to be. Ivah had unfortunately little to share, since it'd been ushered through Kodrog territory into the Gloom after copious mockery and a few beatings, but little was better than nothing. By the sounds of it, there were a few thousand drow scattered across several large caverns but only a small part of those were considered fit to fight. Even fewer of those would be Mighty,

which I'd mentally put in the same league as half a company of Watch. Dangerous, if you took them lightly, but rather killable. If Archer hung at the back taking care of those with fancy Secrets, Diabolist and I could handle the brawlers. Unlike on the surface, I didn't intend to take prisoners here. Wouldn't run down anyone fleeing either, but if they became an obstacle capture wouldn't be the objective.

It took us three days to leave the Gloom. Over the last stretch of the journey the tunnels changed from rough bare stone to something more ornate. Base-relief was carved on every surface, even the floor and ceiling, though the sculptures under our feet were covered by moss and dirt. It was my first look at anything the drow had made, and to my utter lack of surprise pretty much everything depicted was their kind sallying out to the surface and winning glorious battles before returning to the Everdark covered in glory, riches and slaves. There were also depictions of single combat between drow champions, though oddly enough they did not seem to be to the death. The loser was made servant of the winner, carrying their spear and quiver. Honour duels? Those were supposed to be common in Levant. The Northern Steppes as well, though orcs didn't stop until one of the fighters was dead and dinner. The last step was a threshold carved into the tunnel, though one without gates, and there we found fresh signs of life. Symbols had been painted in blood over them, which Ivah informed me promised sundry torments to all venturing in the holdings of Mighty Kodrog.

"We now reach the realm of the Mighty, Queen," our guide told us.

I nodded.

"Bargain was struck," I said evenly. "We part ways now, if you wish, with no enmity or further demands."

The drow hesitated.

"I walk with you a little longer," it said. "Until we reach the ring of stones."

The Kodrog apparently held the remains of an old border fortress, which barred the entrance to their territory proper. It was probably as deep as Ivah could go without being openly associated with us.

"Follow behind, then," I said. "Archer, Diabolist – look sharp."

"Oh Gods, *finally*," Indrani whined.

I took the lead through the threshold, though my advanced faltered after a single step. The others trailed in after me as I stood there in silence, ignoring the words they spoke. Well, we'd found the Kodrog. The cavern I'd entered was twice as large as the



throne room in Laure, its uneven ceiling a natural dome. It could have fit at least a thousand comfortably, which I knew for a fact because it currently did.

The floor was covered with dead drow, thick as a carpet.

"Shit," I finally cursed. "I'd better not get blamed for this."

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[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote everyone! I made it on time today as well!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*NerfContessa*

Dun dun DUNN 😊

*SpeckofStardust*

well, who got here first?

*Jonnnney*

I'm betting pieces of Malicia's new army trying to deny Catherine an ally.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Huh. Well, this could be hearkening back to WB telling DK to 'eat the baby' or whatever the direct quote, although I feel there is a bit more at play here.

Also, if Cat \*did\* get blamed for it, that might actually be a good thing, all things considered for the Drow.

[Javvies](#)

So ... this looks somewhat unpromising.

Huh. Any kill helps grow/strengthen the Night.

The Night carrying knowledge from host to host is an interesting tidbit. And that's probably going to have interesting implications down the line.

Time to check – have these drow been drained of Night or not? Either option could be interesting. Not sure which would be more concerning, though.

*Ternbugkle*

Waste not want not, free night empowered drow winter zombie army sounds like a thing worth having.

*Misting*

Indeed, which is why DK might already be doing it. If he had a couple of drow zombies, it would make sense for one of the first things to do upon being released being to go and slaughter a few thousand drow with them to power them up.

*Rook*

Catherine learning the same lesson young Akua did in that basement all those years ago. The same one Black was reminded of in second Llesse.

If you're going to balk, then balk. But if you take the step? No half measures, it only makes it worse.

Make it count, Cat.

*Clint*

She keeps learning this lesson every book

*Stayer*

Yeah, we're supposed to believe that cat is learning and adapting but honestly she just whines about doing shit until she's forced to do it anyway and then cries about it with an enlightenment sometimes coming in although its soon forgotten. I can't take the long ass conversations about morals and shit seriously when they don't matter at all in the story.

*Someguy*

Aww...Cat was late to the party!

*Decius*

Blamed for it? Cat, you want to take CREDIT for it.

*Sparsebeard*

She'd look like a fool if it was revealed she took credit for a feat she didn't accomplish though.

*Jane*

On the other hand, if it gets her foot in the door, it'll save her a lot of trouble – and there's no doubt she's going to end up fighting plenty of people anyways, which will establish that she's no weakling pretending to strength.

Assuming the Drow have no strong taboo against lying, it'd probably be a net advantage for her.

*Snowfire1224*

Something tells me that they probably have a Prasi attitude towards lying.

*Yotz*

That's why you must vehemently deny any relation to this act in a such *overly specific* way that your denial can but raise questions about your involvement. And after such questions would be raised, your denials must become even more overly specific – to the point of telling anyone who was not able to hide from you that “told you it wasn't me” upon the reveal of even hint on actual culprit.

Works miracles.

[TeK](#)

Wow. The first half is like EE read all the comment and compressed them into chapter.

Nice bit of exposition. Although, I wonder, why drow society didn't give a rise to a single panultimate being that slaughtered every drow and just grew stronger with each year. Like Rnger, but on steroids. I'm betting it's the ultimate goal of the whole Tenets of the Night in the first place.

Also, typo? “granted sigil from the Svet of Night itself”. Is ot Sve or Svet? The second sounds similar to Russian word meaning “light”.

Also also, giving how this book capitalizes on showing us the rest of Calernia and throwing some heavy bit of worldbuilding, I wonder if these drow were killed by dwarves.

[erraticerrata](#)

It was a typo.

*Quite possibly a cat*

Well, the Priestess of Night might very well be that ultimate being.

Well, I think we should be glad they never learned the Secret of Working together. Just imagine if a team of drow had a people farm like the Dead King?

Hell, I bet a Drow could go to the surface and get a job interrogating corpses. “Oh, I can get answers from the dead. You can skip all that unreliable torture and those faulty truth

spells. For a small fee of course. I'm certainly not absorbing all their power into myself."

### Javvies

That only works if the Night can transfer memories from those who weren't already carrying some Night of their own.

I think what happens with non-Night-bearing kills is that the killer/absorber simply draws on the remaining essence or something of the victim to feed/multiply/grow the Night in the absorber's body.

Thus, in order for knowledge to be added to the Night, it has to be learned by someone carrying the Night.

### *beleester*

That would make sense – otherwise weapon-making wouldn't be a problem, since they could just go up to the surface and stab a couple of blacksmiths.

### *Yotz*

They can, but the bearers of new secrets would be immediately hunted down by the more powerful Sigils. After which

>"The Ysengral hoard it mercilessly, and Ysengral itself hunts for the finest whispers."

So the society itself would be deprived of the secret of weapon-making.

It seems that Drow stumbled upon the something akin to Borg problem – the Borg can not invent. Drow can be incredibly knowledgeable and powerful, but they are not able to *multiply* Secrets – only transfer it from one vessel to another, with communal Harvesting being single possible way to actually *spread* knowledge. And if vessel is lost with its Night unharvested – so is the knowledge. And if someone culls Drow population and prevents Harvesting, that would result in total collapse of civilization, for all the Secrets the killed bore would be lost.

Similarly, if someone of Drow is to invent something, it would be immediately harvested by more powerful ones, thus strengthening the strong and weakening the weak. There are literally no incentive for anyone of the lower stand to do anything not directly related to harvesting enough Secrets to higher its stand in one swoop. If it tries to penny-pinch Secrets from different sources – or create new Secrets for the matter, it would be Harvested long before it could get even a bit closer to its goal.

We may see more on this point, but so far it seems that total sum of Drow knowledge follows the modified version Laws of Thermodynamics:

- \* in isolated society knowledge can never be created, only transferred or changed from one form to another;
- \* in isolated society total sum of knowledge always decreases until it reaches the possible minimum of knowledge;
- \* total sum of knowledge of isolated society approaches constant value with number of vessels decreasing, to the point of being zero if there are no one to bear Secrets.

...or something like that.

With this structure in place, only possible way for the society to gain new knowledge would be to Harvest outside the system – id est, to raid other races for their Secrets. And such raids *must* be done by lowest of low – simply because loss of even one Mighty without the ability to Harvest its Secrets will result in weakening of the Night. That's why it's the "Last Chance" mission for disgraced – read, "weak". Lowest of the low have nothing to lose, and – if – they can return with new Secrets, that would increase their status – at least temporarily.

*SilentWatcher*

Maybe this slaughter was made by this panultimate being? It makes way more sense to let many Drow grow the night and when the time is right, they get "harvested" of their night. Could be a reaction to Cat intruding into the everdark. or something/ one else

intresting. i seem to recall the scuttling of green and pale? skin underground in hierarchs vision in the epilogue of ark 3. I love these little hints which suddenly make sense

*SilentWatcher*

WAIT! this system benefits mostly the top dogs right? 2 chapters or so back wasn't there a quote about pyramid systems? i bet sve of the night founded the tenets of the night

*Reqqe*

Link to here doesn't appear to be showing up on the previous chapter

[NZPIEFACE](#)

And you know she will.

So, why doesn't she just raise an army of dead Drow and make an artificial name? Have a random Drow just absorb the rest.

*Rook*

I think it'd be more advantageous if she could find a way to partake in Night and absorb it herself.

It would be the way to reinforce her biggest key weakness. She's too young by several thousand years.

She's got power gushing out her metaphorical ears, but her foundation is so flimsy it's an insult to wet cardboard. Like a baby wielding a sledgehammer. A hundred years from now she'd still be a baby in the eyes of the big name players

But if that could be shored up with thousands of years of knowledge, experience, and unending practice from an ancient, warlike race that predates the first elf that ever set foot on the continent? It could turn that crumbling foundation into the rock of Gibraltar.

*WuseMajor*

Yeah, but...I kinda suspect that the Night might contain more than just skills, it might contain memories. Personalities.

Trying to eat The Night might be akin to letting it eat Winter. The resulting amalgamation would be a monster to be put down quickly not an amazing master.

*haihappen*

Let Winter eat the Night. Seems thematically sound. Winter takes, that's its nature, she should fit right in.

I can see the Sve taking a good look at Cat and the bodies that will trail her wake, and decide: "yup, you make a fine drow".

And I reckon the list of things Cat could offer them is very long:

- \* Metalworking, or just "trade" weapons (oh the secret that secrets can be "learned", not only "claimed")
- \* Opportunity to kill Praesi legionaries/Procerean soldiers - > absorb their skill etc
- \* Learn/Claim the secrets of Praesian mages, as even the lowest Drow would probably make excellent raiders/assassins if properly lead. Discipline seems to be the major hurdle
- \* training in advanced tactics, courtesy of Juniper

The list could go on but discipline in following orders without backstabbing seems to be a major issue.

It would need a skillful commander with lots of experience...

oh... can anyone else see Black train/lead a company of Drow to devastating effect?

Another thought: Have the Drow "forgotten" that Secrets can be learned?! That skill can be accumulated without taking it from somewhere else? It would certainly explain the state of their society.

In an ideal world, a few intelligent Drow that see the big picture would enterprise to accompany Cat to learn the Secrets of the Burning Land's people. Upon their return, they would be masters of many Secrets (mostly related to killing), and other Drow would see this and decide that this "Exchange Program" that Icy Princess was proposing may not have been a bad idea, resulting in many new gray-skinned recruits that Juniper has to whip into shape... But as I said "in an ideal world", and their culture may make them incapable of even thinking this way.

*samshadar*

Winter might be one thing, but she is/was the 'Duchess of Moonless Nights'... Can't get much more 'moonless' than 'underground'...

[knockoffnikolai](#)

It looks like a society-wide Prisoner's Dilemma to me. If everyone learned skills, they could rebuild society. But if you learn skills and someone else kills you for them, then you're dead and they get all of the benefits with only a fraction of the work. So that means everyone defaults to an equilibrium of killing instead of learning.

*Jane*

Counterpoint: Being blamed for a massacre of a decently powerful group is a *wonderful* advantage when dealing with an entity that only values strength, and cares nothing for the dead. If there was ever a time to practice "lies and violence", it's with the Drow.

You know, this whole "harvest the power and knowledge of the slain" thing sounds perfect for Cat, assuming it's not exclusive to Drow, attached to membership in some kind of deranged cult, or intrinsically drives those who know the secret to madness and/or violence. It probably is, though, that kind of thing has a way of spreading elsewhere.

That's a horribly overpowered talent, too... If they weren't so viciously self-destructive, they'd pretty much be the Borg, only a bit more digesty than assimilaty. One can only imagine how much the mightiest of the Mighty know... Above and beyond the killing

arts, there's all sorts of secrets they must possess. A pity that they can't actually do anything with it, though.

Incidentally, I wonder if this whole suicidal system originated as a way to preserve knowledge... That by killing the oldest and wisest amongst them, rather than only harvest the wisdom outsiders, they could ensure that their lessons lived on whole in the next generation. Of course, that also sparked conflict as to who would inherit the knowledge, and encouraged some to attempt to claim said knowledge earlier than its possessor would prefer, and sparked this whole system of paranoia and endless bloodletting as things grew worse.

It's unfortunate, in many ways; knowing that all of your studying and practice would live on in the hands of an heir would normally be a wonderful thing, giving back to those around you. Even if you hated the first person who inherited your talents, they aren't immortal, and in time your work would pass to someone you didn't despise. By taking it to this extreme, though, they've squandered the benefits to the whole in pursuit of maximizing the benefit to the individual – it's long past time for the strongest amongst them to begin to rebuild, but because none of them can trust one another, they remain hiding in a mountain.

Well, perhaps I'm passing judgment a bit early – what we know about the Drow is still mostly hearsay and assumption.

*Amoonymous*

Could you imagine if they had a relatively normal, cohesive society?

Every drow works to learn, increase their skills, etc. When an Elder dies, they have some kind of ritual for another drow to inherit their knowledge and further refine and build upon it.

The drow would have the capacity to become one of the most advanced species if they weren't so self-destructive.

*RanVor*

Maybe this is what the Tenets of the Night are for – to prevent the drow society from advancing. Maybe someone intentionally installed a system that causes them to self-destruct to stop their growth before they could become a threat to the surface... and suddenly I have a strong suspicion the Bard is somehow involved in this.

[bookhero123](#)

Now here is an interesting thought, what if Cat claims parts of the night? Giving her winter and night powers to work with and as



she kills she grows more powerful.  
That would be very interesting.

Thanks for the chapter~~

*Faiir*

Well she is the Sovereign of the Moonless N...

[Javvies](#)

She's the Duchess of Moonless Nights and the Sovereign of Winter.

It's not quite the same thing, though while it may or may not be a significant asset in dealing with the Night, it is unlikely to be a significant detriment, unless the Night and Fae powers are inherently inimical to each other, which seems unlikely.

However, what is also relevant is that she has the Aspect of Take, which seems like a more limited form of claiming the Night that doesn't require a corpse, first.

Sidenote – I wonder what would happen if Cat used Take on Hanno's past Hero-life power, can't remember what it is called offhand. Besides violence.

Whatever the source (Fae Mantle, Take Aspect, or something else), Cat certainly appears to have a some sort of affinity for, or connection to, the Night based on the "You are what you take" bit.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

Cat doesn't have Take anymore; when she went full fae, her name effectively died of frostbite. She still has Fall, but only that and IIRC it works differently than it did when she was still relatively mortal.

*JAMES*

For the record Cat's Fae title are "We swear to your service, Queen of the Hunt," the fae said. "Queen of Air and Darkness, Sovereign of Moonless Nights"

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/03/07/epilogue-3/>

*naturalnuke*

I'm totally stealing The Night and these drow for my dnd campaigns

*nick012000*

It'd probably work as a fluff explanation for getting XP for killing monsters, at least. Reminds me of the fluff explanation for how XP worked in Knights of the Old Republic 2.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

[This template](#) may come in handy... May need some tweeks to account for losing whatever was gained (and probably a well-maintained "baseline" character sheet keeping tabs on "home" skill points vs "Night" ones). But...

*Jane*

Say... Just *how* much knowledge ends up transferred, exactly? Because it occurs to me that "living" the entire life of the person you just killed – and who *they* killed, and who *they* killed, and so on – could easily end up "erasing" who you once were, under the weight of so many memories that weren't "you".

I doubt it actually works that way, for plenty of reasons, but if it did... Well, that would also be another way of explaining why the Drow are the way they are, would it not? Those who might have been inclined to change the system found their goals buried under the weight of those they killed, while those who chose to abstain never had the strength to consider changing things at all.

It's a plot point I've seen used before, where directly absorbing information on too large a scale had dangerous side effects – though, not used in this particular manner before.

*WuseMajor*

22. No matter how tempted I am with the prospect of unlimited power, I will not consume any energy field bigger than my head.

On the other hand

"You can never have too many tiger pits, Chancellor. That's the same lack of vision that has people say "that's too large a field of energy to absorb" or "calling yourself a living god is blasphemy"."

–Dread Emperor Malignant III, before his death and second reign as Dread Emperor Revenant

*nick012000*

Might be why the Mighty get referred to using gender-neutral pronouns, to be honest.

---

Well, yeah, different names referring to the same person with the different amounts of power are somewhat of a hint in that regard. Catherine was able to resist something similar, when

fed a slice of a mind by Masego – and he has an Aspect to make up for that – but that was explicitly because she was approaching divinity even then. Add to that the fact that the Mighty are sigils, yet at least some of the sigils are apparently granted, and the whole thing starts to look like a liability bigger than even the Winter titles.

*1queenofblades1*

Think Ranger finally managed to get in? Or Neshamah helping Cat out/hobbling her? (dunno if this is positive or negative yet)

Malicia killing the Drow before Cat could recruit them? The Grey Pilgrim? Ugh why isn't it Monday already!?

[DroughtBringer](#)

I don't think Malicia has the resources to pull this off at the moment, Grey is probably busy preparing for the Dead King, and Ranger doesn't fit quite right, although I couldn't say why.

*SpeckofStardust*

Ranger is explicitly not made for army killing, going by her interlude with the dead king, she wouldn't kill absolutely everyone.

[Javvies](#)

Though, she certainly is built as more of a boss-killer/single-target type, Ranger doesn't normally bother with army-killing because it's not a meaningful challenge to carve her way through grunts, not because she can't. She goes after those she deems "worthy". These days, "worthy" is apparently around the level of a Fae Monarch, and she's been beating up and stealing the eye from a Fae Prince every year? for so long, just because she likes the ring she made out of it.

Now, call me crazy, but I doubt that all of the now-dead drow would have been anywhere near being "worthy" by Ranger's standards.

*haihappen*

Looks more like something the Saint leaves in her wake. But an internal power play is more likely.

*MetruX*

Don't worry. All shall die before you know it, and after Monday you'll still be waiting for Wednesday ;3

[Javvies](#)

Malicia has not the resources, nor the knowledge that Cat was going to the Everdark, though it is certainly within the bounds of possibility that within the Tower and/or the basements of various High Lords, the knowledge of accessing the Everdark exists.

Neshamah/Dead King is watching Cat to see what and how she does. While I'm certain it is within his abilities to do so, I don't think he did. Getting involved here like this would not serve to help him determine whether or not Cat is worthy of apotheosis. He's intrigued by Cat, but I don't believe that he's going to randomly involve himself in her own arc(s) that don't involve him – at least not so blatantly.

Grey is probably more concerned with the Dead King and/or the actions of the Conclave. Plus, while he is a Hero, a Levantine Hero at that, I didn't get the army-killer vibes from him.

### Javvies

Argh. Didn't mean to hit post yet.

Ranger is unlikely because she couldn't get in, the last time she tried, per Archer. Also, it's likely that she would have stealthed or skirmished past this outer lot towards more powerful/stronger types further in, rather than massacre them all, unless they did something to seriously piss her off.

---

This may be the dwarves, at least I hope so. It's about the time they became relevant, and a common enemy would be a great way for the drow to be at least temporarily united, maybe even grow stronger in the same way that goblins and orcs did during the civil war.

### Euodiachloris

Or, it could be one city of Night getting back at another because it wants its sewer maintenance engineers' knowledge back (enchanted sewers are no joke to keep maintained).  
\*shrugs\*

### *Berder*

The mysterious bodies here might be just perfect for Cat. Trying to negotiate with a whole lot of pathologically violent clans that hold no single leader? Virtually impossible. Trying to negotiate with the most powerful few drow that are left cowering in their last fortress after some horrible disaster slaughtered most of their kind? Substantially more manageable.

### *Helirous*

famous last words Cat. Its like with the goblinfire, there is no way in hell you are not getting blamed for this

*Snowfire1224*

Drow courtship must be complicated considering that identifying as any gender is considered an insult. I imagine it's a bit like Discworld Dwarves but with lots of backstabbing since the Drow are Evil. The other possibility is that they are a one gendered race and so it doesn't actually matter.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Could Cat try necromancy on the drow? When she raised the mages during the Second Liesse, they seemed to have retained some of their knowledge so it might be a good way of gathering info. Plus, it seems like a good idea to see how her powers interact with the Night.

*Novice*

I still don't understand why Cat kept justifying herself here. Of course, I'm glad that she agreed with Indrani in the end but still. Didn't Cat intend to use the Dead King's horde in the first place? Knowing that she would be holding the thinnest of leashes especially after they saw the echoes in Arcadia, that the DK would be further strengthened for future atrocities?

Did the trio met with the force-ghost of Willicakes offscreen or something?

Anyways, I'm looking forward to their adventures in the Underdark. This is bound to be good.

*Dylan Tullos*

"Justifications only matter to the just" is basically a joke at this point. Catherine has spent the entire series trying to justify her actions.

*Novice*

Oh, I'm fine with her hemming and hawing in the earlier books since she was just getting set up character-wise. But I was not expecting it to last into the middle of Book 4 when shit is going down and Calernia is catching goblinfire (metaphorically of course).

*Allafterme*

Don't worry about goblinfire, book is still young...

*ALKATYN*

The Night is a really cool concept for a magic system. Makes the whole society inherently unstable and zero sum. Some thoughts:

- Does knowledge from non-drow get absorbed? I'd guess not given their technological stasis, they would have killed someone with knowledge of blacksmithing or whatever eventually.
- They talk about absorbing skills and secrets, but not memories. Why are those different? Or are they doing so, hence why the guide refers to its past self as a different person. Could one use it to obtain passwords, battle plans, etc?
- Can non-Drow learn how to absorb the Night? If so that's a massive available power source. You could make your own version of the Watch by powering up human soldiers with Night from the Drow.
- Hypothesis for how the Drow society collapsed: While they had a steady stream of Night coming in from surface enemies (the cattle) one advanced by doing raids and getting their share, and the proceeds were spread around the rest of society. But when the supply dried up (due to the Chain of hunger, Dead King etc) the "economy" of night collapsed, it became more effective to advance by killing other drow and stealing their Night, so it became a zero sum all against all continuous war, and cooperation to do large scale raids, infrastructure, etc, collapsed.

Masego will be pissed he didn't come. This seems totally different from the rest of magic in Calernia.

*Letouriste*

I think the drows are not the only ones who can have the night. Cat didn't kill any drows yet but when she does she could get their power and their knowledge...

*Someguy*

It's the other way round. Drow can harvest Night from undead, Cat can mass raise undead. If Cat allows the Drow to powerlevel via herself, she has something to get their attention. Too bad they can't be trusted to harvest enough Night/Winter to make Cat mortal again.

*ALazyMonster*

Anyone else feel that all of Cat's hesitation might be coming from the redemption story that the pilgrim was trying to start? All this angsting seems slightly exaggerated from what Cat used to be like.

*Novice*

Right? This reeks of the same kind of mind whammy as when the Lone Swordsman was still alive.

*ATRDCI*

I mean, to each their own, but I don't see it as that bad. More along the lines of likw when she was trying to take out the Assassin's Guild. Her inner morals all but demanded it if her (because what is the point of ruling if you are no better than the previous regime) but practical issues forced her to give up the moral stand

*Novice*

I guess I thought she was already over all this kind of moral dilemma since her badass stand against the Hashmallim. Justifications and all that jazz, you know?

[Euodiachloris](#)

People and characters can and do backtrack, you know. Just ask any cognitive therapist.

Doesn't mean they stop moving in a general direction, but old habits, behaviour patterns and ideas aren't all that easily broken.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

Doubt it. The Pilgrim threw away the redemption story when he chose the "Sacrifice Callow to the Gods Above for Peace" plan.

*Dylan Tullos*

Well, the drow have just been promoted from "largely useless" to "worst idea ever".

This is an entire society based on treachery and murder. They can eat people to gain their skills. And Catherine wants to let them loose in Calernia, where there are mages and priests and soldiers for them to devour.

If Procer takes over Callow, the people live. If Malicia takes over Callow, the people live. But If the drow get loose in Callow, they'll kill everyone from great nobles to subsistence farmers. Even Akua wanted to leave some people alive to pay her tribute, while the drow would be quite happy to murder every single Callowan to harvest their knowledge.

This has gone from being a bad idea because the drow aren't strong enough to help to a terrible idea because the drow will level up by murdering half of Calernia.

*superkeaton*

Finally, Cat's learning to get over her soapbox moralizing

*DarkDweller*

The whole twilight sages thing makes me think that the night started as a way to keep knowledge immortal. After all, they 'considered death the only sin'. Then the Sve co-opted it in order to increase her power, and turned it into a magical pyramid scheme with her at the top. Probably drained the night from other twilight sages as an opening gambit so none could possibly oppose her, then spread a doctrine that justified her actions.

*Steve*

How do we know these corpses aren't just Drow decor? It could be, like, totally normal.

*Isa Lumitus*

You know, reading Forgotten Realms and Warhammer books taught me to really hate dark elves. It always seemed like their civilizations should have descended into... Pretty much exactly what you have just described for the Drow. So I'm liking the deconstruction.

*Viconr*

Perun and Mokosh? Really – old slavic gods? Is it Fantasy Counterpart Culture or they had stolen someone's cities?

*Levi Kalden*

I assume she can harvest theNight as she is the duchess of moonless night

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## Chapter 54: Scavenger

*"One hundred and ninety-three: should your nemesis offer you a wager, a truce or delay for the first time always accept it. Villains with a fated heroic match have reached the peak of their power, whereas you and your companions can only grow."*  
– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

"That's a lot of dead bodies," Indrani noted. "Like, battlefield a lot, not 'the Woe has a bad day' a lot."

I ignored the attempt at humour. In someone else I might have attributed it to needing to cover up shock, but Archer didn't get those kinds of shivers. The benefits of being raised in a part of



the world where every day a single misstep could get you killed by a raging monster-hunting lunatic. It was an uncomfortable truth that I'd gotten somewhat used to the sight of corpses as well, though not quite to my companion's extent. The drow who'd scuttled in behind us had gone still as statues, stricken by either terror or awe. I left them behind and waded into the pool of death. I knelt in lukewarm blood and guts, flipping over the nearest body to have a better look at it.

I immediately withdrew my hand.

"Cat?" Indrani probed, catching up to me.

"There's still Night in those," I said.

I knew that because I'd felt the eldritch power react to my own. Not an attack or an attempt to meld, but... almost like the darkness had been licking my hand. *Like it recognizes something larger and meaner, and tries to make friends.* I shivered, and it'd been a long time since any kind of cold had caused me to do that. The dead drow was badly mangled. The face had been smashed in, skull crushed through the eye socket, but it had an earlier wound. A bloody hole in its chest, near the centre. I stuck my fingers in there again, ignoring the feeling the Night eagerly pressing against Winter, and popped open the ribcage to have a closer look. There was an organ in there that looked somewhat similar to a human heart, though it had way too many veins coming out of it and it stood deeper in the body – almost next to the spine, which at least was easily recognizable in shape. It was more grey than white, though, and oddly granular.

"That's going to be a pain to wash," Indrani commented, glancing at my now blood-drenched clothes.

"It was a crossbow bolt that did this," I said. "Look at the indent. It's similar to what Legion-issue makes on humans. Didn't go deep enough, so whoever did this had to finish them up close."

For all her many flaws, Archer had deep knowledge of the ways of murdering at a distance. When she turned her attention to the wound I was indicating her eyes narrowed.

"That's a much bigger mark than the crossbows Robber's minions used would have made," she said. "Bigger bolt, and much stronger impact. Honestly, it looks like it should have gone straight through."

Which would require much more force, if the head of the bolt was larger. Whoever had done this they had significantly better crossbows than the Legions of Terror fielded – when it came to the power of a shot, at least. Hard to tell the rate of fire from a single corpse.

"That points a damning finger already," I said.

The Dread Empire was hardly the only nation that fielded crossbowmen, though they did field the largest amount by a significant margin. I could honestly think of no Calernian power that wouldn't have crossbows in a field army, save for the Chain of Hunger. But Praes used a goblin crank model that was a significant improvement on what the likes of Procer and the old kingdom used. Better rate of fire, better range, better impact. Whoever had done this used a superior model, and I couldn't think of any power that could boast of one. Not on the surface, anyway. Indrani leaned forward, jostling the corpse from my grasp, and then leaned back with a frown on her face. She was looking at the eye wound, the one that'd broken the skull.

"Yeah, you're right," she said. "Look at the angle. Hammer – and it's absolutely a hammer that did this – came down all wrong for someone of the same height. That's dwarf work, unless there's another bunch of murderous little people running around the region."

I dropped the dead drow entirely, slowly rising to my feet. For a butcher's yard, this place smelled nothing like rotting flesh and blood. There was that coppery scent wafting around, but aside from that? Another physical oddity for this already strange race. My gaze swept across the slaughter, looking for the lay of it. Some bodies had obviously been dragged and dropped, but others had been left where they fell and from those I could try to piece together the events that had preceded our arrival.

"First volley hit them by surprise," Indrani said, come up at my side. "Look at the bodies there. Too many of them are face down, they were shot in the back."

I followed her pointed finger. The corpses were as she'd said, but that was not what drew my attention. The crossbows would have been fired from a passage leading roughly to my current left, but I could see it winding closer to my back. That should lead to either the Gloom itself or a cavern very close to it. Ivah *had* said that the dwarves sometimes pierced through the Gloom, sending an expedition through to mine or claim other sources of wealth.

"Then the second volley went straight into the crowd, right there," Indrani mused, finger moving towards a handful of dead bodies closer to the centre. "That's interesting. You'll know what kind of tactics that is even better than me."

"Panic," I said. "They were inciting a panic, so the drow would try to flee instead of fight back. Which means..."

Our two gazes swept towards the right side of the cavern, where the other passage out could be seen. It was broader than the other one, would likely allow for twenty through at a time. The

corpses near it were piled almost hip-high, not a single one coming closer than twenty feet of the passage.

"There was another force waiting there," I said. "So they're numerous enough to afford splitting up at least, assuming there's a single dwarven expedition at work here."

"They did it cold and methodical," Indrani grunted. "I'd guess they let the panic sink in before moving in the second force, so the drow wouldn't get desperate too early."

"It was mean to be a massacre since the beginning," I softly agreed. "They never intended to leave anyone alive."

"There's more. Look around. No structures in here, Cat," she pointed out. "Nowhere to huddle in, not even the beginnings of a camp site. So why were there at least a thousand drow in the middle of fucking nowhere?"

"You think the dwarves slaughtered the entire tribe," I said. "Sigil, whatever."

"Whatever they're up to, it doesn't involve leaving survivors," Indrani shrugged. "This lot didn't give much a fight, by the looks of it. I'd bet they were bottom feeders who fled another battle and got cleaned up before the dwarves moved on."

"That's monstrous," I said, appalled. "I understand hitting those who can fight back, but civilians? Gods, Archer, I wouldn't be surprised if we found children in the piles should we look for them."

"There's a sense to it," she replied. "Hard sense, mind you, but still sense. Leave a bunch of Night-bearing corpses behind and the survivors will eat that. Possibly make trouble on the way out. No one can harvest if there's no one left."

"Fucking Hells," I said. "Is there a single place on Creation where we're not going to find atrocities if we scratch the varnish a bit?"

"This whole fucking place is an atrocity, Cat," Indrani dismissed. "All the dwarves did was heap another ugly day onto the pile."

My finger clenched. Her utter lack of sympathy for the drow was not without reason. But there was a difference between holding the responsible to account and shrugging off massacres. I'd wrestled with this before, when I had to make choices about the Empire. How many people in Praes could really be called at fault for the many sins of the High Lords? Farmers and shopkeepers did not get a voice in the run of the world, no matter whose banner they lived under. For every drow calling themselves Mighty and

heedlessly partaking in the slaughter, how many thousands were just *meat*?

"Enough," I said. "We've got too many worries for me to be angry with you."

The other Named shrugged.

"Sure," she said. "We might consider this a useful turn, if not a good one. We need to get deeper, right? If we follow in the wake of the dwarves I expect we'll have an easier way of it than on our own."

"We don't know why they're here," I reminded her. "Or even where they're headed."

Indrani gestured down at the slaughter beneath us.

"That's not the opening move of someone after a few rubies, Cat," she said. "They're leaving no one behind, so it follows they're gonna be in the Everdark long enough they're worrying someone might raise a banner here before they return."

I reluctantly nodded. Not because I agreed following the dwarven expedition was our best bet, but to concede she was right about the logistics. The drow were terrified of the Kingdom Under, evidently with good reason, but this brutal a massacre wasn't something that would go unanswered. Even a rat bared its fangs when cornered. The entire affair reeked of calculated risk.

"This complicates things," I finally sighed. "It might be easier to find friends here, if the drow are under attack, but the price..."

"We're not picking a fight with the Kingdom Under," Indrani flatly said. "Not even the Lady does that. You kill a single dwarf and they won't send a complaint, they'll sink cities underground and slaughter everyone remotely involved. Maybe their relatives just to be sure. It doesn't matter if by some miracle you manage to beat the army they send, Catherine. They'll keep sending them, just get across the point that *you don't fuck with the dwarves*."

I glanced at her, surprised. I didn't disagree with what she'd said – odds were that if the Queen of Callow killed a dwarf then Laure would be a ruin before winter arrived – but I was taken aback by how vehement Archer was being about it. She'd always been, well, fearless. Occasionally to the point of foolishness, though that was not unusual for any of the Woe. Including myself. I'd been under the impression few dwarves ever came to Refuge, even though it probably the surface entity with the closest ties to the Kingdom Under. Save maybe Mercantis, but that was famously

strictly business as all the relationships of the City of Bought and Sold tended to be.

"You won't get an argument from me," I said.

"Good," she said. "You got more on your plate, anyway."

"How's that?" I frowned.

Archer pointed down at the pond of corpses.

"That's a lot of Night, Cat," she said. "Even if they were all nobodies, that's a great many nobodies. You just going to leave that lying there?"

I'd been trying not to think about that, all the while knowing I would have to soon enough. I wasn't sure if I could devour the Night myself, but I did have Diabolist with me. If there was anyone who could tutor me in the basics of eldritch cannibalism it was Akua Sahelian. That'd still involve eating power from a source I only poorly understood, unaware of the possible long-term consequences. If Ivah had been upfront about what the Night was, then this could represent an extremely useful addition to my arsenal. I'd been running into old monsters more and more, of late. Older heroes, yes, but there was also the fact that the Dead King would be fielding an entire battalion of the most dangerous Named he'd been able to get his hands on. Having a much shallower bag of tricks than the opposition had cost me, in my last few fights, and I didn't have the time or the kind of opponents available that'd allow me to play catch up. Drawing on the ancestral knowledge of an entire race would, to be frank, be the perfect solution. That was the most obvious reason not to go through with this.

It was too good a solution, too perfect. Like it'd been handpicked for my problems. Mundane coincidence was not unknown to Creation – the Gods were not behind every stroke of fortune or disaster, even for Named – but this crucial a coincidence? No. It wasn't happenstance. I would go as far as to say I was inclined to believe this was a bid from Below. *Look at what you could get, if you start acting like a proper villain.* My last talk with the Dead King had involved a warning about the offers that would come knocking at my door. About the kind of stories that would be offered to me. I had not forgot it, even though it had been the least ominous part of what was spoken.

"No," I finally said. "I can't. It's too useful."

"Tell me you're not drinking dead drow juice," Indrani said. "You don't know where it's been, Cat, it could be full of diseases."

"Not me," I said, glancing back at the rest of our band.

The drow had gathered themselves while the two of us had been examining the massacre. None of them came within even spitting distance of the corpses, though, and from the looks of it one of them had thrown up against the cavern wall. Diabolist was still with them, though her eyes remained on the bodies. She was too well-taught to let her face betray her deepest thoughts, but the blankness of her expression was a hint in and of itself.

"Shit, you feeding them to Dubious Witch?" Indrani muttered. "Vivi's going to have a *fit* when she learns."

I waded back to dry land, boots trailing blood all over the stone. The drow visibly shrunk on themselves while Akua withdrew her gaze from the massacre's aftermath to meet my eyes.

"Catherine," she greeted me. "Have your deliberations come to an end?"

"In a manner of speaking," I said. **"Akua Sahelian, I forbid you to partake in Night."**

Diabolist shivered as my order sunk into the heart of her being, words writ into law. She threw me a reproachful glance, after gathering her bearings.

"I would not have so blundered, dear heart," she said. "Such power would not come without trappings or demands. I am more discerning in my usurpations."

"Then this shouldn't be a problem," I replied flatly.

She could argue all she wanted that she wouldn't have done it, it was bad form to give an alcoholic the keys to a liquor shop. Even when they told you they didn't like the bottles on the shelves.

"As you say," Diabolist murmured, bowing her head.

I turned to the drow. I'd gotten used to them over our journey, well enough I no longer had trouble telling them apart. Ivah was the only one who talked regularly, even among each other. The former guide shifted uneasily when my gaze came to rest on it.

"Ivah," I said. "Are you still set on us parting ways?"

Silver eyes narrowed.

"I am reconsidering this matter, Queen," it said.

"Good," I smiled. "Then I have a bargain for you. I still need a guide to Holy Tvarigu, or at least someone who can take me to the path that leads there. If you're willing to be that guide, I can offer safety on the way there."

I paused, then glanced at the corpses behind me.

"There would be other benefits, were you so inclined," I added.

The drow's face creased in thought.

"You would grant me right to harvest all of them?" it probed.

"So long as you can do it in a reasonable amount of time," I said. "I want to get a move on as soon as possible. I don't suppose it's possible to take all of the Night at once?"

"There are rites to do this," Ivah admitted. "Yet I know them not. It could take more than hours to finish this. The act of harvest is tiring."

"If I may intervene?" Akua asked.

I nodded at her.

"If simply gathering the Night is the issue," she said. "I believe we can be of assistance."

"You can drain all those dry?" I said, jutting a thumb at the dead.

"The power itches to be held," Diabolist said. "It would not fight us in this."

"And contamination?" I pressed.

I got the impression the shade had to hold back from rolling her eyes.

"I have struck bargains with demons and devils most ancient," Akua said. "This is ancient work, to be sure, and strong. It is also incredibly simplistic. I am no green warlock, drunk on the success of binding an imp."

"Gods, you sound like Masego only two parts more Evil," I muttered. "Fine, I didn't mean to impugn your talent at short-sightedly endangering the very fabric of Creation to try winning battles you ended up losing anyway on account of being kind of a fuckup."

I heard Archer choke behind me.

"That was unnecessary," Diabolist said, sounding genuinely miffed.

"Don't know about that," Indrani mused. "I got a laugh out of it."

Ivah's eyes were moving from one of us to the other in sequence as we spoke, face visibly split between fear and befuddlement. I suspected the Mighty weren't keen on banter with their

underlings. What little I knew implied they were pretty direct about having their displeasure felt, though in all fairness that made me the pot mouthing off at their kettle.

"The terms stand, with the addition that we'll help you gather Night at least this once," I told the drow.

Ivah did not need to mull over it much longer.

"I would accept your bargain, then," it said.

I nodded, pleased.

"Give me a moment to phrase the oath," I said.

"That will not be necessary, Queen," Ivah said.

My brow rose. Trust already? We'd only struck one bargain, and I'd needed it for urgent purpose. The silver-eyed guide smiled thinly, reading my surprise.

"This will make me drow again," it said. "Drow neither give nor take oaths."

"That's rather inconvenient," I frankly replied.

Would it try to betray us the moment it had a bit of power under the belt? I wasn't overly worried about it hurting us, Secrets or no Secrets, but it'd be a pain to have to find another guide so soon after empowering the last one. A closer eye needed to be kept on it, then. I gave Diabolist a meaningful glance, getting the slightest of nods in response.

"Let's get this done," I said. "Akua, I'm getting the impression that improvising here would be a bad idea."

"Your discernment remains impeccable," Diabolist said, without a hint of irony.

I smothered a grin. The diabolism quip had actually gotten under her skin, which was just delightful.

"If I may?" she said, extending her hand towards me.

I nodded and she made contact with the bare skin of my neck. It felt... like when we'd fought together against the Skein, but softer. Access granted but not power. Her thoughts bloomed right under my fingertips, little whispers of knowledge and intent.

"Extend your will," she murmured.

I closed my eyes. I could feel the Night wriggling in the bodies. She'd been right to say it was itching to be held: it responded eagerly to even the slightest of approaches. My mind covered the



whole of the cavern – close to the perception that emerged when others entered my domain, but somehow incomplete. There was no inherent understanding here. I was blindly groping my way.

“Call it,” Akua said.

**To me**, I ordered. The Night slithered out of the corpses like a tide of snakes, eating through dead flesh. It hesitated, but I lashed it with my will and called it closer. It became easier the more I exerted myself, as if I’d overcome its hesitation. I spun it into a sphere until it grew larger than a person, then told it to contract. When I opened my eyes, there was only a pinprick of darkness hovering in the air before me.

“Ivah,” I said. “Now.”

The drow approached and bowed towards the Night, beginning cadenced whispers, but they fell away from my ears. I was looking into the small piece of darkness, and seeing beyond it. Through it.

I was not the only one looking.

There was a face, but I could only make out the barest contours because of the eyes: deep and perfect silver, they were glaring harshly in otherwise absolute darkness.

*Splendid*, a woman’s voice spoke into my ear.

“Who are you?” I asked.

*Ah, perhaps not. Merely usurper. What an unusual creature you are.*

I could feel her mind scuttling across my own, like a spider on glass. Feeling out the shape of it, tasting the power. It went both ways. Her soul, her mantle was no thick bundle of power. It was an impossibly large web of the thinnest possible strings, spread out so far and wide I could scarcely comprehend it.

“You’re not the Night,” I said. “I can feel you too, Named.”

*I sensed you tread the Gloom with stolen feathers. Felt you come to me, purpose on your lips.*

“Sve of Night,” I whispered. “I seek audience with you.”

*So take it*, the woman laughed. *What stays your hand?*

“You’re under attack,” I said.

*All is strife. The Tenets will hold, or they will break. Only the worthy rise.*

"Then you're willing to talk," I tried. "We need to-"

*All paths lead to Tvarigu. I await you beyond the reach of dawn.*

Silver light shone, blinding, and for a heartbeat I thought I saw her whole. A colossal silhouette, limbs outstretched and shivering in pain. Then I saw only the cavern and the concerned looks of my companions.

"Fuck," I said feelingly. "This just keeps getting better, doesn't it?"

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### [DroughtBringer](#)

Yet another monday, everyone! Time to go vote so we can keep the Guide on the top (where it deserves to be) <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Also when I got here (To the website) the chapter wasn't up! Which is surprised me, and is awesome. (Sad that the chapter wasn't up, but...) this just goes to show how good Erratic is at getting chapters up on time, that I am caught off guard when they aren't up, because it so rarely happens. Thank you, Erratic, for all the work you do sharing this amazing story with us, and putting in the effort to publish an \*outstanding\* three chapters a week, and getting them out almost always on time. It is appreciated, and I am always looking forward to each chapter. Thank you for all you do.

### *SpeckofStardust*

"Fine, I didn't mean to impugn your talent at short-sightedly endangering the very fabric of Creation to try winning battles you ended up losing anyway on account of being kind of a fuckup." Well... this is fun.

### *Antoninjohn*

Cat does not need the Drow night she can make her own night out of Moonless Nights to gain power from those she slays

### [DroughtBringer](#)

I think the Night, and Moonless Nights are too separate of things. She might be able to do \*something\* from the corpses of those she slays, but not the same.

### *Gunslinger*

It does feel like the Night's usurpation aspect is related to the Sve's aspect. I don't think Cat can replicate that with Winter.

[\*shieldredblog\*](#)

She could come into a name though, in the right situation. For example if she kills Sve and usurps the Tenants of Night, safe money is on those Below offering her a job.

[\*Javvies\*](#)

That's mildly ominous.

Cat is not going to be claiming Night here, though she could, because it looks too good and would come with strings attached and lock her into certain stories. That's irksome. I wonder if that would apply to all possibilities of claiming some of the Night or just this specific opportunity laid before her (and thus similarly laid out freebies).

And, of course, Cat just looked like she was taking to herself because nobody else was aware of Sve of Night's presence.

*Byzantine*

Hmm. It feels like Sve's aspect – if that is what it is – drove her insane and left nothing behind but the aspect.

*Nic*

"should your nemesis offer you a wager, a truce or delay for the first time always accept it. Villains with a fated heroic match have reached the peak of their power, whereas you and your companions can only grow." – Considering this was what Cat did with the Lone Swordsman in Summerholm, it seems inaccurate. She did, in fact, grow tremendously.

*Michael Sanders*

Not the first time, nor the last time, Cat played a Heroic role in a story despite nominally being a Villain. She's an uncooperative bitch like that, riding the line between the two as best suits her own whims.

[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

The concerned looks... did Cat accidentally take the Night? Did something happen to her, did they see part of the whole of the Sve? So many unanswered questions. Kind of sad that Cat did not (willingly) partake of the Night, but she might have? No idea. But it makes sense why she did not, at the very least. Might cause a few too many problems. Wednesday will be fun.

## *FactualInsanity*

I believe in this case the simple answer is the most likely one by far. Her companions merely heard her talk, seemingly to no one.

What I find more thought-provoking is that the Night seems to be a manifestation of an aspect. Is the Sve a reverse-Ranger? One that grows in power through her minions amassing experience, instead of doing it herself?

Yotz

I do believe the concerned looks caused by the fact that she just went on discussion with an imaginary collocutor – from Archer's and Akua's pov; and the fact that Sve *actually talked* to someone – from the Drow. Though, the latter ones probably not so concerned, as more like "eyes popping out in disbelief, awe, and shock".

*Someguy*

I take it that Cultural connotations aside Cat is able to tell Sve of Night is a woman not by "hearing" her voice but by sensing it through her Mantle? If they physically meet she'd be anonymously androgynous like every other Drow?

Yotz

Maybe that distinction is largely dependent on the amount of power one has. Meat simply doesn't have enough to display any signs of gender, or even biological sex. And on the transition from low to Drow they gain enough power to undergo a metamorphosis of sorts – kinda like a form of neoteny.

In other news, it seems we'll finally be able to clear that point in regards to Ivah. Who will not be Ivah any longer, I assume...

[TeK](#)

You mean meat can't reproduce? I'll second Cat, it's a horrible approach to animal husbandry. You want as much cattle as possible.

Yotz

Oh, I agree completely!  
Though, there is an option with Drow being a Hive life form...

[TeK](#)

That... May be closer to true than I'd like. We are yet to be introduced to hive-mind and I'm pretty sure Chain of

Hunger's not it. What if drow is an artificial attempt to create a hive-mind? They even have genestealers and genderless drones. Between them and Chain of Hunger we have one whole Tyrranid hive.

*16JSundberg4*

Eh...not really. The Chain of Hunger is rather, almost terrifyingly so, inspired by the Skaven given the fact that the ratlings are that, ratlings. Ratmen with their leaders being "horned ones" like Grey Seers were in Skaven society. The drow though...it seems to be close to a hive mind without actually BEING a hive mind, since each of the drow have an independent will that desires to rise and grow within their own society. Cutthroat, yes, but not serving the betterment of the species as a whole.

*Drd*

Well the artificial hive mind thing could possibly explain why the Dwarves treat the Drow with such extreme prejudice... or they could just be bigoted, territorial, elitist, genocidal, psychopaths with small man syndrome.  
0\_o

[TeK](#)

Oh come on, Cat. What do you mean "this is too large a field of energy to absorb"? Are you a Villain or what?

*Michael*

"This energy field is off the charts!"

Is probably what she would say in the crappy, half-baked sci-fi adaptation.

*BryceWilliam*

its less the size the the seeming lack of a cost. evil never gives you power for free. \*never\*

*Yotz*

Ah, but there *is* an exception to that rule!  
See, the first dose is always free...

*Gunslinger*

I'm was more piqued that she was taking advice from the Dead King here. Good advice but still funny

[sengachi](#)

Evil Overlord List Rule #22: No matter how tempted I am with the prospect of unlimited power, I will not consume any energy field bigger than my head.

[DroughtBringer](#)

"When I opened my eyes, there was only a pinprick of darkness hovering in the air before me."

I mean, this one *\*was\** fairly small in the end.

[sengachi](#)

It definitely started out larger than a person. But yeah, I'm going to say that compressing an energy field larger than your head until it becomes a rift in the fabric of reality to an endless abyss and a mad, murderous demigod who stares back at you from within that abyss by no means makes the consumption of said energy field 'safe'. Not by any stretch of any definition of safe.

*ArkhCthuul*

Ah, but at least it makes it into a bite sized morsel of doom, no? ^^

*papermache7*

That'd make a lot of sense normally, but she's basically balking at eating at consuming a cloud when she's already drank an ocean before.

*Alivaril*

There's also the story of someone refusing dark power only to draw on it during a moment of desperation, Cat. That story ends even more poorly than the vaguely-villainous carrion devouring. Eat the baby, Cat.

"I spun it into a sphere until it grew larger than a person, then told it to contract. When I opened my eyes, there was only a pinprick of darkness hovering in the air before me."  
C'mon, Cat, this IS an energy field smaller than your head. Take a little bite. You know you want to.

[DroughtBringer](#)

I'd argue the drawing on it in a moment of desperation is set up much better, the original one is a story of Gluttony, this is a story of Desperation.

[sengachi](#)

Desperation is a story that has a potentially good ending for heroes fighting a tyrannical despot. For a villain though? Down in the Underdark? No down in the Underdark Desperation only has one ending and it is far, far worse than Gluttony's.

*RanVor*

Cat's story has been of Desperation from day one. No need for making it even worse by adding Gluttony to it.

*burguulkodar*

She is a Hero in the Everdark framing. Between two evils, in a story a lesser evil is always a Hero-role. Antihero is still kind of a hero, and that's Cat since like forever.

*Death Knight*

"All paths lead to Tvarigu. I await you beyond the reach of dawn."

Thematically there is no way the Priestess of Night does not join Cat. She is the Duchess of Moonless Nights after all. A deity in all but Name, and what are the Roles of Priestesses?

Preaching the tenets of their deity.

*GuidingMoonlight*

Cat should stop trying to take moral highground, she lost this privilege like 3-4 books ago.

Anyway why she still wants this alliance with drow?

They are not organised.

They are completely untrustworthy, just because drinking Callowans is always more beneficial for drow than dieing for them.

They are currently at war with fucking dwarves. This means by making friends with drow, cat willingly puts callow in dwarven shit list.

Why is she still there?

*Amoonymous*

Kinda agreeing with this. Drow also don't take or give oaths, so she can't even get any oaths to make them trustworthy or not just kill Callowans and siphon them whenever they think they can get away with it.

Even before this chapter it felt like way too few pros and way too many cons, and this just made it worse.

*Jane*

Properly speaking, she doesn't need an *alliance*, per se. Just give them a reason to attack Procer and/or Praes, and offer a way to make it easy for them. Even if all they accomplish is a distraction, that's enough to give Callow a bit of breathing room.

If the Drow are hostile to everyone, just make sure they're closer to your enemies than they are to you – if they're not interested in holding territory (and they don't seem to be), then making sure they're harassing your enemies is close enough to being a friend. So long as you stay away from them.

Yotz

At it was said once – *the enemy of my enemy is my enemy's enemy. No more. No less.*

...

...and now I can't but help to imagine Drow raiding party with stickers "Front toward enemy"...

*burguulkodar*

actually what was said was "The enemy of my enemy is second on the list"

[Javvies](#)

"The enemy of my enemy is second on the list" was a Dread Emperor chapter quote ... I think. Definitely one of the Dead Emperors, though it might also have come up inside one of the chapters, rather than in an opening quote.

Yotz's "the enemy of my enemy is my enemy's enemy, no more, no less" is Maxim 29 of the Seventy Maxims of Maximally Effective Mercenaries, from Schlock Mercenary.

*Drd*

The Drow would LOVE a chance at praes or procer, but they can't get there due to being surrounded by the Dead king, ratlings, and psychopathic dwarves, but they STILL occasionally try anyway. All Cat has to do is open a gateway into her enemies back yard and back, I'm sure they'd jump at the chance. Because they do still want to go home with their spoils, they'll play nice with Cat too.

*Gunslinger*

It seemed like a desperate gambit at best before but hopeless now. I guess she's hoping that they'd listen to the Sve if she orders them to ally. Though that's never gonna happen



*RanVor*

No, you got it wrong. You should be asking: with whom should she make an alliance instead? Everyone else is either already hostile or even more dysfunctional, after all.

*GuidingMoonlight*

- 1) Goblins. Yeas they are treacherous bitches, but Cat has atleast some idea what they want to be able to predict their behavior. Unlike Drow.
- 2) Make Winter Court. Its a matter of time anyway. Better now than in Cat yet another "darkest hour".
- 3) Go full Lich King. She has alot of dead bodies. Why not use them. I dont even remember for how long we have been teased with this. Her fae zombies are inteligent and resistant to Heaven usual hard counter.

3 option from the top of my head. All far less dangerous, much quicker and in direct control by Cat. And i didnt make up any of them. They all were introduced in story at some point but cat doesnt use them because she keeps pussyfoot around some vague defined "Line"

And dont even start with "it will lock her up in villain story and villains always lose". This rule ignores Cat and Black for some reason.

*werafdsaew*

With (2) she'll be bringing new pieces to the board, which allows Above to do the same. At least with the Drows she's just re-purposing existing pieces.

*GuidingMoonlight*

New power already on the table. She brought Winter in Ceation and actively uses it. Heavens already have an excuse to put new pieces.

*Jane*

I think she's probably going to come to a deal with the Goblins anyway, but they're not going to be enough to change things directly – they prize their own survival too highly to play a pivotal role in her conflicts. They're excellent support, but she needs someone who can engage in a more direct fight.

Building a Court has unknown, permanent effects – it's true that it could be helpful to her, especially if it allows more people to use gates, but what if it drives her most loyal followers mad? She has a hard time dealing with the

principle alienation, and she has quite a strong strength of self; those she bestows a title upon may not be able to deal with it at all.

The dead might make good cannon fodder and shock troops, but they still need to be armed to be effective, and they have a shortage of money and arms. Raising the dead from a battlefield is one thing, but building an army of dead from scratch involves a different set of economic concerns. Furthermore, Catherine's undead are "different", insofar as they retain skills from their life – raising the civilian dead as well as the military might not be as effective as her usual dead soldiers. Also, there's also a matter of suitable corpses – Black mentioned at the start that the freshly dead made for better undead than older corpses; we don't know whether digging up old graveyards will yield undead good for more than scaring farmers with. And finally, there's a real risk that she's going to have to face some of the Dead King's undead, as a result of his agreement with Malicia; they might well end up turned against her, in such an instance. It's not a bad tool in her kit, but it's questionable as to whether it would be worth more than pursuing an outside alliance.

There are sound arguments against relying on each plan that don't involve moral concerns. And besides, none of them are mutually exclusive with the Drow – it sounded like the Goblins know pretty much what they want, and just need Cat to agree to their terms, and she can start handing out titles any time she wishes. The Undead are the only thing that would take her any real amount of time, but raising an army of the dead will be much easier and faster if she has a few battlefields to work with anyway.

### *GuidingMoonlight*

"Building a Court has unknown, permanent effects"

And releasing Drow from containment between Dwarves, Elves and Dead King doesn't? With Court Cat atleast has nope-button, because she is The Queen and can easily take power back.

"but what if it drives her most loyal followers mad?"

Than dont use unknown powers on your friends? I think Cat forgot but she has the Gallowborn. Turn them in Immortals and look for side effects. Again, Cat has full control over winter. Its established fact. If you affraid of people going mad, make them take binding oaths before they go mad.

"but building an army of dead from scratch"

There were atleast 2 major battles with ten of thousands fully equipped soldiers dead. There was a overhyped crusade but it was pretty forgettable. Damn Demon of Alzheimer.

“freshly dead made for better undead than older corpses”

Shouldnt have wasted time on DK nd Drow than.

“Catherine’s undead are “different”, insofar as they retain skills from their life”

And resistant to AOE blessings. And become more intelligent with time to the point where a horse can show personality. And animated with winter. And generally all around better.

“there’s a real risk that she’s going to have to face some of the Dead King’s undead”

Than dont send them against DK. Its not like she lacks other enemies. And frankly i dont see Cat winning against DK no matter what, so its a mute point anyway.

“none of them are mutually exclusive with the Drow”

Everything takes time, and time is limited.

Goblins can decide to deal with Malicia any moment for what Cat knows.

Finding volunteers and safe ways to make Court require testing.

And dead bodies are spoiling like you said.

*Jane*

Whatever ill effects might come from Cat freeing the Drow can be safely presumed to be Somebody Else’s Problem, however, unless she decides to become Dread Empress herself. Unless there’s a realistic chance of some new Drow Empire arising, they’ll just end up a persistent thorn in the side of somebody else – worst case, she might feel a twinge of guilt from time to time when she hears about what they’re doing.

The *results* are unpredictable, but outside of the worst case scenarios, the *locations* of those effects can be predicted fairly well – the Underdark (wholly irrelevant to her, unless it ticks off the dwarves), and the exit point of wherever she unleashes them.

Regarding Courts, empowering people you *don’t* trust (presuming that you’re doing so as an experiment to see the results, before killing them to give the title to someone that you do) sounds like a horrible idea to me.

I know you said not to bring up Narratives, but... I mean, it's *really obvious* how that ends. Setting aside Narrative, though, giving an unknown (but significant) power to someone so that you can observe how they respond to the power doesn't sound like it will yield good results – unless you hand them over to Masego for an unknown period of time (who has generally been working on equally important matters), you don't really have the right tools to get good answers out of them, and if something goes wrong, they'll do a lot of damage before you can properly execute them. And I don't even know how you could tell what the consequences of expanding Winter's reach might have on Callow, until it's too late.

Regarding the already-existent dead, she had to let them go in order to secure her truce; Procer certainly wasn't going to treat with her if she'd left them standing, and I doubt they would be reasonable if she asked to keep the bodies.

Regarding corpse-hunting instead of pursuing potential allies, is there some other great source of freshly dead bodies that I'm unaware of? Outside of a disaster, I don't imagine there's more than a few bodies generated in any given Callowan city per-day – certainly not enough to matter for military purposes.

Regarding the differences between her dead and “standard” undead, what I meant was that, despite their advantages, we don't know whether their “old life” restricts their capacity for military affairs. A “standard” zombie doesn't need to think much – it follows the magic in its veins, and attacks a necromancer's targets according to its programming. If Cat were to make, say, a baker undead – would she still be similarly programmed? Or would she retain knowledge of baking, but not know how to properly shamle and bite, or swing a sword? Furthermore, if they retain elements of their previous personality, would they still march solemnly forward, blue-eyed towards certain death? Or would they begin to express hesitation or cowardice? So far as I recall, everyone she's previously raised has been a soldier or mage of some sort; raising the civilian dead might not be as effective.

Regarding the Dead King... Well, then, Cat's probably already lost. Do you really think that Malicia was so eager to cut a deal with the Dead King and cut Cat out if her deal *didn't* involve Cat in some way? A full invasion's probably off the table, for obvious reasons, but she's going to find herself in at least a limited

conflict with him. I mean, he practically said as much with that whole "Don't take it personally if we fight" speech.

Regarding time, Cat's most pressing issue is the Crusade; the goblins will be used against Malicia, if they play a direct role at all. They can wait a bit longer. Testing the effects of bestowing a title will take longer, but honestly, if she's going to do it at all, she should just skip the testing – in which case it doesn't take much time at all. Raising an army of the dead takes time if she wants to establish one before the fighting begins, but I seriously doubt that digging up a few graveyards will be of greater value than opening a second front – the series has suggested in the past that low-quality undead are of little value.

### *GuidingMoonlight*

Regarding Drow. Do you think nobody will figure out who let the Drow out? When it's get out she will be on everyone shit list, so she could kiss goodbye to her dream of peace for callow. If nothing else, i give 75% chance that Dwarves will notice Cat following them.

Regarding Court. Trust is not a factor, because Cat already heavily relies on people she shouldnt trust: Akua and Larat. And there are still no consequences. Thats why i refuse to accept "Villain story" explanation.

Why empower people who are not your close friends? Well, you said it yourself, friend or not you cant trust him or her not to go full villain. But you can make them take oaths(like Cat did to herself and Larat) or bind them through power-link(Like Akua). Like that you have loyal winter army and all your friends alive and sane.

Regarding Dead bodies. Most recent Places in Callow with thousand dead soldiers: Red valley, New Winter-Swamp, Liese, Summerhold. Main goal of dead army is to hold the line and lower the casualties for Legions and Court army. Their main qulities are "hard to incapacitate", not "highly lethal"

Consider battle of the camps. Heroes cut through Legioners like butter, So technically there is not differents between legioner and living dead when in comes to holding the line against heroes.

### *Jane*

Regarding the Drow, if she uses them against Praes, nobody will care – you can do whatever you want to a

Villain. If she uses them against Procer, it will end up overshadowed by the fact that Malicia unleashed the Dead King on them. Besides, she's already the Arch-Heretic of the East – exactly how much worse can her diplomatic position get, at this point? And it's true, the dwarves might well notice what she's done, but what do they care? To them, the Drow appear to be little more than pests, and surface-dwellers aren't actually considered people.

Regarding trust, Akua and Larat are two people – creating a Court involves dozens of people, and would presumably be the heart of her forces. She has heavy leverage over Akua, and makes use of her in a relatively limited capacity; Larat has also been kept relatively peripheral to her plans, despite his power (I'm treating him separately from the Wild Hunt as a whole, to be clear). She can't keep dozens of powerful people with questionable loyalties under her thumb at all times, and there would be no point in making them and then *not* relying on their talents; it would be quite different than her arrangement with her current dubious subordinates. Oaths are a potent tool, but the Fae are well-experienced in abusing technicalities and unexpected situations; it's not a panacea. Besides, this still doesn't deal with the "What side effects might there be to bringing more Winter into Creation?" issue – there's no point in winning the wars if it plunges Callow into an eternal winter.

Regarding the dead; the Vales are on the wrong side of a landslide, and surrounded by hostile soldiers (admittedly, a good situation for stirring a bit of mischief by ambushing the enemy army, but probably not worth the risk to Cat herself), the Camps likely saw the enemy's dead taken with them, and her own would have invited unnecessary morale issues, Liesse would be a public relations nightmare (as I think she mentioned, didn't she?) and are probably too decayed at this point, as are the dead of Summerhold. They'd offer her a tactical advantage, but she needs to be more concerned with her strategic position at the moment – bolstering her troops would help her win a battle, but ensuring that Malicia can't attack her while she's otherwise occupied would be of greater significance, as would tying up another Crusading army, depending on circumstances. Besides, she's unlikely to have to face that many Heroes again during this war – they'll be tied up fighting the Dead King, and if they're not attacking in number,

she can limit the damage they do to her forces without much trouble.

### *GuidingMoonlight*

Drow

Siccing Drow on Praes is a disaster. You dont want The Night anywhere near thousands years worth of magic theory especially blood magic and demonology. And Praes is right next to Callow, so in couple of years Cat may end up with much more hardcore version of Wastelanders invading Callow.

Siccing Drow on Procer is redundant, because they will be busy being depthroated by Dead King.

Speaking of Dead King, If i understand it right, he bitch slapped Drow hard enough(or frequent enough) that they piss themseves just from a suggestion of fighting him. I dont think they will be very effective agianst him.(To be fair not many factions can beat late game Necropolis with expert Necromancy and Cloak of the Undead King)

Sending them after Hierachy is unnecessary antagonistic. They did swear undying love and friendship after all.

"And it's true, the dwarves might well notice what she's done, but what do they care? To them, the Drow appear to be little more than pests, and surface-dwellers aren't actually considered people."

That is exactly the kind of thinking that gets your cities burned by dwarves. You dont fuck with dwarves. If in doubt, assume that dwarves would not like it.

Court

Ok, i think we talking about different things. I am talking about several companies of immortals. Cat doesnt need ruling caste, she needs line troops to share casualties with legions. Immortals are perfect for that role. Hard to put down, resurect, highly lethal, have no personlaity and perfectly loyal based on what we saw. Cat can give Nauk and remaing original Gallowborn some titles if she really needs too(to be fair i hope she does, Nauk and Gallowborn undeservingly fell from spotlight)

## Undead

Cat can teleport – mountains are not an obstacle. if she really needs fresh corpses (and i doubt that) she always can take Wild Hunt and haras Praes. Or just follow Black in Procer for some time.

More ruthless option is to let Praes refugees in, wait until they piss off Callowans and murder them all. From what we know of Callowans, they wouldnt complain much about it.(I know she would not do it but option is there)

All im saying is, she HAS options. They are not perfect but they are more manageable than Drow IMHO.

## Jane

Regarding the Drow, I do agree that Praes is the most likely target for them, but I disagree that it is a danger – the Drow were not interested in maintaining a surface kingdom in the past, and do not seem to be interested now. It's far more likely that they'll take the knowledge they harvest, and go back beneath their mountain, using their newly-claimed knowledge to gain an advantage over their old rivals. They are an inherently unstable society in their current form – empowering them for a moment doesn't matter, because they'll always collapse under the weight of their internal bickering. As for the Dwarves, I just don't see them caring – they don't care about the Drow now, unless they're in the way of a mine, and they don't care about surfacers. Giving knowledge to the Drow doesn't matter, because Praes isn't a threat to the dwarves either – why would pests armed with Praesi knowledge become more than a nuisance? It's just paranoia to assume that the Dwarves would be deeply offended, based on what we know so far.

Regarding Courts, it... Doesn't really work like that, historically speaking. Whether she uses those she grants titles to as commanders or as an elite company, they're going to receive a lot of attention and be granted special privileges, because being strong and very publicly successful tends to be rewarded (usually because things start going pear-shaped quickly, when they aren't). In creating powerful individuals to throw into the worst of the fighting, they *will* end up



influential, whether they were intended to be or not; they won't just be cannon fodder. It's important to keep such figures under tight control, either by strong ties of loyalty (something that Winter inherently erodes), or by some form of coercion (something that gives them incentive to betray you at a key moment, especially given how reliant she would be on such a strong force).

Regarding the Undead, I... Guess she could go raiding in Procer for bodies, but I think that would have the same issues that Bonfire did. Killing the refugees would create bodies, but they still need to be armed – even if they're just fodder, they're not going to accomplish anything without either swords or strong claws.

I agree that she does have other options, but I don't think you give proper weight to the value of involving an outside force – as it stands, her enemies are able to focus their attention on her, and know that if they kill her, they (functionally) end the war. By introducing the Dead King (had negotiations worked) or the Drow, she presents a threat that won't go away with her, that will split Malicia's attention. Furthermore, I believe you exaggerate the dangers of this plan – the Drow are considered irrelevant to society at large for a reason. Assuming Cat doesn't die down there (and we know she won't), she's not risking much.

Mostly, though, I objected to you suggesting that her only issues with these plans were *moral* concerns, when there are practical objections that can be raised.

*RanVor*

Stories are so integral to the functioning of Guideverse that any argument specifically excluding them is flawed by default.

*GuidingMoonlight*

Cat and Black don't care about it why should I? Well, they say they care but then go and do it anyway.

*RanVor*

If you can provide examples of situations where ignoring the narrative worked out alright for them, sure. Because

I don't remember any. I do, however, remember plenty of the opposite.

*GuidingMoonlight*

Ok, then.

Cat, destroy horcrux of your archenemy, or she will come back in most inconvenient time.

Nope, Akua now helpful loyal servant.

Black, don't go alone with your squire in Castle of her archenemy. It's suicide by narrative.

Nope, he literally won everything.

Cat, don't go after powerboosts. They will betray you in most inconvenient time.

Nope. She became a half-fae winter queen.

Black, don't make plans revolving around single point of failure when fighting heroes. Hero will foil it.

Nope, dropped a stone on Cavalry charge led by hero while riding a dragon.

It's just most recent I remember. All of them were described in story as Bad idea for villains.

*RanVor*

Example #1: The story is far from over and Akua will have plenty of opportunities to come back in the future, but it's not *completely* wrong. I'll grant you half a point for that.

Example #2: Funny that you mention it, I intended to use the exact same situation as a counterpoint because it's a testament to how good Black is at *not* ignoring the stories. The Second Llesse was Akua's story, not his. By expertly manipulating the narrative, he forced the Diabolist into a scenario that just *had* to backfire on her. By setting up his defeat, he used Akua's own victory to destroy her.

Example #3: Cat didn't go after power. It was forced upon her. That is a) a completely different story, and b) hell-bent on fucking her over as soon as possible. She knows it and tries not to rely on it unless she has no other choice.

Example #4: It has been established that the Heavens can only grant so many auto-wins in a short span of time without giving the Hellgods an opening to exploit. Before going on his little dragon-induced flight, Black has ensured that the Crusaders' Heroic Victory was wasted on something totally insignificant, again by observing the narrative and planning around it.

Your score: 0,5 out of 4 points.

Congratulations, the only thing you've proved is that you haven't been paying attention.

### *GuidingMoonlight*

NO, my pride! i am slain! I would never dare to question things you like again!

1) We had Akua POW. She genuinely wants to help Cat and sees her as Empress.

2) "By expertly manipulating narative" offscreen. He did it offscreen. Akua captured Assassin, because the Narative somehow mistaken Black with Assassin. Black, somehow, walked undetected through Villain Sit of Power. then he, somehow, managed to find and capture protected and prepared VIP who based on Akua POW was most powerful not named mage. And Akua didnt notice him anyway, somehow. How did he do it? Hell if i know, i didnt see it.

3) Yees, because "power granted by eldritch abomintaion" is so much better story... And it fucked her so much that she won Arcadian war by non stop using it. Oh and when Akua caught her by scaffolds around her soul, she used this power to escape not only captivity but the "Knight-Squire" patern. Oh and she also became Queen of winter after that. What a curse.

But Cat is responsible Villain and only uses this curse if absolutely necessary, i.e. everytime she needs something.

Anyway, Cat willingly and intentionally went after winter title to get leverage in winter court. Remeber the Duke of Violent Squalls?

"To shut down Winter's invasion of Marchford," Adjutant said.

"Winter can't invade Marchford if Marchford is part of Winter," I murmured.

4) Oh right, sorry, i misread. I thought Black has always said that "Heavens are dirty cheaters who cheat and the only way to win is by not giving them any openings". You opened my eyes! now i see that he actually said "When facing a hero/crusade on a break of defeat go for standart villain escape with monologue and imidiately follow it by something even more dramatic. They will never see it coming".

to be fair i liked everything before Dragon. Slow fighting retreat, multiple landslides, Black not involving himself to exclude the Narative etc. If you forget about Augur and dont think about why she didnt predict it all, it was pretty soild strategy.

Anyway, how can i cash out my points? every bit helps, you know.

[Darth.](#)

>All roads lead to Tvarigu

Silly Sve. Such an ignoramus. All roads lead to *Rome*

[TeK](#)

You meant Miez, the centre of Miezian Empire.

Yotz

Miezian Ministry of ██████ is in approve of the message.

Yotz

...ahem

*Look into the silver eyes –  
In the mist of dark forgotten times.*

Summon up the beast of flame,  
Unchain the warlord, call her name!

Children of the Night –  
Let her reign and bear your plight!  
And save you from the day  
In which you will be slain!

The Queen will rule with iron hand,  
Through blood – she'll repossess the land.

From the dungeon to the throne –  
From the darkness freedom has been born!

*Soldiers of unholy empire,  
Hail the Moonless Night! – the silver eyes foresees end of light.  
Soldiers of unholy empire,  
Hail the Moonless Night! – make the enemy crawl!  
Soldiers of unholy empire,  
Let her rule, the raging one!  
Into dawning Night  
The time of fear will die...*

[TeK](#)

Rythm is mighty shaken. Is this a poem or a song?

I kinda made a more consistent verdion, rythm-wise at least, but may be I'm wrong. Hod you sing this?

Btw, good job as always.

Yotz

*//with eyes cast down//  
Well, that's a filk, technically.  
As for how to sing it*

Yotz

*Also, speaking of something Night-themed, less rhythm-shaken, and more... ahem... "poem"-like – although distinctly less plot related and/or sensical...*

*Well, to cut blatant attempts at false modesty short – here's one more for you.*

*...and anyone else who had misfortune to read it, I suppose.*

*'Tis not the towers – silhouettes of ships:  
Their sails, and flags, and masts with broken tips –  
Dark blots on canvas dark and darker still.  
And yet they brighter than the starry swirl.*

*The world asleep. We stepped on deck of ferry-boat.  
Reigns silence. Ferry heaves and rolls from side to side.  
And like a clap of sudden thunder oar's gentle slide  
Caressing waves,  
and as if only echo from the depths  
is keeping us afloat.*

[TeK](#)

An interesting take on providence, Cat. I wonder if there is a similar Hero who avoid free power ups from Fate. I mean, ot's kinda obvious in hindsight that taking hand-outs from both Above and Below makes you into Stupid X. Would be interesying to see Hero turn down the golden luck so that there would not be any strings attached. Also, kimda wondering something. If help from

Above brainwash you, and help from Below zombify you, how are they any different, exactly? There's a quote from the very first chapter, that some Gods sought to guide, and some to rule. But they both kinda do it. So what if the Side is actually anyone who has anything to do with Narrative, and the other Side is losing their wager badly? Wait, what if there are actually two worlds, one where everything is railroaded by gods, and another where they never intervene? Am I thinking too much? I'm thinking too much...

By the way, if I understand correctly, the Night is basically Sve's MANTLE, and I doubt those were chosen randomly (well not doubt, more like hope they're not). It's pretty obvious that she's the one who kickstarted the whole Tenets of the Night thing, so, crazy theory, probably wrong, but it'd be funny if the whole "Tenets" is a socio-cultural experiment powered by Sve. She said so herself, Tenets would hold or they wouldn't. It's a hypertrophied Darwin socionomics ad absurdum. She's a scientist! An evil one, probably.

*Someguy*

Hooray for Mad Social Science?

*Yotz*

Hip hip hooray!

*Gunslinger*

Not to mention that her mantle is constantly growing. It's fucked up darwinism but one that will ultimately make her immortal

[shieldredblog](#)

IS her mantle actually growing? It seems to me the Drow are failing, they spend all their time killing each other and getting massacred by The Hidden Horror, Emerald Bloom and Dwarves.

Unless it doesn't diminish, only grows, it should be getting smaller.

*Darkening*

It seems like anything the drow learns themselves gets added to the Night that they leave behind when they die, as mentioned in Cat's queries about drow learning blacksmithing or construction and getting killed for the knowledge. So yeah, the Night is constantly growing anytime they learn something for themselves or kill someone from one of the other races to add to it. Unless it disappears after a corpse after a while if it goes unclaimed, I can't see it

diminishing in total, though it might end up spread thin through the hordes of drow. Though I suppose someone could kill a bunch of drow and burn/hide the bodies and maybe prevent the Night from being reclaimed. Which is sorta what the dwarves tried here, though they should blown the cavern or something to make the bodies inaccessible.

### [shieldredblog](#)

The way I see it, the difference when it comes to the God, is that those Above shut down human growth hard, with morals and religious reasoning as well as handing out crutches instead of real and personal growth or power to heroes.

Those Below, allow the potential for growth and freedom, but do not actually encourage it. They don't want mortals to ascend or glimpse beyond the veil or whatever, they just think it should be possible. So they hand out real power and potential but never for free and with downsides that are basically traps.

Like how heroes are mortal but revivable, while villains are technically ageless but are cursed with 'opposition in all things.'

Neshamah proves its possible to leverage villainous power into true lasting power, its just really really hard on purpose and that's before the bard intervenes.

### [crysjal](#)

I think that the issue with below is that people who were empowered previously "went mad with power" and the freedom it granted. This resulting is "bad" or evil events occurring resulting in the narrative that exists surrounding Evil. Good, representing order and a lack of choice evolved narratively aswell. I try to put aside the concept of "Good" and "Evil" for the purposes of this because in this universe they mean the sides of Order/control and Chaos/free will that the gods above and below represent.

### *Snowfire1224*

I remember someone mentioning they thought Cat was being influenced by The Grey Pilgrim's redemption plot and I think they might be right after reading this chapter. I mean Cat has always had standards- it's what seperates her from Akua as well as Black- but she's kind of being ridiculous for being mad at the dwarves for their tactics. I can understand her being mad at Akua for murdering a city, but the Drow are the Drow, they probably stab each other in the backs all the time and think nothing of it.

### [TeK](#)

How dare she condemn slaughtering of a sentient beings, who are already are viewed like a cattle by their own kind?

Yotz

Indeed – how preposterous!

Snowfire1224

Point taken, but I was trying to say was that she seems to be reacting stronger about it than she usually would, not that she should condone what happened to them.

*1queenofblades1*

Agreed. But I think on the whole it's a good thing. Cat has always been about breaking stories; I doubt she's going to die, if anything in Book 5, if the dwarves are the "final enemy", she'll have the Providence of the Heavens *and* the Powers of the Hell Gods on her side (through Winter)....provided of course that she hasn't ascended and become a full-on Goddess herself by then.

Also; remember how in the "Death to Malicia!" arc, Akua was siphoning off the Principle Alienation from Cat so she could draw on Winter deeply and not start spouting monologues? *You'd think Cat would catch on that the larger Winter Court she has, the more she can draw on Winter while the others siphon off and share the Principle Alienation between themselves* giving her not just a powerful Inner Circle of....Winter Soldiers (I'm sorry, I *had* to) but also a way to *really* cut loose with Winter Power and show Creation why you don't mess with Catherine Foundling.

*Because the Night is dark and full of terrors*

Yotz

Step 1: Provoke Gnomes to attack Dwarves.

Step 1: Be anywhere else.

---

Dwarves live under the most of Calernia, there's not enough of "anywhere else" to hide from the fallout.

Yotz

I hear your counterpoint, and raise you one Serenity.

*Darkening*

I suppose there is her whole, "the people are important, not the place/government" thing, which could lead to her evacuating Callow to somewhere not so... strategically inconvenient for them to be at peace. But going to Actual



Hell where an ancient evil lich can reshape reality to his whim is not the most comforting alternative.

*Yotz*

That indeed so – but what prevents Cat from aping DK's achievement and carving a personal piece of Hell for her and her own?

Though, I should probably use "who" instead of "what"...

On the other hoof – evacuating Callow...

*Novice*

"almost like the darkness had been licking my hand. Like it recognizes something larger and meaner, and tries to make friends."

Did...did Cat just compared the murderous, self-destructive, eldritch Night to a puppy? That's kinda cute?

[crysjal](#)

She compared it to an animal or beast of some sort, like her Name, Squire felt to her. It's a good way to foreshadow the night being a Name or Aspect of some sort.

*Allafterme*

Implications of grandfather Neshamah had a more "constructive" dialog with Cat than mere excuse is interesting. Also, Pricks Below strikes again...

*Gunslinger*

Well the dwarf are scary. Reminds me of the bondmages. Kill one of them and they'll come after you with vengeance. This might explain why Black bought out the dwarf mercenaries in the Callowan rebellion rather than fight them

*RanVor*

You mean the ones from *The Lies of Locke Lamora*? I'm reading this book right now, and it's good.

*Cayle*

She makes good points, I'm still disappointed. Noticed everyone's quoting not consuming Energy fields bigger than their head but forgetting that Catherine's head is as big or small as she wants it to be.

*Naeddyr*

Please no, Catherine's head is big enough as it is!

*Darkening*

I wonder when she'll realize that she can make herself taller now since she's always complaining about it.

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

Never has catching up with something felt so bad. Now I have to wait like everyone else.

*Snowfire1224*

You're not alone.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Horrible point to catch up... as is almost everywhere in the guide. I still remember when I caught up...

At least we have three chapters a week now! See you at the start of the next chapter!

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

Which days were it again? I know Monday.

*RanVor*

Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

*kinigget*

monday, wednesday, and friday

*RanVor*

At least I was lucky enough to catch up at the very beginning of this book. It would really suck otherwise.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Frankly, I'm all for the "nah – I'll watch what the energy field does to the local, first, thanks" approach. It's the Evil-Lyn approach to seeing whether others grow tentacles or turn to goop *before* she tries to eat that energy field herself – after extracting it from their corpses or pain-wracked and very chained-up live selves, of course.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Forgot to include "testing to see if the awesome cosmic power goes to their heads so badly they forget how to toast sandwiches without a multi-step plan involving kidnapping a baby dragon, pillaging a farm and framing the baker to

‘encourage’ the blacksmith to help in reprisal”. Because she never was into the resulting suicide- by-local-heroes consequences of that. ;P

*soma*

I see people complaining about Cat making justifications or caring about things. In my opinion when people are complaining about these things they are confusing wants and desires for justifications, and missing that a truly dangerous villain in many stories cares deeply about things that are reasonable to care about. People follow these types of villains because it is reasonable to follow them, to fight for them, to visit evil upon others on their behalf.

The Necessary Evil is so dangerous because it is needed by someone. Cat is a necessary evil for Callowans; Callowans would be subjugated by Praes or Procer without her. Her story arc is based on becoming this and using this to force her goals onto others. Look at her starting motivations for joining the legions. She’s become, and will continue to become, a necessary evil for others as well, seeing as that is her *modus operandi*.

As for why this isn’t a justification or related to justifying actions, being a necessary evil is how others view her (forced to, or otherwise), not how she’s justifying her actions. She truly has no high and mighty justifications. She simply has something she wants. Callow free, able to a place to foster humanity and compassion, and no longer a killing field where her people bleed for all eternity. Those aren’t justifications, those are goals. She took up evil because she needed to in order to get what she wanted. Want doesn’t justify evil and make it right. Wanting things that could be considered good does not justify the deaths of hundreds of thousands. In some (or all) cases Justice may simply not exist. No scale can ever be righted for the dead.

The danger of Cat is that what she wants could be considered justifications by some, though she clearly doesn’t see her wants and desires that way, and her goals draw people to her. I think that confuses people because they think the things Cat wants are justifications rather than things Cat wishes to impose on the world. They see the things Cat wants as good and so mistake them for justifications. They ignore the cost of those good things, the horrors visited upon others in pursuit of those things. Basically, the reason Cat is a villain is she can’t justify the cost, doing horrible things to other people, for a hopefully better outcome, but she’s going to do it anyway because she’s damn well going to get what she wants. A hero ignores the cost and says they’re right, good and justified.

tl;dr Cat is a villain, or evil, in this story framework created by the gods because she’ll do anything, justified or not, to ultimately get what she wants, though her wants are unorthodox

for a villain. A hero, in this story, wouldn't do something they couldn't justify to themselves or the gods above, though they might take horrendous actions by refusing to truly acknowledge the cost.

Or, well, that's like my interpretation for now, man.

*Xinci*

A touch saddened by the Gods Below in this scene. They were a bit...disappointing? This is one of the first real mentionings of preparations by them in the story directly(as in planned effect on the story). So to compare the Gods Above monitor the flow through providence, mold and grow the heroes to create greater pawns/pieces to effect various bits of the geography/topography of reality as they see all possible timelines and decisions. As such when they cannot effect a situation they should be winning/attempting to win in some other way. Thus their orderly procession of societies for various roles are/were gradually improving over time, as mentioned by the bard herself on both bits. They improve you if you let them, make you better. Along with her mentioning of how the plan is gradually working. Below however manipulate the setting more than the narrative, they are the cause of Praes, The Chain of Hunger, etc. They manipulate through a more Darwinian approach, that which can win through all the various societies and environments they set up is obviously the answer(well possibly that doesn't feel quite right as a answer sequence). Though that doesn't seem to be an overall answer for that equally a win by their book, because Ranger seems to be used by both sides to test for weakness in various powers and she is highly adaptive. Then again the fact that she can do so through have a Refuge, may point towards Catherine's solution, given she needs some kind of force to get her outside the game or at least provide a solution for her people through her actions before her particular game board is flipped. Anyway this felt a bit heavy handed for people who could assumably see so far ahead, though maybe Cat was just unexpectedly genre savvy for them this time?

*Unmaker*

I am thinking both sides (Above and Below) are used to dealing with a different type of person. I am sure there are exceptions, but in general, heroes don't turn down gifts from Above. Villians given a gift from Below will try to improve it, leverage it, bargain to lower the side effects, move the side effects to victims, give the gift to someone they control, etc., but even then they will rarely turn it down. Black is one of the first to flat-out subvert story elements. I suspect both Above and Below have yet to up their general game to his level.

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## Chapter 55: Outskirts

*"Over the month I spent in Atalante I witnessed no fewer than two hundred debates take place under the gaze of the pale statues of the Temple of Manifold Truths, for the people of the city delight in such exercises of rhetoric as those of Stygia delight in bloodsport. The subjects varied from the purpose of mankind to the proper shape of apples, though the true wonder of the place was that I do not believe a single speaker left the Temple believing they had been wrong."*

– Extract from 'Horrors and Wonders', famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

I'd come across more than my fair share of impressive fortifications, over the years. Summerholm, the river-straddling Gate of the East. Liesse, whose walls had been old and half-abandoned yet still holding sorcery powerful enough to give pause to the full might of the Summer Court. Ater, the Dread Empire's own capital, with towering walls and massive gates that had held strong under the Tower's shadow for millennia. Keter, Crown of the Dead, a haunting spire of rock beholden to no laws but the Dead King's that had turned back crusade after crusade. This, though? This was laughable. There were fortifications in northern Callow, a region that had not known the touch of war for a hundred years before Procer created the passage, that were greater than this. When Ivah had called the 'fortress' at the edge of Kodrog territory a ring of stones, I'd thought it half-poetry. Daoine and the eastern stretches of Callow boasted old fortifications called the same thing, ancient broken-down forts used in wars that predated the unification of the kingdom and peace with the Deaoraithe. Many of them had been made into the heart of small towns and villages, the hill-forts used as a guild hall or minor noble's seat. What I was looking at right now was not that: it was a literal ring of stones.

A few narrow tunnels had led us out of the butcher's yard and into what had once been the lands of the Kodrog, our first approach into another large cavern almost intimidating. There were no corpses to be found, but thrice we came across trails of blood on the stone where dead drow had been dragged. The way into the great cavern was through an angle slope, narrow as the tunnel that had led us there, and part of me noted that this was a natural chokepoint. Easily defendable with a company of crossbowmen and some half-way decent infantry. The ancient drow apparently agreed, for mere feet beyond the end of the slope the ring of stones stood. The sight of it had me raising an eyebrow in skepticism. It wasn't indefensible, really. The slabs of granite making a loose circle of upright stones could serve as a

curtain wall of sorts. Or they would have been able to, without the large gap in the slabs just to the side. Anyone could just... walk right in. That wasn't a fortification so much as a decoration. The dwarves had apparently been of the same opinion, because they'd wasted no time filling it with corpses.

I'd had dinner with Baroness Anne Kendal, after ascending to the throne, and over pheasant she'd praised me for how quickly I'd reacted to Akua unleashing devils at First Liesse. Said that most would have been stricken with terror, and that my swift decision to 'conscript' everyone in the city had saved dozens of thousands of lives. I'd not quite had the heart to tell her by then I'd bared blades at things scarier than mere devils. When I came knocking at the gates of Liesse with the Fifteenth, even my legionaries no longer flinched in the face of the hosts of Hell. Masego had called it *horror fatigue*. The way some people beheld so much terror their standards shifted and sights that would have once horrified them grew mundane. It was apparently a common phenomenon among Praesi sorcerers. On occasion it led to diseases of the mind, he'd noted, when mages witnessed so many terrors that it was the mundane matters of the rest of the world that grew eldritch to their eyes. I wondered if I was inching towards that, one slaughtering yard at a time, because the aftermath of brutality no longer stirred any great feeling in me.

Most the corpses in the fort had not been slain there. There were tracks leading to tall piles beneath the stones, and even taller ones inside the circle. If there had been marks of fighting there, they were now buried in death. I heard Archer come towards me as I stood a handful of feet from the piled dead within the embrace of raised stones.

"The trail leads north," Indrani said.

I nodded.

"Did it betray anything about their numbers?" I asked.

"Hundreds, at least," she shrugged. "Hard to tell the difference between those and thousands on stone grounds. There's tracks though, from carts or something else on wheels. Heavy things, I'm pretty sure even the wheels are metal."

My fingers clenched, then unclenched. It had always helped me think, but there was too little to go on here to make any real deductions. It might be carts to carry whatever they'd come for back to the Kingdom Under. They could be supply wagons. They could be machines of war, as Ivah had said the dwarves sometimes used to slay the Mighty. Hells, it could be all of that. We wouldn't know for sure unless we took a look with our own eyes, and that struck me as a bad idea for all sorts of reasons. I glanced at Indrani.

"Do we know what's north?" I said.

"Ivah says it's the core territories of the Kodrog," she replied. "We're still in the outskirts of the outer rings. I'll be at least a few days of travel before we reach the first ruins."

Piecing together the lay of the Everdark from what my guide was very willing to share had been difficult, even though Ivah was trying its best. The drow considered too many things to be self-evident to be a proper informant. The outer rings, as far as I could tell, were the drow territories outside the loose web of underground cities that had once made up their empire. Those were the harshest battlegrounds of their people, and a gathering place for the strongest Sigils and cabals. The inner ring, singular, was vaguer in what it covered. From context, it seemed to mean all the territories between the old cities. There the tribes that'd been forced out of the cities fought against each other, murdering their way to enough power to try to get a foot in a city again. The cities were where the strongest of the Mighty gathered, Ivah had said, but the inner ring was where a Sigil could be wiped out in a night. Those that fled that underground sea of carnage eked out a living in the outer rings, but pickings were sparse out here. It was uncommon for a Sigil that bolted to the outskirts to make a comeback, even if they bided their time for a few decades.

Holy Tvarigu was at the centre of the madness, the handful of paths leading to it guarded by powerful Sigils who were said to rival those of the cities. We'd need to gather strength and support, before trying those.

"There's one last thing," Indrani said. "I found black blood."

My eyes narrowed. That meant a Mighty. Ivah had been clear that the more Night a drow held, the deeper the changes to their body. I had no reason to distrust that: after reaping the harvest of the cavern it had visibly changed.

"Show me," I said.

"Sure," she said. "It's not far. Want to grab our favourite scavenger in case there's a survivor?"

"Might be for the best," I agreed.

And still she did not move. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Archer?"

Her lips thinned.

"You all right, Cat?" she asked. "You've been looking at dead bodies for a while. And not that long ago you were hearing voices."

"Just the one," I sighed. "And that was the Priestess of Night, I'm sure of it."

"I'm sure you believe that," Indrani delicately said.

"I'm not quite that far gone," I reassured her. "Anyways, I'm not going morbid on you. I was actually wondering why they're not burning the bodies. Wouldn't it make more sense?"

"Not a lot of firewood down here," she replied. "And you need that or oil to get a good pyre started."

"I really doubt the dwarves ready to commit mass slaughter without tallying proper supplies," I said. "If they're really killing everyone to make sure there can be no harvest, it'd be logical to burn the dead. Can't claim Night from ashes, I don't think."

"If they're as prepared as you say, they'll have a reason for it," Indrani pointed out. "I try not to spend too much time figuring out why dwarves do what dwarves do. You'll only end up with a headache and an empty purse by trying."

"We're missing something," I told her. "I'm not gonna go digging in corpses to find out – we don't have the time to spare – but it's worth asking questions."

"Somehow I doubt our little band of murderers is going to have a good explanation for you," she said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, let's grab our minion. We're wasting daylight, even if we can't see it."

The rest of our company wasn't far. I'd learned why the drow were so afraid of coming close to the corpses, after a little chat with Ivah. It'd said it wasn't the death that scared most of them. It was all the Night that waited there to be taken. By beating them down, we'd established ourselves as higher on the pecking order. Drow who eyed Night ripe for harvest when stronger drow were around tended to end up killed just to make sure there'd be no trouble. Diabolist was keeping an eye on the prisoners, but Ivah was visibly itching to have a look at the corpses. It didn't consider itself strong enough to just harvest the Night no matter what we said, then. Good. As long as it was afraid of us, it'd uphold its part of the bargain with no qualms.

"Ivah," I called out. "With us. Archer has found a Mighty's blood trail."

"I follow, Queen," the silver-eyed creature smoothly replied.



Its eyes were brighter, now, but that was the least of the changes. Where before it had been stooped by days of travel with limited supplies and little sleep, now its back was ramrod straight and its stride had grown assured. The skin was still pale grey, but now and then from the corner of my eyes I could have sworn I saw small arcane patterns of Night shine on its bare arms. I suspected there'd been other changes less obvious, though it was hard to gauge something like senses and reflexes without actually testing them. The rest of the cavern beyond the ring of stones was a great deal less bloody. There were trails and footsteps on the dust and dirt, but little else. A handful of leather tents and fire pits skirted the edge of the walls, not enough to shelter more than a few hundred drow. There was at least twice that in dead inside the fort, which meant the corpses had likely been gathered from other tunnels and caverns. Three passages out could be found. Two heading north, side-to-side, and one towards the east. It was that last one Indrani led us towards.

Unlike the last stretch of tunnels out of the Gloom, these were not carved or sculpted. Apparently even when the realm of the drow had still been worth such a name, this had been considered the edge of nowhere. We passed through a small cave half-filled by ponds of water, though they'd all been fouled by dirt and blood, and only found what Indrani had mentioned after another stretch of winding tunnel. There was a naked body, which she hadn't mentioned, but it was easy to see why. It was a ruined wisp of a cadaver: the head had been pulped, but the rest was a ruin without needing wounding. It looked like it'd been exsanguinated, drained of all fluids and insides until all that was left was paper-thin grey skin and hollow bones. In other news, drow did have genitalia no matter how they called themselves: this one had a cock, though it was as much a shrivelled husk as the rest of it. Black blood and brain fluids formed a blasphemous halo around the wreck of the head, but that wasn't the interesting part. From the body another trail came. There were bits of blood in it, but also some sort of transparent fluid gone dry. A sticky, stinking trail led from the corpse deeper into the passage ahead.

"Another twenty feet of crawling, then whatever came out got on its feet," Indrani said. "From there it's just drip. Haven't touched the body yet, figured you'd want the honours."

"Kind of you," I drily said. "Ivah, anything to say?"

"This is not known to me," the drow admitted. "Though none but Mighty would have blood so dark."

Less than helpful. I knelt by the body, gingerly raising it. Immediately my eyebrows climbed up. The entire back was messed up, like something had ripped its way out forcefully. Almost no

blood, though. At a guess, whatever had left the trail was responsible.

"Looks like our friend here had one last trick up their sleeve," I said. "Ivah, you mentioned something called the Secret of Many Lives to me once. Would this be what it looks like in action?"

"I have never witnessed this with my own eyes," the drow said. "Only heard rumours. Yet if this is true, we look upon the body of Mighty Kodrog. Or one who slew them and claimed the whispers."

"Let's find out," I grimly said.

I left the body there. There was no Night in it, and I wasn't sure I should let Ivah harvest it even if there was. We set out again, though the trip was amusingly short. Maybe sixty feet further, after the trail of dried fluids had ended, another corpse was waiting. Its head had been pulped as well. There was another trail, and we didn't stop to check the body before following this time. Apparently the dwarves hunting Kodrog has lost patience, because when we found the next body not even twenty feet further around a corner it was thoroughly demolished. No flesh or bone had been left untouched, the remains more smear than corpse. And still a trail crawled away from it. I heard a rasping breath, further ahead. Had the hunters missed the last rebirth?

"There's something still breathing," I announced, and pressed on at a pace.

Indrani snorted.

"Yeah, not surprised," she said. "Look at the fluids, Cat. It didn't crawl away, it was dragged."

Honestly the trail looked to me exactly like the others, but she was the tracker and I was the city girl. Regardless, we did not make the survivor wait long. I almost winced at the sight, after we stumbled across it. This particular body was no husk like the others, though it might wish otherwise. The naked drow had been nailed to the tunnels' wall with iron spikes through the shoulders and calves, limbs flopping listlessly. The drow's eyes were closed, but I could hear it breathe just fine. It was still rather improbably alive. Ivah breathed in sharply, and earned a curious look for it.

"This is Mighty Kodrog itself," my guide said. "The wound splitting the lip in half, it is famed. The blade of the Mighty Soln caused it."

There was a rather nasty scar and chunk of missing flesh parting the drow's lower lip in half. More interesting were the night-invisible patterns of Night covered Kodrog's face, surrounding

the closed eyes like they were some sort of spider web. It looked like a tattoo of arcane symbols I was unfamiliar with, though a very faint one. Apparently the repeated rebirths had weakened the Mighty considerably.

"It's unconscious," I said. "Let's drag it back to camp, see if we can wake it up there."

"You're going to have to handle the spikes," Indrani said. "That's solid rock they were hammered into. Not sure I could pull them out."

I grimaced but got to work. The difficult part was doing it carefully enough I wouldn't rip up Kodrog's body, not taking them out, and greyish blood began pouring out the moment they were removed. No longer black, huh. Someone had had a rough week. I froze the wounds shut, which was about as much as I knew of healing, and hoisted the drow over my shoulder when it became clear the pain wasn't enough to wake it up. Ivah was looking at me carrying a Mighty like a bag of potatoes like it didn't know whether it should be amused or appalled. The walk back was quicker, though I was careful not to jostle the goods. In part because I didn't want to worsen the bleeding, in part because when strangers dangled their dangly parts against me I preferred fewer gaping wounds being involved. A rustle when through the prisoners when we returned bearing our newest addition, a few whispered words in Crepuscular being traded. Kodrog was the only word I recognized. I lowered said burden to the floor carefully and smiled at Akua, who'd silently approached.

"I've got a surprise for you," I cheerfully said.

"Joy," Diabolist drawled. "More half-dead drow. My favourite. I expect you want me to attend to it?"

"If anyone's going to know what happened here, it's that one," I said. "I need it capable of talking."

"That much I can promise," the shade noted. "How long it will remain that way is more chancy a matter."

"Do what you can," I said.

"Ugh, does that leave me on guard duty?" Indrani asked. "Because that's really tedious. You won't even let me make them fight."

"I'm sure Ivah can inform them of the consequences of acting out," I said, casting an eye at said drow.

It nodded slowly.

"Find me in what direction the dwarves went," I told Archer. "Try to find out numbers, or anything more than we have. If you run into any of them..."

"Stay out of sight, head back immediately," she said. "I've got it. How long you giving me?"

I chewed my lip.

"We'll need a while for the interrogation," I said, watching Akua begin to remove the ice I'd shut the wounds with. "We might as well make camp here. A few hours, at least, but careful not to get lost."

"I never once in my life got lost," Indrani assured me.

"Last month you told me you'd been sober your whole life," I noted. "You really should start picking better lies."

"That sounds like a horrible way to live," Indrani said.

I rolled my eyes.

"Just don't get killed," I said. "Or start another war. Gods know we already have a net surplus of those, and the year's not even over."

She waved me away in a less than reassuring gesture, but she adjusted her bow against her shoulder and got moving towards the north-leading passages. She might give me backtalk the way sparrows flew, but I knew I could trust her to pull through when I needed her. I had few worries about her reconnaissance.

"Now would be a good time to inform your fellows we're camping," I told Ivah. "They're free to scavenge tents and necessities, though they are not to touch the Night."

"As you say, Queen," the drow nodded.

I watched it walk over to the others, then returned my attention to Akua. I dropped down next to the body in a seat, watching her work Winter into dying flesh. There was Night in this one, though unlike the one in the corpses it was not reaching for me. Neither was it hostile, though. It was just there. A tool in someone's hand, firmly grasped.

"How's it looking?" I asked.

"More than halfway into the grave," Diabolist said. "Which eases my work a great deal."

I didn't need to ask her why. What instincts my mantle had granted me made me aware that Winter held dominion over death and decay, among other things. I'd dabbled in necromancy as the

Squire, but I remained an amateur at the art. When Akua had ridden my body, she'd raised an army of dead Procerans without even using a ritual.

"It's a recurring pattern, with you," the shade said. "That you use and demand others use powers in way that seem ill-suited to them."

"Power's a tool," I said, repeating someone else's words. "The only limit to its use is your own cleverness."

"Spare me the Carrion Lord's lessons, if you would," Akua said. "I have heard them before. My point stands. Even as the Squire your use of your limited necromantic abilities was admittedly inspired. Never before had I seen someone kill their own flesh to better wield it."

"Desperation is a sharp teacher," I grunted.

"So it is," Diabolist mildly said. "Still, you extend this philosophy beyond the boundaries I expected."

I scoffed.

"How's that?"

"This entire enterprise, dearest," Akua said. "To be frank, I am still somewhat at a loss as to why we now tread the passages of the Everdark."

"You were there when the decision was made," I reminded her. "I \_"

"Need an army, yes," she interrupted. "Surely that is not all of it? I surmised this to be the excuse you gave to mask deeper purpose."

"I don't lie when holding council with the Woe, Akua," I said. "Even when you're there."

Scarlet eyes considered me skeptically.

"Then you truly came to gather a host of drow?" she said. "That seems ill-advised."

I frowned at the casual dismissal. Still, I'd let her out of the box for a reason. She had a better grasp on the corridors of power than any of the Woe, and if she had something to say it was worth hearing. Not necessarily heeding, but at the very least listening to.

"You're aware of our military situation," I said.

"I am, to an extent," she agreed. "The Battle of the Camps thinned the ranks overmuch, which led you to seek the Dead King in the first place. There was need for the hosts of Procer to be sent elsewhere and bled. This has already been achieved, Catherine, by the Empress' own pact."

"Look deeper," I said. "What's the thing that keeps Callow afloat?"

"Farming," she replied without missing a beat. "I do not disagree with you on the implication, my dear. Your kingdom has weathered a large-scale rebellion, the invasion of the Courts and my own works. If the Army of Callow recruits as heavily as it must to be more than a border garrison, there will be lack of field hands come harvest. Which would have consequences more disastrous in Callow than most realms, admittedly, as it boasts little but fertile fields."

*My own works*, she'd said. Almost nonchalantly. Three words for over a hundred thousand souls. The urge was there to simply tear her in half. Pop her head with a squeeze of my fingers, have Winter itself devour her from the inside. I pulsed with the need of it. *And you feared I might grow attached, Vivienne*, I thought. *That I might come to see her as more than the useful devil on my shoulder*. I mastered myself, kept the flare of rage away from my face. Not even a slight cooling of the air betrayed it. I'd learned the ways of my mantle well. It would not do to punish her for this, no. Best she keep speaking those words, those barbed reminders of who it was I had murdered into my service.

"Then you know why I need another force on the field," I said. "One that can take the losses I can't afford."

"There are others you might have sought," Akua noted. "Lord Black still fields legions, and his fondness for you is well-known."

"Black's running a game in Procer," I said. "I don't know what it is yet, because I don't know what he's really after. If he intended to depose Malicia, his opening was just after Second Liesse. He went to the Vales instead, prepared for the crusade. He had most of a year, Diabolist. To plan and plot. It's not *happenstance* that the Vales were collapsed and he's wandering the heartlands of the Principate. He's trying to accomplish something. The Gods only know what it is, if even that. I'm not getting in the middle of that mess without a very good reason."

"You have ties to the sole Court of Arcadia," Diabolist noted. "Bargain might have been struck there."

"You think that's better than the drow?" I snorted. "Last time I went for a spin with the King of Winter, I got taken for a ride. I doubt I've learned enough in the last year to turn that around, and you can be sure that any pact made with Arcadia will result

in the fae having a permanent foothold on Creation. I might as well start calling on fucking demons – those are easier to put away after you let them loose.”

“The Dread Empire-”

“Was a possibility I considered,” I interrupted flatly. “Of course, to get my hands on any of its armies I’d need to climb the Tower and make it stick. Which means I’ll likely have to assault a few of the most heavily fortified cities on the continent with my already mangled forces. Possibly fight Malicia’s loyalist Legions as well. Losses are certain, and even if I win I inherit a mess. Ashur’s still sacking the coasts, Akua. I can’t call myself Empress and just... leave them to it. Not to mention the dangers inherent to killing the person that let the Dead King out. Could mean he has to retreat, which would fuck over a now even more wounded Callow. We’d have to go back and negotiate, assuming he’s even willing. Or it could mean he’s loose with *absolutely no leash on him*.”

“I believe you underestimate the amount of support a bid for the Tower would find in the Wasteland,” Diabolist said. “There are promises that could see many flock to your banner.”

“Oh, I know all about those kinds of promises,” I murmured. “There are some prices even I balk at paying. I will not wade into a snake pit just to try turning the snakes on my foes, Akua. I have no intention of ever ruling Praes.”

“You may not have a choice,” Diabolist mildly said. “Though I shall let the matter lie. It will come to your door without any need for my advocacy.”

“You should hope not,” I replied. “If Praes is made my problem, I will not be gentle in how I solve it. Should we go over our other options? The League won’t talk with me if the Hierarch won’t, and the man is both mad and stubborn as a mule. The Chain of Hunger cannot be treated with to any real degree, the elves would shoot any envoy of mine on sight and the closest thing the Gigantes have to an ally – Levant – is currently at war with me. You think I’m stalking these fucking tunnels because I want to? *I need the men and there is no one else*.”

The last sentence came out in a hiss, almost like a wound lanced of pus.

“I understand,” Akua said.

“No, you don’t,” I replied. “I drew a line in the sand, after my coronation. That if all I could accomplish was make a ruin out of Callow, I would melt the godsdamned crown and go into exile. Or walk to the gallows, if that was what it took. The crusade was always going to come, there was nothing I could do about that.

But now, Diabolist, even if my armies win the coming battles the kingdom is fucked. We were already a bad summer away from widespread food shortages, when I left. How do you think it will go if the fields are empty at harvest? Either this works, or I'm done. I capitulate, do whatever is necessary for Hasenbach to offer terms that aren't complete subjugation and kill as many problems as I can before I die."

"You are what keeps this together, Catherine," Akua warned me. "If you abdicate, the kingdom collapses into anarchy. Malicia will likely invade and even the League might be swayed by such a tempting feast. Do you think Callow can weather the Dead King without you?"

"The question isn't 'will it be bad?', " I said. "Of course it'll be awful. Even if I clean up every loose end I can before going, it'll be a shitshow. The question that needs to be asked is 'will it be worse if I'm wearing the crown?'."

"The only reason Callow was more than a waypoint on Cordelia's way to Ater is that your power gave the Principate pause," Diabolist said. "This is... navel-gazing in the worst of ways. Do you think you are responsible for every disaster to plague your homeland?"

"They happened on my watch," I said. "I had a responsibility. If I'd fucking bled you like a pig at Liesse, no matter the consequences to me, a hundred thousand people would be alive today. Winter went after Marchford because it was my demesne. Summer torched a third of the south to match Winter. And the Liesse Rebellion... well, you weren't the only person I should have killed then and let's leave it at that."

"It is absurd to pretend to you did not mitigate the damage inflicted," Akua flatly said. "You dispersed the Courts yourself. To clarify, you drove back forces as older than the First Dawn at the mere cost of a *few leagues of burned land*. Who else could have brought the invasions to an end at even twice that cost? And let us not pretend to you were the only possible pawn for Winter's king. The Courts did not emerge in Praes, where bargains would have been eagerly taken, or fractious Procer or the squabbling lands of the Dominion. Why, I wonder? It is almost as if Callow was easiest prey, the most vulnerable locale. You ended the Liesse Rebellion on lenient terms, your mere existence enough to soften the stances of both the Carrion Lord and the Empress against those who raised banner against the Tower. Not a matter in which either would otherwise have been prone to so mild a response. Had you not been on the field at Second Liesse, I would very likely have slain your teacher and triumphed. You seem under the misapprehension that the rest of the continent fights over Callow because you bear the crown. That is disingenuous. Callow suffers because it is *weak*. Because greater powers can afford to



make it a tool to expunge their own troubles. The Principate, the Empire, half the heroes that flocked to the Tenth Crusade. Do you truly believe your kingdom, even under a villainous queen, is greater threat to Good and Calernia than the Kingdom of the Dead? Than the Chain of Hunger?"

"There's a balance of power," I said. "The Grey Pilgrim admitted as much."

"Indeed," Akua sneered. "The Principate cannot afford too many powers sworn to Evil at its borders, is it? Yet you could have been made friend, through the right treaties. Can the same be said of the Hidden Horror? Yet is is Callow that was marched upon, and Praes beyond it. Because if the First Prince had called for a crusade against Keter, none would have answered. Because against the Kingdom of the Dead the Principate did not believe it could win, and Callow was *weaker*."

"You stated the very reason," I grimly smiled. "Against Keter, she did not believe she could win. And so the strategic reality was that a villainous queen in Callow was unacceptable. You're also dismissing the fact that it was your own fucking doomsday fortress, built on a massacre of my countrymen it is worth remembering, that served as the rallying cry for this mess."

"I will not defend what I did," Akua said. "There is nothing defensible about failure, and my means were abhorrent to you. Yet I will remind you that Procer loomed at the gate long before my works took place. I served as an excuse, it is true. And for my sins judge me as you will, for that is your right and privilege as victor. Yet even had you slain me long before, excuse would have been found sooner or later – Praes ruling Callow was no more acceptable than your bearing a crown, after all. You are a justification, Catherine. You are not a *motive*. At best, you were ancillary to the reasons forces went into motion."

"I could have gone the other way," I said. "I was made an offer, in Liesse. If I'd signed up with the Heavens-"

"You would have been slain, fallen upon by the full roster of the Calamities and your own allies," she said. "The Black Knight, deeming your existence a failed experiment, would have set to ensuring Callow was incapable of rising in rebellion when Procer came calling. I need not remind you of the manner of methodical butchery your teacher is capable of."

"So that's your fine wisdom?" I mocked. "Thousands died under your watch but it's all right, because thousands would have died either way?"

"Yourself and the Woe, the Fifteenth you assembled painstakingly," Akua said. "All of these are the only reason anyone of import on this continent considers Callow *worth*

*treating with.* Gods Below, Catherine, do you think without your casting a long shadow the Empress would have waited this long to act? That the Carrion Lord would not have excised treason out of your kingdom? The First Prince may claim to despise all you stand for, yet she stills speaks with you. Because you wield power, warrant fear, and this means the land you rule over are more than a subject to squabble over after someone wins the war. Without the might you have assembled, the only Callow that exists is that which other powers allow to exist. Is this the sorrow you mull over late into the night? That your acts, though bloody, have made your homeland actor instead of *spoils*?"

"You don't know that," I said. "If I'd never taken Callow in hand, heroes could have risen. They have before, with reliability that borders on law."

"The same heroes the Empire repeatedly smothered in the crib for decades before your birth?" Diabolist gently said. "Or perhaps foreign heroes, from the same nations now marching on you."

"It's better to be Proceran vassals than a wasteland, Akua," I tiredly replied. "And despite my best efforts we seem to be headed that way."

"I know few things about your people, and much I thought known has been proven false," the shade said. "Yet how many of them would agree with what you just spoke?"

"A crowd has only one voice, and no wisdom to utter," I quoted. "My people aren't always right, especially when pride is on the line."

"And so now your argument is that you know better," Akua said. "That you should make the choices for them. Yet you deplore having done that very thing. With some defeats to show for it, yet also admirable successes. What brave soul do you happen to use for comparison, then? I am curious what world-shaking sage would have steered Callow unfailingly, had you not been at the helm."

"Asking for whoever would have risen not to have lost the second largest city in Callow is hardly unfair," I barked back.

"You turn blind eye to the realities of the time," Akua noted. "Another Named would not have benefitted from your relationship to the highest tiers of Praesi power. They would have been forced to rebel while under hunt of the Calamities, raising essentially the same army that was crushed by your teacher with perhaps a few additions. Likely, they would have needed to rely on help from the Principate to stay afloat, which would have begun the Tenth Crusade with Callow the midst of a bloody civil war instead of when its borders were garrisoned. It would have been a nonentity at the peace table afterwards. Perhaps I would have been slain by

such a replacement, perhaps not. It is arguable at best if the resulting body count would not have been superior, and beyond debate that the destruction would have been more widespread. The Courts of the Fair Folk would then have found that deeply divided and damaged land much easier to make sport of than it was under your aegis, however flawed."

"You don't know any of that," I said. "It's speculation."

"Which does not seem to be of import, when you castigate yourself," the shade said. "Your usual hypocrisies leave a better taste in the mouth. You are not even alone in those, truth be told. The First Prince calls you a warlord, though she herself rose through war to the throne through the same means. Levant was warring against the Principate not even two years ago, and Ashur was happily trading with the Wasteland but months before the Tenth Crusade was declared. I am indifferent to the moralities of this, admittedly, but they seem to matter to you and it rather beggars belief that all these rivals must now be considered righteous merely because they march against you."

"I'm not saying they deserve to win any of this," I got out through gritted teeth. "I'm saying it's self-defeating to fight them for the kingdom's sake if the price of that fight is to break the fucking kingdom."

"The Kingdom of Callow is already broken," Akua frankly said. "You've succeeded at keeping it from falling apart entirely after evicting Praes, which is already impressive. Catherine, four years ago there was no kingdom. There were only the provinces, ruled by the edicts of the Carrion Lord. In that span, you pried your homeland out of the Empress' grip with minimal destruction and forced a semblance of order onto a realm that was under occupation for several decades. All the while fending off repeated interventions from the two largest nations on the surface of Calernia. This strange expectation you have that anyone, including you, taking up the crown would lead to miracles is rather naïve. Nation-building is not the stuff of months, my dear, which is more or less what you managed to wrest away from more powerful and experienced rulers trying to deny you even that."

"So I'm the lesser evil," I bitterly smiled. "There's a familiar tune. Been a while since it last managed to lull me to pleasant sleep."

"It is most easy to fall short of a paragon of victory existing only in your thoughts," Diabolist said. "You speak as if you believe you somehow hoodwinked an entire kingdom into following you."

"I didn't exactly ask for opinions before the coronation," I said.

"And yet Callow did not rebel," Akua mused. "The remaining highborn and your officials obey your orders. You have brought every Named of note in the kingdom into your service and called the guilds, even those calling themselves *dark*, to heel. Your army, which is now for the most part made of your countrymen, followed you into war willingly. You are not a Fairfax, it is true. Also largely irrelevant, as they are all dead. Considering the founder of that dynasty was a mere knight, a Named with a distinguished military record can hardly be considered lesser origin."

"Eleanor Fairfax ascended to the throne by popular acclaim," I flatly denied.

"She was a skilled and charismatic warlord with the power to make a claim on the throne and popular backing to press it," she meaningfully said.

"Also the blessing of the Heavens," I drily said. "I seem to be missing that part."

"Now we argue theology," Akua said. "Can no crown be worthy without affirmation from Above? I've yet to hear of Cordelia Hasenbach receiving this accolade. Strange that it would be required of you alone."

"You're ignoring the part where I'm a villain," I said.

"You have devoured your own Name and taken Winter in its place," she said. "You share foes with Below, perhaps sympathies with some who strive against Above. I have yet to hear you offer a single prayer to my Gods, Catherine. Even if it were so, the hypocrisy here would be a deep one indeed. Where is this outrage when a Tyrant rises in Helike? Stygia pays dues only in brimstone, and Bellerophon is a maddened altar of a city. And yet no crusade darkens their doorstep. A standard upheld only when convenient is no such thing: it is merely a tool."

"It's a pretty song you sing me," I admitted. "That I am not always right, but just enough. That my enemies are no better."

"And yet," Diabolist said, "you believe not a word of it. Why?"

I thinly smiled.

"Because it was what I wanted to hear," I said. "And you're Akua Sahelian."

It was two hours before Mighty Kodrog woke, and we spent every moment of them in silence.

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## DroughtBringer

\*insert 'inspiring comment about how awesome The Guide is, how awesome Erratic is, and that you should go vote for some reason or another. NOTE: Includes heartwarming Pathos-based appeal with puppies somewhere' here\*

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Yotz

\*inset 'appropriately enthusiastic mindless accolade of implied awesomness, and flavourful assurances of incessant inexorable voting, with possible vague implications of immediate undertaking of a research project in the field of puppy-based vorschmacks with side of ardent ajika' here\*

## TeK

\*insert 'obligatory discussion of Ward and Worm, where it has no business being' here\*

Zia

\*insert full quota for misspellings of Akua's name here\*

## Javvies

Sometimes the best way to gray someone to do what you want is to tell them the truth, Cat.

Akua may be a murderous, untrustworthy, psychopathic something, who is totally on board with much of Classic/Traditional/Old School Evil, but she's not entirely wrong here. She's not entirely right, either, but don't discard the entire message because of the messenger.

Yotz

Unfortunately, Ubua is too good at arguing. It's "the boy who cried 'wolf!'" situation – she is so adept and professional with her words that anything she says is doomed to be either overly scrutinized and dissected in search for several layers of hidden meanings; or just outright discarded as blatant manipulation even if it was said in sooth and from the bottom of heart.

## TeK

Honest feelings and truth are the greatest manipulation techniques known to mankind.

Yotz

Ijdeed.

*Jeremy Cliff Armstrong*

More true that you know... for those are the very tools people use to manipulate //themselves//.

*Decius*

Nothing Akua says is actually sooth from the bottom of her soul-container. It is all intended to manipulate. And she knows now that it will be treated cynically as manipulation.

Her next manipulation attempt will account for that. It won't be direct reverse psychology, it will be an attempt to assist at a course of action that Akua does not wish Cat to take. One example would be planning exactly how to abdicate, looking in detail at the things that will happen afterward and comparing them to each other, such that Cat sees how little Callow can benefit from it.

*RanVor*

DISCLAIMER: I'm going to play the devil's advocate here. Nothing in this comment is to be read as my personal opinion on the matter.

There's no way in Hells you can prove the intention behind anything Akua says. We did not have the Akua viewpoint chapter since Kaleidoscope VI, and it did not reveal anything relevant to your point. All you have is an assumption, though admittedly not a baseless one.

*RanVor*

ADDENDUM (the disclaimer above still applies): Your reaction is, in fact, the proof of the truthfulness of Yotz's comment – you immediately dismiss all of Akua's input as manipulation, without as much as acknowledging other possibilities.

*Yotz*

Hence the "even if" part, dear.

*the verbiage ecstatic*

... you're assuming she \*doesn't\* want Cat to abdicate and this \*wasn't\* already reverse psychology.

Ubua is always thinking one level of meta beyond your level.

*Qwormuli*

Sorry, a character in a narrative can't be on a higher level of insight than a reader in a work with a reliable narrator. Try to not be a batman fan.

[frolamiz](#)

Who said Cat was reliable? =)

*Rook*

That's the issue with Akua though. Nearly every word that comes out of her mouth is in a way the truth, framed in the right way to suit her point of view. Akua wields her words like Catherine wields steel and winter.

Here? Akua's arguments are completely correct in technical sense, and disastrously wrong in with regards to mindset. Her advice here is essentially the moral version of horror fatigue, as Masego labeled it so aptly.

She's not leading Cat's next step right into a pit – just the opposite, she's saying just what Cat needs to hear to put aside her self-doubt and get out of the current mess. But if you buy into the message in the long term, you'll look back a thousand steps later and wonder where it all went wrong. That near-flagellant level of self criticism that works against her in some fights is the safety net that keeps her from going into freefall, as she's crossing all these lines.

Cross the line if you have to. Thoroughly cross it, if need be. But the moment you get comfortable crossing it is when you win the battle and lose the war. It should an unwilling necessity borne with clenched teeth, not something made peace with beforehand.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Out of the many issues Aqua pointed out, I have one I strongly agree with.

Why does Catherine think herself unwortht of the crown?  
Her country has a history of fighting up from nothing for it.

*Oshi*

Because she isn't meant to rule. She knows it. Catherine is bad at it. All she wanted was to free Callow and find someone who could rule. She's accomplished only half of her goals. Let's see if she can even accomplish a quarter of the rest.

*Rook*

I don't see her ever being well suited for mortal rule. Cat is the emergency airbag, not cruise control. It'll save your life but it isn't meant to last forever. Even if she lost the argument here she's right in one thing, it's best for both her and for Callow if her end goal is to ditch the throne as soon as things are stable enough.

I mean yeah she's competent, inspires the people, brings them together, and leads them to lop off the heads of their oppressors. But mostly from the battlefield, not from the throne.

Generally when she's on the throne, everything throne-related goes to shit real fast and gets held together by her Deadhand sidekick. It's rather telling that he's astonishingly competent at logistics and managing mundane domestic affairs, when his major role is to shore up Cat's weaknesses.

*Dainpdf*

She argues for not improving because perfection is impossible. That is a false dichotomy. Cat speaks of getting out to cut the losses and Akua counters with hypotheticals. She's being intellectually dishonest, if very skillfully so.

*Agent J*

She's not arguing for not improving, she's arguing for staying the course. Abdication is nothing but a self-righteous way of abandoning the responsibilities Cat forcefully took on for herself.

Akua's right, no one else would've been able to end the civil war with as few casualties or put to bed the Arcadian incursions so swiftly. Neither Malicia nor Cordelia give a single fuck about Callow or her people and both intend to screw it and them viciously for their own purposes. Callowans for their part would rather be a graveyard with an army than a conquered colony. They are not a people that take to subjugation well, and if Cat condemns them to it anyways, nothing but war, death, and misery will follow.

Furthermore, let's not pretend that this entire exercise has been anything but one of hypotheticals. Cat speaks of failures and hypothetical scenarios in which they might have been prevented or mitigated. Akua gives sound rebuttal to each point and buries them with her own. And after all is said, Cat has nothing left but *personal attacks* to throw at her. The dying gasps of a failed argument.

*Dainpdf*



She does do that. Cat argues her continued rule may do more harm than good, and Akua outright responds that Cat is comparing herself to perfection.

Here she implies that, since the perfect queen is impossible, it is futile to make such comparisons and attempt to improve in that direction.

As for the hypotheticals, Cat starts from reasonable assumptions, while Akua attempts to feed her ego – she assumes the Fae invasion was inevitable on very little ground, and also says the Calamities would simply put down any and all heroic efforts (here she is wrong out of ignorance – she doesn't know about the Bard's involvement).

### *Agent J*

Yes, that's what kick started the conversation, the question of abdication, but the perfection response came when Cat began tallying her losses and contriving hypothetical ways they could have been better addressed. Akua's response was that she handled the shitshow that is Callow as best as reasonably possible.

Her argument then, is not "don't improve, perfection is impossible", it's "so your rule hasn't been perfect, that's no reason to quit now". The difference, I feel, is clear as day.

If Cat wishes to improve and learn how to rule better, Akua seems to be in full support of that. Whatever Cat's vision of "better" may entail. But that is not what Cat's talking about. She's arguing that she should put down the crown when she deems herself to be "doing more harm than good". That's not an argument about improving on one's faults. That's just quitting.

As for how reasonable her assumptions are, we're both a little biased in this regard. You've made the case for her abdication multiples times now, and I've been vehemently opposed to it. So I don't really find her assumptions all that reasonable to start with. And she's made a poor case for it in this chapter.

Akua on the other hand has shown just how much of the problems plaguing Callow were born out of her hand and how much of an absolute disaster things would be were she not in the picture.

### *Dainpdf*

Choosing to rule Callow, if she is doing more harm than good, is a fault to be improved.

Akua is not just arguing that Cat shouldn't quit, she's also arguing that Cat has done the best that could be

done. That is an argument against examining her faults, what she could have done better. Akua argues for arrogance, as befits a classical villain – and, as we’ve seen with Black, that way lay defeat.

*Agent J*

Quitting is not improvement, it’s quitting. Let’s not mince words.

Yes, she argued that “you did the best that could be done” in response to “I suck, someone else would have done better”. And she’s right. Those that could didn’t and those that would couldn’t. This entire story started because Cat got tired of waiting for others to get the job done so she got off her ass and did it.

Again, Akua is not arguing for arrogance or complacency or stagnation. Akua is many things, but complacent was never one of them. Her argument is for Cat to stay the course. Keep ruling, keep defending her countrymen, keep trying to bring about the better world she envisioned all those years ago... and keep needing her service.

That she’s a manipulative bitch with ulterior motives does not make her wrong.

And no, she has not made an argument in favour of not examining faults, because that was never the topic on debate. Cat’s been wallowing in misery for some time now and has been contemplated just giving up. The price, apparently, was steeper than the warlord anticipated. If it gets too steep, she’s saying, she may just quit instead. That’s the debate. To quit or not to quit.

The thing is though, Catherine is a known flagellant and takes an almost perverse pleasure in lashing herself. This is not an honest critique of her shortcomings and ruminations on ways to improve. This is another damn pity party. Gods, am I ever sick of them.

When did our beloved Black Queen become a toddler in need of emotional coddling? Does every dozen chapters need someone to tell her to stop belly aching and get the job done? It was barely a few chapters ago that Indrani had to push her to be more decisive with the Drow captives. A few more when Hakram had to push her to be more decisive with Masego. And even Juniper had had enough with the pity sessions during the Battle of

the Camps and pushed her to be more decisive with the crusaders.

The weakest rulers, historically, have always been those left incapable of making and sticking to a decision for fear of failure. Well, those and the ones utterly lacking in agency, but when you're grouped with toddler kings and empty figure heads, you're in poor company.

*Dainpdf*

The belly aching thing? It's called a conscience. And yes, quitting *\*is\** an improvement if you are doing more harm than good. And Cat has reason to believe she has. Admitting you have done what you can but now you're just making things worse is basic humility. I never said anything about Akua arguing for complacency, only arrogance. And arrogant she is. Also, she's not just trying to get Cat to need her. She's trying to get Cat to fit her mold of what a villain should be. Or a ruler. And that is a Dread Empress of the classic sort. Someone who uses their countrymen as a tool for their purposes, someone who achieves what they believe is greatness no matter the cost to others.

*Agent J*

I used to be terrible at riding a bike, so I stopped riding altogether and would you just look at the improvements.

Improvement on a situation and improvement of ability, I shouldn't have to state, are not the same thing. You've been asserting that Akua's argument is that Catherine is as good as she'll get and there's no point in her observing her faults and trying to become a better ruler because perfection is impossible. Yes, that's arguing for complacency. No, that's not at all what Akua said.

And a conscience? That's a great and wonderful thing. It makes our society actually functional, unlike the Drow. But in our leaders? Is it really a good thing if it's crippling their decision making? I'd rather a competent ruler than a kind one, and most of Cat's senior officers would agree. The only one who puts any stock in kindness is Vivienne and she did not join Cat because she's a boundless ray of sunshine. Hell, the man she followed before her tried to enslave an entire city.

Cat used to know that there was a time and place for everything, including a conscience. She's lost sight of that lately, traumatized by Liesse as she's been. Cat is not being humble, she's being sheepish.

*Dainpdf*

The bicycle is a false equivalence. It's more of a "I used to gamble in the casino. Then I noticed it only ever loses money, so I stopped."

See? Improvement. Akua's not arguing for complacency. She's arguing for forging ahead blindly.

As for a conscience, it's useful when you don't wish to throw the baby out with the bathwater. At some point you get so involved with strengthening and securing your rule that you forget what you started to rule for.

[Javvies](#)

That's not what the argument being made actually is.

You're discrediting the message because of the messenger.

Ignore who is saying it for the moment – focus on the statement itself.

What I understand Akua's primary point to be is, in essence, this:

"You didn't do a perfect job, and, sure, in hindsight, maybe you could have done a better one, but in your position, pretty much everyone else would have done a significantly worse job at the whole thing. There may be individuals who could have done parts of what you did better, but they would have done the other things significantly worse, if they could do them at all."

And that's true. No other character we have encountered or heard of could have managed the entirety of what Cat did. It would have taken someone more or less just like Cat to even come close.

*Dainpdf*

That is actually not an easy affirmation to make – saying that, absent Cat, the calamities would have just crushed all heroes ignores the fact that the Bard actually outplayed them in the League. And she was involved in Callow.

Plus, the whole point of the discussion is that,

while Cat's leadership has brought many victories, the cost may have been too great. Perhaps Callow's future will see less carnage in her absence. And saying that the amount of troubles would be the same with or without her is also fallacious – she's completely ignoring how narratives work. I'm not saying that Cat should quit, and that she has been a net negative for Callow. All I'm saying is that she needs to keep the possibility in mind. The moment she stops is the moment she becomes another Akua.

### Javvies

Absent Cat, one of the other claimants – the Praesi claimants – for Squire would have gotten the Name.

William (Lone Swordsman) likely either doesn't get released by Alt-Squire or dies outright, or wins against the Squire/claimants and then runs into Black and Captain and gets murdered, or gets away before they arrive. Either way, he doesn't get the Cat-induced change to his approach. He doesn't have those altered Story-level motivational urges. He doesn't form his group of Heroes. There is no group for Bard to join. He is not in, and therefore he is not protected by, a Pattern of Three with Cat/Squire, and therefore is fair game to get owned by Assassin. William doesn't have the drive to seek out Ranger for training or to spend a year in Arcadia when she rejects him.

The Fifteenth is likely not formed or formed under Akua/Heiress or the Praesi alt-Squire.

Absent Cat, the status of Callow/the Praesi occupation of Callow, and suppression of Heroes, is more or less unchanged.

Absent Cat, Hakram doesn't get his Name.

Cat is sufficiently rare enough in perception, point of view, motivation, ability, and position, that there is a very small subset of people who could feasibly replace her Role in full. The set of people who could partially replace her Role is somewhat larger, but still relatively small, and many of them are in opposition to the others who could fill in for the parts of her Role that they can't.

*Dainpdf*

You underestimate the Bard, for one.  
For another, absent Cat, someone else would have taken her place. A band would have been formed. Would they have succeeded? It's plausible.  
You can't just remove Cat from the picture and assume everything else happens the same way except without her.

### Javvies

You're the one assuming things happen the same without Cat as they did with Cat at critical moments.

William only formed a band of Heroes because of what Cat said and did to him.  
Without Cat at Summerholm as a Villain-Squire Claimant, the Praesi Squire-Claimants likely either kill William in the foundry, because none of them are getting sidetracked trying to deal with Cat, or stall him long enough for Black and Captain to show up and kill him.  
Alternatively, William still gets away, but without the consequences of Cat inflicting Name-level motivational and objective changes the way she did, and without the protection of a Pattern of Three, which, leaves him wide open to getting owned by Assassin, and without the motivation to form and lead a group of Heroes, far less make a deal with Procer to support a rebellion.

In addition, without Cat, or a suitably equivalent Callowan-Villain-Candidate for the right Name, who might as well be Cat, it is unlikely that Bard would have bothered to show up to join a band of Heroes in Callow – the situation would have been more or less status quo, which she hadn't done a thing about in twenty years.

### *Dainpdf*

The Bard set up that band. It would happen with or without Cat. What she did was create a pattern of three that dragged the whole affair out and caused a lot of casualties, but the band would have popped up eventually.  
As for why she would have moved, the timing was good. Malicia was reaching the final stages of her power centralization, Cordelia was fast approaching her unification of the Principate...  
There was a lot of tension in the air.

### Javvies

It wasn't Bard who formed the group. It was William, under the urging of Cat's Name-level influence on him, who called for heroes to join him. Bard showed up later.

Bard wouldn't have bothered to show up without Cat, or an equivalently positioned Callowan. Bard would have accepted the Callowan status quo, as she had for the last 20 years, and waited until Cordelia called her Crusade. Maybe she would've shown up for the rebellion that would've taken place in about five years if Cat hadn't pushed William into kicking it off early. But then, the Crusade might've wound up being concurrent with that. But without something or someone who is a fundamental change to the Story of Callow, like Cat, the status quo is still tolerable for Bard. I suppose it's also possible that Bard might've tried to give Hieress or alt-Squire a nudge or assistance towards replacing the Calamities and Malicia, with pushing Passes back towards classic/old-school Evil instead of the New Evil of Black.

Without William being protected by the pattern of three with Cat, he'd have been taken out by Assassin, and not been available for Bard to try and use. Without William's calling for heroes, there is no Callowan Hero who can form a group. Thief wouldn't, even if she could. Bumbling Conjurer? Don't make me laugh. Hunter would've stayed in Refuge without William calling for Heroes.

*Dainpdf*

How do you know what the Bard would have done? The best source we have (and it's pretty poor) is the illusions Cat had when fighting Akua, and in those there was a heroic band. Cat is not everything.

[Javvies](#)

Because of how Bard does what she does. Bard works through other people.

Cat isn't everything, but at critical moments, replacing her with someone who can fill the same Role she does, and make choices that result in the same or a similar outcome is nigh impossible.

For example, in the first and most relevant critical moment, it requires Cat, or a sufficiently similar Callowan who is a Squire-

Claimant.

None of the Praesi Squire-Claimants could or would have had the kind of impact on William that Cat did. The Praesi-Claimants would have either killed or been killed by William. He would have either died in Summerholm, be it at the hands of the Praesi Squire-Claimants or Black and Captain, or escaped without the Name-level influence on him that Cat caused, and without the protection of a pattern of three, which means Assassin would have gotten him.

Without William being influenced by Cat, he's not going to be interested in calling for Heroes. Or making deals with outsiders.

He called for Heroes first, then Bard showed up. Without William, there is no one to call for a group of Heroes. With no group of Heroes, Bard has nothing to work with.

Remember, Bard plays a hellaciously long game. She can afford to wait a few years of status quo for an opportunity.

That opportunity would most likely come when Cordelia got her Crusade. It might have come in a few years, when Black predicted a major rebellion – Cat used William to kick it off early.

Besides, while waiting through status quo for the right moment, it allows Heiress and her Classic Evil the opportunity to turn on Black and Malicia. If Classic Evil wins, Bard doesn't really need to do anything else to protect The Way Things Are Supposed To Be. Also, a win for Classic Evil, or even just a strong showing, gives grounds for a Crusade.

Akua's illusions are just that – illusions and mindgames. They should not be considered evidence of what might have been.

*Dainpdf*

It is impossible to discuss if you assume so many things about what would happen.

[Javvies](#)

What exactly do you think I'm assuming here?

The primary assumption that I have made is that without Cat, Black doesn't have someone immediately available to fulfill the same Role she does in the same way that she does. As such, the



butterfly effect takes hold, though we really only see meaningful changes at Summerholm, and since Cat's actions and the effects of her actions are significant, things play out rather differently.

Pretty much everything else is largely either directly stated, inferred from, and/or implied in the text. Since of it only much later, but there nonetheless.

*Dainpdf*

You assumed William could not survive the Squire meeting without Cat.

You assumed the Bard's objective is to keep the status quo.

You assumed no successful band could form without Cat.

And those are just the few examples I can cite off of the top of my head.

*RanVor*

I didn't want to interfere in this discussion, but I have to point a few things out.

Your first statement is an outright lie. He did not assume such a thing at all. He said William could die during the Squire meeting, but if he didn't, he wouldn't have the protection offered by the pattern of three. And this is true.

That the Bard's objective is maintaining the status quo can be inferred from her conversation with the Hierarch in the epilogue of Book 3.

Forming a successful heroic band without William is highly unlikely, considering it was attempted for twenty years to no avail. Moreover, it's not illogical to assume even the Lone Swordsman couldn't have done it without a lot of additional narrative weight from his pattern of three with Cat.

From what I see, you are the one doing all the assuming so far.

*Dainpdf*

I disagree with that inference. She has a vested interest in the status quo, because she wins there, but it is not her final objective.

Why would it be without William if he doesn't need

to die at the Squire meeting? Also, things that have not worked before can work now – for example, no one had ever killed one of the Calamities, and yet now someone has. No (direct, at least) Cat involvement.

*RanVor*

William might have not need to die at the Squire meeting, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't die afterwards. And forming a successful band depends heavily on narrative weight, which William probably would not have a lot without the pattern of three.

What does it matter if the status quo is a means instead of an end? The effect on Callow is the same.

To summarize, there is a chance that Callow would be better off if Catherine didn't become the Squire, but it's an extremely flimsy one. Because that's what you're arguing about, right? Whether or not the entire plot of the Guide is one gigantic mistake.

*Dainpdf*

Eh. I think it's more about an imperfect woman making imperfect choices and trying to stay herself while fighting monsters.

*RanVor*

That she's imperfect is unquestionable. People usually are. But that's irrelevant to the argument. We're not talking about why she made choices she made, but whether or not Callow would be better off if she didn't make those choices. In other words, whether or not accepting Black's offer was a mistake.

[Javvies](#)

No.

RanVor's got the short version down nicely. Much more aptly summarized than I would've done. Wall of text version follows.

William's encounter with the Squire-Claimants goes significantly differently without Cat – all the Praesi Claimants get to focus on him, rather than splitting up, one going one on one with Cat and

loosing, and then Cat turning on the rest and allying (however briefly) with William against the Praesi-Claimants. William is certainly in a worse position without Cat than with her when dealing with the Praesi Squire-Claimants.

However, William either wins outright (meaning no Squire), gets killed (because none of them are going to let him go), or escapes that fight on his own. Assuming he survives, depending on how long that took, he might run into Black and Captain, if he does and fights, he dies, though he might be able to escape.

If William survives Summerholm, he is not in a Pattern of Three, and thus Assassin probably tracks him down and kills him in short order. The Pattern of Three protection is the only reason why Black didn't send Assassin after William immediately after Summerholm – it would have been pointless.

Disregarding the high probability that Assassin gets him, William has not had the encounter with Cat, and thus has not been changed by the encounter with Cat. It was explicitly said that Cat kicking William's ass and letting him go, and what she said to him, caused Name-level changes that William had no ability to fight. That those changes were significant and largely out of character for the Name, but enforced by the Name because of what Cat did.

William, without the changes imposed on him by Cat, is the Lone Swordsman, emphasis on Lone. His Name is one that doesn't work with others under normal circumstances. The Lone Swordsman might join a group that someone else formed and leads, but normally doesn't do the forming.

William screwed with Cat's free will, but she screwed with his right back – and harder. She ultimately figured it out, albeit later, and got over it, but he never consciously did, and didn't get past the effects until Liesse.

No Heroic band forms in Callow without William doing the forming because of who the available Callowan Heroes at the time are – Hunter is in Refuge, Thief is busy keeping her head down, and Bumbling Conjuror lacks the ... everything.

Without the Name-level changes imposed by Cat, William, if he survives Summerholm and manages to dodge Assassin long enough, would act completely differently from the way he did under the influence of those changes.

Bard's objective, based on what we have seen her do and say, is to maintain the Story and, apparently to tilt things in the direction of Above.

She protected Heiress, wanted her to beat Cat. She wanted to stop the New Evil that Black believes in, because of it and he succeeded, it would change the Story in unalterable ways.

The status quo of Callow, prior to Cat becoming Squire, is one that Bard had tolerated for 20 years, plus not doing anything (that we know of) to stop the Conquest. She demonstrably isn't that concerned with a Praesi Occupation of Callow, as long as it remains an Occupation of Good Callow by Evil Praes, and Callow is still spawning Callowan Heroes. That's just part of the Story.

Also, as Ranvor pointed out, we have her interaction with Heirarch.

We also have her stopping the elves from killing Akua.

We also have Bard discussing the difference between the Classic Evil that Akua represents and the New Evil of Black that Cat is a successor to, and her preference for the Classic Evil of Akua, because while it makes a mess, it loses in the end, but the New Evil is a kind of Evil that can actually win. I believe that was in a discussion with William, possibly the one where she urged him to summon the Hashmallin.

She plays an incredibly long game. Waiting for the right moment is entirely in character for her, especially when waiting gives time for both a suitable moment for her to do things to arrive, and allows for Classic Evil to take on New Evil to the detriment of the winner, and if Classic Evil wins, the Story is no longer threatened by New Evil.

Bard is functionally immortal – she takes a longer view than anyone except the Dead King, in part because she can afford to, in part because she has to.

There are lots of unanswered questions about Bard, sure, but there are also things where we have some of the answers.

As RanVor pointed out, things pulled directly from the text aren't exactly assumptions.

Things going differently without Cat doing what she does at critical story moments? That's not really much of an assumption either. Cat's a

Callowan with a Praesi Villain Name – that's not a Role that anyone else can readily fill. Critical moments going differently resulting in a different sequence of events following? That's not really much of an assumption either. The butterfly effect doesn't get entirely ignored, in some ways, it's even more important – and it's certainly easier to locate critical moments where it's clear the butterfly effect would have major consequences.

*Zach*

Is it really true that Callowans would rather be a graveyard than a conquered colony? Recall the state of Callow at the beginning of this story – the Black Knight correctly calculated that, as long as their basic needs were met, the Callowan people would not rebel and the number of heroes would be kept to a minimum. So clearly Callowans – or at least your average Callowan who isn't a noble or whatever – are actually totally fine with being a province of Praes or whatever!

Various characters, as recently as the past couple chapters (in reference to the Drow) have touched upon the idea that some of these cultural mores might just be the values of the nobles/elite, and that the common people primarily just care about having their basic needs met.

*Agent J*

That's an excellent point, but Callow was never truly peaceful. There was always deep seething resentment bubbling under the surface. Remember gallows of Summerholm (or was it Marchford?) where Cat first saw the cold Carrion Lord rather than the generally affable Black? How many average Callowans were plotting rebellion? Remember that massive rebellion? Sure, it was the nobles that lead the armies and got the glory, but down there in the mud, who held the line?

You're right. Since we can't exactly take a census of a fictitious people, my assertion is moot. But EE has been beating us over the head with Callowan pride, spite, and stubbornness. I mean, a queen split open her throat at her own coronation after naming her rebel cousin heir. That is sheer badassery to a level I couldn't even contemplate. Callowans are not a meek people. Incessant invasions from all directions tends to harden a folk. I'm thoroughly convinced they'd choose liberty over life any day of the week. Many already have.

*RanVor*

This trait of Callowans reminds me of my own people, the Poles. Polish history is full of people who gave up their lives for lost causes, achieving nothing but retribution and repression, forever hailed as martyrs for an elusive ideal of "Polishness". We are taught in school about the heroism of insurrectionists from the November and January uprisings, even though both resulted only in increasingly brutal repressions. Even now, many Polish people view the neighboring countries, especially Germany, as enemies and oppressors, despite the World War II ending over half a century ago.

Like those Polish insurrectionists, Callowans would fight to the last out of misguided belief that there is something noble in dying in vain. And, again like Poles, trying to divide their ancestral lands would only solidify their resistance. In the end, Procer would end up with a nation-sized graveyard anyway.

*Agent J*

The Callowan plight resonates with me for much the same reason. Their stubbornness and the almost impossible uphill battle they face reminds me a great deal of my own people as well.

Somalis have ever been a hard-hearted and unruly folk. Our lands were conquered and divided into five colonies, a gross injustice that's been emblazoned on our flag. A five pointed star signifying that all our lands and people are united in our hearts if not on the map. Said map only depicted two of the five chunks united, leaving large swaths of our territory and people remaining under the brutal rule of our Kenyan and Ethiopian neighbours. Somalia proper is a shattered, woeful mess gripped by a seemingly endless conflict. In our weakness, our neighbours prey on us ceaselessly, countless nations invade us for the flimsiest reasons, international corporations dump their wastes in our water while major fishing companies strip it of fish by the tons, and the greatest power on earth bombs us unendingly, failing to hit their actual targets frustratingly often, killing scores of innocents instead without so much as a "sorry, our bad". All the while, our people kill each other constantly and senselessly, spilling more of their own blood than all foreign soldiers combined.

Suffice it to say, I'm heavily invested in the Callowan plight. If they can make it out of their dreadful situation against impossible odds, perhaps things aren't as hopeless as they seem for us as well.

### *Decius*

Such is the cost of being a manipulative, backstabbing, mass murdering wastelander. The people smart enough to murder you into servitude treat you like a manipulative, backstabbing, mass murderer from the wasteland.

### *SilentWatcher*

Good chapter and dialog, but look how no one questions that dwarfs are good, when massacring a race and nailing someone to the wall.

### *MagnaMalusLupus*

Umm...nobody said, thought, implied, or even remotely hinted that the Dwarves were Good. Its pretty dang obvious that they're not on the side of the angels, though I don't know that they're Evil either. It's quite possible that, like the Elves, they are aligned with neither.

### *Ternbugkle*

Not sure anybody said dwarves were good, they heavily implied nobody lived to mess with them twice.

Massacring murderous violent slavers on the way to pick up supplies is almost a public service.

### *Metrux*

I do think they treat it as a public service, and let the good deeders pay their taxes this way, instead of in money. Which would explain why the dwarfs are so well furnished for this, the cost is lesser :V

### *taovkool*

Surprising that I actually agreed with the Diabolist, even if she might be doing it just to get more points on her boss's ass.

Cat's been far too harsh on herself. If the usual pattern of escalation I'm reading here rang true, She might be due another wake up call.

### *Agent J*

And how many wake up calls does she need before she gets over her melodrama?

### *Jonnnney*

A major problem with Akua's argument is that Cat being hard on herself is how she gets better. Once Catherine is satisfied

with herself her power will have reached its peak and then something stronger will knock her out. By continuing to strive for a theoretical better solution she continues to gain strength and continues to be a player in the great game. Akua's path is a happy one that always ends in defeat. Cat's path is a sad one that doesn't end.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

One of my favorite chapters.

Lots, and lots of perspective toward the events that have happened thus far, and a lot of character development for Cat, and Akua.

And although it is what Cat wanted to hear, I believe that it is mostly the truth, and tells a lot about the situation.

*stevenneiman*

I'm surprised that Akua didn't acknowledge that the Heavens tried to do the same thing to a major population center that she did and only failed because of Cat's personal intervention. Though I suppose that Cat might have responded by pointing out that she drove the particular hatchet man of the Heavens to do so. Ignoring that the Heavens could have gotten another one, but that's how Cat would think.

### *Thaumaturge*

that last line was perfect.

honestly i agree with a lot of what Akua is saying – and ugh i hate having to say that – but it is a genuinely good point that she is the one saying it. Akua probably makes a lot of sense, really, she grew up in Praesi courts and was named even before Catherine, it's no surprise that she can be particularly persuasive.

but does that make her right? right now she's in a supportive role, certainly, but inasmuch as she is a supportive character?

i think Cat could do with some genuine pats on the back and some assured "you did good"s but if they only come from Akua's mouth, am i really in the right to think that?

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Unfortunately, the only compliments that Cat would believe I think will only come from Black.

*stevenneiman*

The important thing to remember is the two things Akua's current mindset is shaped by: She needs Cat to survive, and she lost to Cat. If Cat decides that it isn't worth existing it's



pretty obvious that her last act is going to be to destroy Akua's soul and ensure that she never has any kind of opening for a comeback. Also, it's just plain annoying to have to listen to the person who ruined the schemes you spent your entire life preparing moping about how useless and ineffective they are. Especially if you're trapped listening to that moping with no possible escape and you've been raised from birth with wasteland arrogance and success-worship.

*limlimrevolution*

I had not considered the existential horror of your lucid soul being enslaved by someone who brutally curbstomped you, only to then be subjected to them moping and whining about how shitty they are at everything. Especially when you have been raised to believe that "iron sharpens iron". Almost makes me feel bad for Akua. Except for, you know, the whole mass murdering psychopathic necromantic demon summoning ritual thing. So in retrospect, it's actually a sickeningly effective punishment.

*Stormblessed*

Hahahahaha! What an excellent chapter. The debate going back and forth was great and gripping, only to have the rug pulled out and subverted at the last second by Cat's final line! How fantastic!

*Nima*

How old cat is? 18? We all forgot she is just a young woman despite all experience and eldritch power

[Javvies](#)

Maybe 23-4 or so, depending.

IIRC, she said she was 18 when she was talking to Talbot in the dungeons of Marchford when he was offering the services of two thousand knights.

The timeskip was ~5 ish years. I think.

*Reqqe*

The prologue of book 4 says its been less than a year since the fey invasion.

[erraticerrata](#)

She's nearing twenty-one.

*Yotz*

Growing old is mandatory, growing up is optional.

## NZPIEFACE

You forget she's immortal.

Both are literally optional.

*Yotz*

Au contraire, mon ami – since her body is a function of her mind, she will be exactly as old as she feels – unless she'll constantly extend her will to regulate her appearance, or just became detached enough from her mortal patterns of thinking. And regardless of all that – she *will* grow older, immortality or not. It just that her age won't be affecting her directly. That's where "growing up" part comes into play.

Imagine this – decade later Cat suddenly notices clear signs of aging on Nauk's and Hellhound's faces. This causes epiphany of sorts – full weight of her immortality suddenly becomes not only known to her as abstract thing, but completely, finally, irrevocably understood; and – somewhat – accepted. Later that day grey-haired and wrinkled Grossmeister Talbot walks into the throne room only to find a frail crooked crone on the Queen's throne, holding a half-empty cup of wine, and looking into nothingness with cataract eyes. And all this only because of one single thing – that's how Cat feels at that moment: incredibly old, frail, and half-blind. She would be nearing 31 there, mind you.

Now, under the strict mental control or absolute dehumanizing detachment that scenario would be nigh impossible – Cat will remain unchanging – or, rather, changing at glacial pace. But that's a thing to think about later – we still a in lack of several future story points to make any educated hypothesis on that particular kink.

So, "optional" would be appropriate for "growing up" only – "growing old" still will be mandatory, just less noticeable.

...Unless time shenanigans ensue.

*Jane*

Even if it's what Cat wanted to hear, it was certainly what Cat *needed* to hear. Self-reflection is necessary to avoid doubling your way down into destruction, but at a certain point, self-reflection becomes self-pity instead, and Cat's been over that line for a few months now.

Yes, the loss of Liesse was a tragedy, one that she failed to avert despite her best efforts (setting aside the dubious “Raise banner against the Empress by killing one of her governors without permission” option), but expecting to avoid loss when playing games on this scale is to demand perfection of yourself – something that *no* person, Named or not, can offer. And every other sin she lays at her own feet is nothing more than a reflection of that single mistake – that she couldn’t avert Liesse.

And, you know, if she wants to mourn Liesse, that’s a good thing – it demonstrates that she still has a heart. But if she lets that guilt guide her more than the facts at hand, that’s an indulgence that Callow can’t afford. Because if she lays down her sword because she genuinely believes the situation to be hopeless, that’s being a good ruler – but surrendering the kingdom out of a misguided belief that she’s failed them is just trying to soothe her own ego while making her kingdom pay the price.

Even if she has to raise the farmhands and starve Callow in order to keep fighting... Is a season of famine *really* worse than becoming part of the Principate? Because that’s a cost her people would willingly bear, and it’s something they only need suffer once. Accepting annexation by a foreign kingdom is something with much longer consequences, and will probably involve more than one rebellion, to say nothing of resuming the wars with Praes.

That said, I do understand where Cat is coming from – she’s comparing herself to Malicia, Cordelia, and her teacher, each of whom has played a nearly perfect game in her eyes. But someone who still a novice comparing herself to seasoned players, and expecting to *surpass* them on her first round is simply being arrogant. As Akua says, that she has slipped her kingdom out of their hands and not watched it burst into flames *is* success. To expect that success to be flawless is asking the impossible.

Listen to Akua, Cat. That she just doesn’t want her owner to be buried with her cape doesn’t make her wrong.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

I’d argue that Cat did play a near perfect hand her first time through. I mean, go look at Akua’s entire argument.

A lot of what Cat pulled off simply could not have been pulled off by most other people, and with our behind the scenes looks at the others, we see that they are all in similar situations, just in such a way that Cat can not see it.

*Jane*

Well, with precognition or a spy network on par with Malicia’s, she probably could have acted in the extremely

narrow window between [when it was politically acceptable to kill Akua] and [when Akua massacred Liesse]. But that falls firmly under the heading of “unrealistic expectations of perfection” – it was a misstep, but not one that any sane person could blame her for.

It's why I describe her guilt as self-indulgent – she's blaming herself, heavily, for not being perfect in a situation where *nobody* could be perfect, and the only reason she can even consider such a standard realistic is that she's measuring herself against people who built their legends before she was even born. That's not honest self-reflection – that's just a pity party, whether she realizes it or not.

### *Novice*

I once hated Akua as a character, now I only hate her as a person. Hells, I once wanted her to be nothing more than a plot device, if at all given a role.

Casting her as a way for Cat to confront her own insecurity and then Cat dismissing her entirely without the whole thing seeming ill-contrived? I don't know how you've done it but you changed my mind EE. Well done.

### *naturalnuke*

I always liked Akua as a character actually, she's both a foil and a mirror. She is Cat taken to her logical conclusion if Cat actually went down that slope. Akua had a goal, a drive to do something that is basically impossible, and the pragmatic and unscrupulous practical realism to clearheadedly do what she thought she needed to achieve her goal. She's literally Cat with a different set of values because of upbringing.

I mean, this whole book is a story of 'how does Good look from evil's side', what would this have looked from Akua's perspective?

A plan years in the making, progresses against all odds, until a rival appears, an up-and-comer who wins by the skin of her teeth on impossible odds. Of course you tried to put roadblocks in her way, but she always overcomes them and comes out stronger for it. She progresses to the level of skill you took years to achieve in only 1, gathering a host of competent individuals who can cover, effectively, all the inadequacies of her, and a mentor who intervenes should you ever gather too much of a lead.

But you persevere, and manage to achieve a plan that cost countless lives, resources, and time to achieve her penultimate goal. And your rival, impossibly, is there to meet you. But you have one last plan, a way to surely beat her, to beat everyone who might stop you, and at your height? When you have your

rival, who you've grown almost attached too because she was the only thing that stood with you in your climb, when you have her at your mercy, planning to SPARE her, her mentor comes to the rescue.

Akua suffered Cats 'villain fighting the hero story' but instead of raging against it says 'that's life, gotta make the best of it'. I fucking respect that. I like her as a character for the sheer irony of her story and her reaction to the same injustice the MC suffered.

*naturalnuke*

It goes back to that quote what was it, "...you were brought up in a culture that said you can win. We don't even get that...", or something to that effect.

I think Akua is genuine in the 'Cat won so she can do with me as she will' attitude. Of course she was also raised in a culture where backstabbing is a legitimate career path. I think the attitude lasts as long as Cat is the 'winner'. Cat hasn't lost yet, she's struggling but Akua's not gonna even try to jump ship because she genuinely believes 'to the victor goes the spoils.'

*naturalnuke*

Because really, what does it say about you if the person you lost to is beaten? You just drop lower in the tower don't you?

[DroughtBringer](#)

This is a beautiful way of looking at Cat's story, and harkens back to something Akua said here.

The Gods Bellow do not own Cat, she does not worship them, and it creates a much more mobile story thread for Cat to manipulate, and allows her to play the Hero role in stories.

*Dainpdf*

She believes Cat can do anything so long as she doesn't show enough of her back for Akua to reliably slide in a knife.

*Dainpdf*

Akua's problem is she was trying to keep the sand castle up when the tide came calling.

That, plus she was a foil against a regular hero. Her position doesn't work as well against someone like Cat, who gets some heroic luck but also dips into villainous practices.

*naturalnuke*

I feel like he's been sitting on this interaction for months and was itching (and rushing) to get to it. This chapter has fewer – negligible even – spelling or grammatical mistakes on release than any of the chapters of this book so far. And it feels worth it almost, because this was a joy to read (so much so that I started reading parts out loud to myself because I felt they deserved to be spoken).

[TeK](#)

I like it when I don't know I was thinking something, until someone else said it.

*Dainpdf*

Akua's arguments are beautifully crafted. I tip my hat to EE. It's hard to portray this level of masterful sophistry.

[wyaldriddler](#)

And I'm going to be absurdly amused if Vivienne basically repeats the same thing to Cat. Or Hakram.

Cause that would be something of a real shock to Cat's system.

*Aeon*

I kind of love what's going on here. For all that Akua's manipulative, she still has a very good point here. Something tells me that Cat won't be dismissing this conversation as easily as that last line claims.

Also, I really do like what's been going on with helpful Akua. It may or may not happen, but I'd love to see her join Cat legitimately.

[ahd](#)

As noted: the smart move for the Diabolist is to behave exactly the same way she believes a competent, loyal, trustworthy follower would behave, even when Cat is not watching her, always and forever.

Not to somehow earn trust or friendship, but because if Cat keeps winning, Akua keeps this semblance of life and freedom and opportunity for happiness. Sixth Ranger ahoy.

We all know the Black Queen is never going to run out of enemies, so the Diabolist is never going to run out of runway. And Akua may be a handy target to redirect the redemption story to. (:

## *Death Knight*

THAT'S YOUR REBUTTAL CAT?! ARGUMENTUM AD HOMINEM? Oh for fuck's sake... Diabolist was right on all counts.

[\*ahd\*](#)

Black Queen: "Akua is brilliant and thoroughly well-informed and so can figure out what to tell me to get me to dance to her puppet strings. I must not listen."

Also the Black Queen: "Akua knows nothing about me and is kind of a fuckup; so when she tells me that I actually did the least bad job possible, except when I indulged my squishy wannabe-hero wishcasting, I must not listen."

Within two chapters of each other. Catherine Foundling, ladies and gentlemen. She's here all week. Try the veal.

*agesbe*

The second opinion is something she espouses a lot more than she actually believes, because it gets under Akua's skin. In her more personal, honest moments, she acknowledges that Akua was abominable, but skilled, intelligent, and capable.

She wants absolution, which Akua is giving her, but also knows that Akua will say whatever she thinks she should say to manipulate Catherine. I don't think she's going to be dismissing this conversation as much as she pretends. Akua isn't saying anything Cat hasn't already considered herself, but at this point Cat views these as justifications, not excuses.

For my part, I feel like Akua has a lot of good points, but the mindset she's putting forth is also dangerous; it is as bad to feel like you are the best choice for your kingdom no matter what happens as it is to feel like you are the lesser evil at best. She hasn't given up yet, and I doubt she'll just surrender even if the Drow don't show up; at the very least, all of the Woe will be trying to talk her out of it, and probably most of the remaining government as well.

*Dainpdf*

Akua is a master manipulator and analyst, but she has heavy blinders on that limit her. That's why she lost to Cat. Also, she will use poor arguments if they are what she thinks will convince Cat to see her way.

[\*ahd\*](#)

Learning to see those around you as separate from their crimes is one of the skills of adulting.

<https://t.co/YzKAU4qMDP> [pic.twitter.com/FULxwPUXs8](https://t.co/FULxwPUXs8)

[TeK](#)

To be fair, a messenger does matter in this particular conversation. If someone as thoroughly fucked up as Aqua tells you "Good job!"...

As per Godwin law, it's quite similar to what you would feel if Hitler said to you "What an amazing way yo rule your country, keep it up!"

*Dainpdf*

Especially since both drove their enterprises into the ground, besides the whole "being an inhumane monster" bit. And both being charismatic but often fallacious and manipulative.

*mavant*

Did you mean <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/YourApprovalFillsMeWithShame>

*Dainpdf*

Eh. Diabolist was misinformed (did not consider the Bard, who has been proven to be able to outmaneuver Black and was involved with the Rebellion), dishonest (argued that the impossibility of perfection is a reason not to acknowledge faults), and mostly engaged in convenient hypotheticals. Notice how, when questioning the Drow alliance, she chose the worst options to bring up before raising the idea of climbing the tower. This was her being manipulative and nothing more; her points are as empty as her arguments.

*RanVor*

Which options do you think she should have mentioned instead? I'm genuinely curious – maybe you do have better ideas.

*Dainpdf*

The ones Cat raised right after, like the Elves, the Gigantes... The ones which won't treat with her, in part because she is a villain – which is why Akua did not mention them.

*RanVor*

So you *don't* have any ideas, then. Good to know.

*Dainpdf*



Huh? I don't understand. All I was saying is that Akua cherry picked alliances, since Cat herself pointed out there were other options and Akua clearly "forgot" to mention anyone on the side of Above.

*RanVor*

So it is a convenient coincidence that Akua only mentioned the alliances that could feasibly be made, and omitted the ones that are hopeless to even try?

*Dainpdf*

No. It is a suspicious coincidence that she only mentioned the ones that were problematic due to being counter-productive, while leaving out the ones that were problematic due to Cat's own previous villainous decisions.

In doing so, she establishes her main argumentative assumption: that Cat's choice to go with villainy was predetermined and set in stone, and there is no point in arguing about times when she failed to do good, only in wondering how she might best strengthen her position.

This, of course, stems somewhat from Akua's own Praesi philosophy of iron sharpens iron, but is also a subtle appeal to Black's own ideal of "one sin, one grace" aka the ends justify the means.

*RanVor*

And you surely can prove it's not because of Black's Legions and the Fae being arguably superior options to the Drow, and because mentioning the Titanomachy, which is not an option at all, lacks any merit whatsoever.

*Dainpdf*

If it were an option (and it might, if Cat were not a villain – the Gigantes are known for their hate of Procer) the Titanomachy would have made for a pretty good ally.

Better than the Fae or Drow, considering both are bound to attempt to betray or swindle her.

*RanVor*

If it was an option, sure – but it's not, which makes it irrelevant to the discussion.

*Dainpdf*

It is, if considering why it is not an option can lead to making it an option or avoiding losing similar options in the future. For example, would the Gigantes aid Callow if Cat were to resign? That is just a simple idea, but it is food for thought.

*RanVor*

A counterpoint – is allying with the Gigantes worth losing the Liesse Accords?

*Dainpdf*

Debatable. But it should be kept in mind, as a possibility.

*RanVor*

Also, that was not the topic of the conversation at the time. The question was what alliance Cat should consider instead of the Everdark. And you stubbornly refuse to acknowledge that the Titanomachy is out of this particular picture. It's not about what could have been. It's about what is.

*Dainpdf*

I specifically raised the issue of how Akua's pick of possible alliances to mention was part her own biases and part a calculated choice to prepare for her main argument.

*RanVor*

And I specifically called you out on talking nonsense. It'd be way more suspicious if she did it your way, bringing up options obviously not applicable in this situation.

*Dainpdf*

As opposed to bringing up options which are actually counter-productive to the objective, one of which she has vested interest in?

*RanVor*

They are not counter-productive. They just have consequences Cat is unwilling to deal with. Akua wouldn't be, so they naturally occurred to her as possibilities.

I'm not suggesting Akua is innocent. She's definitely not. But you're reading too much into this, and it pisses me off for some reason.

*Dainpdf*

They are, considering that all of them will make the Callow situation worse. They are only viable from the "let's win battles and show these crusaders" angle, not the "let's make sure Callow is in the best shape we can by the end of this" one.

Now, I hesitate to claim things about your reading experience, but I suppose it could be because, much like me and Cat, Akua has told you what you wanted to hear (whether she has a point or not) and you dislike that being questioned.

*RanVor*

I think it's because I dislike overly suspicious people. You might have noticed I tend to respond in this manner every time someone starts to spew paranoid ramblings.

Is contacting Black really that disastrous? Don't get me wrong, I agree with Cat why those aren't viable options, but they're really obvious choices from Akua's perspective. She mentioned them simply because that's what she would do in Cat's place.

*Dainpdf*

I see. Well, skepticism and cynicism are close enough that one can fall easily from one to the other.

What I find interesting is how many people are ready to trust the words of Akua and doubt everything the Pilgrim says...  
(not saying this applies to you, just commenting in general)

*RanVor*

I'm not arguing for trusting Akua, I'm arguing against paranoia. The moment Cat starts to fear everything coming from Akua's mouth is the moment she loses control over her.

And it's kind of hard to believe your remark wasn't directed at me, considering it was I who argued with you over the reliability of the Pilgrim as an information source.

Also, I have a personal question to you: do you ever sleep? Because while my own sleeping schedule is currently very irregular, you seem to always reply to my comments within an hour at most, no matter what time it is.

*Dainpdf*

So is mine! I guess we just happened to match. As for direction, I don't recall names easily, so I had not made the connection. As for losing control over Akua, that control is not one of trust, but of power.

*RanVor*

But power is irrelevant if Akua can't fulfill her primary purpose due to Cat refusing to listen to her. What is the point of keeping an advisor whose advice is always ignored?

*Dainpdf*

She has abilities that can be used. And being skeptical of someone's words and never taking them at face value is not the same as plugging one's ears and going "lalala". Plus, she has her areas of expertise. Magic, politics, even medicine, among many other things. Definitely not ethics or "how not to be a classical villain".

*RanVor*

You seem to be under the impression that we're discussing the entire conversation. We're not. I'm refuting your claim that Akua's choice of potential allies is a proof of her ulterior motives towards Cat. This aspect of the argument is strictly political, and therefore within Akua's area of competence. Morality has nothing to do with it. And there is a point where skepticism and ear-plugging become interchangeable.

*Dainpdf*

I did not state it is proof. I stated that, given the fact that she is attempting a manipulation, her choice of allies becomes much clearer. Therefore, it is evidence of her manipulation, though not necessarily proof. Politics in Creation necessarily involve morality; in fact, I wouldn't be averse to claiming that it

does in our world as well, because ethics and morality dictate what is acceptable or not. In Akua's case, her political expertise is clouded by the Praesi doctrine she subscribes to, which accepts great damage or risk to one's own side in order to hurt the other guy. A doctrine which she is trying to get Cat to embrace. Her framing of the discussion in terms of pure "efficiency in hurting Procer" also helps her influence Cat towards climbing the Tower, because it steers the conversation away from both narrative and moral impacts, as well as the cost to Cat's own people.

Javvies

This is circular reasoning. You are assuming a particular slant and manipulation in a particular direction, which colors interpretation of what she says, and using that interpretation as evidence of her manipulation in a particular direction.

Or so I understand from what you just said.

Things don't work like that.

*Dainpdf*

It is not. It is collection of evidence through observation. One makes a prediction based on a theory, then observes the data. If the data fit the prediction, they are evidence (though not proof) of the theory.

*RanVor*

If politics are inseparably linked with morality and Akua is proficient in the former but not the latter, then her political expertise is no such thing and any advice she may offer on the matter is inherently flawed. Which begs a question: what is she for? If her experience on the field of politics is rendered useless by her lacking ethics, why is she still outside the box?

*Dainpdf*

Politics being intrinsically linked to politics does not mean that she is not skilled at them. It just means that whoever listens to her advice, or works with her, must take into account their differences in ethics, because while Akua's

stratagems are great, she may not be devising them for the same purpose as what you'd want, and her readings of people are necessarily slanted by her ethics, as are everyone else's.

*RanVor*

Assuming your first sentence is a typo, the direct consequence of what you're talking about is the existence of different "types" of politics, and the one Akua is skilled in is not the one Cat needs, and that makes her of little worth to the Woe. And though Cat wrongly believing in her usefulness is not unthinkable, how did Vivienne come to the same (wrong) conclusion is beyond me.

Unless, of course, Akua does, have some genuinely useful advice to offer. And this is where paranoia starts to get in the way.

*Dainpdf*

Akua *\*is\** useful. You just have to ponder what she says instead of trusting it blindly.

*RanVor*

Eh, despite the fact I repeatedly stated my opinion in no uncertain terms, you keep misinterpreting it and the discussion is going nowhere because of it, so I have to reiterate:

TRUSTING AKUA BLINDLY IS STUPID AND IRRESPONSIBLE AND I NEVER SAID OTHERWISE. DEAL WITH IT. ALSO, WE'RE NOT DISCUSSING THE ENTIRE ARGUMENT, JUST THE OPENING FRAGMENT UP TO THE WORDS "DREAD EMPIRE", SO STOP REDIRECTING THE DISCUSSION ONTO TOPICS I HAVE NO BUSINESS IN DISCUSSING WITH YOU. THANK YOU FOR YOUR (LACK OF) ATTENTION.

The problem is that you create a false dichotomy by framing my opinion on trusting Akua as in opposition to yours, while it's actually similar, just less extreme.

*Dainpdf*

Let's agree to disagree, then?

*RanVor*

Sure. It's going on for too long anyway.

*RanVor*

Also, we're straying from the topic again.

*Dainpdf*

I am sorry for reopening this chain, but I have been re-reading the Guide and stumbled upon one of the earliest chapters, where Cat attributed wavering in part to having been caught up in a redemption story – by a hero, even. That has made me reconsider some of this whole argument. It actually baffles me somewhat now, that Cat wouldn't think of that lesson when if anything she's more bound to stories than before, now.

*Someguy*

Akua is only correct about the realpolitik, it's her own goals, aspirations and methods in such a situation that is garbage. Cat should only use Akua for political analysis and seal her away otherwise.

*Dainpdf*

She's also an okay paramedic, if you don't mind the "patient has become a half undead abomination" bit.

*mavant*

She's aces in a scuffle.

[happyhavak](#)

Her attachment to the land the kingdom sits on baffles me. I would just round up all the callowans, move them to Acadia, bide my time whope training a massive army, then pop out a couple centuries later to fuck up everyone on my shitlist. Or their descendents. I'm flexible like that.

[happyhavak](#)

How the shit did while become whope?

*Yotz*

Tipo, brobbably. Ith appens.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, Cat struggles with the fact that her body is a construct, I doubt she really is willing to think like a functionally immortal that she is. Plus yeah, she doesn't know of centuries down the line would be a better opportunity. Plus people may not be as keen at leaving their homeland to live in literal

fairy tales. Besides, Cat is just not someone who will bail at her country to go hide in corner. Why should she?

Oh, and also, two centuries later she will be just an otherwordly evil invader. Not a good story.

*Dainpdf*

Depends on how it is set up. It could be a return to reclaim the lost land, if set up correctly (which would involve it being a last resort after being pushed from all sides... Much like right now). But it's too Dead King for her, I suspect.

*Someguy*

Unless there's an overlap for both King in the Mountain/ Sealed Evil in a Can that Bard swings her way, I don't think it's possible.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King\\_in\\_the\\_mountain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_in_the_mountain)

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SealedEvilInACan>

*Dainpdf*

Does it need to be the Bard? Cat has proven herself perfectly capable of setting up stories by herself. And well, Triumphant is basically a villain version of the King Under the Mountain

*Agent J*

Arcadia is not free real estate. Her treaty with the King and Queen of Arcadia only permits her to ferry her troops and supplies through. The moment they she starts setting up shop in Arcadia instead of merely passing through she breaks her treaty. Broken treaties with Fae royals is not going to end well, not to mention it opens up a new front in her many wars.

*ericwinter*

You know, a lot of people seem to be missing the exact point of what Ct meant by her last line. She's not just saying 'I don't believe you cause you're you.' She used Akua, because she's Akua, to remind herself of why she's fighting. She used her to remind herself that for all she's accomplished, for all the ancient monsters and older Named she's beaten, it's \*Not good enough\*. IT's exactly what she wanted to hear, because it would push her to do better. Because Cat has always broken the scales, proved the impossible, when she's the underdog. When people tell her you can't hope for more, \*She proves them wrong\*. And Akua, the woman she hates more than any other, telling her she's done more than enough? That's just gonna light a fire in her belly hot



enough to burn the entire continent to ashes if it gets her what she wants.

*lennymaster*

Akua did not say, stop trying to be perfect, she said stop beating yourself up for not being perfect, for that is impossible. You did a better job than anyone could have reasonably expected of you, that neither means good, though her efforts certainly can not be considered to be less than decent, nor bad.

Stop being such a whiny selfrighteous asshole, nobly talking as if your surrender would make things better.

Do not get me wrong, I love this story, but I liked Cat better when she raged against Goods hypocrisy instead of flagelating herself for consistently making the best out of a bad situation.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

It's a strange philosophical argument in this chapter. Do the successes that Cat has gained thus far show proof of concept? Or is she sailing down a deceptively smooth path. Does the constant need to be 'better' result in a more well stood Cat? Or does her constant strife and turning away valid paths result in her own trappings. Was she more successful when she was ignorant to how much the world turned to shit every time someone tried to do something? Is the illusion of succeeding in something better than actually doing it? What is a story, more than a structured narrative designed to place the protagonist in the spotlight, as if they have the only real agency in the world?

I think that Akua's analysis/manipulation applies for her earlier actions. The 'greater good' and 'lesser evil' work when she genuinely believed in what she was doing, and deceived herself from what was happening. However, one cannot stay innocent to the world forever. Cat stared into the abyss, and thus she learned. She set herself upon a new stage in this Book, where she is playing the role of someone who has to fight the world. She can't afford to be believing that she's just better than the other guys, she has to constantly prove to herself that she is better than the other guys.

There is a reason each of the Books are called Books. They have a different stage, a different story. The first Book is the story of Cat stepping onto the stage, and fighting for her place in it. The second Book is her first step of agency, her first time her ideals and goals are put to the test. The third Book is about her getting what she wanted, and realizing that it isn't enough. The fourth Book seems to be about the temptation of an easy road and the world trying to break her off her true path. It's possible that we have the Story itself trying to right itself by pushing Cat off of her protagonist villain path. For the story of the

protagonist villain to work, the Villain genuinely does have to be better than every Hero, and the Story is putting temptation in her way at every step.

It all falls back into her original goal of making Callow better than it was. Her Story is the Story of Restoring a Homeland. If she strays from the path, she falls. Akua's options results in Cat acting as Callow's 'Rightful Ruler' which she is not. Her Story is not to rule Callow, it is to restore it. If she tries to solidify her control, at any expenses to her people, she will fail, because she will then be the villain in someone's Story. Maybe not immediately, but years down the line, when Callow has suffered under her rule, and malcontent rises along with heroes. It will result in a similar situation to Callow prior to the start of Book 1.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

I really want to see Cat abdicate now. The more I think about it the more I think that this gambit isn't going to work. Either she's going to get rewarded for her diligence by Story intervention in her favor, or her dedication will be put to the test one more time. She's insisted that she'd abdicate if she was the worse option, and if she thinks she's the worse option, then she will. That much repetition implies foreshadowing.

That and I really want to see how that story goes.

*mavant*

That smells heroic.

I'd be delighted to see her abdicate in favor of a democratic election system.

Then the league might be on the side of callow after all. Or at least the hierarch.

*MetruX*

You do know democratic systems are some of the most flawed in the history of mankind, right? Of course the ones that came before are flawed, it's why we changed out of it through the generations. But our system right now is not any better, it's just a different flavour of bad, so I really don't think a democratic election system will do any good for her people.

To note, we only use democracy because no one has found a better alternative so far.

*RanVor*

Also, Catherine has expressed a disdain for democracy before. It's hard to blame her, really, considering the only democracy she might have possibly heard of is the Bellerophan one.

*mavant*

I didn't say I think democracy is flawless, I said I'd be delighted to see our Queen of Air and Darkness use it as a political weapon.

As for better alternatives IRL, Hanson's futarchy concept seems pretty intriguing.

*Xinci*

A Futarchy by would honestly be on the side of the above or some neutral power I think. The gods above regularly use their understanding of all possible timelines(story threads) and all actions to mould specific pieces to highly specific events. They would want to test this out somehow though they may have done this through the hard and early heroes in the style of levantines like the Valiant Champion instead of forming a test society. On calneria at least...

*RanVor*

The thought that came to my mind upon reading this comment was "there must be something seriously wrong with this story if people want the protagonist to give up".

*Allafterme*

Such blatant foreshadowing also has a way to hilariously subvert itself in Guideverse. We shall see which way it goes...

*lqueenofblades1*

I really have no idea where the story's going...and I love that. It isn't predictable; something lots of stories with an MC as OP as Cat suffer from. Sure she wants an army from the Drow; but will she succeed? And if she does, what's she going to do with it? Defend herself and the Kingdom obviously, but will she climb the Tower? Or burn it to the ground? Will she raze Salia or save it from annihilation? What is the fate of the Principate; will it endure or fracture? What's Black doing? What about the Tyrant and Hierarch? What's Intercessor up to? Where's the Grey Pilgrim? What's the Princes Graveyard? What's going to happen with the Dwarves? Will the Gnomes be relevant? What about the elves and the Chain of Hunger? How does the Dead King tie into all this? If Book 1 set up Cat as a character, Book 2 was First Llesse, Book 3 was Second Llesse and Book 4 seems to be the Tenth Crusade;

what's Book 5? Will we ever get a peek across the Tyrian Sea? Is Malicia losing the plot? What do the Gods think of all this? Is Saint of Swords or Ranger a bigger cunt? Will Cat get a happy ending; or will it end all fucked up like Worm? Will Triumphant return? What's going on with Warlock and Hierophant? Are the goblins really going to rebel? Will Cat make the Drow *more* like Black made the Orcs more? That is, will she become to the Drow as Black is to the Orcs? Will Akua ever redeem herself?

*So many questions!!!!* I really hope EE hasn't written himself into a corner.

*lennymaster*

That is one of the things I so deeply enjoy about this story. After reading over a thousand fantasy and scify books it becomes hard to find any kind of story that can genuinely surprise me. After a certain point even the most shocking betrayal and twistiest plot twist tend to be long anticipated.

[TeK](#)

Well there were some nice "Take that!"'s for many comments. But I think that Cat has a valid reason to think she wasn't good enough – Threefold Crossing. While the realities of her visions are arguable, she knows enough of Calamities to know that they're not invincible. It just as well may've happen as follows: Cat rejects the knife, Swordsman kills every calimant on Squire, Heiress becomes Squire and everything goes downhill from here. Or any other quasilausible case that Aqua seems to be so fond of making.

Now, admittedly, I am a little to eager on selfdeprecation, so my point is not objective at all.

Also, am I correct in assuming that sigil is basically Mighty and some redshorted mooks? Will Cat feed all the spare night in here to Ivah too? Will he change his name since he's no longer cattle? I mean he already calls her Queen, she clearly need to overpower him into another treacherous lieutenant, Larat is lonely.

*mavant*

He could be Larat's treacherous lieutenant. Let them keep each other occupied.

*RanVor*

Treacherous sergeant?

*Miles*

I wonder if it's going to be an issue that kondrog heard all that

*RanVor*

It didn't. It was unconscious.

[TeK](#)

By the way. Not to notpick, but IT has a cock.

*RanVor*

The Drow don't care. If Ivah says it's an it, it's an it.

*Agent J*

I thought only cattle were undeserving of a gendered pronoun.

*WuseMajor*

Mighty are too Mighty for your puny pronouns.

<https://www.schlockmercenary.com/2008-07-24>

*Silverking*

This debate reminds me of the quote, "The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; and the pessimist fears this is true." Cat keeps imagining that things could have been done better, while Akua claims that no, Cat is the best thing that could have ever happened to Callow, by virtue of the fact no other option could have actually worked. If the Heavens were capable of dropping down the Perfect Restorer of Callow, they would have done it ages ago. Instead, the Callow-born Heroes got smothered in their cribs by the Calamities, and the foreign-born heroes apparently never let "the liberation of the provinces formerly known as Callow" get to the top of their to-do list (as Cat herself called out with her first conversation with the Grey Pilgrim). And, to paraphrase King Edward, no Heroic quality is a better match for a Queen of Callow than Cat's willingness to kick Callow's enemies in the teeth with all her might.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Well, according to the Book 3 ending, where the 3 alternate lives of Cat play out, she was that 'perfect savior'. She was probably intended by the Heavens to be the better part of the Swordsman's band, but something happens and the Guide is born out of it. Maybe it's just Cat's innate nature of violent independence that drove her from her heavenly path.

The lack of observation of something does not imply the lack of it's existence.

*Allafterme*

If memory serves right and Akua's shenanigans can be trusted, by the time Cat would become White Knight Callow would be reduced to land of swords, pikes & spears, remnants of a people battling out over carrion of a nation. Things may be grim but at least they are not THAT bad...

*MetruX*

It's what Black first saw in her. When he heard the information on her, she seemed like a Hero ready to be born. When he met her, he clearly said "I was wrong, you couldn't ever be a Hero". The thing is, in the Guideverse, Heroes strive for the status quo, while Villains strive for change, in the most usual way breaking what they don't like. Just think about it, there was no Hero shown so far that didn't strive to keep things or bring them back. Cat is not that kind of person, and as such, she would need to be different to be able to become a Heroine.

*Snowfire1224*

Your comment of the best of all possible world reminds me of the book *Candide*, that book talks a lot about both complete optimism and pessimism and reject both. If I remember correctly it was written to reject someone else's optimistic philosophy that was being used to justify a lot of horrible things

*Dainpdf*

I find it interesting that this wasn't just what Cat wanted to hear. It was what we, readers, wanted to hear – and what we wanted her to hear.

If we forget that this is Akua Sahelian. She talks a good game, but she ignores quite a few points, some on purpose, some out of ignorance. First, the Bard made a play during this time (and outplayed Black at least once in the process). With Cat on Team Good (or whoever rose in her place), it might be that the Calamities fell. The Bard is that powerful a player.

She speaks of the whims of the fae, but really those are hard to predict in the best of days – as Cat proved.

In any case, her main argument rests on perfection being unachievable, and this recognition of faults being meaningless. Which is blatantly stupid when put that way, as is the auxiliary "but your opponents on the side of Good also have their faults". The first one is just fallacious reasoning – she sneakily assumes the only point of improvement is reaching perfection. The second is her own brand of myopia: she only understands principles as relative to others.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Not going to lie, this is really going to bite her in the ass.

When you don't listen to the one wise person in your retinue... well, yeah.

Starting to think that Vivi is giving her biased opinions on what good advice is and what bad advice is.

*Metrux*

Excuse me, the only wise one? I think you have something very wrongly misunderstood. When it comes to mind, I like to cleanly separate some parts: smarts, knowledge, creativity and wisdom. Why they are separate? Why, of course because they are DIFFERENT. Smarts is your logic, your ability to think in logical paths and come to logical conclusions. Knowledge is anything that you learn, and has no value in itself, it has value when used by the other three skills. Creativity comes not only in the artistic sense, but also in your ability to think outside the box, in the way you can invent new ways and paths to follow. Wisdom is your inherent skill to know when to employ each skill, or follow your heart/instincts. A smart person knows that tomato is a fruit. A wise one knows not to use tomatoes in a fruit salad.

If you take those skills and try to compare between all the members of the woe, you may find that Akua is great at the first three, but is the worse in the lot at wisdom. Not kidding, she loses to Archer and Masego in this department, they still know when it's worth it to just let it go for others, or when to just enjoy the little things. She doesn't. Akua is all about doing whatever is necessary for her objectives all of the time, which is commendable, but really not wise.

*lennymaster*

I generally agree with Akua in this chapter, mostly because Cat's self flagellation has been going on my nerves this entire book, and while I would not consider her to be as lacking as Metrux accuses Akua of, but to call her "the one wise person in your retinue" is just strange.

Also, that implies Akua harbours good intentions for Cat. Which is just plain wrong.

*RoflCat*

A part of me wonder.

Is Akua doing this for her own purpose, or because she's part of Winter and she's being affected by Catherine (whose soul is weaved into Winter, affecting all that drawn on it) to have a self-reflection moment?

Just instead of talking to yourself, it's your nemesis, the one person closest yet furthest away from you, speak it out.

*mavant*

Plot twist: this Akua is a construct, the real one never got out of the cloak. The villainy was inside you all along!

*werafdsaew*

I thought it's pretty simple. If Cat ever abdicates, then she would have no further use for Akua, and we know what will happen to her then, so she is simply trying to prevent that future from ever happening.

*RanVor*

Akua or not Akua, Cat was in dire need of a pep talk. I know from personal experience that the lack of faith in one's own abilities is an anathema to ever getting anything done.

*unLuckerII*

Akua the Peptalker, that would be the role for her...

*NotQuiteHere*

It's as if Erratic needed someone to give Cat a talking too...but all the characters who should do it were away...not that it doesn't fit or that it seemed unplanned (very well done in that respect), I just spent the entire chapter going is Akua really offering emotional support?!

Thx 4 the chapter!

*Coincidence*

Duck autocorrect!

*werafdsaew*

Foreshadowing for when she becomes Dread Empress!

*Metrux*

You wish xD

[shimizubad](#)

Don't we all?

*Agent J*



Not really. Cat's slipped the leash of the Hellgods and I can't think of anything more binding to them than the name of Dread Empress.

*superkeaton*

Thank you, Akua, for telling Cat to stop being a self-pitying prick. And damn you, Cat, for not listening to her. It's the same shit that Hakram's been saying, that Juniper's been saying. Damnably frustrating.

*werafdsaew*

Wait a minute, why is having lots of farm land a bad thing?

*Unmaker*

It's the 'little but' part of the statement. No iron mines, coal mines, or forges to make weapons. No war colleges or wizard colleges to make human weapons. No other significant ways to make money to hire mercenaries or train defenders. So they've got what every army wants (supplies) but no good way to defend it. At least, that's my take on it.

*Unmaker*

The Secret of Many Lives is almost up there with Named power. And Kodrog is only one of many Mighty, and apparently not the mightiest. And each and every power of Night is somehow connected to Sve. Can she draw them all in? Or use them, even occasionally? That could potentially make her the most powerful single being around.

*gloomyMoron*

"Laure, whose walls had been old and half-abandoned yet still holding sorcery powerful enough to give pause to the full might of the Summer Court."

Wrong city. Laure is Callowan's capital, correct? Liese, or however it was spelled, was what was meant. The city Akua soul-nuked. The Summer Fae never reached Northern Callowan.

[erraticerrata](#)

Yup, typo from me. Can't believe I missed that.

*the verbiage ecstatic*

Great, the arguments I made two chapters ago in the comments about how crazy this whole expedition is are now coming out of Akua's mouth 😊 I guess sociopathic villain mastermind is not too bad as a fellow traveler?

*Exec*

The way Ubua describes Callow while she's freezing the wounds of a broken, half-dead warrior inches away from the grave that has escaped death from vastly superior opponents multiple times... all because Cat doesn't have a better healer to offer...

It's like poetry, they rhyme!

*burguulkodar*

Lots of hollow discussion here, but I concur with Akua. I never liked Cat's disgust of herself. Seems very psychotic and obsession-based, to me. In a different way from Masego, but it has always been there.

Cat herself has noticed this trait, when she pointed out in this book that it was no coincidence she murdered her own swamp self in the Named Dream, and disliked her condescending self.

Cat is in perpetual war with herself, something that is not really something pleasant to be and is prone to mind disfunction (which, frankly, she has ever been). Her impulsiveness and outright violence as a way to solve things is the tip of the iceberg for a deep personality problems.

*Jeffery Wells*

I love this novel, and the world that has been built up here.

It's pretty clear to me that what takes the name of Good is not inherently good, and what takes the name of Evil is not inherently evil. The only difference between them is the strategy. One is straightforward about doing evil, the other hides it behind lies of goodness. I prefer to think of them only as Above and Below, rather than Good or Evil.

The Grey Pilgrim is the clearest example of this. He speaks platitudes of goodness and light, and even fulfills such platitudes of you are on his side, seeking to guide people to be better than they are. He preaches righteousness and goodness wherever he goes.

Yet he is perfectly willing to consign tens of thousands of innocent people to death to prop up a warlord against a queen who he knows with certainty has done everything in her power to prevent the deaths of innocents. He even used this against her to steer fate like a weapon to kill her.

All for literally no reason other than that her Name belongs to the wrong team. If that is not the embodiment of evil I don't know what is.

Also the various priesthoods of Calernia declaring the least evil villain in the history of villains to be Arch-villain, while simultaneously declaring all priests of Callow heretics to justify it. If that's not pure evil I don't know what is.

That is the evil of Above – they pretend to be good to do their evil, while the evil of Below doesn't pretend.

*Figurally*

Yet she isn't wrong.

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## Chapter 56: Knock Knock

*"Best not to think too deeply, lest the dwarves take the thought."*

– Mercantian saying

The Mighty Kodrog had been granted a blanket to wear as a makeshift skirt, because I was a merciful captor, but that failed to detract from the fact that it still looked mostly dead. It'd tried to get up, after waking, but the old Foundling response of unpleasant-smile-and-knife-to-the-throat had put an end to that real quick. Ivah had joined us without even need for summons, and spent the last few moments conversing in Crepuscular with our latest addition.

"It is done, Queen," the drow said.

Informing it that 'Lately Queen' wasn't actually my title had ended the misunderstanding, though not soon enough Indrani hadn't made it part of her vocabulary.

"It's willing to share all it knows?" I asked, not hiding my surprise.

"That was not what we conversed of," Ivah said, silver eyes blinking. "It is now agreed upon that the Mighty Kodrog is no longer so. It is named Bogdan, ispe of the lowest rung. The Kodrog are no more."

Wait, had they really been talking about this the entire time? Gods, they quibbled about this stuff even more than Praesi did.

"Ispe," I repeated slowly. "Is that higher or lower than rylleh?"

"Lowest of the Mighty, Queen," Ivah said.

Well, the silver in its eyes was full but it was admittedly quite dull. I'd have to remember the terms, or see about getting a more comprehensive list at some point. Feeling my way up the Everdark's ladder one corpse at a time might take a while.

"Fine," I said. "Then ask our friend Bogdan about the dwarves. What does he know?"

Ivah spoke to the other in that strange, fluid tongue of theirs. It was hard to read tone in Crepuscular – I suspected even loud imprecations would just roll off the tongue like honey – but Bogdan's body language was less difficult to get a feel of. It looked wary, but also less than worried. Was it under the impression it could kill us all and escape if it wanted to? My knife was no longer at its throat, but I could bury a few inches of steel into its throat before it blinked. I'd gotten used to my reputation helping things along, I mused, but it didn't mean much down here.

"Bogdan requires the clothes of another and its pick of weapons before entertaining such exchange," Ivah finally translated.

I eyed the Mighty Bogdan skeptically. It was kind of impressive it could look this self-assured a full step into the grave, but my patience had limits. I flicked a glance at Ivah.

"Ask it if it enjoys having all ten fingers," I calmly said. "And remind it doesn't need any of those to answer my questions."

The drow slowly nodded, and passed that along. Bogdan's lips quirked at an angle impossible in a human, as if its cheeks muscles were entirely different from ours. It replied softly.

"Bogdan says all you attempt to inflict to them will be returned tenfold," Ivah said.

"Will it now?" I mused.

It was quicker than I'd thought. Bogdan had seen me set my knife back into Pickler's clever little contraption, and it reached directly for the hidden sheath. It was not quite quick enough I didn't catch its wrist, though, and it was all downhill from there. There was no need for a brawl: I just *squeezed* and the bones broke. The drow paled in pain and tried to roll away, but I put a thumb on its collarbone and pressed. The sickening crack that followed was almost drowned out by its scream. Almost. I dropped it back onto the ground.

"Ivah," I mildly said. "Inform Bogdan that if I actually exerted myself, I could punch through its ribcage and spine without so much as scuffing my knuckles. Once that's been established, tell our friend it has ten heartbeats to give me a reason not to do that. I'll begin the count the moment you're done translating."

My guide flinched and hurriedly spoke.

"One," I said.

Bogdan, eyes clouded with pain, looked at Ivah and then back to me.

"Two," I said.

Ah, fear. There was a familiar scent. The drow spoke urgently at my translator.

"Bogdan is now willing to speak," Ivah drily said.

"Its wisdom truly has no bounds," I replied just as drily. "Ask about the dwarves."

Back and forth they went, my guide going through what I presumed from the length to be a comprehensive gauntlet of questions. Ivah suddenly looked surprised, then spat to the side. It turned a trouble look towards me.

"None who were Kodrog remain," it said. "The nerezim were many, and armed for war. They moved with slaughter for their purpose."

"How many?" I asked. "Hundreds, thousands?"

"Bogdan knows not the whole number," Ivah said. "Yet more than five thousand struck those who were Kodrog, and before that ruin came there was word that the Solya and the Mogrel were struck."

My eyes narrowed.

"In sequence?" I said. "Or simultaneously?"

Ivah questioned the prisoner, receiving one word for answer.

"Same time," it replied.

"Those two names you said were sigils as well?" I said.

"That is so," Ivah agreed.

"Stronger or weaker than the Kodrog?"

My translator shrugged.

"Not much weaker or stronger," it said. "The outer rings do not often spawn greatness."

Assuming the dwarves had used the same amount of soldiers for each sigil, and that the force that'd hit the Kodrog was not the same as either of the other two, that meant around fifteen thousand dwarves. *Shit*. Archer was right, that didn't sound like

an expedition gone through the Gloom to empty a few mine shafts of precious metals and gems.

"Does it know why the dwarves came?" I frowned.

"The nerezim do not give reason," Ivah delicately said. "Snake does not reason with mouse."

I sighed. Yeah, a monologue neatly informing me of why there was a dwarven army marching into the depths of the Everdark had been a little too much to hope for. Still, they could have dropped a smug yet cryptic hint at least. Was that really too much to ask for?

"Does it know where they were headed, at least?" I said.

Back and forth, one that lasted longer than I'd anticipated. Bogdan might actually be of some real use then.

"Before Mighty Kodrog fled," Ivah said, "it found that the nerezim were headed north. And while in flight, found tracks of others that did the same."

"Towards the cities," I said. "And the inner ring."

My translator nodded silently. I drummed my fingers against my thigh. It could be what they were after was in a ruined city, or even the inner ring, and that was why they'd come with such a large host. The opposition would be stronger and entrenched, further in. But what could possibly be worth enough that sending at least fifteen thousand soldiers into this mess became warranted? That was too large an army for simple wealth, even if there was an old treasury buried somewhere. Artefacts, maybe? It was an open secret that dwarves stole those, let a few decades pass and traded them back to the surface as 'wonders of dwarven blacksmithing' after having slapped a fresh coat of paint over them. Still, fielding an army this side wasn't cheap. I knew that *painfully* well. It would have to be a massively useful or precious artefact. Not impossible, and it might even be that the pit of snakes that was drow society had regressed enough it no longer knew how to use said artefact – which would make it even more tempting a prize.

That was worrying. Anything worth sending an army for would be dangerous even in the hands of a bumbler, and the dwarves were hardly that.

"Ivah," I said. "Do you know of anything important close to the north? Old ruins, or a holy site?"

"The closest city is Great Lotow," the drow replied. "Beyond it the Hallian ways lead to Great Strycht and Great Mokosh."

That gave me nothing. I knew one of those names, from – wait, *Mokosh*?

“Great Mokosh,” I said quietly. “That’s where you got your feathers, isn’t it?”

“That is so,” Ivah said.

“And you mentioned the sigil there was granted by the Sve of Night itself,” I slowly continued. “Is there a passage between it and Holy Tvarigu?”

“It is rumoured,” my guide admitted. “Yet none but the Sukkla know for certain, and they speak not of this.”

I might be going too deep with this one, since I doubted even fifteen thousand dwarves would be able to get to the Priestess of Night, much less killer. But there was a simpler explanation. Ivah had implied, when we’d spoken of it, that dwarven incursions were infrequent and tended to keep to the outskirts. Odds were that the method to pierce through the Gloom either required time to take place, or a non-negligible amount of resources to implement. Maybe it was wasn’t an artefact they were after. How much easier for the Kingdom Under would it be to take regular bites out of the drow, if they had enough feathers to equip an entire army?

“How many feathers are there in Mokosh?” I said. “Is the number a secret?”

Ivah shook its head.

“It is holy duty, known to all,” it said. “At all times a thousand coats must exist, every one taken to the Burning Lands replaced. Never more or less.”

I frowned. Well, a thousand wasn’t nothing. And they could use them repeatedly, or try to make artefacts of their own that replicated the effect. But my theory had taken a blow there, no two ways about it. It could be a long-term investment, I told myself. Or I could be missing key information.

“Does our friend Bogdan have anything else to say?” I finally asked.

Ivah asked, and there was a quick exchange. My translator came out of it looking conflicted, and smelling slightly of fear.

“Mighty Bogdan offers to serve as your guide in my place, after harvesting the Night from my corpse,” it said.

“How kind of it,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “There’s no need to be afraid, Ivah. We made a deal and I intend to uphold it.”

"Your kindness is great," it replied, bowing its head.

The fear was not wafting as strong, though it'd not disappeared entirely. Drow had trust issues that would make even Praesi raise an eyebrow. I rose to my feet, dusted off my shoulders. I'd come out of this with more questions than answers, but at least there'd been measurable progress. Hopefully Indrani would find something shedding light on this mess, though I wouldn't count on it. It seemed likely we'd have to head deeper into the tunnels blind to the designs at play. The dwarves would likely clear the way, which was a mixed blessing. It'd limit the fighting, but I couldn't ally with corpses. It was starting to look like my best bet was to head to Tvarigu, where the Priestess of Night would be waiting. If I could have stolen an army's worth of drow without ever shaking hands with that particular devil I would have preferred it, but choices were running even thinner than usual.

"Inform Bogdan it is to behave itself," I told Ivah. "If not, I have no qualms in doling out discipline as harsh as the situation requires. Diabolist will have a look at the broken bones, but I'm not inclined to offer too much comfort after that little interlude of ours."

The drow bowed once more, and I left it to speak with the creature that had once been Mighty Kodrog. Gods, so many names and changing too quickly. That was going to be a pain to commit to memory. I'd have to go through Archer's stuff and see if she had parchment and ink, it might help to make a bloody list. I had the time to kill anyway, we weren't going anywhere until she returned. Two hour later, she did. To my surprise, she emerged from the same passage that had first led us into this cavern.

The surprises that followed were a lot less pleasant.

—

Archer looked exhausted, more than I ever remembered seeing her. She claimed a waterskin after dropping down on a vaguely flat stone, another surprising turn. She'd yet to run out of booze, after all. Scarf hanging loosely around her neck, she dropped her sweat-soaked leather coat to the side and fanned herself vigorously enough she could only be making the heat worse.

"Had to run," she got out.

I blinked in surprise. The tunnels had so far varied between cool and outright cold. It'd take quite a bit to get her this sweaty.

"How long have you been running?" I said.

"At least an hour," she grunted. "And we'll need to get a move on too."



"You found something," Akua said.

"There's that famous Sahelian cleverness," Indrani replied. "Sharp eyes you got there. Or, well, soul bits that look like them. I'm still unclear on the fundamentals of what you are, Wasteland Waste."

"Even Masego was pretty vague," I said. "You sound like an hourglass just got flipped, Indrani. What did you find?"

She ceased drinking just long enough to pour the liquid all over head sweat-drenched hair, sighing in pleasure.

"Right," she said, wiping her eyes clear, "So I've got good news and bad news."

"Let's start with the good news, for once," I tried.

"The good news is that there's only one bit of bad news," she replied with a winning smile.

Akua closed her eyes, looking physically pained.

"I cannot believe I fell for that," she muttered.

"What's the bad news, Archer?" I sighed.

"I went looking for the dwarves ahead," she said. "Didn't run into them, but I found clearer tracks in one of the taverns. It's not hundreds, Cat, I'd say they're numbering between four and five thousand."

"Our friend from earlier said as much," I told her. "And mentioned that another two sigils got hit around the same time. I'm considering them a conservative fifteen, at the moment."

"Shit," Indrani said, scattering her wet hair. "Yeah, that makes sense considering what I found. So the thing was, I came across a tunnel going back towards the Gloom and it had a fresh trail on it. Oil spill, still wet."

"So you followed it," I said. "You came back same way we came in."

"That wasn't where the tunnel led," she grimly replied. "Went straight through another slaughterhouse, only this one had been cleaned up. Neat piles of dead to the sides. Couldn't figure out why until I went back all the way to the Gloom."

"More are crossing," Diabolist quietly said.

"You might say that," Indrani grunted. "Interesting aside, if you were wondering how they go through the Gloom? Lamps, ladies. They're going through in massive caravans carrying hundreds of

them, like a giant snake of light. Pretty sure that's where the oil was from, someone must have spilled some."

"You got close," I said, and it wasn't a question.

"Stone's throw," she admitted. "Legged it when they started getting suspicious, but then I came across another crossing."

My fingers clenched.

"How many?"

"I found six," Indrani said. "But that was maybe an hour's length of distance, walking quiet. There could be hundreds for all I know."

"You think this is an invasion," I said.

"I think the nice little corpse piles we keep finding were the vanguard's work," she said. "And now that a foothold's been secured, the real army is coming through."

"And that army's marching towards us as we speak," I finished.

Well... fuck seemed to mild a curse, for once. Assuming all three forces I was also assuming were five thousand each had crossed on a single caravan each, just the six Indrani had come across would mean thirty thousand.

"The lamps you saw," Akua said. "What did the light look like?"

"Not like a candle," Indrani said. "Sunlight, maybe? Whatever it was it felt warm as the literal Hells and I would know – I've visited a few on training trips. Didn't work every time, though. One of the lamps further in went dark just before I left a place, and what must have been thousands in the distance just... vanished. The dwarves weren't happy about that."

I wished I could say I was surprised Ranger had taken her pupils into the Hells just to blood them, but it would have been a lie. She'd done it with Arcadia, after all, and it was about as dangerous a place even when invited.

"A detail of great importance, this," Diabolist said. "The Gloom seems to have properties related to the night, and so therefore the classical element of the sun would be a natural foe."

Wait, the godsdamned sun was a – yeah, next time I saw Masego I was definitely asking him for a list.

"This will be the result of an enchantment," Akua continued. "And if it is meant to last an entire crossing uninterrupted, the materials will have to be symbolically linked to the concept. Brightwood would serve well, but deteriorate too quickly. And is

exceedingly rare besides. I would hazard a guess that the frame of the lamps was gold?

"Wow, Akua," Indrani drawled. "You sure did answer that question no one was asking like a champion. You truly are the bag of uselessness that keeps on giving."

"No," I said. "This is actually important, Archer. I know the dwarves are the richest nation on Calernia, but even they have limits on how much gold they can just whip out. You said the other material would deteriorate, Akua. The gold too?"

"More slowly," she replied. "A few days, if the enchantments were laid very carefully. It should allow for a passage through the Gloom."

"But not a return trip," I said.

"Not unless the fuel itself is inherently magical-"

"Which would make this the single most expensive invasion in the history of Calernia," I noted. "Though it might very well be regardless."

"-and that would add large costs to an already costly device," Akua finished, sounding mildly irritated by my interruption. "The lamps would be extremely delicate work, the slightest mistake or corruption making them useless. They would need to be constructed in a specialized workshop, preferably in a magically neutral environment. Neither repairs nor making of fresh replacements should be possible on this side of the Gloom. "

"Still not seeing why this matters, even if you're right," Indrani said, ruffling her scarf.

"Because even lesser artefacts don't grow on trees," I said. "Particularly if they need *gold* to work. They have to have a limited quantity of those to draw from, and you said one of the tunnels went dark anyway. There's risks of failure too. If it was that easy to mount an invasion they would have done it ages ago. This is a massive investment of resources, probably prepared over decades. They'll have had to make a choice."

"A larger number of troops to get across," Akua said, completing my thought, "or setting aside lamps to maintain supply lines."

"Keeping the lines open means leaving soldiers behind to guard them," I said. "Who need rations too, and the broader the area to guard the more mouths there'd be to feed and the more soldiers taken from the main force. And let's assume the crossing fails... one time out of ten, which seems on the low end to me. The price escalates the longer they keep at this. It'd be more practical so

send one large army through with their own supplies, then let them live off the land until they got what they came for.”

“They sent the vanguard to clear the way, so the larger army can advance without wasting time on petty skirmishes,” Indrani guessed.

“The sigils of the region were exterminated quite thoroughly,” Diabolist noted. “Suppressing word of the invasion was likely an objective as well. It would allow the dwarves to penetrate deep into the Everdark before organized resistance is mounted.”

“This is going to be a shitshow,” Archer grimaced. “Living off the land *here*? There’s barely enough for the drow to live on. Even if they manage to keep the ranks fed while they fight out there, they’ll have to march back through a place they stripped clean then risk the crossings again.”

“Did you see any of them carrying unlit lamps across?” Akua softly asked.

Indrani’s eyes narrowed. She shook her head. My fingers clenched.

“They don’t intend to leave,” I said, voicing everyone’s thoughts. “The army’s here to destroy whatever causes the Gloom, and then the rest of the Kingdom Under comes through to take the Everdark.”

And there we were, between the vanguard and the army. Well, I’d come here expecting a magical journey and I had certainly gotten one.

Curses were magic too.

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[DroughtBringer](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

I’m lateish... no one else comment!

[Javvies](#)

This isn’t good.

It also bodes poorly for Cat’s hopes to recruit the Drow to fight for her.

I’m also forced to wonder about the timing of this.

*Someguy*

Actually, this bodes well for Cat. This is an expensive invasion force with limited supplies. If she does this right and fuck up the Dwarven lamps without being found or recognised, the Dwarven invasion will collapse on itself.

*GuidingMoonlight*

Dwarves will find out anyway, because Cat is not and never was stealthy. They almost noticed Archer. Drow are not worth the risk of pissing off OP neutrals. And they are committed to genocide of drow.

Why is she still there? Oh right because now dwarven army blocks her way out.

*Dainpdf*

"Neutral" is debatable. I give 1:3 odds that as soon as the dwarves are done here they spill out onto the surface to create mining outposts.

Unless, of course, the sunlight harms them somehow.

*Rook*

They're neutral in the sense of being equally murderous toward everyone

Like elven neutrality. Except superior, because it's dwarven.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

All crafts dwarfship is of the highest quality.

*Decius*

It menaces with spikes of cat leather.

*stevenneiman*

Elves aren't neutral, they're Good. Ironically they're so extremist in being Good that it almost looks like neutrality though. Their thing is that they rarely venture out of the Golden Bloom and kill anyone who ventures in except for heroes and other elves. Dwarves I'm pretty sure are neutral, in the sense of being equally willing to screw over anyone to turn a profit. The mystery here is just why they think that invading the drow is a worthwhile venture.

*Hardric62*

Forget the invasion, the Dwarves as a whole will be severely crippled if things go belly up here, considering how much

resources this invasion must need. The smug asstards could be looking at a lot of trouble and the beginning of the end if that happens...

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Drow are ready to become refugees in need of a new home.

*therealgridlock*

Even better than that... Suppose she lets the dwarves "succeed", killing the sve herself, taking her domain power, taking the remaining drow to the surface, and applying her now amped up domain powers to her whole kingdom.

Shes Queen of moonless nights, but why not queen of the Kingdom of Moonless Night?

She already has a goblin settlement, on speaking terms with the dead king, the last piece of Winter, if she adopts the drow into her fold, she could scale the tower and combine both kingdoms under the rule of a new kingdom, breaking the cycle forever and spawning an immortal ruler on par with the dead king.

Heck, add in the deoraithe power and adopt the priesthood formally into the kingdom and you would have the most widely diversified power set on the continent!

And promptly get a Red Letter, prompting her to have to get every other country on the continent to ally with her, perhaps even the dwarves, to fight off the steampunk or Technopunk overlords of the world, eventually combining every form of power under one banner, and possibly settling the grand debate of Good and Evil, since she will have masego rip apart both the universe and Arcadia and whatever else the gods have for assholes and make a new world with blackjack and hookers.

*Dylan Tullos*

Javvies:

There's nothing in the drow lands that could justify this kind of expense. Raids are one thing; this kind of invasion is simply impractical, given the vast costs of crossing the Gloom.

My personal theory is that this is Bard's move. I just don't see why she would have prepared a move like this decades in advance, especially since the drow are a failed Evil state that never seriously threatens the surface.

*JJR*

Nothing material sure.

But there is a matter of Dwarven pride. All land untouched by the sun is Dwarven by natural right. If there are some, Goblins, Drow, who think otherwise; they need to be shown the mortality of their bodies.

That being said, I wonder what the chances are that the Dwarves end up digging too deep and releasing some hidden fun stuff.

*Dylan Tullos*

JJR:

I like your description of Dwarven Manifest Destiny.

However, the dwarves drove the goblins to the surface thousands of years ago. Even if the ancient drow were too powerful and dangerous for the dwarves, their civilization has been in ruins for millennia; this kind of invasion has been possible for a very long time.

Why wait and do it now?

*Dainpdf*

Maybe it has been prohibitively expensive up until now, or the political situation back home was just right... But let's be real: it's the narrative and/or the Bard fucking with Cat.

*Flameburst*

Change in leadership most likely. Didn't someone hint at a dwarven civil war in an interlude? My guess would be the dwarves made an uneasy peace with the fact they couldn't get to the drow for millennia until either a militant faction gained power or a war was needed to distract from civil unrest

*Ezreon*

Black said that dwarves are, I quote, "in another expansion phase" to Scribe in one of the interludes when Captain killing scheme was going on. This invasion was foreshadowed!

*Metalshop*

Here's my theory: Population. The dwarves aren't invading for anything in the Everdark. They're invading /for/ the Everdark and they're doing it because they've run out of space at home.

*bakkasama*

My theory is that some random drow killed some dwarves a few decades ago and harvested Night from the corpse. Given that Night also passes knowledge, dwarves are exterminating them so there is no other nation with their tech.

*stevenneiman*

I don't think the dwarves are technologically advanced enough to worry about that. From the sounds of it they had some cool tricks up their sleeves and superior smithing techniques they don't share, but nothing that would be worth *\*this\** kind of endeavor to suppress.

Certainly not when they could just tell the city housing the knowledge-bearer that if it isn't turned over alive and restrained they'll wipe out the city.

Also, I don't think drow can harvest Night from things that don't have it, it's just that Night seems to grow when anything is killed by its servants.

You might be getting the dwarves confused with the gnomes, which sound like they have outright sci-fi tech and are responsible for the permanent dark ages in Calernia. The exact relationship of superpowers is unclear, but I'm pretty sure even the dwarves don't want to get a red letter, which starkly limits their technological options.

*Sylwoos*

How do you run out of space when you already possess the underground of a whole continent and can create multilayered living space?

*bowekin*

Maybe the dwarves are running out of living space.

*Rook*

There's no way this is just out of pride. It's too large an investment and too high a risk. Why would dwarves risk thousands of precious dwarven lives, decades of work, and a metric ton of gold to exterminate the equivalent of silver rats scuttling around in magic rat tunnels?

There is something extremely dangerous or extremely valuable at the heart of the Everdark. Or both. I'd bet bags of gems to Proceran promises on it.

Not to mention, the practical logic barely matters. It's an ancient mysterious realm containing an ancient mysterious



race living in an ancient mysterious ruin of an ancient mysterious civilization. The narrative chances of a ridiculous secret not being hidden in there are as high as the chances of a hundred-step scheme going exactly as planned.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

I think they are due a dose of !fun!, yes.

Sure, the Drow aren't fantastic neighbours to have, but outright *genocide* on the principle that everything is yours and they're stealing some of it by existing? That's deplorable.

*Dylan Tullos*

Euodiachloris:

Dwarves are undeniably evil racists who view every other species on Calernia as inferiors to be exploited or vermin to be exterminated. Remember, only dwarves can own property, because only dwarves are people!

However, their power means that all of the people who despise them (which is everyone) are very careful not to do anything to offend them. If Cat antagonizes the dwarves, they could destroy every city in Callow. Any solution she finds has to avoid direct conflict with the most powerful nation on the continent.

Wait, did I just say that Cat has to find a solution that avoids direct conflict? When has that ever worked for her?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Didn't say it had to be Cat providing the !fun!...

*DHDragon*

More to the point. We already know that Dwarves don't believe non-Dwarves are even people. This isn't an invasion to them. This is a spring-cleaning long overdue.

*Sol Invictus*

Dwarves dig until they dig too deep. Could they be running from something?

*Raved Thrad*

"We dug too deep, and we breached hell itself. We dug so deep we released Triumphant."

*NerfContessa*

Nahh, hell is not down, it's to the left.

*Cicero*

Actually this is an opportunity to recruit Drow.

The pitch writes itself:

"Hey, the merciless Dwarves have decided to exterminate you. You have no chance to survive against them. Swear yourselves to me though, and I will help you escape and give you a new place to live."

*SilentWatcher*

Or cat earns their loyalty by crushing them, or disabling their lamps and gets the rest of the drow kingdom. how does this saying go again? the oriole stalking the cicada doesnt see the mantis?

*Unholier than thou*

That would make the dwarves her enemy, and because of some story shenanigans the elves would also take part. In the end, becoming the new battle of the five armies.

[erraticerrata](#)

The timing is not a coincidence, no.

*Decius*

Because nothing is ever a coincidence.

*stevenneiman*

I don't see why. She's in the market for expendable troops and laborers, and they're very soon going to be in the market for a place they can stay where it's possible that some of them might survive.

*pieter999*

Idunno, those Drow are gonna need a new home if she manages to draw them out. She can't fight the dwarves, the Drow certainly can't fight them off? So why not let them have a bunch of ruins in dank caves and take the army of murderous night-mages with you?

*danh3107*

Far over the Misty Mountains cold  
To dungeons deep and caverns old  
We must away, ere break of day  
To seek our pale enchanted gold.

The dwarves of yore made mighty spells,  
While hammers fell like ringing bells  
In places deep, where dark things sleep,  
In hollow halls beneath the fells.

*Yotz*

Hammers will fall on Elves under the sky,  
Crossbows will scythe Drow in their halls of old,  
Humans will tremble, doomed to die,  
For the glory of People – so it's foretold  
In the lands of Under where the Kingdom lie.

One salvo to beat them all, one salvo to flush them,  
One salvo to bring them down, and in the darkness crush them;  
In the lands of People where the Kingdom lie.

*danh3107*

I like you.

*Jane*

Well. At least this provides good leverage for Cat for negotiations.

"Hey, the dwarves took your homeland, why not set yourself up on the outskirts of Praes instead? I can portal you there!".

...Though, somehow this seems more likely to end in a conflict with the dwarves to me, however little Cat wants to get herself entangled with such a thing. At least it won't be likely that the dwarven army can get word of her involvement back to the other dwarves?

*Decius*

The dwarves are satisfied with forcing the elves to live on the surface. If Cat can evacuate them without the dwarves fighting, that reduces the amount of damage done to the dwarves' weapons. Everyone wins.

*Antoninjohn*

The Dwarves vanguard would need to survive Cat to bring back word of her actions against the Dwarves Kingdom

*Rook*

The stories are going to tell of the mighty Black Queen single-handedly crushing the armies of the Kingdom Under beneath her boot

The reality will be a shitshow where she mangles herself in the usual fashion, before accidentally finding a way to trigger a magic cave-in on them. Rocks fall, everyone dies.

*haihappen*

She reaches the Sve, who knows the Drow are in great peril, and seeks to save her people. Or at least survive to have vengeance later.

For this purpose, she Allies herself to Cat. And how are high-level political alliances made? Marriage, of course? Or the Drow equivalent.

And so the Queen of Winter together with her wife, the First Priestess of Moonless Night lead the exodus of the Drow people into the Burning Lands. While swearing Vengeance in black blood.

Chances of this happening are zero, of course, for an uncountable number of reasons. But this would be very traditional, in epic fantasy terms. And just a little bit Anime..

*Dylan Tullos*

Rook:

If the Black Queen kills a single dwarf, they could wipe out every city in Callow. It wouldn't even be hard for them.

*Decius*

If Cat and company could wipe out the vanguard without leaving enough evidence to identify who did it, they wouldn't need more allies.

[Euodiachloris](#)

The problem is, I don't think the Drow are big on coordination. Or the whole "ally" concept. 😊

*IDKWhoitis*

From the Drow perspective: "Person who I will stab last, given no opportunities come up first."

The Goblins and Drow should really just get along... (You know, stab each other less often.)

*Thaumaturge*

fucking oof

*Scholar of Time*

So, calling it now... Dead King waging a war on the Kingdom Under through an opening located in their kingdom to one of the hells, pushing them to take the Everdark. Sounds like a fine way of removing two players off the underside of an already full board.

*Nima*

Holy shit. The dwarves in this stories like space marines from warhammer 40k

*Yotz*

Oh, but they are not here just to purge and burn – they are going to squat on those lands.

*RanVor*

In 40k, squatting isn't something people do. It's something that is done to people.

*Yotz*

Well, since official stance of the Administratum is to deny any rumours about existence of certain strain of abhumans, that particular interpretation of "squatting" is indeed the only one approved by Ordo Lexicanum.

*Thought of the day: Digganobz.*

*Skraeling*

Just... no. I get the reference but you know we don't talk about them anymore. Not after the troubles.

*IDKWhoitis*

I guess Black wasn't kidding when he said the Dwarves were in an expansion phase.

Which makes me question if Black knew, which I do not totally discount because it is Black...

*Dainpdf*

Scribe probably has agents in the Kingdom Under.

*haihappen*

Interlude coming up with Scribe bringing Black a report from said agents, giving the reader a hint on what is going on with the Kingdom Under.

My metaphorical money is on coordinated Expansion and planned genocide. With the added bonus of getting all those fancy Drow relics that supposedly exist (I mean, there have to be relics of the once mighty Drow Empire?)

*Yotz*

Golden lamps nothing.

Just wait until Kingdom Under rolls out semiautomatic crossbows with bolts made from depleted caelium – a byproduct of corpuscular munitions manufacture.

Also, subterrines with corpuscular furnace engines – but we won't see *that* until later.

*Rook*

Or even worse, a really big hammer.

Similar to a normal hammer, but really really big. A testament to the superiority of dwarven engineering and workmanship.

*Sylwoos*

I just thought of something. Are the Dwarf safe from Gnome intervention because they can't scry underground, nor use their flying ship? Those sneaky bastard remained underground to develop their technologies without retaliation, and that's why they are now the greatest force of the continent. Probably booted the Goblin to the surface to prevent them to do the same.

*Yotz*

Not an impossible scenario. "Can't scry" option seems more plausible, though – unless gnomish ethics did not allow them to bomb through innocent surface population, used by the Dwarves as a living shield. I mean, given the "flying ships" thing, I wouldn't put fuel-air charges and bunker-busters beyond Gnomes. It somewhat hard to develop technologies when everything connected to the surface by even the tiniest air channels will be immediately saturated with compressed sunshine in aerosol form, and everything not connected would be subjected to constant seismic bombardment until it becomes connected.

*Decius*

Anyone capable of developing airships but not heavier-than-air poison gases doesn't deserve to tell others what technology is genre-inappropriate.

*Gunslinger*

I wonder why the dwarves would need to invade the everdark. Resources? My first guess was they they've been routed from their own place by another enemy but who would be powerful enough to do that?

This book has been giving us a splendid look into some of the other races in Calernia but I wonder how they would fit in the broader plot. Drow are unreliable allies and the Dwarves are unreasonable enemies.

*Dainpdf*

Well, it has been established that they are obsessed with owning all of underground Calernia, much like the gnomes are with technological supremacy.

*BryceWilliam*

the Gnomes are pretty much just a tool that above and below agreed to both use. The gods, for some reason, don't want people to advance to far tech wise.

*Dainpdf*

But the gnomes themselves have the tech?

*Yotz*

Probably living space and excess of dwarfpower. Also, it seems that from their point of view that's not an invasion. Merely pest control. As for who could potentially chase Dwarves out of their ancestral lands... Well, let's say – children of Shudde M'ell are plentiful indeed.

*haihappen*

Have any of Cat's enemies shown to be \_reasonable\_ before?

*Decius*

Fenn, from chapter 1?

*haihappen*

The guy she baited into attacking and nearly emasculated? That Fenn? Predicable is not the same as reasonable.

*Decius*

If "Being able to be baited into attacking" makes someone unreasonable, nobody in the story is reasonable, including Black.

*Cicero*

I think it pretty clear that the dwarves are not being pushed into this invasion by someone invading them.

This is not a hasty invasion force being driven by necessity. This is a well planned invasion with decades of preparation according to Auka's assessment of their magical devices.

This is something that was planned prior to Cat becoming the Squire.

My best guess is that it has to do with internal dwarven politics. Someone came to power and has taken up the cause of claiming the entirety of the underground for the dwarven race.

*Unholier than thou*

The elves would be powerful enough for that, even if it's just the Golden Bloom ones. And in a lot of stories elves are generally against dwarves.

*Trickster315*

Now that's a grudgin

[ayon96](#)

Is Kingdom Under sided with Good or Evil?

[wirelessgrapes](#)

They're sided with Dwarves and fuck everyone and everything else, cause anything else isn't more than an animal

*grzecho2222*

EE said somewhere something that they are simply too big of a nation to have people on one side.

[happyhavak](#)

Are dwarves in the same power class as gnomes? Or are they just the top of the beginner village that this whole continent apparently is? And where to the giants rank? Because people seem genuinely afraid of them too.

*Dainpdf*

Procer apparently went to war with the Gigantes and still exists, so that's a thing.

[TeK](#)



I'd assumed that they are isolationist like elves. I'd wager top three goes like this in terms of sheer power: KU, DK (very near), Gigates/Golden Bloom (share a spot).

### *IDKWhoitis*

If this is true (and it seems pretty reasonable to assume so), then none of the major power blocks are part of the Crusade yet. While Procer may very well have the largest "human" armies in existence, those are mostly peasants running on a very Russian like mentality of "drown them in bodies". Are the major power blocks isolationist from core values (possible), or are they afraid of something larger and meaner coming down on them? (Like the Gnomes or the Pricks Above and Below?)

### *Darkening*

Based on Warlock's perspective fighting the Witch of the Woods, giants are extraordinarily in tune with the world and capable of using massively powerful magics because of it, especially as they get older and accrue more enlightenment or w/e, and I'd imagine they're physically powerful as well, being giants, but I'd guess they're not terribly numerous or prolific, which means that while individually incredibly dangerous, they're manageable in a war scenario, hence, procer invading them that one time.

The dwarves haven't demonstrated any machines or guns or anything so far in the series, but it's entirely possible they have them and just don't flash them to outsiders, even when they go work as mercs. It has been mentioned that most people that aren't Praes buy their siege engines from them or just copy their designs, and they're markedly inferior to the ones the fifteenth is running around with, but that could just be them giving the surface inferior designs. I'd guess the gnomes with magic proof zeppelins going around nuking nations are stronger than the dwarves, but who knows what the dwarves have stashed away. I'm gonna guess there's a \*TON\* of dwarves though, since they seem to have territory under basically the entire continent, and even if most of it is just distant outposts, that's still a lot of land to occupy. So, even if you didn't have to worry about them collapsing the ground under your cities, you'd have to worry about fighting a foe that massively outnumbers you.

### *RanVor*

It was stated somewhere that they export shit to the surface and keep all the good designs to themselves, but I can't remember where exactly.

### *IDKWhoitis*

When discussing the quality of Dwarves or their mercs this comes up often. I would not be surprised if the Gnomes were just a non-factor to the Dwarves (and vice-versa) since Air Superiority matters Jackshit underground. Even then, to bomb a whole continent seems extremely impractical...

### [erraticerrata](#)

The Kingdom Under is the dominant power of Calernia, though that's not really felt on the surface since they have very limited involvement. The Gigantes fall under the 'don't poke the bear' category, but they're not invincible. Their war with Procer ended in what was essentially a horribly costly draw matched with a political 'victory' for the Principate.

*nick012000*

Yeah, this is about what I'd expected. Looks like the dwarves are out to genocide the drow, and it's going to be Cat who's going to be able to save them by offering them a home on the surface.

*Hinkel*

Is there even a place the drow could live at on the surface? I cannot imagine them basking under the sun, when the gloom and the dark is a part of them.  
Maybe Cat could relocate them to Liesse or her part of Arcadia?

*Decius*

They would probably fit in somewhere in the Duchy of Moonless Nights.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Why the surface? She has a whole paradimensional domain/plane where their "you are what you kill" philosophy would fit quite neatly. \*shrugs\*

*edrey*

well, cat can't run from the stories that the gods send her way, specially war related. now she is in a savior story with dwarves weapons and drow's magic

*Dainpdf*

Dammit, now I can't get "Down Under" out of my head.  
Do you come from the Kingdom Under  
Where Mighty flee and Dwarves plunder  
Can't you see, can't you hear their thunder?  
You better run, you better take cover!

[TeK](#)

Ok, this may be seem unplaussible, but what if this invasion is an act of desperation? What if Kingdom Under is somehow fucked and in decline? I doubt that EE is so cliché as to put in a Balrog and Mines of Moria expy, but dwarves sound like a fine businessman to me: they would not go onto such a massive waste of resources, unless they expected a profit bigger than worst possible loses. And what would push them now, after thousands of years? There are two more known player underground, goblins and DK. Book 3 epilogue told about black and green figures lurking under earth. I assume green are goblins and black are drows.

*gloomyMoron*

The goblins were forced closer to the surface ages ago. The only deep dwellers left are Dwarves and Drow. The Dwarves might be moving into their end-game and forcing the Drow above ground now that the Dead King is on the move.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, except “green figures lurking underground” is a quote from the visions of Hierarch in the epilogue of the 3rd book. Who are they if not goblins, dwarves in carnival cloths?

*darkening*

I believe it's a matter of depth. Hell, could even be based on sea level, pretty sure the goblin are tunneled into mountains rather than going down.

*Yotz*

...for the sake of Saint Phuk...

I misread “dwarves in carnival cloths” as “dwarves in carnal sloths”...

You know, image of those little critters known as Megatherium, who – probably – had mold colonies in their fur giving them distinct greenish tinge, just like their concurrent distant relatives have; combined with “carnal” implications...

...

Eh, it's not like I was going to sleep tonight anyway...

[TeK](#)

God, now I want to play Dwaf Fortress. I want to see Cat visit great dwarfian capital Boatmurdered where everyone is drunk, mad and also on fire. Something-something she stands up to dwarves, something-something they take her to King Under, something-something they bond over their mutual love to sharp things and

cheap wine, something-something Callow is now dwarven protectorate.

*Yotz*

She must remember one thing though – well, two things: firstly, DON'T TOUCH THE CATS; and secondly – STAY AWAY FROM CARPS.

*TeK*

>DON'T TOUCH THE CAT

The word “cat-plosion” gathers a new meaning in the Guide. Also, carps are nerfed. I believe sponges are new kings of beasts.

*beleester*

Giant sponges, yes – they have no brain, no blood, and no limbs, so it's nearly impossible to kill them. In fact, prior to DF2014 they were literally invincible. Now they're merely surprisingly dangerous and hard to kill.

*Decius*

Cat visits Boatmurdered.  
Cat leaves riding undead elephants.

*Someguy*

You know how the proper non-toxic method of killing an ant colony is to pour boiling water onto an anthill? Should Cat seriously consider pouring a lake-full of freezing water into the Dwarven tunnels?

*RanVor*

I'm afraid a lake wouldn't be enough. An ocean might suffice, though I'm still not sure.

*Yotz*

So.

Here's the plan.

Dwarves have a limited supply of lanterns. With high probability nearly all of them would be used to cross the Gloom, with only a small part kept in reserve on the off-chance of the off-chance.

Now, if someone are to gain control of the source of Gloom, wait until the Dwarven army gathers in one place to commit to all-out assault, and use Source to enshroud that area in Gloom...

>*thousands in the distance just... vanished.*

*IDKWhoitis*

I wonder if those that Vanish die or just get lost for a really long time?

*Yotz*

Well, if they get lost for sufficiently long time, they'll ought to end up dead anyway.

On the other hand, Ranger was merely thwarted, not "lost until death".

On the other other hand – that's Ranger, by all means not your usual lost one.

Also in the kit – Peregrine, who can realistically shine his way through the darkness, and the Saint of Swords, who'll just cut it until it relents.

*Decius*

As an added bonus, dumping the ocean into the kingdom under disables all enemy ports by lowering the ocean level.

*Yotz*

It was tried, once, by certain city. They dug into the dwarven tunnels and opened the dig into the channel connected to the ocean. Now there is a hole in the ground where the city was, but the Dwarves are still there.

....

typos

"fielding an army this \*side\* size wasn't cheap."

" I doubted even fifteen thousand dwarves would be able to get to the Priestess of Night, much less \*killer.\* kill her. "

""Didn't run into them, but I found clearer tracks in one of the \*taverns.\*"should be caverns I think

"And mentioned \*than\* that another two sigils got hit around the same time

*Anony*

"The dwarves would likely clear the way, which was a mixed blessing. It'd limit the fighting, but I couldn't ally with corpses."

Why not tho? If Akua can casually throw around hordes of undead without even a ritual just by using a bit of winter, why couldn't she use rituals to raise them an army of undead drow?

In fact, whether they make an ally here or not, leaving probably at least tens of thousands perfectly serviceable pre-equipped corpses just lying around, seems wasteful.

## TeK

OMG, I just had a thought, drawing on my experience with dwarf fortress. Dwarves technically can dig under ocean, aren't they? If so, then why do we presume that Kingdom Under is really only under Calernia? It is a world power, after all. And heck, if they can, there is no limit on the amount of resources and space. Ocean cover roughly a lot of Earth's surface, no reason to think that Creation is much different. And if they are that big and powerful, what would they want from the Everdark?

The Gloom. It makes perfect sense, I mean, what dwarves need to finalize their domain over all things Under? The way to make underground literally unenterable. Not just that, put enough Gloom, and surface nations will have to buy their way to dig even the shallow resources from Kingdom Under. Just imagine, every cave, every mine, every shaft in Calernia and beyond, covered in Gloom. And the only ones who can manufacture "keys", are dwarves. It worth all those tons of gold and dwarves.

## TeK

The guy below mentioned how Cat never even considered allying dwarves and he's so right! Holy shit, she actually mentioned allying ELVES of all people. Not to mention a Dead King. Yeah, at least sending dwarves an envoy couldn't go wrong. I wonder now, what if she did send an envoy, and dwarves ask a help in infiltrating drow in order to start negotiations? And well, she is probably genre-savvy enough to actually know about Unspoken Plan Guarantee.

No, scratch that. The Dead King told her that dwarves are making a bid for drow, and, in concurrence with my previous theory, for the Gloom (although I doubt he said exactly what they were after, just that they were after something, or rather, giving her reaction, that they wanted something but couldn't get it.) but he didn't say that they making the move now. Just something along the lines of "drow have something dwarves want, get it and you'll have something to negotiate with". Maybe it's not Gloom. But she said she heard about Mokosh before, so maybe it wasn't from her talks with Ivah.

But even if that's true, there's still something. Why Diabolist didn't ask about dwarves? She didn't know Cat's reasons, that much is obvious, so, why? Is it some winter stuff preventing them from actually thinking about dwarves? That's ridiculous. And Hakram, Vivienne, Mazego, none of them thought about it? Ok, so, maybe they all were in cahoots with Cat's secret plan, but what about Ubuah? Although, treating with dwarves may have gone unmentioned for a couple of reasons. First, as Black said, they are in expansion phase, so they a little more dismissive about ground vermin than usual ("They will profiteer through weapon trade, at most."), second yeah, the whole "all who are not

dwarves are no people" take, though that didn't stop her from considering elves or the drow, thirdly, no real leverage, fourth, including such a major player has consequences. But those are all cases that can be made after the possibility's brought up. I'm confused.

### *mordered*

There might be an opening here for an exodus story. A weakened people about to be slaughtered rescued and offered sanctuary by a foreign savior. There must be precedent for something like that.

### *kagelupus*

There is an established narrative here, but it is definitely not Cat being the foreign savior come to lead the Drow to the promised lands.

Cat joins the war college and butts heads with the Hellhound. By the end of that exchange the Hellhound joins her as Cat's general.

Cat goes to Arcadia and butts heads with the Fae. By the end of that exchange the Courts are no more and the former Prince of Nightfall has joined her retinue.

Cat goes to rule over Callow and butts heads with Diabolist. By the end of that exchange Diabolist has fallen and joins the Woe as the Ghost of Hubris Past.

Forget about the Dwarven invasion going on right now, that is just there to increase tension and push Cat towards the real story. She is on a narrative path to butt heads with the Sve of Night, and there is one historical outcome of that kind of exchange.

### [pietromoroni](#)

Cat goes to the Gloom to ally the Drows and butts heads with the Dwarfs. By the end the Dwarfs use the revenues of their real estate enterprise in the Gloom to finance Callow's wars, as a way to end up their part of the deal after Cat's termination of the Sve. The Drow civilization is the baby Cat had to eat.

### *Panic*

So I keep hearing ideas about the Dwarves actively running from something or being invaded themselves and I keep thinking that isn't that the opposite of what EE wanted them to be like. Didn't EE want the Kingdom Under and the Dwarves to be at peak Power as opposed to the remnants of a crumbling Empire, besieged on all sides. Personally I call narrative on the whole thing. Dwarves

have settled their other affairs and want to finish this phase of expansion by taking out the last underground power that is not them.

That aside I am a little disappointed that things are once more going to shite for Cat & Co. You can only read so much about Cat getting shat on before you no longer care. Darkness induced audience apathy and all that. It's why I dropped The Last Angel.

And I was really looking forward to Cat interacting with the Drow society that fits her so well, with a powerset waiting for her that also would fit oh so well.

*haihappen*

The only difference here is that everything instantly goes to shit instead of the situation first looking good or at least "kind of good", also, usually Cat or her Minions come up with a plan or a set of plans that first look to go well and then fail and Cat and her crew have to improvise, i.e. stabbing people.

Here, they do not have a plan, at most the idea of a plan, which consists mainly of "Meet some Drow, stab some of them, ally the others."

And of course it goes wrong at the second step, as the Dwarfs smash the Drows before they can stab them...

*letouriste*

"Best not to think too deeply, lest the dwarves take the thought."

– Mercantian saying

ok, this one is my new favourite. that's absolute gold xD well done EE

*Unmaker*

Given the way Night works, that saying works much better for the drow.

*Yotz*

Offtopic – each time I stumble upon the mention of Mercantis, I can't but remember of certain inverted mountain. You know, of "we all must profit for peace to last" fame.

*DocTao*

Are we sure the dwarves are a single entity?

*Yotz*



Dwarves are known to the surface nations as a single political entity. Whenever they are or are not wasn't a significant point so far. I'd wager they are – at least in regards to relation with the world: they may maintain a loose confederation of small fiefdoms united as a Kingdom Under, or there may be other Dwarven kingdoms under the other continents/oceans – but they all are either unknown to the surface or act as a single entity against outer forces.

*Dylan Tullos*

It turns out that murderhobos are no match for actual soldiers.

I'm unsure how useful the drow are actually going to be; from what we've seen, Malicia's Legions and Procer's soldiers could slaughter regular drow with superior discipline and simply pull the Might down with pure weight of numbers.

Also, they're vicious murderhobos who would kill Callowans as happily as anyone else, and their society is so treacherous that their ruling class refuses to take oaths on principle. Which is honest, I suppose, but they're honest about being completely unreliable, which is not helpful.

*Yotz*

They unquestioningly obey the Sve, though. If Cat manages to extract some form of agreement from her, the Drow will obey her orders.

Martial prowess is a relative thing though – yes, Drow are basically grinded down to soylent gray, but they are against the Dwarves, of whom is known almost nothing in that regard. All Dwarves that visited surface as mercenaries were, afair, either random glory-seekers or outcasts, not professional soldiers. Also, numbers. Confrontation of five-some thousand elite storm-troopers against few hundreds of nearly powerless malnourished outcasts won't produce a fair assessment of Drow military power.

So far, Drow seems to be more of a Night Lords breed as opposed to Ultramarines, though.

*gloomyMoron*

Perhaps you should look into reorganizing your posting schedule to give you more time to edit and/or proofread the chapters more. The increase in (understandable but simple) mistakes and confusing/improperly worded paragraphs is really starting to take a toll on my enjoyment of this series. I don't think I'm alone, but I definitely know I'm in the minority. Maybe take a break, try to get ahead of the curve... or get a trusted friend to proofread for you or... something? Just a suggestion. I'll probably

keep reading either way, but I've noticed more mistakes cropping up in the past few uploads.

### DroughtBringer

A lot of the Guide, and Web Serials as a whole, is that they are first or second drafts. Sure we could have someone proofread it all, but I personally like the experience of just the very slightly edited story that we get.

(Also, breaks to any degree except between books tend to be bad for web serials and they will lose quite a few readers)

### *limlimrevolution*

So here's a question that I've been struggling with for a while with this whole Drow interlude. We had the lovely debate between Akua and Cat last chapter going over all the options available to bolster the armies of Callow and the conclusion is that the Drow are the only feasible choice. Ok, so with that being said, it's time for an expedition underground to enlist a race that is barely known to the world at large with the vague idea that Cat will be able to bully them into allying with her. Great, it's a hail mary, but Catherine is pretty good at those by this point.

But now here's a massive army of Dwarves. Why is there no inkling of an idea or suggestion of allying with them instead? They weren't even mentioned in the list of potential allies during the conversation with Akua. I understand that Dwarves are xenophobic and elitist as far as we know from the limited information we have on them from the story, but we also know that there's precedent for them being mercenaries. Is the issue that Callow doesn't have enough money to buy the services of the Kingdom Under? If that's the problem, one possibility is that Cat can offer them the power of portals, which has huge monetary value. I'm sure there are other things that they might also be interested in, but we won't know unless they ask them.

I understand that the Dwarves are known to be horrifically good at killing things and that you don't want to piss them off per Archer, but why does that preclude trying to recruit them? I just don't know why the immediate assumption by Cat and company is that they are completely screwed by the sudden appearance of this army. They came to the Drow homeland to muster up an army and while they haven't managed to gather up a Drow fighting force, they now have the opportunity to ally with a Dwarven army that's arguably better suited to fighting alongside the forces of Callow (better equipped and more disciplined). Sure, they don't have any plan for recruiting the Dwarves, but it's not like they really had one with the Drow either.

Am I missing something?

### frolamiz

Yes, it is suspicious that allying with them was never mentioned.

But it is unlikely to happen, for the simple reason that it would remove all the tension from the story. Armies of Dwarves (real armies, not mercenaries outcasts) defending Callow would make everyone (except maybe the Dead King) take a loooong look and then return home. I mean, Refuge is almost untouchable because of its status of quasi protectorate of the Kingdom Under.

Others rulers also probably already tried to get them in their war hundreds of times too over the years.

And that's not even taking into account the Evil/Good battle in which the Dwarves don't seem very invested. Or are they? We learned from the discussion between the Wandering Bard and the Dead King that there are quite a few events happening behind the scenes. Maybe the Dwarves are actually too busy underground to intervene aboveground and the Drow invasion is merely the tip of the iceberg?

Or I am wrong and Cat will manage to make a deal with them, but their help will not be substantial enough to remove the tension.

*Yotz*

Only one thing – Dwarves are literally impossible to ally with. Proper Dwarves, that is.

Dwarven mercenaries are indeed a thing, but they hold no loyalty to anyone bar the King Under and can be outbought and used against you in the middle of combat – of which we have in-story example. Not to mention that Dwarven units behave in a manner similar to Kender Peacekeeping Corpse – as in “anything that is not nailed down is considered lost by it's owner and a rightful property of the Dwarf; anything that can be removed from its nails is considered never been nailed down”.

*Decius*

I thought the kender peacekeeping corpse was the offering made by an adventuring party to atone for the thefts one of their members attempted during a formal dinner with the royalty.

*Yotz*

This gesture may be intended so, but it never works. Half of the time such offering ends up with missing corpse, and other half – with corpse *and* silver spoons vanishing into thin air.

### Euodiachloris

I doubt people duck and run for cover when a dwarf goes, "Oops! Tee-hee!", however. ;P

*Yotz*

Admittedly, old "duck and cover" routine makes more sense around goblin sappers going "Tee-hee!", yes.

*Satan*

Some regions of Procer are similar to France and Spain, while Atalante reminds me of a stereotype of Italy. Callow might be a bit like the old English myths. Lower Miezan is like the modern English language while Old Miezan is like Latin. And then someone decided to throw the modern US army into medieval Europe, and they've just found oil.

*Levi Kalden*

This seems too coincidental to not be the work of the gods below. It seems they are still pushing for her

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## **Chapter 57: Betwixt**

*"Come now, my lords, you started this war knowing what I'm about."*

– Dread Empress Massacre the First

It was too large for a pond but much too small for a lake. A reservoir? Nah, I was pretty sure that implied spadework, which this clearly didn't have. Pool, maybe. Regardless, it was a source of unsullied freshwater and it'd been almost a day since we'd run into one of those. Tactically redeploying in the opposite direction of an incoming army was thirsty work and the drow weren't nearly as enduring as the rest of us, so it was probably time for a break. We'd need a bit to refill the skins, anyway, and if there was some kind of edible creature in there it'd be a nice change of pace from our increasingly stale rations. Indrani had taken to pouring brandy on hers, though in all honesty I wasn't sure whether the taste was the actual reason for that.

"Half hour," I called out, withdrawing the finger's I'd been dipping into the waters. "Ivah, tell your fellows they're responsible for rationing their water as well as filling the

skins. They're not dipping in ours a second time no matter how thirsty they get."

I could make ice and let it melt into drinking water, sure, but at the moment we were keeping a low profile. I wasn't sure whether the dwarves had some sort of device that would allow them to sense sorcery, but if they did I was pretty sure using Winter to any great extent would be like lighting a brightstick in a dark room. My mantle could do subtle, theoretically speaking, but it'd never been a specialty of mine and I wasn't willing to gamble our remaining hidden on it. My guide nodded and addressed the rest of its kind in an even tone. Ever since the former Mighty Kodrog had been disciplined and I'd declined to let anyone harvest its Night and serve as a replacement guide, Ivah had gotten much more self-assured.

Akua had voiced opinion that since it'd functioned as a lieutenant to a violent and unpredictable entity for decades, it was falling back on those habits now that it was under my protection. Bogdan wasn't too happy about that, but I'd ordered Diabolist to get the broken bones patched up and nothing more. The message had been received, from the way it was now behaving much more carefully. I got up from my crouch and sighed. Our pace was being slowed down by the drow more than I'd like, but there was little I could do about it and leaving them behind wasn't on the table. If they weren't in my custody, they'd be in that of the dwarves. Indrani was at my side a heartbeat later, footsteps so soft I'd barely heard them.

"They're getting near the end of their rope," she observed. "Might want to give them a full hour instead, stretch out the last gasps."

"We're already crawling at a snail's pace," I grunted back. "You've said it yourself, we're probably a little more than a day ahead of the dwarven army."

"Guesswork," Indrani reminded me.

"Guesswork based on the messengers you've seen going back and forth," I replied. "We're not swinging in the dark here."

She opened her mouth, but I raised my hand.

"If what passes your lips is a pun, Archer, I will drown you myself," I threatened.

There was a pause.

"Fill my skins," she offered, sounding very casual. "I'll take a look ahead, see if I can rustle up anything."

"Ivah says we're nearing the edge of the outer rings," I told her. "If the vanguard is going to dig in and wait for reinforcements, it'll be soon. The odds of running into the army have significantly increased."

"If they dig in, it's our opportunity to go around them," Indrani countered. "Best we know as soon as possible and plan accordingly."

I mulled over that. She had a point. Half the reason she wanted to go for a wander was likely that she was starting to feel like she had a leash around her neck – I'd asked her to cut back how far she went on her exploratory trips – but she was right on the nose about the vanguard digging in. My bet, at the moment, was that when they got close to the first strong drow position they'd set up and wait for proper assault troops. If we went around them while their eyes were on the local sigil, there were decent odds we could make it through without getting noticed.

"Do it," I finally said, taking the mostly empty water skin in her hands. "As usual-"

"Tread lightly, steel stays in the sheath," she finished, rolling her eyes. "At this rate you're going to get that tattooed on my arse."

"I assumed something deeply tasteless was already taking up the space," I replied without missing a beat.

"Hey, my arse is extremely tasteful," she protested.

"You're confusing words again," I airily said. "What you're looking for is *tawdry*."

She flipped me off, I mimed drowning her in the pool and with the traditional rites complete we parted ways. I watched her saunter away, though with the leather coat on there wasn't much to look at, and absent-mindedly tossed up the skin before snatching it out of the air. The drow were going about their business visibly exhausted, and to my quiet amusement Mighty Bogdan seemed to have no earthly idea how to fill up a skin. I was too entertained by its struggles to seriously consider offering help. Akua was kneeling by the pool as well, though her skin – which she didn't need, or use – was full. She was staring at the far wall, unmoving. A few steps took me to her side, and in a blatant abused of my queenly prerogatives I threw Archer's skin at her shoulder.

"There," I said. "Since you seem in need of something to keep your hands busy."

The shade picked up the leathery folds between two fingers, somehow managing a full monologue's worth of disdain without speaking a word.

"It smells like aragh," she said.

"So does Archer, half the time," I shrugged. "What deep thoughts did I take you away from, Diabolist?"

"I was pondering," she said, "the nature of this invasion."

"The term is usually pretty self-explanatory," I noted, only half-serious.

"Context, Catherine," she chided. "This was a significant investment of resources, even for the Kingdom Under. The kind that would have to be prepared over the span of decades, requiring specialized labour otherwise in high demand and significant preparations of logistics."

"And you're wondering why they'd bother, given that the Everdark is a mess of collapsing tunnels filled with violent lunatics," I said. "I mean, there's the obvious answer. Drow don't mine much, as far as we can tell. Lots of wealth to claim once they take over the place."

"Over time, the investment made could be recovered tenfold," Akua agreed. "Yet we both know that kind of long term planning in the highest reaches of a nation is a rarity. The expense would have to be justified in the face of more immediate uses for that coin giving more obvious benefit."

"It's rare on the surface," I said. "Where sinking that much of your treasury into anything makes you weak elsewhere and your rivals will take advantage of it. What rivals do they have left, down here? They can afford to take the long view. Hells, they live longer than humans too. This could just be the life's work of some highly influential dwarf."

How long dwarves actually lived remained a matter of bitter and divisive scholarly debate, a matter not helped by the fact that their kind lied profusely about the matter whenever they ventured to the surface. Theories ranged from a few hundred years to a couple thousand, though most scholars agreed it was under five hundred. Considering people weren't even sure how dwarves reproduced, lifespan uncertainty was no surprise.

"And yet the invasion only takes place now," Diabolist said.

I could have replied that there was precedent for the Kingdom Under evicting other underground nations to the surface largely out of principle – the goblins were testament to that – but that would rather be missing the point, wouldn't it? Dates for the

goblin exodus were vague, since the Tribes rarely gave straight answers to anything unless there was a blade at their throat, but it was a fact it preceded the Miezian occupation of Praes. Which meant at least a millennium and a half ago. If the entire point of this was to remove a rival power, however comparatively weak that rival was, then they'd taken quite a while to get around to finishing the work.

"Might be it was just that one tedious chore they never got around to doing," I mused. "They polished off the rest of the list over the centuries, now they're out of excuses not to massacre the neighbours."

"Overdue spring cleaning," Akua mildly said. "This is your theory for what drives the fate of two nations?"

"You got anything better?" I said.

"Let us assume," the shade said, "that the Everdark's continued sovereignty is the result of dwarven *incapacity* instead of *unwillingness*."

"Which is a wild guess on your part," I said.

"One that aligns with other facts," Diabolist said. "Regardless, it is fact that there was a dwarven contingent on the surface during the Liesse Rebellion."

"Mercenaries," I said. "That's not exactly unheard of. They also took the first bribe offered to leave."

"Because their purpose was not to make war, but to assess the situation," Akua suggested.

"They already do that through Mercantis, supposedly," I said. "Everyone sells information about everyone else in exchange for crumbs about what's happening down here. Why send soldiers?"

"A host of dwarven infantry would represent a significant force," she said. "One which would be worthy of courting by surface powers, as the Carrion Lord did. As the Callowan rebels did, and the First Prince behind them."

My eyes narrowed.

"So you think the point was to gauge how invested all the players were in the rebellion and the wars that would follow it," I said. "They shouldn't *need* to go that far, Akua. Who the Hells would be stupid enough to pick a fight with the Kingdom Under? They'll be selling cheap weapons to at least half the nations involved in any scuffle. There's a reason the Principate can throw massed levies at us without going bankrupt."

"Dread Empress Triumphant, may she never return-"



"Forced them to pay tribute, sure," I interrupted, rolling my eyes. "Once, after she flooded a few of their tunnels with demons. Didn't stop them from funding and arming a continent's worth of rebellions against her a few years later, did it? They just threw gold at her so she'd fuck off and then paid for other humans to actually put her down. Let's not pretend it was more than a headache for them."

"That is still precedent for a surface power proving troublesome to dwarven interests," Akua insisted. "A cautious assessment of the situation was therefore made, yielding the answer that the largest surface powers were preparing for large scale and long term warfare."

"After which they did nothing," I said. "That was years ago, and they're only moving now. I doubt it would take them that long to mobilize."

"Indeed," the shade agreed in a murmur. "They acted only after a much more recent development."

It wasn't the Tenth Crusade. There had, after all, been nine predecessors to it. But if her argument was about a power on the move that usually remained put...

"How would they know about the Dead King?" I frowned. "It's not like he sent them a letter. *We* don't even know how he'll go about participating in the war, and we were guests in Keter not that long ago."

"The Kingdom Under has borders with the Kingdom of the Dead," Akua said.

"Which are, famously, tunnels they drowned in lava and molten metal until there was nothing left moving," I said.

"Your argument is that the preeminent power on Calernia has no way to observe the going-ons at its most dangerous border," Akua mildly said.

I grimaced. Yeah, fair point.

"So they see him pull back his undead for a push on the surface," I mused, following the thread. "And take that as an open invitation to march on the Everdark. Why? That's still thin, Akua. If they're that worried about the Dead King, why take the risk at all? It's not like the drow are a threat to them."

"So I wondered," Diabolist admitted. "If neither wealth nor pride are the reason, then why? It cannot be room for expansion, they could simply layer deeper. Such a large undertaking could hardly be made without sanction from the highest powerbrokers of dwarven authority. That implies, to me, a strategic motive."

"Hard to guess at those when no one knows their exact borders," I said.

She nodded in agreement. I narrowed my eyes at her.

"But you have a theory anyway," I said.

"After your distant kin settled in what is now the Duchy of Daoine," she said, "the largest threat to them was greenskin raids. Yet they did not strike directly at the clans, instead raising the Wall. Why?"

Because only an idiot would try to take the Steppes. The Miezens had done it, sure, but they'd had a whole arsenal of advantages no one on Calernia could boast of having and there'd actually been orc cities to target back then. Which was no longer the case: even after the Reforms, the Clans had remained nomadic. Rulers of Daoine could and had cleared out belligerent clans near the Greenskin Marches but there'd never been a serious effort to conquer the Steppes. The orcs would just retreat deeper in and the Deoraithe armies would have to settle in for winter in hip-deep snow with nothing to live off of and a lot of angry orcs on the prowl. *Which, I thought, is Akua's point.*

"Containment," I slowly said. "Ratlings don't lair deep, so they'd have a free hand under the Chain of Hunger. You think they know they can't take the Dead King, so they're trying to bottle him up instead. And for the encirclement to be complete the drow need to go."

"Should any significant drow presence remain in the region, the fortresses maintaining that encirclement would suffer sporadic assault," Akua said. "To make the sealing easily sustainable—"

"They need the drow gone," I quietly said. "Dead or far, far away."

We filled our skins in silence, after that. It was a fragile house of cards that she'd built one sentence at a time, and all it'd take for it to crumble was a single assumption proved false. But it sounded like a distinct possibility. That was always the problem, with Akua. She was a skilled speaker, one that could spin a decent story out of nearly anything given long enough. *But if she's right...* Either the drow drove back the dwarves — and reckless as I was, I wouldn't put gold on that — or there'd be an entire race of vagrants needing greener pastures to move to.

That, I thought, sounded like an opportunity to me.

—

Archer had returned without any fanfare, before the hour of rest she'd talked me into was even over. We stood to the side of the others, speaking quietly in tongues they would not know.

"This place is about to be a war zone, Cat." Indrani said.

"You found the dwarven vanguard, then," I guessed.

She brushed back her hair, lashes fluttering over hazelnut eyes as she did. Her longcoat was open, revealing the silvery mail beneath, but she wore the metal as nonchalantly as if it were cloth.

"Part of it, anyway," she confirmed. "If there used to be three forces of five thousand like you guessed, that's no longer the case. There were at least eight thousand preparing to give battle."

"That's too large a force of a single cavern," I said.

"Not if it's a huge godsdamned cavern," Indrani snorted. "It's at least the size of Laure. There were a bunch of lichen and mushroom farms down there, I think it might have been some kind of food centre. Water too, the largest body we've come across so far."

"I was under the impression we were still a few days away from the closest city," I said.

"Dunno about a city, but there were a pack of drow there for sure," she said. "Cavern's a drop from our current height – the dwarves found another way down, I must have missed it – and near the back there's some sort of massive stalagmite melding into the wall that the locals carved into."

"Walls?" I asked.

"Nah, nothing like that," Indrani replied, shaking her head. "It's like some sort of spiral ramp going up. Pretty sure it's flat at the top, but my vantage points was sloppy. The whole thing might be hollow, for all I know. There were tents going all the way to the top."

"That's defensible against even heavy infantry," I said. "If the ramps are narrow enough."

"Our short friends were setting up a bunch of weird siege engines," she said. "Infantry's not all the drow are up against."

Eight thousand, huh. That was more than half of what I currently believed the dwarven vanguard to number, which was promising but still meant seven thousand should be traipsing around the tunnels unaccounted for. Fighting underground like this would be different from the kind of wars I was familiar with. With tunnels

it would be much easier to defend than attack, as a rule, particularly if the defender had powerful champions capable of holding a narrow area against superior numbers. On the other hand, without an open field flanking operations became a very different kind of enterprise. No plains down here, no way to see an enemy detachment until they were right on top of you. If I were the dwarves, I'd station hardened troops on the flanks to keep an eye out while I was moving against a fortified dwarf position. Assuming high-ranking Mighty were as dangerous as even just green Named bent towards combat, a single one slipping through defensive lines was enough to make a costly mess. I chewed on my lip thoughtfully.

"I don't suppose you took a look at the adjacent tunnels?" I asked.

"Not in depth," Indrani said. "Glanced down a few, though, and I got the impression most of them curve towards the large cavern."

A chokepoint? It'd explain while the dwarves were willing to slow their advance to take it. Ivah's knowledge of the region was sadly limited, as it'd only crossed it the once and under the understanding it was to move towards the Gloom as quickly as possible. I wouldn't be surprised if the Kingdom Under had maps, though, and good ones. It was tempting to try to get my hands on one even with the risks inherent to crossing dwarvenkind.

"They're going to have the flanking tunnels under guard," I finally said. "So far they've been careful to allow no runners. They'll have the entire place sealed up."

"That's my guess," Indrani agreed. "So what's the plan, Your Queenlyness? We trying to shimmy through while they're busy under a touch of the ol' glamour?"

"We still don't know if they can pick up on my using Winter," I said.

"We *do* know they have eyes, Cat," she replied. "I'm not fancying our chances of sneaking through a dwarven blockade without a little fae juice to help things along, and you know we can't wait this out. The real army's not far behind."

I hummed, not disagreeing or agreeing.

"So we have to place a bet," I said. "If you were a dwarf and you had devices that could pick up on sneaks – a pretty basic precaution, given who you're invading – where would you put them? With the main force, or the flankers?"

"If I were a dwarf, I'd be massively rich and drunk all the time with a city's worth of naked servants catering to my every twisted need," Indrani mused.

"If you were a dwarf, but not a complete waste of a person," I tried. "I know you don't have a lot of experience with that, but use your imagination."

She half-heartedly gestured for me to go hang myself.

"Would make sense for the shortstacks to keep the trinkets on the sides," she finally said. "The stalagmite's pretty fucking surrounded. But that's assuming they don't have enough devices to have them everywhere. And that they have those at all."

"If they do have them everywhere, we're screwed anyway," I noted. "Best we can do is play the odds assuming they don't."

"So you want to take a stroll through an active battlefield," Indrani snorted. "With a pack of unruly drow, a self-absorbed spectre and yours truly. That's not one of our better plans, Cat, and that should not be a hard hill to climb given how we got into Skade."

"Worked, didn't it?" I said. "We played to our strengths--"

"Blatant lies," she helpfully provided.

"- and their weaknesses," I finished.

"Expecting sense of us?" she suggested.

"Unorthodox approaches," I righteously corrected. "It'll be dangerous, I don't deny that, but then so is every other option on the table. I think this is the least stupid risk we can take. Unless you happen to have a better idea?"

"Aside from digging our own way through, not really," Indrani mused. "And we'd need Winter for that anyway. Shovels alone wouldn't cut it, and since Vivi left we don't even have those anymore."

I sighed and passed a hand through my hair.

"Well, let's get moving then," I said. "If this was a mistake, best to know it today."

"Hey, look on the bright side," she smiled. "If this is a horrible blunder that's going to get all of us killed, then at least I won't survive to give you shit about it."

There was a silver lining, I mused. Shame it was on a cloud raining fire and brimstone, but that was life for you wasn't it? Sometimes you just had to put on your good boots, bring out your sword and kill your way to the top of the flying fortress before you got to see daylight.

The last few years of my existence would have been a lot more pleasant if that were actually a metaphor.

---

### [DroughtBringer](#)

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### *Byzantine*

It's a shame the dwarves aren't inclined to talked. Catherine could get the drow out of their hair and save everyone quite a bit of annoyance.

### *Rook*

Don't think it would make a difference even if they did talk. We have to keep in mind that the context of this is an unbelievably large invasion happening on what is essentially borrowed time. It's taken decades of nationwide effort to prepare, years of waiting for other powers to be distracted, and tens of thousands of their countrymen's lives are on the line. They literally have not left themselves a path of retreat, as far as we know so far.

So if you're part of the vanguard that's sent out for the express purpose of killing all potential nuisances and make sure the main invasion isn't slowed down since time is of the essence, do you choose to possibly hamper or slow the invasion by letting an unexpected, unknown variable into the mix?

One that would need time to do work, time that the whole army does not have? Hinging upon the trust that their mighty force of several people will be able to accomplish the task of emptying an entire – particularly unreasonable – race from lands that they've occupied for thousands of years?

Not a chance. You immediately nail them to the wall with your 'mighty-slaying' engines of war just to be safe, because if you fuck this up your dwarven commanders will nail your ass to the wall instead.

### [TeK](#)

So. Continuing one of my previous thoughts, why can't she just talk with dwarves? Aqua said so, she is a powerhouse worth treating with. She can even offer to take drow on the surface for no cost of dwarven lives. I mean yeah, it'll give away her position, but dwarves are aware of current situation, surely, they are aware of the Catherine Foundling.

### *Gunslinger*

All of this is contingent on the Dwarfs trusting her word that the Drow would simply leave. Most likely their tenets mean they'd rather fight to the death than leave with a whimper.

Plus I get the sense that the Dwarves are rightfully confident they can steamroll the Drow easily enough

### *Rook*

For it to work they'd be so in awe of a single surface dweller who doesn't even have enough prestige to ward off a politically motivated crusade, that they'd risk compromising what may be the most expensive invasion the continent has ever seen.

And even then only if they were so unbelievably enamoured with her relatively mundane -Villainous- reputation as to put their faith in her ability to remove an entire backstabbing, murderous race from the Everdark.

At least it might make it easier to convince them when they see that she's brought with her a jaw-dropping host of... two people, a collar ghost, and some captured drow serfs

Seriously though I'm doubting even Catherine even has much faith in her ability to square things away neatly, let alone the dwarves. This isn't a story where everyone decides to roll over in the face of the hero(ine)'s main character aura

### [TeK](#)

Well, if she crosses them, Callowan cities are getting sunk underground. Going out in the open has it's downsides, true, but also it shows that you came in the good faith. She can also offer to kill them herself if they would refuse to leave.

All that aside, it still does not answer a question of why she didn't try to treat with dwarves. Unless she did and it went horribly wrong and now she refuse to talk about it. Would make sence though.

### *Rook*

The question isn't what reason she would have to treat with the dwarves. What reason do the dwarves have to treat with her?

If she brought all of callow, all of the woe, and every legion at her command with her she still might not have enough capital to make the kingdom under change their plans. This is a kingdom that can go toe to toe with the dead king, whom her betters on the surface dread the possibility of provoking.

But she doesn't have the kingdom of callow and all her legions with her. She's got two people and some pathetic Drow prisoners. What could she possibly offer them that would be enough incentive for them to change any plans regarding an undertaking of this scale? Why would they even bother wasting time instead of turning her into mighty kodrog 2 to be extra safe?

The answer is nothing. She has no capital to negotiate with, so she doesn't entertain the idea as a first second or third choice. The same way the king of Zimbabwe would have no place walking up to the vanguard of allied forces on D-Day and trying to negotiate.

*the verbiage ecstatic*

I mean, you could say the same thing about treating with the Drow... what can she possibly offer them that makes her think this expedition is worth trying in the first place?

*the verbiage ecstatic*

I mean, you could say the same thing about treating with the Drow... what can she possibly offer them that makes her think this expedition is worth trying in the first place?

*Ravin*

ah but that would ruin the story...besides there is no guarantee that these dwarves are briefed on surface events, would they need to be? i mean beyond being told that no-one is paying attention at this time

[TeK](#)

Oh come on guys, you never let me have a peaceful solution. For all we know the dwarf commander is a really kind and trusting person.

*MetruX*

Peacefull solution? Okay, I prescribe you to take a month of leave from the guide and go read something nice, like Eragon



or Metaworld Chronicles. Then you come back, ready for the full on 24/7 world of conflict we got here XD

*kelioez*

Bruh, don't call eragon nice(sarcastically, I assume), it might have a happy end and not too many people die but the storyline and world building is top tier and it's pacing is smooth af.

*Rook*

You are a soldierdwarf. Or even an officerdwarf. You firmly believe dwarves are the best and everyone else is trash.

You have some power in the field but nowhere near the top echelons of society and the privileges/knowledge that follow. You know what your superiors deem it necessary to know and what you pick up on your own time.

You're serving as part of the vanguard in a genocidal invasion where your orders are to kill everything that moves, nothing escapes. You meet unexpected moving things while preparing to kill expected moving things. Do you:

- A) immediately treat with said unexpected moving things, contrary to orders.
- B) immediately murder said unexpected moving things, per orders

[TeK](#)

Welp, what would you do if

- A) Those tings refuse to get murdered
- B) They came under the flag of truce
- C) They just don't die!
- D) Things don't attack you
- E) And also can't be killed
- F) While trying to talk to you
- ?

*Rook*

The premise of the entire story has been that special named characters aren't anything close to one-man-armies. Black has made it a very specific point to illustrate that even previous Black Knights – who could wield power that made Amadeus look like a child – have died to a common soldier's blade out of exhaustion.

The kingdom of Callow's great shining prince died during the Conquest by being swarmed by fucking goblins.

Catherine isn't a pushover, but this is far more than a mundane army and she's a denizen of Calernia, not dragonball z earth. If the vanguard was a fifth the size of what it is now, she and archer would still get squashed in a head-on confrontation.

*Nathan Bellis*

I think it would be more accurate to say that armies matter, but only so long as they have Named of their own to back them up.

I mean, high-tier Named absolutely can destroy armies all on their own- look at Catherine freezing thousands of wights solid in an instant back in book 3. The real problem is that if you expend all your energy and narrative weight destroying your enemies army, they can just come out and kill you at their leisure once you've exhausted yourself. Thus, you end up with the fine balancing act we see in canon, where it's rank foolishness for a Named to march off to war without an army, but just as foolish to expect your army to carry you to victory.

*Ravin*

- A) everything can be murdered
- B) its never been mentioned whether dwarves recognise the same truce rules as the surface
- C) see A
- E) see C
- F) assuming the dwarves speak the same languages as Cat,

most likely they will run into some dwarven sentry, who will attack (as ordered) and things will go downhill from there....there is nothing quite like having an army of angry people whose arms are perfectly posed at approximate castration hight.

*Drd*

But Cat, Archer and Akua are women, why would they worry about arms perfectly posed at approximate castration hight...? o\_0

*werafdsaew*

She is a powerhouse compared to other human powers. The Kingdom Under won't be impressed as they're the real power.

*Someguy*

Well, if found out, Cat can simply claim that she's here on a shopping trip for both weapons and armies & it's wouldn't be a lie.

## *Gunslinger*

I'm totally not surprised there's Dread Emperor Massacre. I bet Cat would have loved all the High lord's getting cut down.

Lots of Dwarven politics info in this chapter that made it super interesting. Ohh and we also get an explanation as to how the underground folk feed themselves. Good stuff all around.

On a side note I was pondering on the thought that the Bard played a part in setting the Dead King lose which set the Dwarves in motion which might lead to Cat getting her Drow army. How much of this was the Bard's play? I feel like she's become the Simurgh of the Guide verse where everything is her plot.

## [Javvies](#)

It's Dread Empress Massacre **the First**.

Which implies that there's at least one more Massacre.

## *Ravin*

yes, well triumphant is also referred to as "the first" (though she also gets "and only")

## [Rey d`Tutto](#)

Anyone else thinking Dread Empress Massacre is Cat?

## *Morgenstern*

"The First" is basic throne name shit. Throne name counts only ever say anything about what came BEFORE you, NEVER anything about what comes after, as you cannot know that at the time of your coronation. 😊

Example: You could be the 18th and there does not have to be a 19th (but there COULD come one in times to come, you'll never know). But there certainly do have to be 17 others before you. 😊

## *Morgenstern*

It is something special to be "the first of their name", though, that's why people say \*that\*, too, even though it's kinda self-explanatory.

Mostly, if a kingdom/empire has reached some age, people will just get names from some (or rather many) predecessors.

## [Javvies](#)

As I understand things, if you are the first one to use your Reign name, you are normally referred to without a number until there's a second person using your reign

name, then you're referred to as The First and the new one is referred to as The Second.

Triumphant being referred to as First and Only to me implies that Triumphant is no longer considered an option to be chosen as a reign name. That the name Triumphant had been retired. Sort of like when sports teams will retire the jersey number of a great player – nobody else gets that number.

Ie, it's Pope John Paul the Second, Pope Benedict the Sixteenth, and Pope Francis (no number until there's a Pope Francis the Second).

*Rook*

A plan hinging on Catherine's subtlety and ability to remain undetected .

I see no possible way this could go badly.

[wyaldriddler](#)

"`The last few years of my existence would have been a lot more pleasant if that were actually a metaphor.`"

Hah!

Hahhahahahahahahahahaahahahahahah!

[Javvies](#)

That's a reasonable theory.

And the motive – containing the Dead King, is not a bad one.

Waiting for the Dead King to be distracted isn't a terrible idea either – it's certainly going to be better and easier than if he weren't distracted and decided to actively contest their attempts to contain him.

Of course, that implication ultimately saddles Cat, if she succeeds, with responsibility for the Drow. Either to find somewhere to settle them and keep them under control or to use them up until they are few enough left to kill them all.

And it isn't like the Drow are popular with anyone, which will cause Cat more problems.

*Azure*

Its also a huge opportunity for the DK to strike at the dwarves. Seriously I'm trying to figure out why he hasn't gone for those lanterns. They think he's distracted but meanwhile he's just waiting to take them out.

*Justin*

Not a huge fan of this chapter. I appreciated bringing together thus far disparate elements in the Dead King and the Dwarves but the Archer/Catherine banter felt forced and the Drow as a whole are just not that interesting. They are coming off weak and lacking in identity, which makes me regret that so much time is being spent on them.

*Djinn O'Cide*

"The last few years of my existence would have been a lot more pleasant if that were actually a metaphor"

Doesn't this sentence dramatically change the nature of the story as a whole? Thus far, the narrator has been using pretty much entirely present-ish tense, as if she's describing events as they unfold, or at least as they occurred in the recent past.

Now, suddenly, she's switched locations in time—and form also. She's suddenly describing events which happened in a more distant past—while implying that currently she is a being who no longer exists...but remains able to tell the story.

*PapaWalrus*

I think in this case "last" is not "final", "last" is being used as "previous" (see Definition 2 here: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/last?s=t>)

[Javvies](#)

No, it works fine as is.

In this context, read "last few years" as "previous few years". Similar to "the last few days the weather has been awful for anyone on the Mid-Atlantic in the USA".

The "of my existence" would probably be "of my life", except Cat's body isn't exactly alive – or consisting of biological processes – these days.

More broadly, it's a reference to Akua's Folly having been a thing that actually happened.

*Morgenstern*

"of my life" always implies "of my life SO FAR". It does NOT always imply a recount via someone on their deathbed or even already a shade looking back at their life, that's just some relatively seldomly used narrative trick.

*Morgenstern*

I.e. it's a perfectly fine sentence for the -Cat of that very moment in her story- to say.

[TeK](#)

Oh, come on, they're like puppies. A big, dark, murderous puppies of the Night.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Whoever generated this Night thing needs a clip around the ear, frankly. Because nightlife isn't all stabby-stabby, kill-or-be-killed.

Families den up at night while their children play (in the smallest possible hours, usually making a racket); those for whom night is their main shift go about their active lives doing creative or destructive things while being safe from eagles; stories get told; crafts get crafted on by firelight, main meals get eaten; it is the best time for life in hot deserts... and so on and so forth.

The drow got majorly short-changed and should demand their money back. 😏

[alvibo](#)

If it's so bad to provoke dwarves I wonder why Cat doesn't use her powers to change the appearances of herself and others as she's done with Akua once already. Using Winter to any meaningful extent would still be a giveaway, but at least she wouldn't risk as much just meeting with dwarves somewhere along the road.

*Morgenstern*

Are you suggesting impersonating dwarves to get through? (Just what this comment made me think of.)  
Sounds hilarious... to see how it failed, of course. Because I don't see that working in the Guideverse. Or at least not without other problems arising from doing so, like being "caught" as a dwarf moving away from their line, not doing what they're supposed to do. 😏

*Morgenstern*

And yeah, they totally won't take THAT as (even more) offensive, if found out ^^

*nick012000*

Akua's speculation on the Dwarf's motivation is interesting. I just assumed they were ideologically-driven to murder all the drow for having the gall to live underground.

*MetruX*

Why mean... Why can't it be both?

*Shaerick 68*

Dwarves that flood places with !!MAGMA!! to ward off an undead threat? Wonder if they got a fortress called Boatmurdered...

*Morgenstern*

I instantly had to think of the Hobbit. \*wistful

*Morgenstern*

(The movie I mean. With the "undead" in the sentence being replaced by "dragon".)

[anonymous4968](#)

Dread Emperor StarkRavingMad the First was a ride.

*Antoninjohn*

Procer is above ground and away from the little bearded folk so why don't you settle the Drow there then it's Procer's problem

*RanVor*

Because the Dead King is on the march. Procer will need everything it has to stop him and adding new threats to the mix will only increase the chances of failure. Cat doesn't want them to fail. She needs the Principate on its knees, not six feet under.

*Aston*

Drow get to move to Arcadia.

Best. Move. Ever.

*Oshi*

You joke but I'm actually thinking this is exactly what she might do.

*Drd*

Favourite comment, had me in stitches. :]

*GreenSunLuminary*

Aww, hell, I just realised, the kingdom under are practically memetic Dwarf Fortress dorfs aren't they? What with the refusal to acknowledge ownership of other races, and the ludicrous overkill responses to any slight, and tunnels filled with magma, and the only thing that ever stopped them was High level FUN being summoned into their tunnels

*Decius*

That penultimate sentence barely isn't a metaphor. It's at least unforgivably hyperbolic. When was the last time Cat saw literal daylight? Plus, Liesse wasn't flying when she had to murder her way to the top of it.

*Me*

... Is it just me, or Cat is drowning in puns?

*superkeaton*

Ah, the refugee ploy. Chancey, but predicted.

*Morgenstern*

I kinda wonder why they didn't just think of using the refugees from Praes to till the fields, seeing how they're worried they won't have enough hands left to till the fields / risk a hunger crisis... why the focus on needing an \*army\*? Which could do much, much worse things, if they don't behave than people on the fields could...

Nationalism?? (AKA don't let Callowans take the field, so they don't die, use other people?)

*Morgenstern*

I mean, as if it seems you could trust the people from the Everdark, be they "drow" OR "meat" any better than the refugees from Praes. If you're so afraid of betrayal, why look to someone who has seemingly made betrayal their shtick even WORSE (down to the last rungs of society, no matter if they lived their whole life as "meat" or not) – instead of the commoners from Praes (that Cat herself has more than once included in her thoughts about how the peasants etc. are just normal innocent people going about everyday business, downtrodden and not responsible for what the nobles do, like anywhere else), even though they are bound to have some \*agents\* in their middle? SOME agents versus ALL OF THEM being all about what you fear. This current plot seems somewhat forced and/or Cat thrown the idiot ball to me, considering this part of the whole thinking-through what you need to hold Callow "above water" and, most of all, FED. Because tilling the fields seemed to be the most prominent reason WHY she can't have every one of her peasants trained for the killing field, i.e. not wanting their volunteering all \*that much\*... or did I miss something there? oO

*DD Durnell*

The direction of this story will ruin Cat's plan of eventual retirement/abdication, assuming drow relocation to Callow is in



the cards.

A race of stabbing murder faces must be controlled with a firm hand, lest they kill off productive, innocent citizenry. Unless they abandon their moronic tenets, Cat will need to stay in permanent control to keep them as docile as possible. Which will probably mean putting down sporadic rebellions, etc.

In the long term, they don't seem worth it for the short term gain of a handful of undisciplined troops.

Maybe if she kills off the Sve...

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## Chapter 58: Quiet

*"May the Heavens strike me down if I lie. Again."*

– Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck

No one in living memory had seen a dwarven army take the field, not on the surface anyway. Even with all the dangers swirling around us I'd been looking forward to that part. Since becoming the Squire I'd scrapped either with or to the side of most the famous militaries: the Legions of Terror, the Spears of Stygia, Helikean exiles, both fae Courts. My own people in rebellion, Akua's host of old breed Praesi. The Tenth Crusade too, though in all fairness I'd seen neither hide nor hair of soldiers that weren't Proceran in the northern campaign. There was little left to account for. The other cities of the League were hardly known for their soldiery – apparently Bellerophon didn't even have career officers, which just boggled the mind – and Ashur was primarily a naval power. The Dead King and the Chain of Hunger were the last two contenders, since the elves didn't really fight wars. I'd be facing the former sooner or later, and the latter was allegedly more horde than host. With the drow having proved to be a pack of squabbling assholes bleeding themselves over the right to be Creation's ricketiest demigods, the only force of note that remained was the Kingdom Under. Juniper, I thought, would have given her right hand to stand in my shoes right at this moment.

Indrani had led us to the same perch she'd used on earlier trip, and for all that it felt overly exposed it did give us a perfect view of what took place below. She hadn't been overselling the size of the cavern, I quickly found out. Large as Laure might, if anything, be an understatement. There were a lot more people in Callow's capital, of course. Maybe half the cavern was taken up by a lake, which to my mild interest revealed itself to be another food source for the locals. There were fish farms, walled in with stones, and what I was pretty sure was crab traps though

the creatures writhing inside didn't look like any crab I'd seen before. Most of the rest was 'farmland'. Raised stones covered with thick lichen, mushrooms patches and what looked like some strange cousin of potatoes wherever the dirt was thick enough. Most of that was now occupied by the dwarven vanguard. The only drow holdout was the massive stalagmite in the back that Indrani had mentioned, though she hadn't done the sight of it justice with her short description.

At the base, it was about as thick as fortress. Archer had labelled the path up as a spiral, but the angle was too sharp for the term to really fit. It zig-zagged across the sides of the stalagmite with precision too defined to be anything but manmade, the parts of the path that passed between the stone spire and the wall of the cavern effectively tunnels. There'd been tents there before, but they'd been flattened or taken away by the drow awaiting the assault. Which was coming soon, there were no two ways about it. I could tell as much just by the way the army had been positioned. At the bottom of the stalagmite a force of three thousand was standing patiently, and I'd almost let out a whistle at my first good look. Dwarves were known for their heavy infantry as well as their lethal contraptions, but these soldiers went a step further than I'd expected. It was like looking at walking barrels of steel. It was plate, in the sense that their armour wasn't mail, but layered so thickly no a spot of dwarf could be seen underneath. Not even the famous beards: the helmets bore face-covering masks that ended in a sculpted steel beard where I assumed their actual beards lay protected. The weight of that should be too heavy for even the famously physically strong dwarves to be able to move in, so while there were no runes to be seen on the surface I assumed some had been inscribed beneath. To a dwarf, they bore long halberds with steel shafts that weighed enough even Hakram would have difficulty swinging one around.

They're weren't infantry so much as a company of walking battering rams.

The five thousand remaining dwarves were less heavily armoured, at least. Three divisions of a thousand each wore ornate but otherwise unremarkable plate, with square shields and war hammers. They all had crossbows on their back. I was classifying them as regulars in my mind, though in anyone else's army they would be heavies. The last thousand was... interesting. The most lightly armoured of the lot, with only steel cuirasses over leather and plumed helmets that left the faces bare. They attended to the three dozen war machines the vanguard had set up in a crescent facing the stalagmite. If Juniper would have given a hand to see the battle, then Pickler would have eaten her firstborn to get a good peek at those. About half the machines looked to be some kind of fat steel ballistas raised on wheeled platforms. Not even the rope was, well, rope. It looked to be some kind of woven metal chord. There were wagons full of

spherical projectiles next to them, two per ballista. The remaining half of the engines was hard to classify. The basic shape was like an onager's, more or less small and portable catapults. What a scorpion was to a ballista, though my sappers would string me up for making so broad a comparison. The similarity ended at the shape, though. The steel base had been nailed to the floor with spikes almost as large as the engine itself, and instead of spheres to throw the already-loaded projectiles looked like elongated battering rams in a metal I did not recognize.

I wasn't sure what those were meant for, but I doubted the drow would enjoy it.

The last of the dwarves were maybe two hundred, including what I was pretty sure was their command staff. Their armour was closest to that of the regulars, but lined with enough precious stones to steady Callow's treasury for a good year. Unlike the grunts they were mounted. No horses, though. Best way I could put it was the unholy offspring of a lizard and an insect: the creatures were scaled and their reptilian heads had an impressive set of fangs, but their legs numbered six and were strangely segmented. They had three claws at the end of those, though they looked like they'd been blunted. Those officers were only around four dozen in number, and the remainder was unlike any other troops I'd seen so far. They wore heavy cuirasses and mail beneath them, but no helmet and both hair and beard were almost obsessively braided. Their weapons were not standardized, ranging from greatsword to some kind of chain with spiked weights at the end, but the eye-catching part was the trophies dangling down their bodies. Skulls and claws, stingers and broken weapons. Indrani caught me looking and leaned closer.

"Deed-seekers," she whispered. "Met of few in Refuge. They're after things they're not supposed to get according to other dwarves, so they're trying to earn enough glory that they become worthy of getting them. Some came up to hunt in the Waning Woods. Heard others go through the gate in Levant to have a tussle with the stuff in the woods there."

"They any good?" I whispered back.

"Ran across one who broke his hammer on a mantichore's horns so he beat it to death with his bare hands," she said. "And I'm not talking a juvenile, the thing was fully grown. They're pretty hardcore. Polite for dwarves, though. Those I met knew surface tongues and they were willing to pay for guides."

"So crazy of the dangerous kind," I grunted. "Just what we needed."

The conversation ended there and for good reason: the dwarves were on the move. There was no horn, no trumpet or warning. The

ballistas just shot their first volley and the battle began. The projectiles, round orbs of steel, smacked into the upper reaches of the stalagmite. They'd been denied a better target: the drow were holing up out of sight. Rock shattered under steel and the whole spire shook. My brow rose at the sight. Those hit a lot harder than anything my goblins had ever cooked up.

"Flushing out the drow, you think?" Indrani said.

"If that stalagmite is solid rock, it'll take them a while to make a dent even with strong engines," I said.

Twenty heartbeats later the second volley hit, hitting the same places with impressive accuracy. The drow remained in hiding, which I honestly couldn't fault them for. Between the crossbows and the siege if they made a stand anywhere in the open they'd get slaughtered. Their best shot was to make the dwarves come to them and hold a narrow passage hidden away from the engines. Alas for the locals, it was not to be. Three volleys later the entire stalagmite *cracked*. I could see the fracture going through the side, jagged and large enough to be easily visible even from where Indrani and I were laying on the floor. The entire top third of the spire had been cracked, at least on the side facing the dwarves. Had the thing been hollow? Maybe. Still, crack or not the weight of that upper third was keeping it in place. My eyes moved to the second kind of engines, anticipating there would be answer to that. My instincts had been correct. The almost-onagers were being seen to, long steel chains being attached to the back of the ram-like projectiles. The chains led to matching cranked wheels, already nailed into the ground.

"They're going to pull the damned thing down," I murmured.  
"Gods."

How? Even if they put dwarves to work the crank, they shouldn't be strong enough to apply sufficient pressure. The rams flew and sunk into the stone like a knife through butter, shivering after coming to a rest. There'd been sorcery at work, I thought. Blades unfolding inside to give greater grip? Impossible to tell. Anyhow, my first question got an answer moments later. Only a single dwarf attended to each crank, but the moment they laid hands on them the wheels lit up with runes. Not even thirty heartbeats later, the whole upper third of the spire came toppling down. They'd angled it so it fell into the water instead of on their own troops, though the great splash wet a few of them anyway. My eyes narrowed as I returned my attention to the stalagmite. It was hollow. The drow inside were swarming like a hive that'd just gotten kicked. The angle of steel ballistas was adjusted, projectiles from the second wagons loaded, and the volley arced up moments later. The spheres were stone this time, not steel. I did not wait long to learn why: at the summit of

their arc, just above the hollow, they burst. Burning rain fell down, reaping a harvest of screams and death.

"Lava," I quietly said. "That was fucking lava."

"I mean, it's not like they're ever going to run out," Indrani mused. "I can see the logic behind it."

"Don't you try to make it sound like it's reasonable to shoot *magic lava stones* at people, Archer," I hissed. "Who even does that?"

"The dwarves, evidently," she said.

Sadly, throttling her might have given away our position so it would have to wait. Our time to move was fast approaching, though. The moment the dwarven infantry engaged we'd be trying our luck at sneaking through. Our exit tunnel had already been picked out, and we had a route across that wouldn't take us too close to the fighting. The drow had been on the defensive so far, but since it'd become clear that the dwarves had no intention to climb up and the alternative was remaining inside a hole that'd slowly get filled with molten rock they were finally coming out. It was the first time I was having a look at a drow force that wasn't already a pile of corpses, so they earned my full attention. *This is not a professional army*, was my first thought. Even Proceran levies had officers and an order of battle, but the drow? This was a tribe of warriors, with not a single soldiers among it. I could make out the hierarchy by the way they were equipped. No steel to be found on any of them, but there were tiers of a sort. The lowest of the low wore skins and leathers, armed with spears and blades. I winced when I noticed some of those blades were *bone*. That wouldn't even scratch the dwarven armour.

Higher up the ladder, and fewer in number, there were drow in obsidian and stone. The equipment was not uniform, some of them having what I'd consider decent armour while others wore essentially the same as the first batch only with dangling bits of stronger material over it. Their weapons were mostly iron, of passable make. They'd at least manage to leave a mark on the enemy before being slaughtered. The last and rarest were those I assumed to be Mighty. Only a dozen of them, but they stood out starkly from the rest. Garbed in long flowing robes of Night with shifting plaques of iron in it, they moved swift as arrows through the charging crowd. Spears were the only armament they seemed to wield, with what I was pretty sure were sharpened ruby heads. Wasn't sure how that would measure up to steel, though I did remember rubies were supposed to be one of the harder gemstones. The whole muster of the sigil was maybe two thousand. They'd get brutalized when they got to the bottom of the spire and engaged the dwarven heavy infantry, but the dwarves seemed disinclined to allow even that.

One of the mounted officers brought a horn to his lips, the first signal of the battle, and the deep call got the regulars moving. The square shields were set down to cover their bodies, crossbows taken out and the proverbial fish in the barrel got that same proverbial end. It was a relief to see that their firing rate was lesser than that of my legionaries. The range, though, was at least double. I would not want to fight those on an open field. The bolts scythed through the drow as they kept charging down the ramp, though only for the lesser warriors. The rest melded into the shadow-state when they saw the volleys approach. The ballistas had never ceased firing, slowly emptying the wagons of projectiles. Lava kept raining down into the hollow spire. The screams hadn't ended either, and I was fairly sure the only warriors in the cavern were the ones charging to their doom. It would have been interesting to see how Mighty fared against dwarven infantry, but I didn't intend to stick around until the final clean up. Their attention should be on the drow, for now, and that was our way out. I elbowed Archer and gestured towards our back. She nodded and we crawled out of sight before rising. The others were a short ways back, Akua keeping an eye on them.

They'd been waiting on us, and there was little need for conversation when time finally came to move. The plan was fairly simple. Indrani had the rope and hook to allow us to climb down to the floor of the cavern below, and the drow should have no issue managing it. The only thing up in the air was whether or not our friends would pick up on my use of Winter, and there was no real way to know that without trying it. Glamour shouldn't draw as much attention as more direct uses, so it was as calculated a risk as we could take. I returned back to the edge, and with a deep breath allowed Winter to slither through my veins. I kept it simple, erasing our presence to the senses – I wasn't sure whether the dwarven mounts could smell us at a distance, but I wasn't about to take the risk. The working wasn't too complicated, but it would take concentration to keep it going. The moment it settled, I glanced down at the battle. The dwarves had not stirred, which was promising. I gestured for the others to begin climbing down.

It was a tense half-hour before everyone made it to the cavern floor, shimmying down before Archer tugged back her rope. I'd not been certain whether or not I could keep the glamour going while having to focus on going down the rope, so an alternative solution had been required. The working should take care of the sound, and that was the important part. I glanced down and shrugged. Only thirty feet or so. I'd fallen down worse before. I leapt. Wings would make this much easier, admittedly, but they would require drawing deeper on my mantle. Besides, I mused even as the ground came ever closer, I'd been meaning to find out something. If I could turn myself into outright mist, finer manipulations should be possible as well. I landed on the stone in a crouch, having meddled with my legs, and found mixed

results. Strengthening my knees had succeeded at making sure they wouldn't break, which had been my main objective. Sadly, it'd also torn up whatever smoke and mirrors passed for my leg muscles these days. Half a win, I decided, adjusting my cloak where the fall had put it in disarray. The muscles were already reforming. Next time I'd have to see if I could make the entire legs solid without rupturing my insides above them.

The others clustered around me without a word. I'd made it clear that the closest to me they stood, the easiest it was to keep up the glamour. Our way through was still open, thank the Gods. Dwarven forces had been placed to prevent the drow in the spire from escaping, not occupy the whole cavern, which was too large for that regardless. It meant that if we kept close to the wall on the left side, we avoided coming close to the battle. In a strange and silent pilgrimage we tread through moss and mushrooms until we were hugging the wall and began our way through. My control was not fine enough to erase our footsteps, I'd warned them. It took longer to go through while avoiding leaving visible marks on the ground, but there was no other option. I'd never kept a working going this long before, and now I knew why I'd unconsciously avoided it: the longer I did the more I could feel Winter's influence creeping into my mind, even if I was drawing no deeper on my power. Fortunately, Akua was there for me to shunt the influence into. It was almost tenser to stalk through unseen than take part in the fighting, I thought. Battle I knew well, but this? It wasn't my wheelhouse. It took us most an hour to get across, and by then there was not a single living drow left.

I'd not had a good look at the last of the fighting, but the dwarven heavy infantry hadn't been shaken by the doomed charge of the Mighty in the slightest. The regulars had gone up the slope afterwards, into the hollow part, and soon after the screams had gone silent. There'd never been a chance the drow would win this, and the outer rings were supposed to be the weakest part of the Everdark, but if this was a sign of what was to come... Well, I didn't fancy the chances of the drow as a whole to turn back this invasion. I allowed the thought to fade as we neared our chosen tunnel. Archer hadn't had a chance to take a look inside, but she'd noted it was the most lightly guarded. Ivah had gone through one close to it, on its way to the Gloom, and assured us that after another large abandoned cavern it led into a mess of small paths. Enough that it would be more or less impossible to keep an eye on all of them. It was a detour, taking us to the northeast when the quicker route would have been straight north, but a few additional days were well worth keeping out of sight. I was an old hand at disaster, by now, so my nerves grew more ragged as we neared the exit. If this was going to fail, it was going to fail now.

There were dwarves near the tunnel, but only a small company. Less than a hundred. It was my first time coming this close to their kind, but I did not slow to take a better look. Distractions were the enemy of this not-fight. I did note they were regulars, however. Those in layered armour might not be too common. More importantly, they were dawdling near the tunnel and not blocking the exit. We passed them by, step by step. I felt a dim spike of fear when a pair began talking loudly in some dwarven tongue, but they began brawling not long after and I let out a relieved breath. My shoulders loosened as we left them behind, allowing myself a strangled laugh. I wasn't a fool, of course. I wouldn't drop the glamour until we were much further in. But it looked like – no, I wasn't going to finish that fucking thought. *Never count the chickens, Catherine, even when they're hatched. The Gods will shove them back in the fucking eggs just to spite you.* Being absolutely still in the middle of the metaphorical woods, we pressed on. Archer took the lead, Ivah at her side, and they took us through a handful of short passages in quick succession. It was maybe another quarter hour until we reached the large cavern Ivah had mentioned.

Abandoned was something of a misnomer, as it was currently full of dwarves. Slightly more problematic was the way my glamour was ripped apart before we even entered. Runes shone on the tunnel walls, panes of force fell down around us and dwarven yells sounded in the distance. I looked up angrily.

"Can I really not have a *single* chicken?" I complained. "You tight-fisted assholes."

---

*Droughtbringer*

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Go vote everyone! Should be fun, think of all the amazing satisfaction that you will have by knowing that, thanks to your contribution, the Guide will be on top!

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Go vote everyone! Should be fun, think of all the amazing satisfaction that you will have by knowing that, thanks to your contribution, the Guide will be on top!

[TeK](#)



YEEEEEEES. THE DWARVEN ANSWER TO EVERYTHING! POUR SOME LAVA ON IT!!

*Decius*

There's more than one way to skin a !!Drow!!.

*Antoninjohn*

Cat you can shape shift into a giant chicken with the power of Winter

*Someguy*

No chickens Cat. The Gods Above and Below do not play ball unless you play Stupid Good/Evil on their terms.

*Jane*

Look at the bright side, Cat; you wanted more information on Dwarven forces, and now you're going to see them firsthand! You missed most of the massacre, so this is the perfect opportunity to make up for it!

Joking aside, it was a real missed opportunity to leave Thief behind. Pinching some of that fancy, expensive armor could *totally* have solved Callow's budget issues, and swiping a siege engine or two could have really advanced Callow's military science – if they were willing to risk exposing the fact that they were the ones who stole it to the rest of the dwarves, of course. Ah, well, not like they knew they'd be seeing dwarves down here...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Given that Cat's glamour got torn to shreds, I'd not bet on even Thief's dimensional pocket going unbreeched. And, getting caught with dwarven loot = whole new vistas of badness. <\_<

*RanVor*

Assuming they would manage to sneak away with the armor, which is unlikely, nobody right in their mind would buy a stolen dwarven property.

*Jane*

You can pry out the gemstones from the armor, and sell those separately. Nobody'll think you were crazy enough to steal a bunch of rubies from dwarves,

It's a waste of fine craftsmanship, but it would still solve their money problems.

*Dylan Tullos*

Jane:

"Stupid enough to steal from dwarves" is a popular saying in Calernia.

It's deliberate exaggeration, of course, because no one is actually stupid enough to steal from dwarves. This is a people famous for their disproportionate retribution. One gemstone could cost you one town; one dead dwarf could cost you Laure.

*Jane*

Yes, but they're in the middle of Drow territory at the moment, a place that no surface-dweller has bothered going to in centuries (Ranger aside) – if they were to wait until the Dwarves made camp, and Thief yanked a few suits of fancy armor under cover of invisibility, wouldn't it be far more likely to for the Dwarves to blame the Drow than a human they never saw?

Afterwards, they could recut the gems (just as an additional precaution), and sell them in Mercantis, using Thief's agents in Procer for further caution.

With this much money (even accounting for the fact that Cat was likely exaggerating their value, and the consequences of unloading so many gems on the market at once), she could easily levy Callow's soldiers and *import* enough grain to avoid crippling the country; even better, with one of the continent's most fertile countries not producing for the year, she'd probably end up causing famine across everywhere else on the continent, and be one of the only countries in fighting shape next year.

The gold would be a more reliable ally than the Drow, and if she could return home after shadowing the Dwarven army for a single night, that would be far less likely to result in conflict than going on a long quest like she is now. Don't you agree?

I mean, setting aside the actual story for a moment and the fact that Cat's going to find some important things down there, of course.

*RanVor*

It's all very cool and stuff, but you're missing a very important point: it's not about money. The people who are so eager to be recruited now aren't going to be stationed in the outposts. They're going to be thrown

into what might very well be the bloodiest meatgrinder since Triumphant. Even with allies, the casualties are going to be *horrific*. And when they die, who is going to take care of those fields? You can buy enough grain to last a few years, but it won't do you any good when your workforce is crippled for *generations*.

### [filtern](#)

And the fact that no one would sell grain to her if she was an enemy, and she is an enemy to absolutely everyone. No one would willingly give Callow grain if they needed the supplies themselves.

### *Jane*

There's already a ton of refugees from Praes, and soon there are going to be a ton of refugees from Procer; if Cat were to establish communities for them in her own country, she should be able to replenish the losses. Being a Villain is a bit of a barrier, true, as is the traditional hostility between Procer and Callow – but when the Dead King is claiming principality after principality, that has a way of ending up overlooked.

That aside, though, the diminished workforce isn't as problematic as it seems – Callow's ability to grow food decreases with the population she'd be sending to war, true, but so too does their demand for food. The only reason she'd need to import food at all is because not *all* of them will end up dead in the war. And it's true that this will hamper Callow's ability to export food, leaving them with little in the way of currency... But it's unlikely that the imports Callow would require would exceed the amount they could sell a few sets of gems for. So long as she doesn't go crazy with the spending once peace is restored, she can probably sit things out for a generation.

*That* said, though, my argument was tailored along those lines mainly because I know how much Dylan disapproves for seeking an alliance with the Drow, so I thought I might as well portray this as an alternative :p . They say you ought know your audience, no?

### *RanVor*

Arguing with Dylan is a fool's errand. Trust me, I've tried.

*Snowfire1224*

Famine is the reason Praes attacks Callow in their so called cycle so I'm thinking that might not be such a good idea.

*Jane*

Eh, this is all assuming that Cat fights Praes – she won't need an army at all, otherwise. After she does, Praes won't be in any shape to fight Callow for a few years either, and the reduced food exports will hit Praes harshly, limiting their ability to invade until Callow recovers.

*nipi*

Also a good way to get the gnomes to look your way.

*Droughtbringer*

Interesting build up to next chapter as we either see the start of the Great Dwarven/Callowan war, or Cat actually learning to Negotiate. Either should be interesting.

[TeK](#)

What do you mean, "learn"? She is a renowned diplomat back on the surface, she said so herself!

*Jane*

Nah, Dwarves are quite famous for their love of beer over cheap wine.

[Javvies](#)

And good beer, at that.

Cheap/ bad alcohols are frowned upon, if not considered criminal.

That terrible stuff that Alaya and Amadeus were drinking would probably be considered a war crime.

*Isa Lumitus*

It would only be a war crime if it was actually used in war.

More likely, it would be considered a crime against alcohol, which might actually be worse.

*mavant*

Did you mean "alcohol abuse"

*Yotz*

"Greetings, fellow dwarves. We are your fellow dwarves, just like you and totally not spies, stand here doing normal dwarven things – like grumbling, and also grudging – just as we, dwarves, do. Pass along, fellow dwarves, there's nothing to see here."

*Jonnnney*

To be fair she is probably better suited than most. Her knowledge of the dead king's plans, origin, and defenses would be a decent bargaining chip. Plus with her sappers, her fae, and her woe she has loads of experience wrangling insane groups of people handling powers mortal men weren't meant to wield.

*SpeckofStardust*

...

...

I think diplomacy with dwarfs next chapter.

If only because in a straight up fight she'll lose.

*Someguy*

She can probably talk the dwarves into looting Levant (not stealing obviously, only dwarves can own things).

*SpeckofStardust*

Or they can identify her as a \*possible ally of the dead king\* and kill her for trespassing their rightful lands.

*IDKWhoitis*

I feel Catherine's penchant for rough language and roughhousing may actually be perfect diplomacy for Dwarfs. Especially if she trades an artifact or two.

*Yotz*

And so, after once again sifting through the Maxims, I think I have found a suitable one for the diplomatic solution to the puzzle of future short encounter:

*Ravin*

i actually think that no.17 is probably the best summation of this chapter though

*Yotz*

Quite. But we shouldn't forget №70. One should never forget №70...

*Death Knight*

What Maxims are these?

*WuseMajor*

The 70 Maxims of Maximally Effective Mercenaries, as curated here: [http://schlockmercenary.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Seventy\\_Maxims\\_of\\_Maximally\\_Effective\\_Mercenaries](http://schlockmercenary.wikia.com/wiki/The_Seventy_Maxims_of_Maximally_Effective_Mercenaries)

*Yotz*

As Major said.

№ 17, in particular, is a variation on Murphy's Law, and № 70 goes thusly

[Javvies](#)

Ah, Cat, you know this.

On the upshot there are dwarves who speak surface tongues nearby. And Cat, Archer, and Akua are clearly not drow, so the dwarves will want to know why they're there.

[sengachi](#)

Cat clearly needs to practice her glamour more. Fae monarchs are the kind of entities who show up unannounced to parties in the freaking Tower, not who get caught with their pants down by a few hastily wrought runes.

*Daemion*

I don't think there were ever any fae sneaking into the Tower. That place is warded so heavily, current Cat would struggle to get in already.

*Death Knight*

Quadruply so now since the current Warlock is a ward specialist.

*Jeff*

The dwarves drink and brawl and speak in an unintelligible tongue.

They also come from a land down under.

Dwarves are fantasy Australians, pass it on.

*Yotz*

PS: Hey, Sheoldred!

*superkeaton*

Don't be a hypocrite, Cat, you've lake'd a couple thousand yourself. And justifications, after all, only matter to the just.

And no, no chickens for you.

*Jonnnney*

It's too bad Masego couldn't make it. Lacking would work pretty fucking well underground.

*Rook*

You're good at cutting chickens in half, Catherine, not sneakily hatching them.

Thief has better odds of successfully assassinating a main antagonist than a foundling stealth mission being anything but a complete disaster.

*Dylan Tullos*

Rook:

"Foundling stealth mission" not recognized by Autocorrect.

Did you mean "Foundling stabs everyone", "Foundling burns everything", or "Exploding suicide goats"?

*nipi*

You had to mention the goats. Thanks for reminding me. I miss those.

[\*chris S\*](#)

Lava, lots of pointy weapons.... all we need now are the war elephants, and we're a proper Dorf Fortress army.

*Oui*

Can somebody explain why does Cat insist that bringing the drow to her kingdom is a good idea? They are the losing side in a war of extinction and they have proven themselves to be practically useless. What kind of mental gymnastics does she do to justify angering their continent's superpower in exchange for backstabbing rabble that gets stronger by killing other races? Say, Callowan civilians? It says quite a lot about her when Akua is the voice of reason.

*Cassiemouse*

My thoughts that are that if Cat can beat the Priestess of the Night she could use the principle of usurpation to replace the Night with Winter which would spread through out the entire nation and turn the Drow into an army of winter.

*Daemion*

Each Mighty is a match for a new Named and the rest of the drow make for excellent fodder. That they are useless against a proper dwarven army doesn't mean they wouldn't be a match against humans. The shadow teleport ability they have through the Night is quite nice as well.

Cat's goal is to have enough bodies to absorb the inevitable losses of war and she'd prefer if those weren't Callowans. The drow being backstabbing assholes makes it easier for her to sacrifice them later on.

*Dylan Tullos*

Daemion:

Humans have armies.

Drows have mobs.

Armies beat mobs, especially when the mob's leaders spend more time planning to kill each other than they do trying to fight outside enemies.

I don't doubt that Catherine would be willing to sacrifice the drow; I also don't doubt that the drow could figure that out and find a way to backstab her first. I suspect Malicia would be more than happy to help them with that.

*Yotz*

Drow are warriors. Armies consist of soldiers. One warrior will kill one soldier with ease. Ten warriors against ten soldiers – half and half outcome, hard to predict. One hundred soldiers will exterminate one hundred warriors with trivial effort. Try to field warriors as a footsoldiers, and all you'll ever get will be a massacre. They are by nature incapable to efficiently function in large groups, be the reason behind this incorrect usage of them by the HQ, or plain old prideful arrogance of a supposedly superior fighters. For the examples I'll refer any curious soul to Battle of Agincourt for the former, and Battle of Shiroshima for the latter.

For less truistic approach, Drow would be ideal special force units. Single persons or small groups capable of operating with great degree of independence, highly effective in stealth and disruption, guerrilla warfare, harassment and



terror campaigns. Highly specialized instrument with a quite narrow field of usage. One should never use SEAL teams nor Ranger Regiments for garrison duty and/or direct wall-on-wall confrontations.

Teel deer: basically, Drow are discount Faeries.

*Jane*

They've been useless against dwarves, widely considered to be a power that's completely suicidal to go against, and against Cat herself, a literal goddess. Against humans or undead, they're probably fine, though she might need to give them proper weapons first.

Furthermore, the raiding party she fought were the most worthless of the worthless, drained of all their power and sent out on a suicide mission to redeem themselves – and they still had a nifty trick that would arguably put them on par with the Doaine (butchered the spelling, my apologies), who would be considered the elite of Cat's forces. The settlement that the dwarves effortlessly destroyed were also considered the outcasts of Drow society, those who had been pushed out from the power struggles that define Drow existence, and who settled for merely surviving.

And, well, we didn't actually see these Drow *fight* – the dwarves pretty much just poured lava on them. They might have had some nifty tricks, or just been darned good fighters, but... We wouldn't know. They only had a few minutes in which to figure out how to stop what was, in essence, a bombardment with napalm – that they failed doesn't really speak that poorly of their skills, just of how terrifying it is to fight dwarves.

Also, she hasn't really said anything about bringing them to Callow – just noted that finding a new home for them is pretty good leverage when the dwarves are hell-bent on driving them from the underground. Also, there's little reason to think that the dwarves will care what happens to the Drow, so long as they're no longer in the Dwarves (newly claimed) caves.

All in all, now that she's come this far, she might as well see what she can salvage. I mean, the alternative is probably to wreck Callow for a generation – it's probably worth the risk, so long as she doesn't end up recognized if she ends up fighting any dwarves.

*NotQuiteHere*

It's cos of how the dead drow in the kingdom of the dead she fought was OP and kicked her ass.

*Snowfire1224*

That was an elf

*Snowfire1224*

She needs people who can take major losses where her people cannot because then there would be no one to till the fields and grow food.

*Digitize27*

Hmm, at first glance I thought the steel ballista might have been cannons, but Cat would definitely have commented on the sound they made, so I imagine they're more like giant ball-bearing slingshots. (Besides, I think gunpowder technology might be red-letter worthy)

The giant grappling hooks are interesting, in that the Dwarves brought them along at all. Seems they have some fortresses they want to be tearing down. This really is a full-scale invasion, not just an incursion.

*Jonnnney*

The kingdom under is the biggest dog on town, but even they aren't strong enough to fuck with the gnomes so gunpowder based weaponry isn't an option.

*Aston*

And Catherine manages to beat the entire Dwarven army.

In a drinking contest.

In reality she's a god who scares the hell out of them and they have been in fact invited by the Named Drow to weed out the weak.

Invited. Invaders.

Time for Cat to show her diplomacy skills.

By confusing everyone.

A young woman pretending she's not actually a God on the same level as the Dead King.

Vote for this web serial! Vote for greatest fiction!

*John*

Why are you being silly, Catherine? Now that the alarm's been raised, there's no point holding back on Winter, so just take a shortcut through Arcadia to the center of Drow territory.

*Dylan Tullos*

In a shocking surprise, the terrible plan was in fact terrible.

After several chapters of detailed discussions on how the drow were useless and the dwarves were terrifying, we finally saw exactly how the drow are less organized than peasant levies, while dwarves make the Legions of Terror look like a drunk in a bar fight.

Catherine is now risking a fight with the mightiest living nation in Calernia for the sake of an "army" with no discipline or loyalty. If she did recruit the drow, it would take Malicia about five seconds to make them a better offer and turn the Mighty against Callow.

This is quite possibly the stupidest thing Catherine could be doing.

*RanVor*

I'd ask if you have a better idea, but I already know you don't.

*MetruX*

Uhh... Guys... She is imprisoned right now, her fae powers just been 'canceled', so her only way out is diplomacy... Something no one has ever done with dwarfs... If we assume she can this time make some negotiation... Wasn't the absurdness of negotiating with dwarfs the reason they are out of the table for alliances? They are not Good, so maybe this could even end with her having some dwarven troops assisting her defences.

*Yotz*

I would go not with assist but with a trade of sort. Cat spares dwarves the effort of continuing costly campaign by taking all surviving drow away with her, and dwarves agree to not murderize her on the spot.

Which reminds me. We know that anything below certain depth is considered a property of Kingdom Under. But what about mountains?

I mean, would remnants of drow be able to settle inside the Whitecaps without aggravating the dwarves beyond the point of no return? Because this way Cat would be able to create a buffer state between Callow and Procer, with her and the Wild Hunt being a stick weighty enough to prod inevitable drowish (drowan?) incursions into the needed direction.

*Dylan Tullos*

Yotz:

The drow are murderous slavers. Even if Catherine was able to point them in the "right" direction, they'd be leveling up by murdering Proceran peasants.

The drow would inevitably get stronger, and just as inevitably turn on Catherine. Malicia wouldn't have any difficulty convincing them to backstab their saviour, and Catherine would soon find herself fighting on two fronts.

*Yotz*

>peasants

Same peasants who are the main source of proceran fantassins and materiels for the invading army. Who are also either murderous slavers, or murderous slaves, using your definitions. At which point such action would be acceptable, if outright evil.

>Drow growing stronger.

Just like they grew into the strongest nation of Calernia after Triumphant burned them, I suppose. Next point.

>saviour

Please, remind me where or when I ever talked about any kind of gratitude from the Drow towards Cat in the case of hypothetical "salvation".

Putting that aside – chiefly because you wouldn't be able to provide anything but straw – Malicia is far away and wields little to no personal power, only the power of institutions. To your regular Mighty she is a meat. Murderous Queen who can toy with any Mighty like it was a simple meat, and her retinue who will have no trouble in outdrowing the drow, are much closer. And they wouldn't have any difficulty convincing drow to backstab their new praesi benefactor in cruelest way possible.

In case you haven't noticed, Callow is already fighting on two fronts. Situation is dire enough that unleashing the Hidden Horror was considered an acceptable option. Arguably, Drow are better variant in regards to all things humane. Yes, their presence in the Whitecaps would lead to future conflict someday. Their absence in contemporary conflict, however, may lead to the absence of Callow, making the point of potential future conflict moot.

Their martial prowess or usefulness, though, is an open question. From the story so far, they wouldn't be able to serve Cat as intended cannon fodder. They are not without their uses, though – and, as a side boon, Cat

wouldn't have much grief over the drow killing procerans and procerans killing drow – whoever dies, Callow wins.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Having just been caught by the dwarves, Catherine risks a violent confrontation with a nation that could casually destroy every city in Callow. "Do nothing" would be a better idea than "provoke the notoriously violent and racist superpower". That said, I do have a better idea.

My plan is for Catherine to start actively assisting the Grand Alliance in the coming fight against the Dead King. She might be "Arch-Heretic of the East" for now, but when the dead start coming south, I suspect that the nations of Good will be willing to accept any help they can get. Catherine can save countless lives with portals and show Procer and the Levant how Callow is still committed to fighting the good fight.

It's funny how easy it is to come up with good ideas when you're trying to help people. Catherine should try it sometime, rather than trying to recruit an entire nation of Stupid Evil murderhobos as part of a "plan" that looks dumber by the day.

[Javvies](#)

Cat tried to join the side of Good. Then her attempts at peace got thrown back in her face, and then she got declared Arch-heretic of the East over Malicia, when every previous Arch-heretic of the East has been the reigning Dread Emperor or Empress. Oh, and basically all of Callow got declared heretical at the same time.

Also, with regards to Procer, Cat's current priority is holding her borders while she goes after Malicia. Cat has to deal with Malicia and Praes in a permanent, or at least lasting, way before she can do more than hold her western border.

Even ignoring the whole Arch-heretic of the East and associated issues, Cat has higher and more immediate priorities than the Dead King invading Procer – Malicia just tried to gut the hell out of Callowan government and military institutions. The Dead King may be zombie army marching down the road towards her, but Malicia is the facehugger jumping at her now.

*RanVor*

Ok, some most likely consequences of your “brilliant” plan: the Callowans are bled as a living shield against the undead because it’s the only thing those dirty heretics deserve, Callow is eviscerated by Malicia with impunity, Cat is deposed and executed for ultra-heresy, Callowan lands are partitioned and turned into principalities, Callowans rebel, brutal purges to eliminate the resistance, Callow is gone forever.

Cordelia didn’t put much effort into hiding what she intends to do after pressuring Cat into fighting her battles for her. And the fate of Callow is not only hers to decide.

*Dylan Tullos*

RanVor:

Most likely consequences of Catherine’s current plan; Catherine is distracted fighting against the Dead King, and comes back to find that her drow “allies” have murdered half of Callow to level up. The last time she made a deal with Classic Evil, Akua killed everyone in Liesse; do you think that the drow are less treacherous than Diabolist?

Everyone is going to have to bleed to stop the Dead King. If Callow tries to avoid doing their part, they’ll just guarantee that they stand alone when Procer is defeated and the dead come for them. The living can stand together or they can hang separately.

It’s worth noting that Cordelia’s people have spent thousands of years fighting against the Dead King, and they don’t whine about being “bled as a living shield”. They’re proud of doing their duty, even if they think the rest of Procer needs to pitch in and help.

Cat’s well-being is not important to anyone, least of all her. This isn’t about her happiness or future. It’s about what’s best for Callow, and what’s best for Callow is not being a neighbor of the Dead King.

Procer can’t just annex Callow; their allies in the Dominion and Ashur don’t want to see them with more territory. And after fighting the Dead King, they won’t be in a position to annex anyone. But even if it did somehow end with Callow divided into principalities, Callowans have fought a successful rebellion against the Principate before. Callow wouldn’t be “gone forever”, because they could simply rise up and overthrow their foreign overlords.

When one group of humans conquers another, rebellion is always possible. For that matter, life goes on; Callowans could still farm and live under the Principate. If the Dead King conquered Callow, he'd kill everyone in the country and raise their corpses to join his army. That's what Catherine should be afraid of, not those mean Crusaders who don't want Callow ruled by a Villain.

*RanVor*

Whatever. I'm not making the mistake of getting in a prolonged discussion with you again.

*RanVor*

Actually, the problem of the untrustworthiness of the drow is laughably easy to resolve by dropping them in the middle of the Wasteland. Nobody expects them, nobody has any idea what they're capable of – a perfect distraction. They will have enough of an initial advantage over the unprepared enemy to inflict sufficient losses on the Legions loyal to Malicia, giving Cat time to prepare for battles against Procer and/or the Dead King. And there's no way they will survive to get to Callow, so no risk there.

*Javvies*

Cat isn't going to be fighting the Dead King until she's settled the score with Malicia and Praes/the High Lords. She literally cannot afford to do anything other than hold her western (Proceran) border while she turns east against Malicia. Fortunately, she has the Whitecap Mountains and decent choke points to cover the west.

The Dead King is a problem, a huge one even, but he's down the road, while Malicia is an imminent threat who just tried to gut Callow's military and civilian infrastructure. With some success.

*tyizor*

Cat needs to learn that subtlety is *\*not\** her strongsuit already. Malicia's "assassination" attempt wasn't even too long ago.

*Yotz*

Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck, inventor of the lightning conductor.

*RanVor*

To counter all the doom and gloom that has taken over the comments, I present you my opinion:

*I'm reasonably confident it'll all work out for metanarrative reasons.*

Firstly, it looks to me that we're starting to get to the part of the book that contains the climactic confrontation, and Cat is still very much in deep shit. Therefore, she is bound to get some support soon, possibly after mutilating herself again.

Secondly, she already failed in negotiations once, and the Creation abhors repetition or something like that. So it's unlikely to happen again so soon.

Thirdly, she is in a hopeless situation with her back against the wall and a knife to her throat. The narrative is so obviously in her favor it's almost impossible for her to fail.

Lastly, we know there is one more book coming, so Callow obviously has to survive somehow, and no other solution has presented itself so far.

*Dylan Tullos*

I prefer it when Catherine makes actual plans that might work, rather than relying on Protagonist Armor to save her from the consequences of provoking the dwarves.

*RanVor*

You're forgetting this is a universe where relying on Protagonist Armor is a totally valid way to get on top.

[vexingvision](#)

Let's skip the silly Drow, Cat.

Let's hire the dwarfs instead.

*Dreamer*

This new moralistic Cat has been kinda weird to me for the past few chapters. She refuses to kill her drow prisoners in cold blood, for some reason, despite her killing those would be rapists from way back. Furthermore, she dropped a magic fae lake on people so I don't really feel like she has room to judge here either? I feel like her character's either becoming inconsistent, or it might be the redemption thing that hasn't been mentioned in forever.

*Isa Lumitus*

You do have a point about the redemption thing. This might be related to Cat's deal with the Gray Pilgrim.



That said, this doesn't seem that out there from my existing view of her. I'm reminded of Worm's tagline, 'doing the wrong thing for the right reason'. I'm also reminded of Akua's advice that Cat's hesitance to jump off the slippery slope might be making things worse for everyone but her.

*Jane*

It's easy for Cat to do the right (wrong?) thing when her back is to the wall, and she's struggling to survive; when she's the underdog, she does what she must, whether it's knife a few people who would otherwise evade justice, drop a lake on an invading army, join the Grand Alliance or unleash the Hidden Horror on an unsuspecting world.

When she's in a position of strength, though, it's a struggle for her to hold on to her humanity, and avoid becoming the greater evil that she's fought against.

In short, she really doesn't know what to do with success – whether it's reforming Callow's institutions into something new (her first plan was a dismal failure, and her current plan is literally just to hand the problem off to someone else), or dealing with really vicious prisoners of war who haven't, properly speaking, done anything wrong yet. When her options are limited, the path is clear to her; when she is free to do as she wishes, she struggles with the consequences of her decisions.

*Xinci*

It may be due to the fact that Cat is not "more" yet. She doesn't have enough of a presence \*reality\* and narrative wise to really be able to cover all the bases and make a change in the world. If she can make those changes in herself and a local area however she may be able to change (you know... construct) enough that some of her plans may work. But general thing is she has plenty of growth left if she wants to form a solution which she is still lacking in ability to do and quibbling (not entirely good, not entirely bad but a path has to be made) over the metaphysical path she has to take to get any better. The Night might help her, it in many ways is kind of like a Evil version of what the Gods Above showed the White Knight I think. The information available could be quite useful in forming her into a better... "solution"? Part of her current problem is not having enough awareness/information like Black does of what the world around her is, perhaps with the Night she will have more success doing so or at least get someone else to do so for her.

*Sylwoos*

Cat lost the right to be offended by a little bit of molten rock when she made burning people with inextinguishable magic fire as her go-to strategy.

[sengachi](#)

There's a big, biiiiiig difference there.

One of those is killing people you don't really know, whose circumstances you don't understand, who for all you know hate the system they're a part of (which you also don't really understand), and who might not be a threat to others if you can just find the right way to handle them. Especially when you walked onto their turf. "Killing those who try to kill you is justified" loses a lot of moral validity when you break into a khans-era Mongol warrior's tent in the middle of the night and they accost you with a sword. And yeah, sure, maybe Cat killing the drow is justified. But it's genuinely a worthwhile question to ask if it is or not.

The rapist and his enabler on the other hand ... Well, that's the thing about rape. There's *\*never\** a justification for it. And in that chapter the rapist clearly showed that he knew what he was doing was wrong, that he was a repeat offender, that he and his enabler were willing to kill innocents to protect themselves, that they abused their authority to do so, and that they would almost certainly do it again. You could not ask for a more cut and dry case of "these fuckers need to be removed from the picture in whatever way you can manage". Which is what Cat did.

And frankly, if your conflation of the two makes Cat's actions seem confusing to you, I don't think it's that Cat's moral system is messed up, I think it's that your moral compass is a bit askew.

*Isa Lumitus*

I'm with the crowd that still doesn't understand why Cat thinks that the Drow are worth negotiating with. On the bright side, I can at least see some good reasons for her to continue. If she can steal whatever artifact either makes the Gloom, or the passes through it, she will have a good bargaining chip.

Either of those could make or break the dwarven plan to encircle the Dead King.

*mavant*

Ah, yes, that classic Dwarven ballad, "Pour Some Lava On Me".

*Xinci*

This is truly a exemplary chance for cat to try her code of regulation. She said what she could not break she would regulate and the drow are a prime candidate for doing so. If she can broker a proper deal with the mistress of the Night, she could refine the tenets to something more worthwhile. The night is a excellent testing, refining, and evolving tool. This also depends on narrative wise, what kind of artifact is most likely being refined over time by the Night's tenets/experiments. If Cat can properly regulate the drow and transform them into a workforce under her she could have a excellently adaptive unit of troops and workers. I will note several things, the drow are warriors because they are a composite experiment on getting skill and information into specific(the most worthy and therefore mighty) individuals...the problem is its not enough. They need more and better institutions to actually become mighty as a race...which cat(and winter) can most likely manage far better than their current testing methods.

Also suprised no one is making any theories on how to kill the dwarves, for example how well could you unsup control of their runes to make that heavy infantry collapse in on itself? How vulnerable are they to air flow, is that armour of theirs prepared for extreme cold after extreme heat?

Basic thing being=If cat finds a proper stipulation to bind the night and create new tenets she could forge the drow into something new and wonderfully effective. The main problem comes with how to properly integrate that troupe into her powerbase or at the very least to keep a good controllable area.

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## Chapter 59: Audience

*"Note: bottling up the power of friendship cannot be achieved by bottling up friends. Must pursue further trials, perhaps prior liquefaction diluted the substance."*

– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

So, runic trap. Just what my day had been needing. I ran a palm across the transparent pane of force and found it solid. A sharp rap of the knuckles told me it was probably breakable, if I exerted myself. This wasn't a ward so much a magical pit trap, although one we'd strolled right into.

"Cat," Indrani hissed. "Now's a good time to do the Winter thing."

Was it, though? The panes didn't mute sound, so I could hear the dwarves running towards us. It was hard to tell their numbers, with all that armour jostling, but I'd wager at least a hundred. I could most likely shatter the back of the trap and leg it with the others back into the tunnels. Except we'd have a dwarven company hot on our heels, the alarm would spread and there was a non-negligible chance we'd end up in more or less the same situation in half an hour, only with having attempted to escape added to our first impression.

"We're going to talk to them," I finally said.

"Or you could open a godsdamned portal and get us out of here," Indrani said. "Like, now."

"To where?" I said. "Either we go blind, which seems like a *very bad idea* underground, or we go back. Where the army is."

"Or we could stay in Arcadia for a bit, until they're gone," she said.

"The gate out would lead us back here," Diabolist said. "I do not believe it likely they will leave this place unguarded after the traps were triggered."

"Archer, they'll be curious enough about our presence they'll want to interrogate us," I said. "If it really does go to shit, I'll grab everyone and leg it into Arcadia. But I want to *try* to talk to them first, at least."

I caught movement from the corner of my eye, but it wasn't dwarves. The drow accompanying us had gone still, when the runes shone, but the conversation between the three of us had gotten their attention. We'd been speaking Lower Miezani, so not even Ivah should be able to understand us, but if they were guessing from the tones that might not matter. One of the drow we'd caught on surface said something in Crepuscular, addressing Ivah, who nodded and then turned silver eyes to me.

"They would like weapons, Queen, since we are to fight," my guide said in Chantant.

"We won't be fighting them," I replied in the same. "I'm going to speak with whoever leads them."

"Nerezim do not negotiate, Queen," Ivah flatly said. "They take what they want and kill all in their way."

"It is," I told the drow. "I am queen of a kingdom, on the surface, and powerful enough they will not seek my enmity for no reason."

"This is not true of us," it said. "We will be slain."

"You're my prisoners," I said "Until release or judgement, you are under my protection."

"They will not care," Ivah insisted.

"Ivah, you seem under the impression any you have a voice in this decision," I said. "You do not. It has been made."

"They will not accept this," the drow warily said.

"They are free to contest my judgement, of course," I said. "Though the consequences of that have already been stated."

Ivah grimaced and turned to speak, but before it could even do that the Mighty Kodrog – no, Bogdan now – made its move. The drow pushed one of its fellow prisoners away and reached for the longknife at Archer's hip. Apparently after failing with me, it had come under the impression it would have better luck with my companions. Archer gave him the knife, in a manner of speaking. It was only a lending, though, and she clamly withdrew it from the eye socket with a flick of the wrist. The other drow stepped back. Great, now I was going to meet the dwarves with a fucking corpse on the floor. Although, considering their record so far, that might actually raise their opinion of us.

"Tell them this," I addressed Ivah. "They can die now, or take a chance on the future. There is no middle ground, and I've no more attention to spare on this. Akua, if any of them tries to escape kill it."

"Any?" Diabolist asked.

I met Ivah's eyes.

"Any," I confirmed.

My statement that I had no more attention to dole out had not been theatrics: the dwarves were now close enough I could make out the individual steps. They did not come from deeper inside the cavern. The company of a hundred that spread out in front of the trap had been posted near the outer wall, to the left of the tunnel's exit. Regulars again, I noted, and since now the dance had come to end I finally spared a moment to study dwarvenkind from up close. I'd pictured them as short, stocky humans but evidently that'd been a failure of imagination. There were basic similarities: eyes, nose, brow, lips. But they were the same more in principle than practice. Their skin was so rough and craggy, enough it looked more like some beast's rough hide. The old tale that dwarves were born when a dwarf ate stones for a year and then spat out a baby fully-formed came to mind. Their eyes were almost too large for those thick faces, with coloured sclera and no irises. *Owl-like*, I thought, though they had eyelashes. Their strands of hair were visibly larger and thicker than a human's,

their noses flat and broad. The tallest of the lot stood at five feet, though they were much broader of shoulder than any race I'd come across save orcs. The dwarves spread out facing us, shields and hammers at the ready.

"Good evening," I smiled.

A few of them spoke in dwarvish, rough accents flowing back and forth quickly, and there was a sparse wave of laughter. One of the dwarves elbowed his way to the front, attired differently from the rest. The armour was much like the one the engineers had worn, back in the other cavern, a cuirass on leather. Said cuirass was covered with runes, though, which I didn't remember the others being. The dwarf, sporting a thick black beard thrice bound by rings of bronze showing runes of their own, frowned at me and laid a bare palm on the transparent pane. His frown deepened and he barked something in his language at the other dwarves.

"I don't supposed you speak Lower Miezán," I said.

His eyes, a ring of deep gold around a pitch-black pupil, moved to my face.

"You," he said in that very language, though the accent was nearly unintelligible. "Human."

"Close enough," I agreed.

He pointed at the drow behind me, finger lingering on the corpse.

"*Kraksun*," he said. "Why?"

"Prisoners," I said.

He turned back to the others and spoke again. One of the dwarves spoke loudly and the entire company shook with laughter. I got the impression that what he'd said was complimentary to neither humans nor drow. Another dwarf, this one's beard russet, raised a baton of stone and silence took hold. He spoke at the one wearing runes, who shrugged and turned back to me.

"You," he said. "Prisoner."

"I want to talk with your leader," I said, enunciating slowly.

A dwarf left the ranks of the others, bearing a bag of woven reeds, and dropped it to the side of my interlocutor. Who promptly opened it, and took out a pair of rune-inscribed shackles. They weren't linked by chains, I noted.

"Wear," the black-bearded dwarf said.

"I want to talk with your leader," I repeated, forcing patience.

The dwarf rolled his eyes, the size of those making it rather eerie to behold, but he spoke to the one with the baton. Who replied with a single word. Yeah, that one needed no translation. I sighed and rolled my shoulders before plunging my hand through the pane of force and ripping out a chunk. The black-bearded dwarf drew back in surprise, the soldiers moved forward and I smiled once more.

"I want to talk with your leader," I said one last time, looking at the russet-bearded one.

His eyes flicked at the trap I'd casually ripped open, then back to me. He barked something at our interpreter.

"Who you?" the dwarf asked.

"The Queen of Callow," I said.

The dwarf looked skeptical. He pointed a finger upwards.

"Callow," he repeated slowly.

"Yes," I said.

"Angry horse people," he said, even more skeptically.

Well, that was one way to describe us. His eyes dipped down to note what I assumed to be my current lack of horse. What, did he just expect all Callowans to be mounted at all times?

"Of which I am queen," I agreed.

He translated at the russet beard who snorted. He gestured a knock against his temple, the meaning of which I felt safe assuming. Then he shrugged and added something else. Blackbeard turned back to me.

"Speak to Herald," he said. "But."

He presented the shackles again. I mulled on that, eventually jutting a thumb towards the people behind me.

"Mine," I said. "Safe. No touch."

The dwarf spat on the floor.

"No touch," he agreed. "Herald choose."

It was a start. I offered my wrists to the shackles, and the dwarf leaned forward to clasp them closed. The runes – nothing like those I knew, sharper and much more complicated – shone and I felt a binding form. Ah, meant to seal sorcery. Or at least have an effect when someone called on them. Were they assuming I was a mage? It was a flip of the coin whether or not Winter would

be affected by those. My ability to call on it was uninhibited, so far. I looked back at my companions.

"Negotiations will proceed," I said. "Cooperate."

Archer looked quite displeased, but Diabolist simply nodded. She was the first to come forward when the dwarf presented another pair of shackles, sharing a meaningful look with me afterwards. They weren't affecting her either, then. Good to know. The drow came forward one after another, each of them moving delicately as if they feared the slightest sudden move would get them killed. They might not be wrong about that, I reflected. It had not escaped my notice that when the drow came forward some of the soldiers discretely put up their crossbows. Indrani was the last, and she shot me a glare.

"We could have legged it," she said in Kharsum.

"We still might," I replied in the same. "Day's not over."

She put forward her wrists, and with that last clasping we were all officially prisoners. Blackbeard drew a circle on the transparent wall then pressed his palm against the rune that formed inside it. It came down without a sound. From the corner of my eye, I'd glimpsed Akua watching him work eagerly. Never one to lose an opportunity, was she? The soldiers swarmed us after that, though at least they put away their weapons first. I was guided forward in a surprisingly gentle manner, though I stopped when I heard Indrani raise her voice.

"No you don't," she hissed.

One of the dwarves was tugging at her bow, eyes half-closed. I looked for Blackbeard as he'd melded into the crowd. Another dwarf raised his hammer when Indrani pushed away the one trying to get at her bow, speaking loudly. Every dwarf around us turned.

"Archer," I called out.

She turned to me.

"Cat, they want to take-"

"I know," I said. "Let them."

"You know they keep shit like this," she said. "And the Lady will kill me if I lose it."

"I'll get it back," I said. "I promise."

"You'd better," she growled.

Lips thinning in anger, she took out her bow and shoved it forcefully in the dwarf's arms. The soldier almost toppled,



looking furious, though his companions laughed. Another one was eyeing the sword at my hip, so I smiled blandly and took it out. Hammers rose again, but I presented it by the hilt. The dwarf blinked, but took it anyway. If it'd been goblin steel I might have felt a pang, but this was just a sliver of Winter. I could recall it to my mantle at will, what did I care who held it? We were taken deep into the cavern in a procession, surrounded by soldiers. The vanguard, I saw, had made camp here. Tents of cloth that were charmingly small dotted the place, while makeshift ramparts of piled stones had been raised around siege engines and supply wagons. At the centre of the camp I glimpsed a large dais of stone, a high seat upon it. Anyone important enough to warrant that was worth talking with, I mused. The first hiccup arrived when I was taken toward that dais but the others were not. I stopped, to the displeasure of the dwarf escorting me. I pointed at Akua.

"She comes with me," I said.

The dwarf made a face, blatantly not understanding a word I'd said and rather displeased I was talking at all. He tugged at my wrist, but it would take more than a pushy dwarf to move if I did not want to be moved. My escort barked out in his language until Blackbeard returned.

"Why you not move," he asked impatiently.

I pointed at Akua again.

"She's coming with me," I said.

He shook his head.

"Prisoner," he said.

"She's my handmaiden," I lied.

The dwarf blinked, looking confused. Didn't know that word, huh?

"My herald," I said.

Blackbeard frowned.

"You human," he pointed out.

Was he implying no human could possibly be important to have a herald? Good to know the High Lords had a superior even in matters of bloody-minded arrogance.

"Human queen," I reminded him.

He still looked unconvinced, but must have decided arguing wasn't worth the trouble. An order had Diabolist taken aside from the others and brought to me.

"Your Majesty," Akua said, bowing to me.

Quick on the uptake, Diabolist. Sometimes in the wrong way, but there was a reason I wanted her with me when speaking with whatever fancy beard was in charge. We were escorted the rest of the way to the dais without any further trouble. The seat was facing the other way, so it was the dais itself that earned a second glance. Roughly hewn stone, and I was pretty sure a single piece. Handhold were carved into the sides. Had they carried this here? Lots of trouble for a seat. We were brought in front of the high chair, where a full two hundred of those heavy soldiers from earlier was waiting in silent stillness. The seat, I could not help but notice, was empty. I glanced at Blackbeard.

"... am I supposed to talk to the chair?" I asked.

Big eyes stared me down without a word.

"That's a no, then," I muttered. "I'll wait."

Not long after the rows of soldiers parted for a pair of dwarves, which seemed promising to me. The first was the tallest dwarf I'd seen so far, and the first without any armour. He wore cloth, dyed a green so dark it was nearly black, though I didn't recognize the style or the cut. It was wrapped and knotted in layers over layers, heavy enough it might actually slow an arrow. His beard was dyed as well, in the same colour, and his eyes matched. The hair was black, though, long and braided. The staff in his hand was crooked thing of wood with trinkets of some strange metal hanging off the end, softly chiming as he walked. The other was one of those Archer had called *deed-seekers*, and his chest was so thickly covered in skulls the armour could not be seen beneath. Some of those were human, I noted, but most too large for that. I even glimpsed dragonbone among the multitude, though that struck me as the result of grave robbing rather than fighting. There were few dragons left on Calernia, and the death of one would have resounded across the continent. Blonde of beard and hair, his face was covered with either an exceedingly thick black tattoo or pristine face paint. The shape was a rat's head and fangs, though the horns sprouting out made it clear it was not just *any* ratling. The two of them came to stand before the dais, though they did not touch it, and the deed-seeker cleared his throat.

"Chantant?" he asked in that same language.

I wiggled my palm.

"Lower Miezán?" I tried.

The dwarf nodded.

"You stand before the Herald of the Deeps," he announced. "Name yourself."

Akua replied without any need for prompting on my part.

"I introduce Her Majesty Catherine Foundling, Queen of Callow and Sovereign of Moonless Nights," she said, sketching a bow.

The deed-seeker cocked his head to the side.

"I am Balasi, Seeker of Deeds," he said. "I will translate for the Herald. You may kneel."

I smiled amicably.

"I do not kneel," I said. "My attendant will do so out of respect."

Akua elegantly did so under the emotionless eyes of the dwarves, rising just as fluidly. Balasi turned a bronze gaze to Blackbeard, who still stood at my side, and spoke in their language. The dwarf replied in length, then paused and quickly tacked on something. The Herald's lips quirked in amusement, Balasi laughed outright.

"I feel like I've heard that one before," I noted.

The deed-seeker inclined his head.

"Even a lizard can eat a tadpole," he said.

My brow rose.

"Guess you had to be there," I said.

Which I had been. I did not smile.

"It loses in the translation," Balasi said. "The words... even an idiot can bully a dimwit?"

Ah, charming. We were going to get along great, I could just feel it.

"I take it the dimwits are the drow," I said.

"You have taken some of the *kraksun* prisoner," he acknowledged. "A matter of great hilarity to us."

"I did notice you haven't bothered, so far," I said.

The dwarf bared his teeth.

"Only children pet vermin," he said.

About what I'd expected out of them, though it was still jarring to hear it spoken out loud. The casual dismissal of an entire race as pests. *Not that the drow are any better*, I thought. There was little difference between cattle and vermin, when it came down to it. The Herald spoke softly, addressing his translator, who then turned to us.

"His Eminence would know why you have come to the Everdark," he said.

My instinct was to answer, to establish some kind of relationship, but this was diplomacy and not an evening at the tavern. If I fielded all the questions myself, I was implying myself to be on the same level as the Herald's translator. Which was something I needed to avoid, if I wanted to be considered an interlocutor and not a curiosity. I held my tongue and let Diabolist speak in my stead. It was, after all, why she was here.

"Her Majesty sought to raise an army of drow to war against her enemies on the surface," Akua said. "We were unaware that the Kingdom Under intended to invade when we began our journey."

"You are aware now," Balasi said. "You will be allowed to depart unmolested. Your prisoners will remain, as they may know useful information."

"A decision perhaps premature," Akua replied. "It seems our interests may have fallen in alignment."

The deed-seeker fixed her with a steady look.

"Callow intends to meddle in the affairs of the Kingdom Under?" he said, very mildly.

"Callow is willing to pursue its interest so long as they do not contradict those of the King Under the Mountain," she smoothly replied. "We would consult with you to ensure such an unfortunate turn of events will not come to be."

"You're not human," Balasi thoughtfully said. "Some sort of spirit, bound in service. The kingdom you claim to come from is not known for such pacts."

"The world ever changes, Seeker Balasi," Akua smiled. "New eras demand new methods, lest we be left in the dust."

"You're a long way from home, Callowans," the dwarf said. "Stumbling into matters beyond your understanding. To presume to even speak of them is a dangerous kind of arrogance."

"You are correct, Seeker," the shade said. "We are a long way from home. With little love for those who dwell here, and a mind

open to fresh opportunities. It would be a sad thing to turn a blind eye to mutual profits without good motive."

I left her to it, my eyes drawn to the Herald's staff. The trinkets, in particular. It was a subtle thing, but there was power to them. They were no simple decoration. My eyes narrowed. Not, not the trinkets themselves. Something inside them, bound.

"The shackles do not bind you," the Herald of the Deeps said in perfect Lower Miezán.

The other two went silent as I met those eldritch green eyes. I called on a sliver of Winter and tore off one of the shackles like it was made of parchment, runes struggling impotently.

"They do not," I agreed.

"You are not human," the Herald said.

"I was," I replied. "Then I murdered a demigod and stole his power."

"And so you come to the Everdark," the dwarf said. "Seeking yet more."

"I have a great many enemies," I said. "Enough it might be said we share a few."

The Herald smiled, slow and mean.

"I offer hospitality to you, Queen of Callow," he said. "Let us eat, drink, and talk of murdering gods."

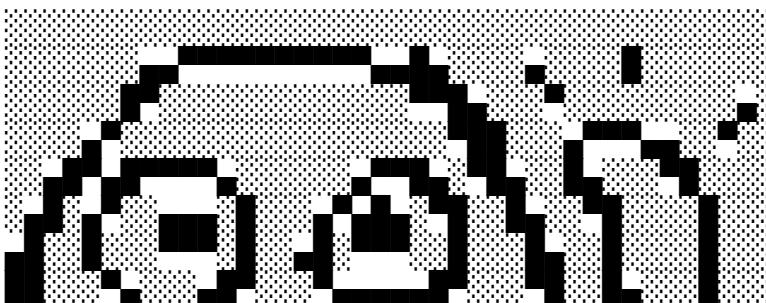
Well, *now* they were speaking my language.

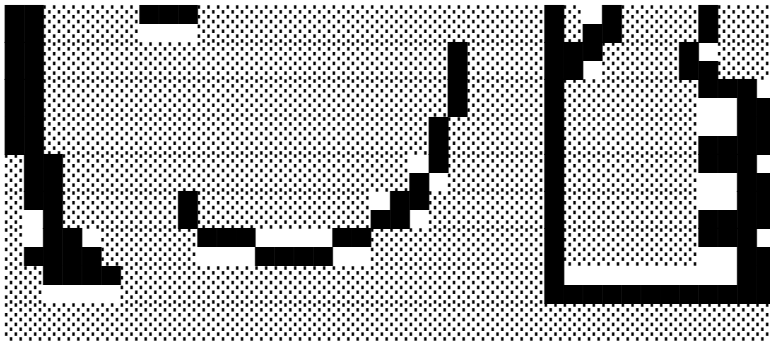
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[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Yotz





*1queenofblades1*

>Angry horse people

Lmfao now I like them.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I mean... not \*exactly\* wrong and kind right at the same time, just...

Yeah.

[Javvies](#)

Could be going better, could be going far worse.  
On the whole, not a terrible start to these negotiations.

Also, angry horse people. I feel like that's a hilariously accurate description. At least for some Callowans.

*Dainpdf*

Excuse you? They are \*vengeful\* horse people. Though I guess dwarves wouldn't understand that since they don't really accept that other beings can be offended.

*John*

Simplifying "vengeance" to "anger" seems pretty mild as language-barrier issues go.

[daegone823](#)

I like how he hit his temple to show how these people do not think before fighting. Funny how Callowan hard headedness has persisted everywhere. Fae have histories detailing it, the kingdom of the dead has immortal revenants who still hold grudges, even the feared kingdom under recognizes Callowan logic as a pure anger if you cross them so best step lightly

.

*Dainpdf*

Drow are traitorous, Praesi are vainglorious, Procerans are pugnacious, Bellerophans are fanatical, and Callowans are vengeful.

*Skraeling*

And Dwarves are assholes. All the worlds a stage and every single player is Tybalt

[TeK](#)

Or spiteful. Really more of this.

*superkeaton*

Oh Cat, only you could bond with genocidal molemen through a shared appreciation of butchered deities.

This makes all prior negotiation failures hilarious.

*Drd*

See, that's where Cat's been going wrong all this time. If she'd only started all negotiations with "which god shall murder?", she'd be well ahead of the game! : D

*danh3107*

I LIKE THESE DWARFS, they may not be dawī but they're speaking my language.

*Fucking Impressed*

See, I knew that blindly murdering everything in your way would come in handy at some point!

*Cicero*

Well, I guess even a human can gain the interest of a dwarf as long as you murder a demigod first and steal his power.

*Dainpdf*

That, plus all that smooth Akua tongue. Also, he probably feels pretty secure he has the superior negotiating position, and so can get himself a pretty good deal.

*Byzantine*

Yep, from his position at worst he will end up exactly where he started, as far as he is concerned. He's probably right, too. Cat is powerful, but so is he. It's a good position to be in.

*Dainpdf*

Plus, she needs something from him, and while he could stand to gain much from allying with her, he doesn't \*need\* to.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

"all that smooth Akua tongue"

( ˘ ˘ )

[TeK](#)

See? They are going along just fine. Dwarfs are nice.

[TeK](#)

Are they going to conspire to kill Dead King?

*Dainpdf*

Or the priestess of night. Or the intercessor, because hey, why not. But most likely the priestess, with a maybe tossed Neshamah's way.

*Rup*



*Gibborim*

Has anyone else had a problem with this website on mobile? I frequently get redirected to spam/fishing/whatever websites while in the middle of a chapter here. I would assume that there is some sort of WordPress virus infecting the site.

*Gunslinger*

I haven't noticed anything but I use a browser that comes built in with adblockers

*haihappen*

Using an Adblocker, or more precisely, a scriptblocker, makes the web such a nice place.

When I am forced to use a browser without is astonishing how slow AND ugly many sites are and how obnoxious "in your face" pop-ups are. Also: ads with sound that just start playing. It feels dirty somehow.

Drawback: many sites sadly rely on scripts to build up the content. those break with NoScript...

[TeK](#)

Didn't notice nothing. Use only mobile version. Also, yeah, adblockers.



*Byzantine*

Ah, that has nothing to do with the website I'm afraid. At some point a redirect cookie (virus) wormed itself into your phone's cookies. They activate when certain conditions are met, but remain on the phone itself at all times. You need to completely erase your internet history, saved settings, etc to get rid of it.

*Big Brother*

Gibb, I'd recommend downloading the WordPress app. It's much easier to keep track of the stories and read new updates with it.

[shravkabl](#)

Nope. I'm pretty sure it's something with your phone and not the website.

*Take the first stuff*

I have the same issue

*Death Knight*

Well, that happened. To the surprise of absolutely nobody.

*Dainpdf*

It's not a real party until someone starts up the deicide.

*RoflCat*

Welcome to the Foundling Party, any mortals get stomped under angry feet of some God until one of us get drunk enough to put a knife in them.

*Byzantine*

A knife? Please, I borrowed Emiya Shirou so I could put \*all\* of the knives in them.

*Dainpdf*

There's no party  
Like the Foundling party  
'Cuz the Foundling party  
Don't stop!

*TheCatLord*

Ah. Cat bonding with dwarfs over dinner table talk of God killing. This novel is lovely.

*Gunslinger*

Damn the turns this arc is taking. Quite fascinating. Though I really question Cat's confidence that they won't steal Archers bow. It seems like the very first thing they'd do

*Dainpdf*

Depends on how lucrative the deal the dwarves get would be, I suspect. Though they are very intent on keeping \*everything\* they can get their hands on, I don't think that bow is valuable enough that they wouldn't trade it back to Cat in exchange for concessions.

Plus, if anyone on the surface is scary enough that the prospect of them being pissed might give the dwarves pause, it's Ranger.

[\*TeK\*](#)

She is a honorary dwarf, and it's her property, temporarily loaned to this particular maggot.

[\*wirelessgrapes\*](#)

Yeah there's no way that they won't give it back once they tell them that it's from Ranger. Ranger is Ranger, everyone else fucks off when she's in the building. It's getting to the point where saying that matters, so either she dies or she gets her bow back

[\*sengachi\*](#)

Even Ranger doesn't fuck with dwarves, remember?

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

One sentence should sort it: "the bow belongs to the Lady of Refuge who loaned it to her ward: she might love this excuse to be a pain to get it back, but you won't".

*Drd*

I couldn't work out why they just didn't hand the Dwarves archer's arrows and kept the bow, personally. They is the sharp pointy bit after all.

*Decius*

How exactly does someone with the Name Archer ever exhaust her supply of arrows, even intentionally?

*Yotz*

Have you heard a story about Archer being locked in the hermetically sealed room, absolutely empty sans two balls of pure goblinsteel 16 feet in diameter each? In mere quarter of an hour she managed to lost one ball and broke another in half. Mind you, we know about latter purely from her words since she hid the shards somewhere in that empty room, and promptly forgot where exactly.

*Decius*

To be fair, she was drunk when it happened. Despite there not being any alcohol in the room.

*Yotz*

Quite so. Indeed, she is an enigma wrapped in alcohol and shrouded in tactical facepalms. And wooden duckies.

But really, what else one have to do in such a pickle, being trapped in the supreme nexus of inconceivable boringness...

*Someguy*

Well, the drow have obviously been culturaly mutilated by Bard into what they are so dealing with them in any political capacity is going to be a Narrative Trap. Trophy Hunting dwarves out to play Great White Hunter among the primitives should be more predictable.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

The superiority of inferior vertical prowess truly proves to be one of Cat's key strengths.

*danh3107*

I wish I could figure out the confounded like system on here to like that, biggest smile I've had in a while.

[DroughtBringer](#)

You press the star and it should work.

*Yotz*

You'll need to have a Gravatar/WordPress/whatever account to be able to do that, though.

[TeK](#)

Since we no longer see any contemplation of that particular inferiority, one wonders if she used eldritch and terrible

powers of Winter to fix her previous failures in that direction.

*mavant*

> "Let us eat, drink, and talk of murdering gods."

BIG FUCKING MOOD

[sengachi](#)

It ain't a proper party until gods start to die.

*Forrest*

There is now way she would get to forge an alliance with the dwarves... surely? That would be too good for her too early on, unless Cat's victories are actually going to start coming mixed in with her losses, which would be a nice change of pace.

*Byzantine*

The dwarves don't give a shit about human affairs. They will not help Callow.

They will, however, work with Cat if it results in what they want, which likely includes a war against the Dead King.

So an alliance would be very conditional, and only apply against certain foes – more of a pact to take down a mutual threat than anything else.

*haihappen*

First step would using Cat as a tool to murder the Sve, as this would be more cost effective than invading once the drow know they are invaded, and start employing raid tactics which that are supposedly very good at. Simply fortifying their position and wait for the Night to vanish because the demigod fueling it is dead seems like the frugal approach.

They may make a deal with Cat in that vain, but it is questionable if they feel obligated to uphold their part of the bargain.

*IDKWhoitis*

I don't think any of the Dwarves would survive the betrayal if that were the case. I'm betting on Cat either getting a powerup, piece of eldritch advice, or both in her fight with the Sve.

[Javvies](#)

Probably not an alliance proper, nor even protectorate status like Refuge has.

However, it's likely that the dwarves will either cooperate with Cat to deal with the Drow, possibly allowing Cat to take them over and relocate them, or steal power from the Drow. Alternatively, or possibly in addition the dwarves might make a deal to provide Cat/Callow some assistance in other ways, most likely by way of armaments or by allowing her to hire "mercenaries", likely in exchange for her helping them murder drow.

Also, the dwarves are probably not exactly pleased with the thought that the Dead King might end up taking over large swathes of Procer/Calernia at Malicia's invitation. That would render useless their attempts to contain him underground.

*delspaig*

Basically what everyone else said, but I also disagree that it's too early. We're in chapter fifty nine of book four of (iirc) five total, and they're the fourth group she's approached about resolving the Crusade. It's really not early by any means.

*Shequi*

"Let us eat, drink, and talk of murdering gods."

"Murdering" could be either a past tense verb or it could be an adjective here. Just saying.

*Decius*

My thought is that it was a gerund.

Either bond over the story of how you murdered a god, bond over talking about gods who murder, or plan the murder of a god.

[TeK](#)

So, the King Under is actually a King Under a Mountain ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/King\\_in\\_the\\_mountain](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_in_the_mountain)). Coupled with empty stone throne, does that mean there are no King?

*Yotz*

May be a formal thing – an effigy of sort, metaphoric representation of Throne's leadership over this particular group of Dwarves.

[TeK](#)

Well, the throne is heavy, who do you need to be to drag around metric tons of stone as a symbol?

*RanVor*

A dwarf.

[wyaldriddler](#)

I expect it is a Dwarven Name like Dread Empress. It might be purely symbolic as well, but that will likely come out in the next few chapters.

[daegone823](#)

Every time I read of Drow dying all I think about is the light to harvest. Hope the drow brought the corpse of that lesser mighty. It feels like Chat is slinging Ivah to returning to greatness,

I hope he takes Bogdan's light and becomes a mighty.

*Novice*

Night not light. Big difference.

[daegone823](#)

My bad but you know what I mean so....

[NZPIEFACE](#)

this is reminding me about the talk with the dead king a bit

*trippdup*

I feel a lot better about this arc now that I see the point was not the Drow but bringing the Dwarves to the fore. Great work as usual.

*letouriste*

"Note: bottling up the power of friendship cannot be achieved by bottling up friends. Must pursue further trials, perhaps prior liquefaction diluted the substance."

– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

O.M.G you have a gift for that xD

*Yotz*

On the offtopic note – gonna steal that epigraph and use it in hypothetical MLP:FiM fanfic.

*grzecho2222*

Well, Guide does need crossovers with something other than Worm, because really guys they made 60% of Guide fanfics

Yotz

Hmmm...

Don't know about crossover per se, but...

*In the once magical land of Equestria, where ancient ideals of Harmony and Friendship lie now forgotten, a new move in eternal game between eldritch inequine powers threatens to break millenia-long stalemate.*

*Pieces old and new set once again in motion by unseen hooves – and not only hooves.*

Under the lead of new First Princess, Prancer finally emerges from a brutal civil war, bearing an unspeakable grudge against its instigator – the Dread Empire of Pygna, who used discordian state of its nemesis to finally occupy the heartlands of ancient princessdom.

Ships under the banners of Zeab Fabulocracy muster on the raising winds of trade – and conquest.

People whisper about Eldeer sightings outside of Blessed Thicket.

Deep thunder rumbles under the ground as Diamond Autocracy prepares for the new wave of expansion.

Something stirs in the North, in frozen and desolate Crystal Wastes; and ruins of Stalliongrad are covered with a blanket of roiling smog once more.

In this land, balancing on the verge of new all-consuming war, a young orphan mare struggles in search of long-lost ancient heritage.

Will she be able to find it?

Will she be able to restore peace and harmony in the world long torn by hatred?

Will she be willing to do so after paying the dreadful price for the secrets contained in the ancient book penned by the Dread Princess Twilight Sparkle (may she never return)?

*Coming soon(TM)(C).*

[TeK](#)

A practical guide to chaos'd be more fitting.

Yotz

A practical guide to discord, then.

One have to adhere to certain guidelines in the matter of such significance, after all.

grzecho2222

-You don't have to be Evil, you can have friends instead.-  
-But I'm Evil and I have friends? -  
-But, but...-Head explosion.

*Yotz*

That. That is a one mighty fine suggestion.  
Exploring the humane and social interactions of Evil.  
...Sans head explosion, most probably. At least, on the  
protagonist part.  
Unfortunately, every oh-so-good-and-original author –  
and quite a few pretty good and original without sarcasm  
– already plowed that particular field up to the  
proverbial bedrock.

*chris knarvik*

A comment is required to follow

*Morgenstern*

>> Another one was eyeing the sword at my hip, so I smiled  
blandly and took it out. Hammers rose again, but I presented it  
by the hilt. The dwarf blinked, but took it anyway. If it'd been  
goblin steel I might have felt a pang, but this was just a sliver  
of Winter. I could recall it to my mantle at will, what did I  
care who held it? <<

Oh dear. Now, if I were a devious GM, that would just make me rub  
my hands... inside of my head, of course. Freely given... you really  
think they can't make use of it? You better wish...

[frolamiz](#)

Yeah, but it's also a very Fae like thing to trick mortals with  
glamor. Usually, it's Fae gold, here it's just a variant with a  
weapon instead.

I'm more interested by the possibility that she's becoming more  
of a Fae in her behavior.

*Morgenstern*

Murdering gods:

Uhm... Cat didn't exactly \*murder\* a god, now did she? She got the  
mantle as a result of giving the King of Winter what he \*wanted\*  
– an end to the cycle, while being the last remaining noble of  
said court – which she was trapped into by said King, so he could  
control her do what he wants...

The one how ACTUALLY murdered a god and took his mantle was the  
"Beast" AKA Sabah... \*honorary minute\*

(( On that thought, whatever happened to that heart of ice and  
having to xy in span of x moons or belong to him aka actually



contemplating to murder him? Was that a part of what made her lose her humanity to become sth else? \*musing\* She must have lost that ...”bet” by now, what with all the time gone in the interval...? ))

*RanVor*

I think she meant the Duke of Violent Squalls. She *did* murder that one.

*MetruX*

She only became of moonless nights once she killed her “uncle/dad” of violent squalls. It was retroactive true, but minor details.

Also, when she completed her “quest” for the Winter King she actually got freed from that... Curse? It was all very strange in that part, but it was clear she didn’t have those problems anymore, though she kept winter powers, and Masego had to make a clutch so she wouldn’t be consumed by winter. When it did happen, right when she fought Akua, instead of being consumed she consumed winter, probbly because she is the last of winter.

[doominator10](#)

As a lesser consolation, she did bully an angel all those years ago. I’m sure that counts for something.

*Agent J*

Catherine masqueraded as the daughter (and heir) of the Duke of Violent Squalls before murdering him (a demigod) and inheriting his Dukedom/Mantle.

As for the ‘xy’s of the bet, she was supposed to defeat Summer in six months or be owned by the Winter King forever more. She did, so she’s not. Also, Winter King isn’t King of Winter anymore, and all the Winter Fae automatically joined his new court.

So yes, she murdered a demigod for his power.

*SMHF*

I’m enjoying this arc a lot more than the Dead King’s... mostly because even if by some miracle Cat had passed his test, Malicia would’ve had a backup plan for it. But ‘negotiating with the dwarves to evict the drow from Everdark to use as cannon fodder’, isn’t something anyone can plan for! XD

*Xinci*

Glad to know my theory of them being after power was probably right. Though given not much has been seen of the dwarven power structure as of yet cant know the intricacies, byplays and interplays of the power structure proper. Least we know some of how Cat may deal with her local one/her current potential allies for this war.

I wonder if Sve is planning to take action soon or if her current state of torment isnt capable of properly disseminating orders through the night to coordinate a strike against the dwarves? Maybe she just doesnt want to since she wants to see the tenets tested? Might not be able to do so for story reasons, but definitely feels like the dwarves should get punished for pushing into a metaphysical and metaphorical spiders web. Huh actually what happens to non-burned/harvested Night? A spider often keeps hold if its webbing for its entire life after all, unless Sve is not truly a spider in theme.

Well this was interesting. Even though not much was gotten on the dwarves power structure it gave a bit more of information on why Ranger is a honorary dwarf. The dwarves go for the same things as ranger (concentrations of power) and attempt to steal, destroy or control them (potentially all at once?) similarly to how Ranger seeks things worthy of hunting to understand them and become even stronger. They don't seem to like disparate networks power, which may be one of their weaknesses as such techniques properly used (a'la the Night) could probably sap their power-base begin to hurt their culture over time but only if they were focused on doing so (timeframe is iffy though). Archer is kind of like Ranger but isnt enough to go about hunting like her mentor so isn't dwarfishish enough for them to consider her worthy of being a honorary dwarf. I trul do wonder about Archers relationship with the dwarves though, is she wary of them because she hasnt figured out how to outdo them yet? Maybe its because her goals are different than her mentors?

I truly am curious about where they got that wood. Underground forest near a underground sea or lake? Depending on what kind of tempest and heat sources are in the zone such a thing may be possible (who knows could have stone exuding enough energy to act like sunlight at some point down there). I do wonder where the Dwarves get their lava, that is to say when are they getting magma vs lava and where from? I assume it may be spirits, though it being some kind of old god makes sense as well. I dont really know the floral diversity of the Deeps as of yet though I do wonder if the dwarves use mushrooms as bread for sandwiches if they have em (they keep a fairly long time and do keep food in place pretty well).

*Exec*

Bottled Power of Friendship is absolutely something you could buy in Skade, probably for the price of eternal loneliness.

*Snowfire1224*

If not Skade, I would check Mechantis

*nipi*

Cat! You didnt kill a god, he abdicated.

*Agent J*

Demigod\* And yes, I suppose the Duke of Violent Squalls abdicated by way of death from stupidity.

*werafdsaew*

It's finally time for Cat's diplomatic efforts to pay off

*Unmaker*

"The shackles do not bind you,"  
They only bind Night.

*Zachary Burgess-Hicks*

Nooo must know what happens next I just all 4 books till here!  
Now I must wait. The pain....

*Snowfire1224*

Suffering builds character

*Yotz*

Useless fact of the day: there is only one word for concepts of "pain", "knowledge", and "power" in Phyrexian language.

*Nafram*

The master race does not dissappoint, and if by some eldritch way Cat manages to actually earn their favour, the Kingdom Under would be the greatest allies she could possibly hope for.

*aran*

"Let us eat, drink, and talk of murdering gods."

I think they'll get along just fine.

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## Chapter 60: Profiteers

*"In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is lynched."*

– Praesi saying

Since my crowning I'd found it necessary to occasionally entertain 'people of import'. It wasn't something I particularly enjoyed, but a shared meal and a bottle of wine was a decent way to take a good look at what influential individuals of Callow were up to. Most of the time it'd been members of the Queen's Council or envoys from my governors, more rarely emissaries from the northern baronies. Those dinners tended to be calm affairs, where more importance was placed on the conversation than the food. I rather preferred the dwarven take on it, all things told. After nibbling at rations for weeks, a slab of ribs lathered in sauce with a goblet of some kind of pitch-black liquor that smelled like berries and kicked like a mule were a delightful change of pace. The Herald had made a point out of being the one to offer them, even if another dwarf brought the plates, which I guessed to be some point of dwarven etiquette. The table was granite and low even by my standards, though it'd clearly been crafted with burlier types in mind: Akua and I didn't even come close to filling our side of it.

The Herald and his interpreter – not that he needed one, as it turned out – had dug into their own plates without any mannerly pretences. I followed suit, rather enjoying the meat even though I did not recognize it. The liquor was a treat though, I'd own to that much. Diabolist was more interested in the fine make of the cutlery we were using than the meal, though she made sure to eat and drink enough no insult would be taken. The dwarves polished off their plates at admirable speed, knocking back the liquor all the while, and it was not long before all were finished. There'd been no attempt at conversation while the plates were on the table, not from their side anyway. I'd followed suit, in no great hurry, and Akua had followed my example. Soldiers took away the plates when we were done, bringing bowls of tepid water to the table where the dwarves soaked their fingers clean before wiping on cloths. My brows rose. They were a strangely clean people, for a race that dwelled in dirt. Still, I imitated them and saw with mild disappointment that our cups and bottle were taken away.

"Diplomacy cannot be had over such mild drinks, Queen Catherine," Balasi told me amusedly, having noticed my look. "It would be unseemly."

"Your people have an enlightened sense of etiquette, Seeker," I replied. "The liquor, may I ask what it is called?"

"Black kasi," the dwarf said. "I will part with a bottle as gift, should these talks be fruitful."

It'd been a long time since a bribe that baldly offered had tempted me even a little, I mused.

"The stakes have been raised," I drily replied.

Soldiers returned with four small wooden bowls and set them down before each of us. I studied mine curiously: oak, if I was not mistaken. Old and rough, never varnished or sculpted. A heavy glass bottle was brought, and the dwarven soldier bearing it very carefully poured maybe half a cup's worth of liquid into each bowl. It looked like wine, I thought, but vapour wafted off the surface and it was very clearly near boiling. I glanced at Balasi and found him staring at his own bowl reverently.

"It must be allowed to seep," he told me. "These bowls have never seen other purpose than the cradling of *sudra*, and so the taste of old toasts mixes with the new."

"I'm honoured," I said, inclining my head.

"As it should be," the Herald said. "No such bottle has ever left the Kingdom Under. I doubt more than a dozen of your kind ever tasted *sudra*, much less properly served."

It was utterly wasted on me, considering my tastes in drink had moved from 'decent table wine' to 'nearly flammable' since I'd taken up my mantle. It might be undiplomatic to say as much, though, and I was curious about the taste. I inclined my head again, a little deeper this time. The Herald of the Deeps responded in kind.

"You were introduced as Queen of Callow," the green-eyed dwarf said. "Yet your second name is Foundling, not Fairfax."

"There are no more Fairfaxes," I said. "They were slain to the last, when the Dread Empire of Praes conquered Callow. I am first and only of my line."

"A worthy purpose, that will have earned no small burden," Balasi said approvingly.

The Herald turned amused eyes on him, then back to me.

"You will have to forgive my old friend," he said. "He is quite the radical, even for a seeker of deeds."

"No offence was taken," I said. "There was none to be found, in my eyes."

"I have told you before, *delein*," the deed-seeker snorted. "The ways of their kind may be chaotic, but they are not without merit."

"To each thing born, purpose and burden," the Herald chided. "What you seek as correction is mere revelation. Our truth is absolute."

I was missing too much context to be able to truly follow that exchange, but some guesses could be hazarded. Purpose and burden, huh. There was a weight to that, one familiar to me. *Name and Role*. Indrani had said that the deed-seeker were trying to win something other dwarves thought they weren't supposed to have. Considering their way of going about it was to hunt the most dangerous creatures around, their behaviour might just be an attempt to raise their 'purpose' by first raising their 'burden'. Interesting, and worth keeping in mind, but not ultimately why I was seated here with them.

"From your question I take it you're not too familiar with surface affairs," I said.

"They are neither my charge nor concern," the Herald said. "Balasi is more knowledgeable of such affairs, though it has been some time since he last journeyed upwards."

"Last I heard, Praes was trying to invade your people and getting smacked around for the presumption," the deed-seeker said. "Queen Moirin was ruling, I believe."

Queen Moiren, he likely meant. The grandmother of Good King Robert, the Fairfax who'd died on the Fields of Streges failing to turn back the Conquest. Anything they knew of the surface dated back at least a hundred years, then.

"Callow was conquered, and under my aegis was made independent again," I said. "We are now at war with most the great powers of the surface, three of which have declared a crusade on Praes and would break my homeland on their march to the Tower."

"And so you come to the Everdark in your hour of need," Balasi said. "You must truly be desperate, to seek anything but corpses from the *kraksun*."

"I've knocked at every other door," I said. "The Dead King is on the march, now, and there are no limits to his hunger. This is no time to be squeamish about one's allies."

"The *kraksun* will flee, or perish," the Herald of the Deepes said, and he spoke it not as promise or prophecy but as mere fact.

As if there could be no doubt. Gods, maybe there wasn't. What little I knew of these people was enough to have me very, very wary – and they were just the vanguard.

"Such an outcome may very well be inevitable," Akua said. "Yet the path by which it is reached remains shadowed, does it not? There is little purpose in entertaining us otherwise."

Balasi cast a look at me.

"You allow your spirit a great deal of freedom," he said.

"She has her uses," I mildly replied. "And considering the costs of her service, she will be worked until she breaks."

Diabolist bowed her head at me, without the slightest hint of displeasure on her face. It could be true, I thought. The right of the victor, she'd called it. It could also be a lie, and I would never know until the end. My very own viper, always dangerous no matter how tight the leash.

"How much do you know of this ruin of a realm, Queen Catherine?" the Herald asked.

I hesitated. Admitting ignorance here might see me hoodwinked. Dwarves were infamously disinclined to fair bargains. On the other hand, pretending to be an expert where I was not was just as dangerous in its own way. These were not people to trifle with.

"Little in most matters, yet I have glimpsed deep in some," I finally said. "My power is both kin and foe to the Priestess of Night's, in some eldritch way."

The green-eyed dwarf nodded slowly.

"I have long studied their kind," he said. "Seven wars we fought against them, two of them lost. Yet we won the last three, and the lands of their ancient colonies were swallowed in the Ninth Expansion. The echo of the last defeat saw them collapse, hiding behind the Gloom and turning their knives on each other. They are a pale imitation of what they once were."

"A ruin of a realm," I softly agreed. "And the spider at the centre of the web lies waiting in Tvarigu."

"She is more monster than woman now," Balasi said. "She devoured the Twilight Sages, it is said, and made them into the first of the Night. She has only grown since: her hand is on every knife, her lips wet with every red bite."

"A creature without purpose," the Herald said, and there was hatred in his voice. "A burden on all her kind. You surface people quibble over devils and books, but the Sve Noc is breathing blasphemy. Voices were raised, when we warred against the goblins, and Ishti's Bargain extended as mercy. Yet there was

only silence in the Deep Places, when call was made for war on the Everdark.”

“I have known little but war since I was sixteen,” I quietly said. “And so I know this: annihilation is a costly enterprise. To break an enemy is one thing, to destroy it wholesale another.”

“Yet annihilation is the only path, so long as the Sve Noc draws breath,” Balasi said. “Many will die, for this purpose. It will take decades to scatter the greatest of the Mighty and lay siege to Tvarigu itself, perhaps as long as a century. We will not have that.”

“The King of Death has turned his eyes to the wars of the surface,” the Herald said. “Yet we have seen this before. It never lasts. The dead will return to the depths soon enough.”

The green-eyed dwarf leaned in.

“The Gloom must fall,” the Herald of the Deeps said. “You fled forward, I think, without seeing our host. It is not only that, Queen of Callow. We have brought artisans and tenders, masons and runescribes. Families as well as soldiers.”

My fingers clenched under the table.

“You intend to settle the outer rings,” Akua said in my stead. “To raise fortress-cities from which you can fight the war against the drow even after the Dead King returns.”

“A long and bleak exile, for hundreds of thousands,” Balasi said. “None who felt this to be their purpose expect to see their kin for many years. The Fourteenth Expansion will be a treacherous one.”

“Yet if someone killed the Priestess of Night,” I said. “The Gloom would end. No exile, no hard decades of war severed from home.”

“Slayers have been sent before,” the Herald said. “As far as we known, none lived to reach the inner ring.”

“Yet you have taken *kraksun* prisoner,” Balasi said. “Used them. A dwarf would be attacked on sight. A human, of sufficient power? That would be different matter.”

I took a moment to let the implications of that sink in. Not that they wanted me to traipse through the Everdark and murder yet another demigod for their advantage – that much I’d expected – but the sheer scope of what they were undertaking. *Hundreds of thousands*, Seeker Balasi had said. That was all of eastern Callow, I thought. All those people sent marching across some sorcerous barrier not out of fear or desperation, but because the



empire of the dwarves had deemed it strategic necessity to destroy the drow. What kind of empire could do that? The sum whole of the Tenth Crusade, which had three great nations joined, could barely muster two hundred thousand soldiers. I'd read as a child that the Kingdom Under likely spanned two thirds of Calernia underground: that to the east it reached the heartlands of Praes, to the south it touched the upper half of the Dominion. To the west a gate was rumoured to exist in the coastal principality of Brus, though one scarcely used, and the Kingdom of the Dead had long been thought to be the northern border of the dwarven kingdom. I was no longer certain that was the case, to be honest.

I'd read the words stating all that, ink on parchment, but never really understood them until now. Black had once called the Kingdom Under the only Calernian nation that could be considered more than a regional power. I'd not disbelieved him, I'd had no reason to, but neither had I truly taken the words to heart. Mighty as the dwarves were, they were barely Calernian in the end. Their presence was lightly felt, more an adjacent existence one must avoid provoking than a nation we shared borders with. I supposed that was true, in a way – could an ant really have a border with a giant? And while the great nations of the surface had been tearing each other to shreds for yards of land or points of principles, the Kingdom Under had grown so great it could afford to send a few hundred thousand soldiers and settlers into the dark for a mere gamble. A possibly century-long roll of the dice that would shatter a people's spine over the knee of the King Under the Mountain if it worked. I wasn't a nobody, I knew. I'd done things that would be remembered in histories. In sheer power, there were only a handful of people on the continent that could be called my equal and even fewer my superior.

All of that was dust in the eyes of the people I was speaking with. It was worth remembering that much, before I tried to strike a pact.

"I supposed most queens would find it beneath their dignity to play the assassin for a foreign power," I finally said.

"Fortunately, I have no such qualms. You need the Sve Nocte removed and the Gloom lifted. I believe I can deliver this."

"Then we now speak of terms," the Herald said. "You will want payment, for this service."

"I will," I said. "Before that is discussed, forgive my ignorance but I am uncertain of what your title means. Does it carry the authority to make such a deal?"

Balasi's face turned stormy and he pulled at his beard, but the Herald quelled him with a look.

"I am the Herald of the Deeps," the green-eyed dwarf said, and his voice rang with power. "Promises I make will be observed by all who call themselves dwarves."

I could taste the power in the air, the sharp tang of it. My eyes narrowed. *Named*, I thought. *That man is Named*. Until now there had not been so much as a mote of spillover, which was worth noting. I hadn't seen that kind of control since Black. The dwarf was either a religious or cultural figure of some sort, from the sounds of it. Some kind of priest? Curious as I was, it was not necessary to delve too deep in the ways of the dwarves to make a deal. Asking questions now would only distract from that.

"Understood," I simply said. "Shade?"

Akua leaned in over the table. She knew what I needed, right now, and would be better at bargaining for it. Soldiers were the most direly needed. Drow would have made for useful shock troops but if I could field a few thousand dwarves instead? It was a clearly superior outcome. There was precedent for their kind warring on the surface, though only as mercenaries. After that, my desires were split between diplomatic pressure and gold. An infusion of gold would get Callow through the worst of the current troubles, at least in some respects. Trade with the League of Free Cities had not ceased, and Mercantis never closed its shores to anyone: what my kingdom lacked and could not make could be bought, if we had the coin. On the other hand, a quiet word from the Kingdom Under to any of the powers might solve a lot of my troubles. Even something as simple as declaring the Kingdom of Callow under protection for two years would free my hands to do so much. If I could actually rebuild in peace instead of sinking all the treasury into the army... No doubt the Empress would continue striking through deniable means, but Thief was becoming better hand at the shadow games with every passing month. Breathing room would be godsent, and I could ask for starker price than that.

"Her Majesty came to the Everdark to obtain an army," Diabolist said. "As the days of the kraksun seem numbered, we will need to secure another source of soldiery."

Seeker Balasi smiled.

"You can have right of recruitment among them," he said. "Any you can take into your service will be spared, so long as they depart."

That was a broad promise, I thought. If I managed to sway even a third of the drow, were they really willing to let them go? I supposed it made sense, from their perspective. So long as they left the Everdark, they were no longer a dwarven problem.

"A right we possess, strictly speaking," Akua politely replied. "As you made it clear you have no intention of pursuit beyond the

span of the Fourteenth Expansion. Dwarves have served as mercenaries before, this would not be significantly different."

"It is against decree to war on the surface when the Kingdom Under seeks expansion," the Herald said replied. "You will find no purchase here."

The deed-seeker frowned, then spoke to his fellow dwarf in their tongue. They traded a few sentences, then Balasi cleared his throat.

"While not in official capacity, I could speak to a few of my fellows," he offered. "Should you deliver, we could seek deeds in your wars."

"And how many of your fellows could we count on, Seeker?" Akua asked.

"Two, three hundred," Balasi said.

"Not a significant enough force, I take it," the shade asked me in Mtethwa.

"I already have enough monsters up my sleeves," I honestly replied. "What I need is solid foot to give the vultures pause. Three hundred wouldn't make Hasenbach or the Dead King think twice."

"Their deaths could be leveraged into greater dwarven involvement," she suggested.

"We'd also have to answer for that," I grunted. "Pass."

"Then we return to recruiting from the drow," Akua said. "Shall I press coin or influence?"

"Coin first," I decided. "Best we stand on our own, if we can have that that. But try to get protection if you can. Doesn't matter if it's short so long as we can call in the favour when we need it."

It would have been polite to call diplomacy what followed, but I knew haggling when I saw it. That Akua was arguing the murder of a lesser god was not cheap instead of loudly exclaiming fresh fish for silver was highway robbery did not make the substance of what took place any different. It was a delicate line to walk for Diabolist. We were useful to the dwarves, but not *necessary* – there was only so far she could push. I'd learned to put a leash on my temper, over the years, but I was still glad she was the one doing the talking. Balasi was near-openly trying to screw us, first suggesting a loan to the Kingdom of Callow instead of outright payment. As was always the way with these things, what was hammered out was a compromise no one was truly happy with.

The treasury in Laure would be getting enough coin that Juniper should be able to raise the Army of Callow as she saw fit without picking clean every last copper, though after the expenses of feeding the southern refugees through the winter I suspected we'd have a rather tight belt when spring came around.

Though Akua pushed hard for a degree of open support from the dwarves, the Herald personally killed the notion. What we got was a little more abstract, though in some ways just as useful: for the next five years, sale of weapons to any nation at war with the Kingdom of Callow would end. I would dearly like to see Cordelia Hasenbach try to raise half the countryside of Procer without a steady supply of cheap dwarven armaments. Unlike Praes, Procer had no large set of forges and smithies directly under the authority of the ruler: her options without the Kingdom Under propping up the war effort were few and rather unpalatable. Our right of recruitment from the drow was confirmed, under condition that they left the Everdark without fighting. It was at least two hours before everything was settled, Diabolist arranging for the payments and announcements being carried out through Mercantis as swiftly as possible. We ended as we began, drinks in hand: at the Herald's careful instruction we raised the wooden bowls and drank deep of the *sudra*. It was smooth all the way down, I thought, yet no sweeter for it. There was a faint aftertaste that was almost coppery. Like blood.

A fitting drink for this pact, then.

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### [DroughtBringer](#)

I think we can all agree that Practical Guide to Evil is the best guide to evil out there on the internet, Practical or otherwise. Now, not everyone knows that this is the best guide to Evil, because The Guide is only first on the list over at Top Web Fiction.

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(This has been a weird post telling you to go vote. So do it!)

*mavant*

In fairness it's really more of a guide to antiheroism. I think the Overlord List is still more of a guide to Evil qua Evil.

*RanVor*

Yeah, there's not much doing wrong right lately.

*Vortex*

I mean let's be real she just agreed to assassinate a demigod in order to obtain the support she needs to raise an army of cannon fodder to absorb losses for her main army.

*GuidingMoonlight*

No. She just agreed to help remove genocidal despot from power and liberate proud Drow men and women from tyranny and slavery. She also magnanimously agreed to provide refuge and education to any willing Drow while dwarfs restore their ruined homeland.

*MetruX*

Just a point: no education is to be provided xD

*mavant*

It'll be in education in the advisability of trusting "liberating" revolutionaries.

*GuidingMoonlight*

Military training is considered an education.

*mavant*

That still seems like doing right to me. Murder The Gods And Topple Their Thrones!

*RanVor*

I bet Cat wishes she was a noodle vendor right now.

*mavant*

She's certainly got the "terrible blade of Want" thing down.

*burguulkodar*

Oooh, Kill 6 Billion Demons reference? I always thought that beggar knight was a noodles' consumer, not a vendor.

*Cheerless Mirth*

What is this Overlord List? Googling only gave me literal lists of overlords, plus tons about the overlord lightnovel. Can you give me a link or something?

*mavant*

Oh I am SO happy to be the one who gets to share this with you. One of today's lucky ten thousand!

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/EvilOverlordList>

*Cheerless Mirth*

I'll admit, I was expecting something similar to this novel, but can't say I'm disappointed. Good stuff, much of which I had an idle thought or two about before when writing 😊

*kelioez*

Thanks for this gem, it was really dope, and i just shared it with 10 more peeps, so I'm doing the overlord's work too.

[TeK](#)

In the kingdom of blind, nobody can find a one-eyed man.

*Dainpdf*

I'm sure there is a Name trick or two for that. Or at least an Aspect.

*JJR*

Set off a brightstick, then follow the sound of, "AHH!My eye!"

*Dainpdf*

That, too.

[TeK](#)

But one-eyed man would see you preparing a brightstick, so he'll close his eye and ears, while everyone else will be deafened.

[Barthumphries](#)

I was not aware that your race is able to close its ears like it can close its eyes. This sounds fascinating – tell me more. 😊

[TeK](#)

My race has this fascinating thing called arms. It's a limb that goes from your sides and you can use to various purposes. Like tentacles, but not that pretty.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Cat's getting PAID to kill now? Might as well pay me for breathing.

[TeK](#)

Your breathing just not as useful 😊

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

I feel hurt. Like a dove. An injured dove.

*GreatDerpression*

I see your injured dove and raise you a snapped branch of olives.

*Decius*

Well, she's not getting paid to not breathe.

*Delakar*

Why is everyone set on Cat killing the Sve Nocte, all we heard she agree to was the removal of Sve Nocte. Unless clearer language was used in the terms Cat would be still be honoring them if she went off and made a deal with Sve Nocte to take all the drow away to Callow.

Is it likely no, but it is still a great idea.

[TeK](#)

The word murder was used several times.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Because the dwarves see the Sve as a blight on the world.

That's literally what she's being paid to do.

*SpacyRicochet*

> "Yet annihilation is the only path, so long as the Sve Noc draws breath,"

The dwarves made it beyond clear that Sve must die. They've also established that Catherine will kill Sve Noc and become their 'assassin'. Those were her words, not theirs. The dwarves will hold her to it.

Even worse, she might actually kill Sve Noc, accidentally manage to absorb her Night and the Dwarves are going to claim she's technically still alive. Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Cath needs a solid win for once.

*Death Knight*

Combining her Winter Powers with the Night the Sve holds and Cat stands a damn good chance of wiping out the entire Dwarven expansion though that course of action would likely see the Great Hole being formed where Callow used to be.

*Big Brother*

Ooh-hoo-hoo. I love Dwarven Diplomacy.

*tithin*

Good chapter

*danh3107*

I really, indescribably love this take on the dwarves erratic. For a while they've been an enigmatic boogeyman rarely mentioned, but now we have a face to the hearsay and it's rather satisfactory. As someone who's dabbled in amateur fantasy fiction, it's impressive for me to see someone make something so common as dwarves so wholly their own. I shouldn't be surprised after the orcs, but here we are.

Thanks erratic, for making my weeks a little better every time you post.

*SpeckofStardust*

oh my, 5 years of no one at war with Callow getting weapons? That is going to be crippling.

*Dainpdf*

I assume the smart ones will think to purchase a lot, and then make war. Which is still a negative, in terms of being able to afford a war, but it's still a thing.

*RanVor*

But they would have to see it coming...

*Fucking Impressed*

Damn you Augur!

*Dainpdf*



Over five years? The first will not, but after a year or two they'll notice the pattern

*muffin*

Betraying dwarven trust seems a good ritual to summon Quagmires under your feet.

*Dainpdf*

Who said anyone would be betraying Dwarven trust?

[TeK](#)

"We are not at war with most the great powers of the surface, three of which have declared a crusade on Praes and would break my homeland on their march to the Tower."  
That is some mighty typo.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Huh, Dwarves are interesting. I feel like the Dwarves are building up to something a bit more, we are seeing aspects of their culture that may either lead Cat to war against them, due to something happening with the Sve, or to see Cat to form a further truce with them. I know not which might happen, but either, or a third option still involving seeing the Dwarves in action, would be interesting.

[Javvies](#)

Not as much as she wanted, but still, a fairly decent payout.

Of course, this likely means Cat has underestimated the difficulty of her side of the bargain.  
But, on the other hand, nobody is going to care how many drow and their settlements get broken by Cat in the process of pulling off her end of the bargain.

*Dainpdf*

There is the point that what is difficult for one may not be for another. The gold Cat would save them by killing the Sve easily outsets the loss incurred by not selling to some of the Calernians, and a lot of the gold she gets from them is likely to go right back to their coffers as she arms her people and no longer has as much access to goblin steel.

*Misterspokes*

She does have access to goblin steel, from her own tribe in Callow

*Decius*

Just not as much as she had before.

*Allafterme*

I was under the impression that only supply of Goblin Steel was from Foreman & that supply was basically under monopoly by the Tower

*RanVor*

That was munitions.

*Dainpdf*

That's still less than when she had access to the Eyries themselves.

*Death Knight*

It was mentioned that the Matrons are seeking audience with Cat. So acquiring Goblin Steel may not be such an issue after all...

*Dainpdf*

It's possible.

*IDKWhoitis*

I wonder what Black will think when he hears Cat managed to negotiate with the Dwarves. Especially without getting overcharged.

[DroughtBringer](#)

We don't know if she is overcharged yet. We'll have to see when the murder comes.

*George Maddux*

Enough gold to bring Callow from crisis to a tight belt feels like short shrift for killing a demigod imo. The Dwarves were willing to commit a force that could likely wipe out the Tenth Crusade several times over for the same purpose.

*Dainpdf*

She won't have to kill every single Drow in existence to get there, they think, while gold is really not a problem to the Kingdom Under.

[Javvies](#)

It wouldn't be overcharged. It would be underpaid.

And while I'm guessing Cat probably is getting underpaid for the value and difficulty of what she's offering (killing Sve of Night and transplanting some number of drow), what she's getting is close enough to what she needs that it is still quite valuable.

*Someguy*

Sudra is obviously the blood of hagglers.

[TeK](#)

I wonder how drow will change with the death of Sve of Noc or Nocte. Might it be that they are corrupted by Night, and what Cat can offer them is a salvation?

*Gunslinger*

They'd be a lot weaker is my guess.

*naturalnuke*

Well, if Cat devours the Power then she can parcel it out as she sees fit. What if the 'Night' was suddenly given out by standing with Cat instead of murder?

*Dainpdf*

Given it is apparently part of the reason the Drow have torn themselves apart, she should probably keep to her initial decision to stay away from it.

*RoflCat*

"Night, meet Winter, Winter, Night"  
"Sve, meet Akua, Akua, Sve"

then the Drow get upgraded to (Moonless) Night Elf

*ArkhCthuul*

That made me laugh sooo hard. Everyone thought it, but you said it in the most funny way. Kudos.

*Mr. McNoodles*

Latest chapters are undeniably shorter in a wide margin compared to the first few ones. Still, a good chapter nevertheless!

*Nafram*

I love this deal Cat has struck with the dwarfs. There will be complications of course, but I believe that should Cat succeed at killing the Priestess of the Night, the only part that's into

question is how many drow will she get to recruit. My guess is that she will get enough to alleviate her problems a great deal but not enough to truly solve them.

I don't know what an organized military force of Drow would be, but if they keep the Night beyond the death of its priestess, then they could function very well as special forces, not that the Wild Hunt doesn't already fulfill that role incredibly well

*Fern*

I feel like the obvious Praesi answer of turn them into light disposable shocktroopers wouldn't cut it for this conflict. Coming up the amount of logistical equipment needed to completely arm and armor these pelt wearing dipshits would be too expensive for Callow's treasury, and doing anything less would be a waste compared to the effort to raise this particular "levy." However, if Catherine (or possibly Adjutant) could make some connections with the Matrons, it would be a lot smarter for her to outfit them like skirmishers or sappers. Play to their strengths of lightweight fast moving Night users. Even if the Night disappears with the death of the head Drow woman, she'll still have a division's worth of sappers using goblin munition. That's not anything to sneer at in the hands of a person like Juniper.

*Ravin*

though could you imagine running the drow though legion training?

*Someguy*

They are undisciplined idiots broken into stone-age primitives, organized military force they wont be for centuries. Cat needs a usable force to buy 3-or-more years to rebuild the Army of Callow; I'd suggest a variant of Bonfire as Cat uses the drow as the Wild Hunt's attack dogs targeting the heirs and other claimants of the various lords heavily invested into the 10th Crusade.

Having their momentum undercut as their heirs die and succession crisis bloom across three countries will make Malicia's game with Hasenbach during the Proceran Civil War look like a house party.

*Ravin*

she has those three years, at least from the crusaders  
dead king is attacking, remember?

*Fern*

Also worth remembering that bonfire is an incredibly last-ditch plan, and that according to Juniper Callow will have enough of an army to successfully defend herself by the end of the year. The drawbacks of bonfire remain the exact same, and Cat still wants peace at some point.

*Xinci*

Hmm why are they considered primitive? The Tenets of Sve currently have them in survival mode but their technology and power are not necessarily primitive especially since we don't know what kind of configurations their technology has or what means it gives. Obsidian is naturally formed into a formation of exquisite sharpness, depending on how it takes to magic this could have many effects when the fabric of reality is relative/a illusion. Similar things when it comes to leather and cloth, depends on their methodology and role. Course they will change over time due to environmental conditions (various cities change as they come into conflict, and will have even more change depending on Cats and Sves conflict and its aftermath.). Just seems a strange judgement to think of them as such when what most of what we see is but the purpose of forming individuals by one who doesn't appear to want them to be more than that (if only because of her learning from every action they do). Personally I wonder if Sve will disseminate the information gotten from the dwarves last actions, hell I wonder how well she can see through the current prisoners eyes, eyes and skin.

*muffin*

I still don't like Cat giving callowan territory to so many other races.

Immigrants from the south, orcs and goblins from North, and uncivilized drows from underground.

*Fern*

With the right incentives to stay and a spot of light social engineering, they wouldn't really be immigrants any more, would they? It's an idiotic ruler that turns away useful labor on the basis of something like "cultural purity," when there's so useful a service to extract from them.

*Alex*

Is Cat dooming Procer against the Dead King by denying them weapons? Obviously we don't want a new Proceran army raised to fight Callow, but can the current Proceran armies withstand the full might of the dead? Neshamah's had centuries to raise his numbers. Plus Cat herself can shred most heroes short of the

Saint and Pilgrim, while we've seen dead Names that can take the Black Queen, Hierophant, and Diabolist all at once.

TeK

Yeah, but for this war, Heavens won't just use their hand, they'll put their fat arse on the scales.

*Decius*

Or they could end the war with Callow.

*RanVor*

That would be a reasonable thing to do, which is why I'm convinced they will *not* be inclined to do so.

Javvies

To be fair, I suspect that Hasenbach and her uncle would be inclined to limit their overt/military actions against Callow to fortifying the Proceran sides of the Vales and the Stairway, letting Callow and Praes fight each other, while they focus the majority of their attention to dealing with the Dead King and with Black.

Unfortunately for them and for reason, the actions of the Conclave will complicate matters for them.

On the other hand, they will have the argument that with or without the Dwarven deterrent, Callow is not really in a condition to go on the offensive against the Grand Alliance, and so can be safely lowered in priority relative to the actively invading Dead King.

Alternatively, Procer may not war with Callow, but Ashur and Levant may not be as dependent upon dwarven armaments as Procer is. Though they'd still be dependent on dwarven seige, which would rather complicate any efforts to breach Callowan border defenses.

*Someguy*

If they want metal weapons, Procer can go kill the undead with priests and loot them off the corpses.

*Darkening*

Y'know, I've gotta think the Dead King has some kind of answer for that. Not sure what, but I doubt his troops just die like flies in the face of some priests.

*Decius*

I bet his forces simply stay dead in the face of some priests.

*Someguy*

That's kind of the point. The more priests the Dead King harvests, the less bullshit between Juniper and the Proceran commanders.

*Snowfire1224*

So my thought is when Cat kills the Sve of the Night the Drow's reaction is going to be to follow Cat, causing her to have her drow army and the dwarves promised help. Unfortunately this series being what it is I doubt that will happen because it's too convenient for Cat's cause.

*Antoninjohn*

Cat now strikes at blow at the heart of Procer's war effort, money. War is expensive and suddenly Procer has a lack of cheap equipment

*Snowfire1224*

So the question is when the dwarves say weapons does that include the dwarven made seige engines or only things like swords? Because if that includes seige weapons that's going to be devastating for anyone who doesn't make their own, and from what I can remember only Praes and more recently Callow make their own.

*Dainpdf*

They most likely don't sell those (at least not the super cool ones), so the ban won't really affect that.

*Darkening*

They don't sell the lava catapults, but they definitely sell basic ballistae and catapults to people. I'm sure the kingdom's have enough experience/examples they can mock up some of their own given time, but I doubt they'll be quite as good as professional work since they've never really had to bother before now.

*Panic*

I admit I was a bit worried about how this Arc was going to go but I am pleasant surprised by this chapter. I would say this was the most enjoyable chapter to read since Akua riding Cats body.

*Dainpdf*

It has just occurred to me that Hierophant will be besides himself with jealousy if he learns Akua got to examine Drow \*and\* Dwarven magic. Plus another demigod, which is in his wheelhouse,

dammit!

As for the deal, the negotiations confirm a lot of what I thought, though the size of this enterprise did lend Cat more negotiating power than I thought she had.

What most interested me, however, was the Herald's talk of Purpose and Burden. The idea that the two exist in balance seems to defy the idea of Good and Evil that exists elsewhere in Calernia – in fact, the Dwarves seem to care not one whit about them. Makes me wonder whether this Good and Evil thing is as local as the Fae, and whether it would be possible to slip that particular noose inspired on Dwarven culture.

*RanVor*

Burden = Name, Purpose = Role.

*Morgenstern*

I dunno. Purpose = Name and Burden = Role would seem more intuitive to me. =/

*RanVor*

Maybe, I don't think it's really that important.

*Decius*

The Purpose is what you do, the Role is who you are.

Because it's a different ontology than side/name, it doesn't have perfect parallels. For example, the Purpose of the Empress in the current story is pretty weak,

*Dainpdf*

It's a different way to put it, which points at different views. For example, they believe they can increase their Burden by fighting and so obtain a Purpose, which is not how Roles and Names work.

*Xinci*

Actually it doesn't when you think about it. Certain names have different scopes but because of the unpredictability of reality don't grow linearly into their role. It's why names don't unlock their aspects immediately and why the knight of the dawn was built as he was. If you think of providence as a search aid for who and what to burden at one time it actually shows just how transient destiny is as a concept at least til the "end" of the question that is the guides reality. Cats in a unique transient position due to the nature of her name her role is winter and her purpose is pretty much whatever she wishes. Her ability to add on a burden is tremendous, though with her I suppose the story is



all that matters til she decides she wants a new one so intricate s herself into other values mutilating and furthering her role and her burden.

*Dainpdf*

Cat is not Named right now. She has enough power to play on their field, but she's not Named. She has no Aspects. Anyways, they don't have anything like Deed-Seekers in other cultures, or at least not that we've seen, and this points at that cultural difference.

Dwarves seem to think about Named in other terms than the rest of Calernia – much like how Procerans think in terms of Blessings and Damnation is different from the more narrative focused concept of heroic and villainous "Named".

[Javvies](#)

No, Cat's technically still the Squire, though there isn't much of it left, and she predominately uses her Fae/Winter powers.

At this point Cat's current iteration of the Name of Squire has basically been stripped down to the skeleton, between Cat's Winter/Fae-related escapades (and the associated consequences) and the broken transition to Black Queen.

*Dainpdf*

Pretty sure she lost the Name when she ripped off Masego's construction and let Winter mix with her soul.

*RanVor*

She didn't lose it. She "killed" it. The raw power of Winter overwhelmed her Name and ripped it to shreds. She still has those shreds lying somewhere on the metaphorical bottom of her soul. She does have a Name, it just doesn't function anymore. I don't think there is a precedent for that.

*Dainpdf*

Going by what the Dead King says, apparently so. But where did you get that she has pieces of her name? As I understood it, she has powers of her mantle that behave like her old third aspect, but that's mostly because the third aspect was related to her mantle.

*Mike E.*

Well then Hierophant shouldn't have taken off to take his Father and Papa to task for withholding things from him. He made his bed so gets to sleep in it 😊

*Dainpdf*

Doesn't mean he won't be envious.

*muffin*

What's new here is the notion that voluntarily increasing your burden is the path to increase your power. This goes against the destiny notion in Calernia.

*Death Knight*

The way I understand it is the Purpose is your Name and Burden is your Role. Black mentioned way back in book 1 that the closer a Named plays his Role in the story the more powerful he becomes at the cost of developing tunnel vision. You can either be overtly powerful and rigid or weak and fluid. A similar thing is evident in principle alienation: the more Cat uses Winter the more she slips into Stupid Evil.

So by adding to your burden it makes sense that you become more powerful and since all Stories have a predetermined outcome for all its characters, and playing closer to your Role gives you blinders you are in effect manifesting your destiny.

Unless you have a different concept of destiny.

*Clmineith*

Did they remember to include Archer's bow in the deal? Especially since Cat sworn...

*Allafterme*

Dwarfs may be magpie assholes but I don't think they'll reduce the fighting capabilities of our favourite murder of incompetent vandals, especially when they're going to kill a demigod for them and reduce their military expenses several dozen times over

*muffin*

Just mentioning the rule rightful owner of the bow will be enough.

As with any law, dwarven property rights only make sense if you have the power to enforce them.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I wonder if Cat's core ability set has to do with Usurping.

The resurrection

\*Take\*

The shit with the Duke of Squalls

Aqua

The Crown

There's a few examples, but she's just been taking everything.

*SpeckofStardust*

"The King of Death has turned his eyes to the wars of the surface," the Herald said. "Yet we have seen this before. It never lasts. The dead will return to the depths soon enough."

You know this implies that the drawfs have been in a state of contestant if low end combat against the dead king for a long time. Meaning that the dead king's army hasn't been growing completely unchecked. On the other hand he's been matching the drawfs in fighting.

*Jane*

I know Cat can be flexible with the truth, but that is one heck a big lie...

(Joking, I know a typo when I see one.)

*superkeaton*

This was a fascinating chapter.

*Xinci*

Well good things to be seen here. The Dwarves echo back to the days of yore when heroes were more about going out and doing great deeds to change things. They accept purpose and burden necessary/inherent in that position but some do not. They echo some of the things said about those ruled by both Above and Below. The deedseekers recognize certain parts of their system as incorrect by their views seek to correct their purpose through changing the world and seek to do so by getting a increased role by taking it from others. They seek to rectify and correct what once went wrong or perhaps is becoming wrong? While those at large(or perhaps more centralized along their religion/living conditions, do what they need to do and work with their purpose. Its interesting how they try to get the most out of what they can get...similar to Goblins actually. I can see why Ranger would be worthy to them, even if her(somewhat speciically ambiguous) depth of purpose when doing so hasnt been shown. At least the echoes/waves of her actions when doing so. I would classify the dwarves as greedy compared to the others shown so far...though given the

amount of duty they also show it could just be part of their self-perpetuating system(Deep keeps them stable along with the king, while seekers rectify and self-correct whats going wrong).

[darkalter2000](#)

Pact made, now let's see to it's delivery.

Yotz

//consciousness.stream.start

Know what I suddenly was reminded of?

Lexx.

E1S3, "Eating Pattern", in particular.

So. If it *is* true what was said, what was the reason? Was she found lacking? Impatient? Jealous? Or already beyond the boundaries of sanity? And if so, was it the fallout of the Ninth that served as a catalyst, or the seed of the deed was already there?

I wonder...

Well, we will wait then.

We'll wait, and – maybe – it will be revealed in due time..

//consciousness.stream.over

*Kel the Seer*

What if the Dwarven view of Purpose is similar to name Roles, while the Name itself is the Burden? Names empower, but also limit at the same time, as mentioned earlier, they can lead to tunnel vision if one is not careful. In which case, deed-seekers are atteting to act according to some Name until they gain or align closely enough with its Role to make it become true?

I am still waiting for Cat to be pressed into a corner where she takes the next step in accepting her current Role. Perhaps absorbing Night from Sve will be enough to make her dole it back out to avoid becoming lost to overwhelming power? Granting new Court titles to a group of Mighty would allow for an outlet of pressure and could cement a Name of sorts. All Hail Cat, Queen of Ice and Darkness?

Granted that is only if Akua doesn't use what appears to be a growing connection to Winter to hijack a good chunk of that power for herself instead. She has been doing an excellent job of steadily conditioning Cat to let her use that connection more and more.

*aran*

Good thing she's not Bellerophan, or they would be wiping her off the walls now.

*burguulkodar*

I really don't enjoy that Cat is not named all this while... will she ever be again?

[BarthHumphries](#)

Spoilers. I can neither confirm nor deny that she does or doesn't regain a Name.

I can say that this post was 10 months ago and that a lot has happened since. 😊

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## Chapter 61: Remonstrations

*"Beware those who peddle sweet truths, for that which cleanses is rarely gentle."*

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

I tossed the bow and Indrani snatched it out of the air. She ran her hand down the length, checking it for damages, and only after she'd made certain it was in pristine condition did she turn her eyes to me.

"How much did it cost you?" she asked.

"Not a copper," I said. "Restitution was tacked onto to a larger bargain."

"We're going on a hunt, then," she smiled. "It was about damned time. We've been creeping around for too long."

I wasn't all that surprised she'd caught on to the nature of my pact with the dwarves without being briefed. I had precious little to offer the Kingdom Under save for the work of my blade. I'd sent Diabolist to gather our drow while attending to Indrani myself, though that situation felt like trouble brewing. Leaving the prisoners behind wasn't on the table: the dwarves might interrogate them before breaking their skulls and throwing them on the nearest corpse pile, neither part of which I wanted to come about. Taking them with us on the further journey was trouble too, though. They'd know I'd talked with the dwarves, and there was no guaranteed they wouldn't open their mouths whenever we ran into a drow powerful enough it could give me a challenge.

I was currently inclined to let them go after pulling ahead of the army by a day or two. They could live and die on their own merits, after that. Ivah was the only one I had plans for, though I was still hesitating over pulling that particular trigger.

My mistakes had larger consequences than they used to, and nowadays there was no one to clean up behind me.

The prisoners were awaiting us at the edge of the camp, Diabolist standing among their number while a few companies of dwarven regulars kept an eye on the proceedings. More out of principle than fear, I thought. The shackles had already been removed but still the drow looked uneasy, as if they expected the slaughter to begin any moment. The way some of the soldiers were very casually playing with their crossbows wasn't helping matters, and from the way grins split their beards the dwarves knew exactly what they were doing. I did not bother to offer our escorts any farewells before leaving. Goodbyes had already been traded with the two dwarves that mattered in the vanguard, and none of the other had done anything to deserve the courtesy. To the contrary, one might argue. Ivah had carefully remained close to me from the moment I arrived, and did not give distance until we'd left the large cavern. We went through another two dwarven chokepoints before finally leaving the territory they controlled, and only then did any of the drow let out a breath of relief.

We took our first break around an hour later, when they began to tire. Where before the prisoners had offered only fear, there was now a touch of reverence in their eyes – towards me, mostly, but Akua as well. From their point of view, we'd walked into the jaws of the wolf and gotten off without so much as a scratch to show for it. They might not know why, but they could not argue with the results. Our guide approached me while the others rested.

"You spoke truth, Queen," Ivah said, and smoothly knelt. "For the offence of doubting your word, I present myself for judgement."

I tore off a chunk of dried beef and popped it into my mouth, chewing as I considered the drow kneeling before me. Even on its knees, it was of a height with me sitting. Already I was missing the dwarves and their much more reasonable proportions. I could dismiss this out of hand, I thought. I'd often done this with my doubters in the past, especially when they had good reasons to doubt me. Those who had come into my service had done so after I'd proven myself, shown I could achieve results. This, though, this was different. I wasn't dealing with a human or an orc, not even a goblin. My grasp on drow culture was still weak, but I suspected that if I made it clear doubting me came without consequences then I was giving an open invitation to do so again. Akua had been just right enough I couldn't outright dismiss her, when she'd said it was worthless to offer people mercy when mercy had no worth in their eyes. I swallowed the last of the meat,

then wiped my fingers on my legs. Measured response, I thought. My hand lashed out, swift as a snake, and the sharp tips of ice I'd formed at the end of the fingers raked across Ivah's right cheek. Four bloody clawmarks began dripping blood.

The drow did not flinch.

"A reminder," I said. "When the doubt next comes. You may consider the matter settled."

Ivah rose on shaky legs, and I dismissed it with a wave of the hand after telling it Diabolist would see to the marks. Indrani slid next to me barely a heartbeat later. She'd been pretty blatantly eavesdropping, though I'd seen no need to stop her. She pressed a skin into my hands, and I did not need to take a sniff to know it wasn't water. Her breath made that clear enough.

"So what's the plan?" Archer asked.

"We go to Holy Tvarigu," I said. "And have a pleasant chat with the Priestess of Night."

"Seems to me like we'll need to have a bunch of pleasant chats to get there in the first place," she mused.

"You and I are pleasantly chatty people, by reputation," I said.

"It'll be a load off my back for us to return to the basics," she admitted. "But you've got the look."

I glanced at her, finding her halfway between amused and annoyed.

"The look?"

"The one that says you're tripping all over your morals again," Indrani said. "It's led us to some *beautiful* scraps, mind you, but never before a long spot of hemming and hawing."

"What do you care?" I said.

She blinked in surprised and I passed a hand through my hair.

"I didn't mean it that way," I said. "But this isn't us, 'Drani. We don't have those talks. Did Hakram put you up to this?"

"Vivienne asked that I keep an eye out," she said. "On account of your last advisor around being 'Ol Portal Dazzle. Worries were had that if you got in a bad place our little friend would be eager to give you a push over the edge."

"I haven't talked to her about this," I said. "I don't intend to, either."

"So talk to me," Archer said. "I'm here, and mostly sober."

"Do you actually give a shit about any of this?" I bluntly asked. "I'm not saying this to be an ass to you. You never have before."

"I do give a shit about you, Catherine," she sighed. "Even when you're being an utter wench to me. You think I'm down here for the scenery?"

I bit my tongue. Taking out my mood on Indrani would be underserved, even if she was pushing me and she damn well knew it.

"Why are you down here?" I finally asked.

"Because that's where we went," she slowly replied, eyeing me dubiously. "How hard was the stuff the dwarves gave you?"

So that was how she wanted to play it, huh. Dumb. Usually I'd leave it at that, play it off with a quip or an insult. It was the way we worked, leaving things unspoken. But Gods, I was tiring of that. Of just... letting things go.

"You take orders from me, sometimes," I said. "But I've never considered you my subordinate. If you'd chosen to go back to Callow with the others, there wasn't anything I could have done about it."

"Hells, Catherine," she sighed. "Do we really need to do this?"

"Don't we?" I said. "Indrani, there's maybe ten people in all of Creation I can genuinely call my friends and I can barely claim to understand half of them. I keep leading you into one ugly mess after another, and for some of you I understand. Vivienne's in this for the kingdom, and Hakram... Hakram believes. In this, whatever it's become, even when I don't. I'm not trying to throw stones at you, Archer. There's just some days where I honestly wonder why you bother."

"It's not enough that you're my friends?" she asked.

"If that's your answer," I said, "and I mean your real answer – not us laughing this off and never mentioning it again – I'll take it. But I don't want either of us to survive the other and look back in twenty years regretting we were too proud to actually have an honest talk."

Her eyes narrowed.

"So, Ratface finally sunk in," she said, not unkindly. "Was worried it might happen. You took it too well when we learned."

I flinched.

"Cat, he-"



"I used him," I said, with terrible calm. "He was my friend, and I used him until it got him killed. It's... *Fuck*, Indrani. He still had so much left to do. Who does she take next, Aisha? Juniper?"

*How many people do I need to lose before I'm just a raving monster who just happens to lack a Tower to rave from?* The utter selfishness of that thought shamed me. They'd killed him and still I'd somehow made it all about me.

"We're not going to die that easily," Indrani said.

"We're not *invincible*, Archer," I hissed. "We just got savagely beaten by a dead elf and a giant rat, and those were the toys of what's waiting. All we got to show for it was Malicia taking home a victory once more, and fresh off that she took the knife to Ratface. We're in this mess and I can't protect any of you. You have to-"

"Have a reason we're here," she finished quietly. "Something worth the risks."

"You'd be fine without me," I tiredly said. "Maybe even better off. I'm a fool for saying that, because I need you more than I can put into words, but it's the damned truth. You can leave this at any time and none of my enemies will follow. And let's not pretend they're not *my* enemies, Indrani. We both know they're not really yours."

"Sure they are," Indrani replied.

"The moment you leave back for Refuge, Malicia and the crusaders forget you ever existed," I said. "That's not arguable, that's a fact."

She flicked my forehead. I reared back, more in surprise than pain.

"That's the problem with you, Cat," she said. "You say these sweet things, sometimes, but you still can't quite get out of your head. Refuge's not my home, it's a place I lived in for a while. The Lady being there is the only reason it exists and the only reason I ever went. You have this... loyalty for Callow. I don't really get it, the place is war-torn shithole, but if it's a madness then most of your people have it too. I don't have that for Refuge, or really anyone in it. There's nothing to go back to."

"You could travel," I said. "That what you really want, isn't it?"

She laughed, harshly.

"Gods, I can't get angry," Indrani said. "It's infuriating but that's why it works – because you're such a fucking idiot it can't possibly be manipulation. You think I want to leave without somewhere to get back to, Catherine?"

"You could-"

"Shut up," Archer interrupted. "For once in your life, just shut up and listen. You're right when you say you don't understand us, because you somehow missed who you opened your home to. Do you know why Hunter was afraid of me, when I came to fetch him? Because I used to beat him in the yard. Bad enough he'd bruise for weeks even as a Named. Not because I hated him or because we had a grudge, but because seeing it happen put a twinkle in Lady Ranger's eye. I would have slit his godsdamned throat, if it had done the same. I fought everyone there was to fight in Refuge until I could crush them underfoot, and then I went out into the Waning Woods to find harder opponents. I don't need a cause. I don't need a reason. Every time I come out on top, I prove that I deserve this. That I'm not a fucking charity case, some curiosity she picked up in Mercantis along with whatever artefact took her fancy that year."

"I'm not her," I said.

"No," she replied. "You're not. I trounced your ass the first time we met just so I could prove I was better than the Black Knight's pupil and somehow that just... never became an issue. I thought you were some kind weakling, at first, too afraid for revenge or a rematch. But then you picked a fight with a demon and its minions, not because you thought you could win but because you wouldn't accept losing."

"That's not a virtue," I said. "And that kind of thinking has gotten a lot of people killed."

"You keep your eye on the horizon, always have," she said. "Makes it that you always end up missing what you actually *do*. You opened your home to me. Your family. Shit, Cat, we might make fun of you but there's no one that doubts you'd murder your way through a kingdom for one of us. And you just handed that freely, asking nothing. Not even an oath. And now you're surprised we're willing to kill for it?"

"That's not what I meant to do," I quietly said.

"It wouldn't work if it was," she smiled mirthlessly. "It's like you don't realize who it is you took in. You think Masego asks himself whether people should be killed because he cares about Callowan justice? You found a kid who couldn't talk to others without a chart and you told him he wasn't mad or strange, that he was *right* and clever and worth something beyond his magic. Vivienne was so desperate to do something that mattered she

joined a rebellion of people she didn't like or trust in a place where those have the life expectancy of a fly. She fought you, stole from you, and instead of slitting her throat you gave her your trust and told her what she wanted to hear the most: that she's a decent person and that *she can make a difference*. Hakram used to wonder why he even got up in the morning, Catherine. He was barely even a person. Now he's got such searing purpose his own Name made it that he doesn't need to sleep."

"That was all them," I thought. "I didn't change anything. I'm not owed-"

"You try to be good," Indrani said. "Or at least decent. So you've got this idea that all of us were, before you came along. That you dirty us by making us fight, that you're somehow imposing on who we'd be otherwise. Set that aside, because it only ever existed in your head. You took in wild animals, fed them and gave them a place by the fire. Loved them, in your own terrible way."

Shadowed eyes met mine, the glint in them a savage thing.

"None of us forgot the years out in the wilds, Catherine," she said, baring her teeth. "It was cold and dark and lonely, and if we have to make a graveyard of half this fucking continent to never go there again then *that's what we'll do*."

I did not reply, because after that what could I possibly say? Archer snatched the skin back from me and rose to her feet.

"Gods," she grimaced. "I can't believe you made me do that. Where's Hakram when you need him?"

"Indrani," I said. "I-"

"Don't," she curtly said. "I have no idea what you're wrestling with, right now, but I'll say this: you've been running scared since Second Liesse. We've all seen how it stayed with you, but grieving is one thing and this is another. If you let it bury you, then you've failed those people twice instead of once."

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"An occasionally halfway-clever woman once told me she didn't win battles because she was the Squire," Indrani said. "Or because she had tricks and fancy mantle. You're afraid of what's coming? Then do what you need to and stand with your back straight. Let them take a swing. See where it gets them."

She strode away without another word, already guzzling away at the skin as if liquor could wash away the embarrassment reddening her cheeks. I stayed there sitting in silence for who knows how long, never taking a breath. It had warmed me, what she'd told

me. But it terrified me as well, and not only because of her own words. *Your people becoming warped by your presence*, the Grey Pilgrim had said, *old traits grown more vicious and acute*. I wanted to deny him, as or all his kindly appearance he was a man very much trying to kill me.

And yet.

Archer believed all the hard edges in my companions had been there long before they came across me. That it was circumstance making them come out, not some deeper sinister influence. She might be right. Was is not, in a way, supremely arrogant to decide I was responsible for who they were and what they were willing to do? Masego had been raised by a villain and and a devil, Archer by cold-eyed thrill killer and Hakram was an orc – his people's bouts of savagery filled the pages of history books. Vivienne had been the Thief before ever hearing I existed, and had walked that narrow line between Good and Evil for most her life. Her stolen riches had never gone to feed orphans or the destitute: she'd been settling a grudge. A deeply Callowan thing to do, but if nothing else the last few years had brought out in sharp relief that my people's penchant for vengeance was not necessarily a thing of the Heavens.

The old voice in the back of my head gave answer soon enough. It would be easy, wouldn't it, to eschew responsibility for all of this? To let the comforting words wash over me, to share the burden of all the woe that had come to pass. But I'd seen it with my own eyes, decent men arguing for Bonfire. A little word that meant that slaughter of thousands of innocents simply to prevent Procer from sallying out against me. The excuses came swift and plentiful, that withholding that assault had led to the Battle of the Camps and the deaths of thousand anyway. That it was my enemies who had sought the war, not I. Justifications always came aplenty. I still felt a shiver of discomfort, when I realized at some point I'd become the kind of woman that would sow *justifications matter only to the just* on her own banner. What a vicious joke that'd turned out to be: even while espousing the words, had I ever really stopped telling myself what I was doing was necessary? I'd clutched that whisper tight and led my soldiers, my people, into one war after another.

The Queen of Summer had called us a woe unto all we would behold, and I felt that to be the most savage kind of prophecy: the one that called not on unearthly sight but simple recognition of character. Who was I, to take such grand decisions? Not even twenty-one, taught too little and haunted by grave mistakes. What right did I have to make decrees that might resound for centuries after my death? The fear was paralyzing, that I might botch the matter badly enough a dozen generations might pay for it. I was a drunkard playing dice with the fight of nations, compared to my enemies. I'd be damned for the disaster, and rightly. And yet, I

thought with a dark smile, would I not also be damned for doing nothing at all? Maybe Black was right and I'd never been meant for grace at all, for the righteous choices of a hero's story. Maybe I'd always been who I'd told myself I had become, a deeper truth laid bare by power. Because in the end, if there was only damnation I would rather be damned out of error than fear.

And that left only one thing to do, didn't it?

I found Ivah standing along, the red marks of the blood I'd spilled dried on its cheek. It rose when I approached, but I waved that away. We settled down comfortably, out of anyone's earshot.

"It is my understanding," I said, "that you seek power. To redress what was done to you, to rise above where you once stood."

"That is so, Queen," Ivah said, silver bright in its eyes.

"Then I believe," I said, "it might be time for us to make deal."

Winter whispered in my ear, promises and imprecations, the distant howl of blizzard parted by the deep crack of great glaciers.

I let it.

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[DroughtBringer](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Go vote!!!  
it's fun!

*Jane*

It is still National Voter Registration Day in many time zones...

*mavant*

Heh. Go vote, lest we get the oompa loompa again.

[DroughtBringer](#)

I am going to add to this. First post was a little late, but I feel like this is important.

The Guide has beautiful moments like this chapter here that are stunning. Please go vote, share the Guide on social media, tell

all your friends to read it.

This is a work of art that is few and far between. it is said that anyone can write a book, which is almost true, but so few people are able to actually finish their book, and, if they do, there are many books that are not good – not necessarily bad, mind you- but lack the moments like this one, where dialogue is what you look forward to more than the combat, where Characters actively reflect on themselves, and try to improve. This work is beautiful, and Erratic writes at an astonishing pace. Get the word out, if you have a few dollars to spare a month then go support Erratic on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/user/posts?u=3523924>), he deserves the money.

And if you made it to the end of this text block... Thanks for reading it all! Go vote!

Yotz

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Guide is at the top in the weekly and monthly tallies, but Ward is ~1100 votes ahead in the yearly tally. Keep voting!

Someguy

“Beware those who peddle sweet truths, for that which cleanses is rarely gentle.”

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

What about bitter/harsh truths?

[onedollargum](#)

Most people aren't predisposed to gobble down bitter things =)

Aeon

Oh, I like this a lot. That chat with Archer was amazing. Cat's finally going to get past all the guilt and fear. And it's going to be glorious.

Rook

Not to mention, if what Archer said is the truth then there's a terrifying prospect here. Cat might've accidentally done what Dread Emperor Malignant II tried and failed to do.

She's got a Band of Villains running off the power of Friendship.

That's usually a Good-aligned storypower on the level of Justice and Selfless Sacrifices, as far as cheats go.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Cat's fuckin Ponyboy

Yotz

I believe, technically correct term would be “pegasister”.

*mavant*

That is a delightful pun, but I think we’re talking about The Outsiders, not MLP.

*sheer\_falacy*

The Calamities are already running off the power of friendship. I guess we don’t know about Assassin but Warlock, Ranger, and Captain (rip) are all straight up doing what they do because of Black. They don’t care about Praes, they don’t care about Malicia, they don’t even care about Black’s grand plans – they just follow him. The Woe really do mirror them.

*Jesse Coombs*

The most recent Warlock POV (that I recall at least, Chapter “Sing-we-of-rage” was pretty clear that he does like Malicia, considers her a friend. He was even going to side with her against Black should it come to it.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Warlock is actually torn. He honestly cares very deeply for both his old friends. But, he would take Praesi ideals, practices and mores over most other considerations every day of the week without blinking.

And, he holds to the ideal of the Tower as a concept well above friendship. What Amadeus proposes could well shatter the Tower as it has always functioned for Praes – tweaking and updating power structures using all the tools in the box has always been fine, but destroying what he considers Praes to be in doing so... is not. 😞

*Death*

Where does it say Dread Emperor Malignant II tried to do that?

*Rook*

Flavor text two chapters ago

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

““Note: bottling up the power of friendship cannot be achieved by bottling up friends. Must pursue further trials, perhaps prior liquefaction diluted the substance.” – Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II”

*ArkCthuul*

Ducking yeah, she did it!

And finally, both partially getting behind the truly vile thought of everything being her fault AND testing her Winter Court Creation Powers.

Lovely chapter.

*Thaumaturge*

yessss, oh god yes.

those last few paragraphs gave me actual shivers.

[DroughtBringer](#)

More than just the last few sent chills down my spine, almost the entire chapter.

*Someguy*

That may be because god = Cat (Winter)

[Javvies](#)

While Archer is right – and it is a good look at why people believe in and follow Cat.

I'm somewhat concerned about that ending.

*Novice*

Winter is coming, boys and girls. On that note, does this mean that there's a chance for Summer to resurface? Since Winter and Summer was supposed to be different sides of the same coin; and what Winter does, Summer has no choice but to do as well.

I genuinely can't wait for the fallout.

*mavant*

If so, wouldn't that imply that there is already a sole remaining summer fae somewhere?

[crysjal](#)

There is in fact one Half Fae with red hair and capacity for fire spells out there who we haven't seen in a while..

*Anon*

Oh \$#!/, you're right.



*Letouriste*

She also wanted to become full-fledged far too 😬 damn, how I managed to not see that until now...

*Letouriste*

fae\*

[filtern](#)

And what happened with the previous rulers of Summer and Winter? That's right. They got married. Stories like to repeat themselves 😋

*Jon Snow*

Winter is coming

*Raved Thrad*

I'm tempted to say that you know nothing, but that would be patently untrue, despite your name. 😊

*ArkhCthuul*

Lol.... ^^

[DroughtBringer](#)

"It wouldn't work if it was," she smiled mirthlessly. "It's like you don't realize who it is you took in. You think Masego asks himself whether people should be killed because he cares about Callowan justice? You found a kid who couldn't talk to others without a chart and you told him he wasn't mad or strange, that he was right and clever and worth something beyond his magic. Vivienne was so desperate to do something that mattered she joined a rebellion of people she didn't like or trust in a place where those have the life expectancy of a fly. She fought you, stole from you, and instead of slitting her throat you gave her your trust and told her what she wanted to hear the most: that she's a decent person and that she can make a difference. Hakram used to wonder why he even got up in the morning, Catherine. He was barely even a person. Now he's got such searing purpose his own Name made it that he doesn't need to sleep." most: that she's a decent person and that she can make a difference. Hakram used to wonder why he even got up in the morning, Catherine. He was barely even a person. Now he's got such searing purpose his own Name made it that he doesn't need to sleep."

If I quote quote it all I would...

"It is my understanding," I said, "that you seek power. To redress what was done to you, to rise above where you once stood."

"That is so, Queen," Ivah said, silver bright in its eyes.

"Then I believe," I said, "it might be time for us to make deal."

Winter whispered in my ear, promises and imprecations, the distant howl of blizzard parted by the deep crack of great glaciers.

I let it."

One more step towards Apotheosis, one more step towards the True Mantle of Winter, one more step that you can never take back. This was an amazing chapter, easily one of the best in the Guide. It reminds me of the Akua chapter a bit back, but so much more. Archer actually matters to Cat. Her opinion was not manipulation, but something that Cat needed to hear.

And Cat's 'Justifications only matter to the Just' is either about to die, or about to becoming something more.

When the Heavens come a knocking, Cat will need something to rally herself behind, if not Justifications, then what? She is on uneven footing, pushed there by Pilgrim, and when, not if for it will happen soon, the Heavens come if she is not on better footing the Redemption will come.

*IDKWhoitis*

I feel like something counter-Justice, because Hanno is going to have a field day when he hears it. He is firmly established to be Cats Big Hero to kill.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Is he still, though?

Black has received a new reign on life that messed that story up. When Cat stabbed Black, it was supposed to be a death blow, supposed to send Cat into being the next Black Knight, yet she refused. She is hardly the Squire, and is not set up in opposition to Cat at the moment. If Black dies then I could see that happening, but I am much more inclined to believe that the White Knight will be Black's kill rather than Cat's.

Black is out for vengeance of a friend, a powerful story, whereas Cat has still yet to react to Hanno at all.

And, personally, I want to see Amadeus kill Hanno for what he and his band did to Captain, it would not be the same coming from Cat.

*IDKWhoitis*

True on the Captain part. But it's hardly Black or Cat's call to make. Black tried to force one earlier on and nothing connected. The Angel's may have \*enlightened\* plans for Hanno.

Unless we count the Seige where Cap died as a definite Loss (the bard called it one), the Red Flower Vales as a Tie, and a 3rd engagement will be Blacks unrelenting vengeance (man wont that be something to see).

*Percula1869*

They had an engagement before all that though. The one where Warlock was pretending to be in a bubble in the sky and Cap was fighting both Ash and Champion. So their pattern of three should be closed, anything can happen next time.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Their first engagement Black specifically states that he did not feel a Pattern of Three forming, and I do not believe that there will be one between them, just a good old fashioned slugging fest.

*Darkening*

People really get a bit too worked up over the whole pattern of three thing, it doesn't happen every single time a pair of Named get in a fight :/.

*Yotz*

Simple BNxWN solution would be rather ungratifying, methinks. I'd much prefer the option where Captains killer – courtesy of certain ritual involving two strongest spellweavers of their generations – inherits the Curse through the skin she is wearing and in crucial moment of Black and Hanno's inevitable duel transforms to deliver a crippling backstab to the White Knight.

But then again, variant where after her transformation White outfights her and is forced to kill one of his few friends seems perfectly fine too..

*IDKWhoitis*

I think the Curse is bloodline related, some thing about a ritual not having escapements.

*Yotz*

Sympathetic link is a pretty straightforward and simple thing, and blood is blood. Valiant definitely bled on

the battlefield, and if one can link weave of Creation with that of Arcadia, can't see the reason behind not being able to link blood with blood – especially blood of killer with blood of killed in the case of hunter wearing the skin of her prey. They can be seen very much like soul-sisters from different sides – a Story in itself – and now they are linked with blood rite of greatest intimacy, old as Creation itself. Now, if one to tilt the scales slightly, and make them related not only metaphorically, but metaphysically...

*Death Knight*

I agree. The Valiant Champion too while they're at it.

*grzecho2222*

Champion killed The Old Warrior That Rised Her Children To Be Noncombatants

What chance there is that one of them pop up with "You killed my mother, prepare to die"

[tmeenaks](#)

Black is dead. The moment the Calamities were formed, Black's life was tied to them. Their his lieutenants of dread. The legend they've built up as invincible means that all of that is just backstory until the one chosen hero takes them out. The same with the dead king. All their successes are backstory to enrich the hero's feats. Black had a couple years to live and captain died to the hands of one of the five members of the hero's band. The muscle of the calamities was taken out by the young muscle of the hero's band. With Cat setting herself up to be the new big bad of the story, the old guard will prove to be too weak to stand against the new and will be the crucible the heroes forge themselves in before facing the Woe. Atleast, that's what the story looks like to me

*IDKWhoitis*

And so the Devil sings her song again.

It's nice to have you back Cat.

*usernamesbco*

Please let it stick this time. I loved the dialogue with Archer, but so many similar moments have been set aside to allow Cat to lapse back into wangst again.

The self flagellation over things out of her control is getting old. What happened to the girl who flipped off contrition?

*morroian*

Yet this chapter made clear this latest bout was driven by Ratface's death which is reasonable.

[sengachi](#)

Oh fuck. Oh \*fuck\* is Catherine crafting the drow into her winter court?

*IDKWhoitis*

Maybe not particularly powerful nobles, but new footsoldiers like Deadwood regiments.

Or the complete opposite, and get the current Hunt killed off so Cat can lead a new Winter aristocracy where she is the only meta-story aware.

*Rook*

Also Catherine is a physically offensive ice/dark type

If she attacks with drow it's a physical STAB move since drow are also dark type

It makes perfect sense

*IDKWhoitis*

A Winter that is both good at scheming AND at war? Well shit.

*aran*

I don't know the meaning of the word "STAB" in this context...

*OmniQ*

I'm more than a little late in replying here, but...

It's a term from Pokemon, an acronym for Same Type Attack Bonus. A fire-type pokemon using a fireball attack will do more damage than a non-fire pokemon will, even if all of their other stats are identical.

*Jane*

Hm. It wouldn't be the worst idea in the world – it would give her a claim on a vessel of an alien power that she doesn't wish to directly touch, whom she could proceed to pour more Night into at will. I wouldn't trust that leash too far, but she's powerful enough that she doesn't need *much* of a leash on it.

Of course, there are risks to bringing Winter into the world, but... It's a Drow. Unlike any of her own people, she's much more free to dispose of them when they become inconvenient to her, regardless of what form that inconvenience takes.

*Thea*

Let's face it: the drow could never stay underground, there's nothing Cat can do against the dwarves, and the drow immigrating into Callow would be more than one giant disaster waiting to happen. But hey, Cat has this useful parallel realm of eternal darkness waiting for new inhabitants...

*Agent J*

Why do people keep forgetting that there's already a King and Queen of Arcadia and that Cat can only use the fae gates because she made a deal with said Queen of Arcadia to allow her and her army to travel through the other queen's domain unmolested?

Catherine does not in fact have a parallel realm of eternal darkness awaiting new inhabitants.

*Euodiachloris*

She has got a domain. That doesn't mean it's in Arcadia. Dunno where it is, but... it's a very dark somewhere whenever she needs it. \*shrugs\*

*NZPIEFACE*

The domain is an extension of her own existence.

*Euodiachloris*

That was my point, yes. \*confused\* It is both a location and a facet of her Mantle, i.e. part of her. Ergo, it is also of Arcadia, but also not.

The fae are walking patterns and constructs. So is the dimension they come from. Cat is fae (even though she's stubbornly sticking to old patterns).

*NZPIEFACE*

No, it's not a location. It's literally an extension of her soul. Her domain is a part of her soul.

*Euodiachloris*

Which, when you think about it, must be something *somewhere* connected to her mind, identify, memory and what passes for her body these days, yes? So, it can

be a location in time-space, a link to Arcadia and itself all at the same time.

A damense or a domain is always more than spacial coordinates on a map.

[TeK](#)

Thatbwas amazing. Just awesome. Tippin' my fedora off.

*Yotz*

*M'errata.*

*Jane*

She might have a bit of an argument about the citizens of Callow being warped by a Villainous leader (though I have my doubts, given their legendary grudges and longstanding history with Procer), but the Woe?... Yeah, no. I'm not even certain how she got the idea in her head that any of them would have been decent people in her absence. She *really* needed Indrani to point that out to her?

Still, I'm glad that she and Indrani had a proper heart-to-heart. Even if Indrani found it terribly embarrassing, it was something Cat needed to hear – that fighting for her adopted family was cause enough for her, and not some sort of obligation.

*Someguy*

I still think Pilgrim did to Cat what she did to Willy that's shaking her so.

*Jane*

Eh, it's a lot easier to believe that she's still scarred from Liesse, as Indrani suggested, than that this was some Narrative business. She was showing clear signs of questioning and doubt ever since that day; Pilgrim might have provided a more specific channel for some of them, but if he'd never met her, I think she'd probably just be doubling down on the "Am I competent enough to be making these kinds of decisions?" angle.

I mean, I can't dismiss the possibility out of hand until the Guide is over? But I think using both would be muddying the character arc too much – if Pilgrim were to do more than take advantage of doubts that were already there, I think it would cheapen her struggle over her decisions somewhat.

*Rook*

I feel like the whole moral indecision part has been part of the story from the start. She's always been about the whole born a Hero, raised a Villain theme, to put it simply.

When she signed on with Black and the legions to start, it was to try doing Good from the inside.

Few years later she's learned from and been half-raised by the biggest baddie of the century and she's using all her new nasty tricks to... defend civilians against the forces of literal hell.

She then, in her fear-inducing villainous competency, fights a civil war to defend civilians against murderous faeries and collar ghost

Few years after that she's developed into even more of a monster, this time committing the atrocity of fighting a defensive war to protect her homeland.

I mean, there's a pattern here. Bad means with good intentions, is it really that surprising that a major point of character growth is trying to reconcile the two?

*mavant*

She's arguably more of a hero than the Punisher is, at least.

Jury's out on the comparison with Deadpool (our other favorite immortal regenerating bisexual walking disaster).

*Raved Thrad*

Not to be a niggler, but wouldn't it be more accurate to call Deadpool a pansexual? I've always felt that, if it gets right down to it, Deadpool will fuck *anything*.

*Letouriste*

Get that picture out of my head!

*Raved Thrad*

"Oh, look, a cheese grater!" \*soft music starts playing in the background\*

*Maginot*

I read the story chapters, which are F\*ing amazing. Then I read the comments which are F\*ing amazing in a whole different way. Just make sure its Barry Manilow....

Yotz



Well, in some way Pilgrim's "taking advantage" may look juts so – accenting things, forcing Cat to look at them in the new context, stealing her box of failures and shames and hitting her with it until they will be forged into the blade of doubts...

Anything beyond using what she already have will make the act of redemption into an act of simple brainwashing. An while Above is not above imposing braindeath when it suits them, I am still willing to give Peregrine moral credit on not using such blunt instruments.

PS: Also, I'm secretly hoping he and the Cutter will show up. Hunt for the mark of Sve Noc's caliber is a thing for a full Five of heroes, you know...

*Pipiemman*

So are we to presume that Cat as started forming her own Court?

*Yotz*

<\_\_>

...

Queen of Knaves and Woes?

*mavant*

Why, doesn't Air and Darkness work fine?

*mavant*

I guess she doesn't have Air much.

Queen of Alcohol and Darkness?

*Milpool*

Queen of Booze and Blackouts

*Raved Thrad*

In another world, I can see Andais of the Unseelie going, "I may be nuts, but I'm not *that* nuts."

*mavant*

Oh, I haven't read the Laurell Hamilton books – I was thinking of The Faerie Queen.

*Komploding*

On top of saving her kingdom, is Cat about to raise up Drow kind from the pit filled with used razors they've turned themselves into? HYPE

*stevenneiman*

Oh boy. Now we get to see what Cat can do with an army of titled fey who are also armed with Night. This is gonna be good. but certainly not Good.

*FactualInsanity*

I really liked the chat with Archer, but I really wish Cat would grow out of this kind of self doubt. It's good for a character, important even, to question their actions and always seek to do better next time, but there's a big difference between questioning your actions and questioning your whole being. To put it bluntly, I'm bored of Cat doing the latter. It does nothing except leave her more vulnerable to manipulations by her enemies.

And I really, really, really hope the story is not building to some kind of point validating those doubts. It's just my personal opinion, but that would feel like an utter betrayal.

*Oshi*

I don't want her to grow out of it. It would mark the loss of something integral to her. You stop doubting and you stop fearing loss. It would mean she didn't care. I'd rather see her hone that doubt and grow more adept at dealing with it.

*FactualInsanity*

Perchance you didn't understand me, or I didn't explain properly, because I'm not proposing she stop caring. As I said, questioning actions is fine. Doubting if having made that decision there was better than an alternative is fine.

What I want her to grow out of is the self doubt that causes questions like "Who was I, to take such grand decisions? ... What right did I have to make decrees that might resound for centuries after my death?"

That doesn't mean she should suddenly start thinking she's the perfect woman for the job of ruling, nor that her every decision is flawless. But recognizing that she has as much right to make those decisions, as Cordelia; that she actually is the woman best equipped to rule Callow \*currently\*; that everything happening is not solely her fault, but the culmination of decades of actions, decisions and mulishness, of which only a tiny fraction are her own would be a welcomed change of pace.

[Bruno Benaković](#)

Dunno, seems like a valid doubt to me.

So long as you look around, you'll see countless people better than you at something. And if you're on the path of changing something grand, it's seems perfectly justifiable to doubt whether someone else might be better for the job, especially if you've made a giant mistake, like Catherine feels she has.

And there really isn't an answer to those doubts, no one can tell you objectively whether you're the one for the job or not, we all have some stake in it.

How do you stop this niggling feeling then that you don't really have any right to influence so many people's lives? I'd say you can't. It comes with the responsibility you carry.

The best you can do is decide that leaving things as is is worse than you leading them toward something. Hoping it will stick long enough.

I get that it's tiring to hear her self-doubt recently, especially when we've loved her during her most confident moments, but I like this new side of her as well.

Cause confidence comes when you know too little and when you know too much. And in-between those two is doubt, insecurity and cautiousness. I'd say that is where Catherine is now and where we all are when we go from twenties to thirties.

*RanVor*

Cat is asking herself the wrong question. Instead of asking "what right do I have to make this decision?" she should ask "what right does anybody else have to make this decision?". Because nobody really does. Yet somebody has to. And in absence of other candidates, it might as well be Catherine Foundling.

*FactualInsanity*

Very much this. It's not so much about literally not doubting herself, as it is about stopping to hold herself to some form of lower station than all the other bastards that make decisions that will resound for decades after their deaths and are affecting hundreds of thousands of people.

I can't think of any decision Cat has made that has not had the best interest of those under her rule as a goal. Many (admittedly minor) characters on the so called "good side" have, in-story, made decisions that have no one but their own best interest as a goal.

*FactualInsanity*

I recognize that and it's a valid point, but on the other hand what does wallowing in the doubt achieve? So you make a mistake and admit someone is superior to you. Get them on board. Either offload the responsibility on them outright, or if that's unacceptable for whatever reason, make them your advisor, so that you can do better next time.

If you can't get the best person for the job, try for the second best, the third best, try everyone, until the only people you haven't tried are those worse than you. If it comes to that, well, grit your teeth and keep doing your best, because no one else wants to do it.

Caution, learning from past mistakes, possessing enough self-awareness to account for one's own blind spots, yes to all of that. More of it, even. But developing a weird inferiority complex about herself to the point where she dismisses her own actions of friendship and affectation as calculated manipulations of her friends? I don't know, I just have no interest in that kind of story. Could be other people might find it an interesting exploration of the psyche.

*Bruno Benaković*

Well, we may have some answers to what troubles her as our comments would indicate, but that's probably due to our experience.

Cat has none of that, she never really had a period of doubting herself, at least not for many chapters like now. I feel it is a process she must go through and work it out herself.

I think it's very human to do so as is to eventually conquer that doubt and move on.

We get enough superhuman protagonists nowadays, I'm just enjoying the fact Cat, despite her badassery and being fae still possesses basic human elements, those we can relate to.

*mavant*

In fairness, she is twenty. Do you remember what it was like then? The constant melodrama?

*Antoninjohn*

I don't think she was talking about giving out Winter though it could work but giving Ivah the Night from Siv after they kill her in return for his loyalty (enforced by Fea oaths)

*Oshi*

I agree. This is likely to be the thing she does. What's interesting is in how she plans to shape drow culture in the process. She is the ultimate incarnation of practical evil and the drow are very much not.

*WuseMajor*

I feel like it might be worth noting that she started becoming more indecisive at the same time she stopped being the Squire. She is now one of the few personally powerful people in this world who isn't drawing power from either the Heavens or the Hells.

Cat isn't a Named Villain anymore.

She might well have her free will back. And with that comes a loss of certainty.

*Metalshop*

Ooh, good catch. I hadn't made that connection before.

*Nihilant*

suggested spelling/grammar corrections:

She blinked in surprised and I passed – She blinked in surprise and I passed

the place is war-torn shithole, – the place is a war-torn shithole,

I wanted to deny him, as for all his kindly – I wanted to deny him, as for all his kindly

raised by a villain and a devil – raised by a villain and a devil

Archer by cold-eyed thrill killer and – Archer by a cold-eyed thrill killer and

*Novice*

Fuckin' finally, this is what I've been waiting for: for Cat to recognize, if not address, her own hypocrisies. Her character development is now free to go to the direction it needs to be.

That talk with Archer is one of the many things that made me stay and keep up with the updates. So good!

*Novice*

Since I can't edit my comment, just pretend that my last paragraph is in the present tense.

*1queenofblades1*

>"What right did I have to make decrees that might resound for centuries after my death?"

Because you can't die? Of old age at least and I'm sure you don't plan to be killed in battle.

*1queenofblades1*

You can't make decrees that will resound centuries after your death if you don't die 😊

*Raved Thrad*

It just occurred to me that, as a band of Villains, short of dying in some messy manner, the Woe will never grow old. It's entirely possible that in a handful of years or decades, Cat having abdicated the throne, they could be wandering the world, seeing the sights, meeting interesting people, and killing them.

*RanVor*

The legit best chapter in the book.

*mavant*

I liked this chapter a lot, but every time I'm reminded of how young Cat is I think jeez, no wonder she's whiny.

Maybe this was the real mistake of my adolescence: Not declaring war often enough to justify the level of internal turmoil I was experiencing.

*Snowfire1224*

I think a lot of people forget how old she is, not suprising considering how much she has achieved. Most almost 21 year olds haven't learned to Speak rather quickly, learned how to flip a story, used undead suicide goats, fought with demons and devils, been undead, bullied an angel into a resurrection, ended a rebellion, fought the fae, gained a fae mantle, forever changed the court of Arcadia by marrying the winter king and summer queen, killed a rival and then put them into their cloak, become Queen of her country despite being born a poor orphan, commanded the wild hunt, fought off a larger army and forced them into a truce with two of the oldest greatest heroes actively working against her, met the Dead King and learned of his origins, fought an undead elf, fought an undead ratling, has gone into the gloom, and has negotiated with dwarves. If I missed anything in that list please let me know.

*Big Brother*

Pfft, maybe you haven't. I've spent 7 lifetimes doing just that.

*Snowfire1224*

Well I'm an almost 19 year old so I still have time to finish that list.

*Yavandir*

You forgot that she have to talk to Robber and Matrons of the tribes want to openly side with her against tower.

*Author Unknown*

Stop it, I'm getting misty.

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread – ok mobile so I skipped some

I wanted to deny him, as or all his kindly appearance he was a man very much trying to kill me.  
Change or to for

Was is not, in a way, supremely arrogant to decide I was responsible  
Change is to either it or I

Masego had been raised by a villain and and a devil  
Remove second and

"Then I believe," I said, "it might be time for us to make deal."  
Add "a" after "make"

*jacobhollander*

I'm seriously hoping she steals the Gloom from the Sve and just dumps it all over the Stairway and Red Flower Vales.

*Argentorum*

Narratively it'll only buy her a few weeks at best. Less if she uses it offensively. Still, with the drow forces and Juniper racing through a recruitment cycle, that might be all she needs.

*Snowfire1224*

I'm glad she recognized that her motto is "justifications only matter to the just" and yet she is constantly trying to justify herself.

*superkeaton*

Finally.

*Komploding*

Is anyone else seeing a parallel between Black reforming the legions of terror and Cat reforming the Drow? Being that it's a defunct horde of the old style of evil being reformed into 'practical' evil?

[tyizor](#)

Finally. I admit that I was more than a little tired of Cat's moralizing chapters. Bless Archer.

*Draeysine*

I see a lot of things coming together from previous chapters/books here. Just some things I've noticed.

Every time I see that self doubt in Cat, trying to decide if she is the best one to make decisions, I'm reminded of one of the dread emperor quotes. "Might makes" . I think that was Akua's argument. That because she held the power to make decisions, she was the person to make them.

I think that's a philosophy the drow more than the Praesi take to the extreme, going so far as to call anyone with enough power "the Mighty" and they of course hold all decisions.

When thinking of the drow I also think of a quote from my favorite character of RA Salvatore's Novels. A person was largely influenced by drow culture "With each kill I grow wiser, and with added wisdom I grew stronger "

I think the drow would take this quote as the whole life in a nutshell

*Raved Thrad*

In other fora I've joked about how I like *yandere* girls and how sexy it is not knowing if you'll wake up or die in your sleep, but dammit I think I just fell in love with Indrani. She may not be able to say the words without immediately drinking something flammable, but I love how she managed to express her love and loyalty to Catherine (and, by extension, the rest of the Woe and even Callow, just a little) without actually using those words – it makes the declaration even more powerful, the emotion rawer and more honest.

*Metalshop*

Welp, I legitimately teared up.

Damn fine chapter EE. The world building and plotting and action setpieces in this story are all very good on their own, but it's these occasional character moments that really elevate this serial to be truly great.

*Dainpdf*



Soldiers of Under rejoice  
Swing, swing, swing with me  
Raise the siege and raise your voice  
Sing, sing, sing with me

Down and down into the deep  
All is ours we find beneath  
Diamond, rubies, gold, and more  
Hidden in Calernia's store

Born underground  
Suckled from a teat of stone  
Raised in the (Ever)dark  
The power of our buried home  
Skin made of iron  
Steel in our bones  
We can take all we want for free  
Come on brothers sing with me:

I am a dwarf and I'm killing some Drow  
Killing, killing Drow  
Killing, killing Drow  
I am a dwarf and I'm killing some Drow  
Killing, killing Drow  
Killing some Drow.

A shortened version of the Yogscast song (slightly modified)

Yotz

Hmmm...

*Volley hits them like a storm,  
That's been kept on leash too long –  
They're crying.*

Some days there's nothing left to learn,  
From the point of no return –  
They're dying.

Hey, hey – I killed a Drow today!  
Everybody's happy now –  
The vermin's gone away,  
And everybody's happy now –  
The Dwarves are here to stay!  
We're here to stay!

There's a million pests to kill,  
And I've already got the thrill –  
I'm smiling.

*Hey!..*

*Dainpdf*

Having trouble fitting that into the rhythm of the original.  
Still, very creative!

*Fern*

Y'know, I think this cast we have here is the most morally evil a cast can get while still being supremely empathetic and likable. The Woe (excepting our friendly sixth ranger) are all pretty much genuine whole hearted friends. Their whole found family thing (plus Black's found family) is like the most wholesome fucking thing in this book. It's like loyalty driven to its extreme: there's literally no line they wouldn't cross for each other. I 100% believe that if it took something as horrific as bonfire to save one of the woe, Catherine would do it. Hell, Catherine's really the only one out of these two bands that would even think of blinking at a cost like that.

Consider also the fact that for all the good tropes White Knight's band (plus the crusader band) stuck to, they have far less camaraderie than Cat and her fruity rumpus murderers. That's gotta have some story implications

*plantsbeans*

Gratuitous heart-to-heart works quite well for these characters.

*Kel the Seer*

Finally glad to see Cat considering using her claimed sovereign status to refill her nearly empty Court.

Now she just needs to beat Sve, temporarily rip out Sve's power, and shunt it to elevate her newest titled Fae. Maybe make a new House of the Court for Night wielders?

Still expecting Akua to siphon at least part of that for her own power and freedom, though.

*aran*

Just kiss already, you two.

*Rup*

Um...just realised..the comments contain more words than the chapters...and it is quite diverse..just making this remark to ask..does anyone try to remember particular phrases from the chapters to use somewhere themselves...sometimes i copy text from the ch. and paste it in a collection of sorts.  
...among others the adj. 'searing purpose' was good.  
Ok i will stop rambling.

*burguulkodar*

Awesome chapter.

FINALLY we see Cat getting a little over her guilty-ridden righteous self. Do not think. Just do.

*SentientMango*

I'm really enjoying Ivah's story. He was the first (and only?) one to surrender. And as a result, he's just climbing and climbing the power ladder.

I bet he'll join the Woe after this campaign too.

*Zachary*

In retrospect I wonder if a lot of the guilty navel-gazing Catherine does in this Book is due to being manipulated by Pilgrim towards a redemption story in the same way Lone Swordsman did (that lead to her reacting more strongly than she would normally have to the hanging of the rebels).

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## **Interlude: Queen's Gambit, Offered**

*"Do I even need to give the order?"*

– Dread Empress Massacre

"Mobility is how they have survived, Your Most Serene Highness," General Altraste said. "We have easily five times their number on the field, but divided and constantly forced to march in different directions. The moment the Legions are trapped we have won the battle."

The man's long and elaborate mustache moved distractingly as he spoke, though Cordelia forced herself to ignore it. Diego Altraste had duly embraced the Arlesite practice of turning his facial hair into a spectacle, keeping it waxed and curved with near-religious dedication. The First Prince had always thought the custom made men look like buffoons, though it would not be diplomatic to voice as much. Her court in Salia had scrupulously observed the latest fervours of southern nobility, as it would have been too easy to dismiss her as a barbarous Lycaonese otherwise. She herself rarely partook. A First Prince set fashion, they did not bow to it. Watching dainty Alamans ladies weave their hair into Rhenian war braids after she'd adopted the

style for a few months had been a rare source of amusement in a year that had provided precious little of that.

"I am aware of the numbers, general," she replied. "And of how they have failed to lead to victories, no matter how oft repeated to me."

"I understand you are displeased by the fall of Lutes," the man delicately said.

Quite the understatement, that. Iserre's northern border was not a heavily armed one, as its ruling family's relations with Cantal had been more than cordial for decades. Their lines had intertwined so often it was a popular jest in Procer that to split the difference between the royalty of Cantal and Iserre one would need a very sharp knife. The Carrion's Lord descent into the Principality of Iserre had only one sharp obstacle, the old fortress-town of Lutes. A remnant of the days when ancient Arlesite tribes had pushed deep into Alamans territory, Lutes was a spit of rock with tall wall and taller towers. One that boasted fewer than ten thousand souls, but unlike most of Iserre the town had been garrisoned. Bandits had tried to take it more than once in the past, and so Prince Amadis had found it prudent to station troops there after the Great War. Disaffected fantassins were but a hungry day away from banditry, after all, and there'd been quite a few of them in Procer after Cordelia ascended the throne.

None of the First Prince's commanders had kept to the illusion that Lutes would hold indefinitely, but there had been an expectation that it would slow down Praesi advance into Iserre. Perhaps long enough for the Levantine reinforcing army to make shore southwards enough it would be able to reinforce the gathering forces in the capital of Iserre, preventing its loss to the Legions. Instead the town had fallen literally overnight. The Carrion Lord had struck bargain with bandits, who'd infiltrated the fortress and opened the gates to his forces after night fell in exchange for the lion's share of the loot. The defenders were caught unawares and half-asleep, bloody massacre ensued and when dawn rose the Legions of Terror were marching south once more. Worse, the fact that the Black Knight had kept to his terms with the bandits had spread across the entire region. The temptation of treachery would only deepen, and the Silver Letters were not responding near swiftly enough for her tastes.

"I know little of matters of war," Cordelia said. "Yet it occurs to me that with the fall of that fortress, we have effectively lost the northern half of the principality. They cannot occupy it, of course, but more importantly we cannot *defend* it. And now you come to me with a scheme that involves abandoning yet another city to the enemy."

That this conversation even needed to be had was infuriating. A mere sixteen thousand men had escaped the Red Flower Vales to

wage war on the greatest nation of Calernia's surface and yet the last four months had brought only word of defeat after defeat. Exiled vagabonds were burning a swath through the heartlands of Procer, which was a disaster in too many ways to count. Cordelia knew better than anyone how fragile the Principate truly was, at the moment. The land had not yet truly recovered from two decades of civil war, though she'd had few other choice than to wage yet another conflict – it would have been near-impossible to rebuild if the mass of fantassins left from the Great War were still there to agitate. Cantal being made a ruin had been a heavy blow, and if Iserre was put to the torch as well would mean starvation in the south-east come winter. The bloody Praesi were burning every granary they couldn't carry, after all, years of accumulated grain going up into smoke.

The most aggravating part was, she thought, that she still had armies to field but that she could not send them after the Black Knight. Now that Catherine Foundling had made it clear the Dead King's assault was imminent and not months away, the host under Uncle Klaus had to hurry north at the expense of all else. The northern invasion force under Princess Malanza was already marching towards Cleves, but the woman had made it clear that the Callowan campaign had left the army a wreck. The Black Queen had apparently assassinated almost every professional officer in it, then butchered her way through a significant portion of the most reputable fantassin companies. Malanza had described her host as having *more generals than lieutenants*, and the First Prince did not need to be a seasoned veteran to understand the dangers of that. If Malanza held tall walls, she might weather the storm long enough for Uncle Klaus to arrive. If she did not make it to Cleves swiftly enough, the shores of the Tomb would fall and the Dead King would gain solid foothold in Procer.

The last significant Proceran force was guarding the border with the League of Free Cities, and it could not be moved. The political consequences of that would be dire enough – if Cordelia could no longer offer protection the Princess of Tenerife would seek another patron and further damage the First Prince's position in the Highest Assembly – but the strategic ones were worse. The League had yet to declare war, but it had mustered its armies. The moment the twenty thousand soldiers in Tenerife left the south became wide open to invasion. She'd attempted correspondence with the Hierarch to probe intentions and six months past the man had finally deigned to reply. Cordelia almost wished he hadn't. The missive had been three pages long, most of which castigating the notion of inherited rule as Wicked Tyranny, Procer itself as A Rapacious Pack Of Foreign Oligarchs and her suggestion of formal truce talks as Treason Against The Will Of The People. Which people in particular, she'd noted, he had not specified. He'd at least recognized her title of First Prince, as it was the result of an election.

The Tyrant of Helike had sent a secret missive along the other letter, swearing eternal friendship and making assurances that he'd increased the size of Helike's army twofold as a 'purely defensive measure'. He went on writing of his deep regrets for the recent civil war in the League, which he was apparently trying to cast himself as mournful of after single-handedly starting and winning. The First Prince had not known until then it was possible for someone's calligraphy to come across as blatantly insincere, but her horizons had since been expanded.

"Your Highness," General Altraste said, "may I be frank?"

"I expect all my officers to offer me truth, no matter how unpalatable," Cordelia replied, and meant it.

"If we try to defend the city with every force at our disposal, we may very well still lose it," he said. "And that defeat would be the end of Iserre. I will not pretend the plan I offer is pleasant to behold: it will require ugly sacrifice. But if we do not cut the rot before it spreads, it is not only Iserre we risk losing."

Cordelia did not answer. She looked out the windows instead, watched Salia below her. The tall bell towers of the many churches, the mansions and palaces of royalty. The people still filling every nook and cranny of the largest city on Calernia when autumn was painting leaves red and gold. She thought of a cold night in Rhenia, when she'd been seven and come across her mother drinking alone in the hall. Mother had still been half a goddess in her eyes, back then, implacable and undaunted. She'd asked her why she looked so sad. *Sometimes survival is an ugly affair, my sweet*, Mother had told her. It would be years until she learned that her mother had just ordered a pass collapsed and every village beyond it abandoned to the ratlings. Too many soldiers had gone to Hannover to aid in turning back the warbands come with spring thaw. Hundreds of Rhenians had been left to die to tooth and claw, abandoned in the cold. The thousands that would have died had the ratling made it through the pass were spared.

"Do what needs to be done, general," Cordelia Hasenbach quietly said.

—

"Interesting," Amadeus said.

The others insisted on treating him like he was made of glass, yet for all that his body had become pale and sickly his mind had not dulled. Spreading an aspect across sixteen thousand soldiers – closer to fifteen now, he corrected – exhausted him to the extent he could barely stand, most days. Being carried like on a litter an invalid had been a private humiliation, though he was

not one to let petty pride get in the way of necessity. He was currently more useful as a logistical asset than a field one. Still, the sweat and shivers had been an unpleasant surprise. He'd not known sickness in a very long time, and this was perhaps as close as a Named could come to it.

"We won't get to plunder a waystation twice," Scribe said. "The Circle of Thorns is recalling all assets in the region and the Silver Letters are withdrawing everything but observers."

Those two organizations were, respectively, the foreign and domestic intelligence apparatuses of the Principate. The Silver Letters occasionally also dabbled in assassination or a spot of sabotage in the past, though under Hasenbach they're curtailed those activities to Praesi agents only. He had great respect for the Circle of Thorns, personally. They were one of the most skillful and well-funded spy networks in the history of Calernia, and had been pursuing Procer's interests abroad with regular success for centuries. It also operated with only middling oversight from the throne: even at the height of the Proceran civil war, the Eyes of the Empire had been forced to fight them tooth and nail for every success in the Free Cities. Their information was, as a rule, reliable and delivered to the appropriate individuals in a timely manner. The Silver Letters, on the other hand, had been made sport of by Imperial agents for decades. They had connections with the gutter and the servants as well as the ruthlessness to properly use them, but they lacked the professional training and arcane tools the Eyes of the Empire had gained since Alaya climbed the Tower. Their internal squables had been exploited by Scribe's agents with relish, though only ever through careful intermediaries – they despised the Eyes to the bone.

"It does not matter," Amadeus finally said. "From what we have learned we can deduce more, and sooner or later we will succeed at getting our hands on royal correspondence."

The household guard of Cantal had burned their ruler's personal papers when it became evident the capital would fall, which was good and clever service yet somewhat inconvenient to the Black Knight. He'd personally commended the captain responsible and offered the man an officer's commission in the Legions, though sadly he'd refused. Out of respect he'd allowed the captain poison instead of the blade, though the execution had been a given. Amadeus was fond of talent, yet not so fond he would leave it in the service of his foes. Grem strode into the tent moments later, parting the flap and letting in the scent of smoke and blood. Two villages had been sacked today, though legionaries had only ever marched on one. It remained a matter of great amusement to Amadeus that the Proceran campaign was yielding a greater harvest of traitors than the civil war in Praes ever had.

There was reason to it, of course. The fresh auxiliaries gained by his host were bandits who'd been at odds with local authorities long before he ever came, and who intended to melt back into the countryside with their loot the moment the Legions left. His army was seen as a passing storm here, an opportunity to be exploited. When he'd fought to put Alaya on the throne it had been with the stated intent to crush every significant Praesi power block underfoot and have them remain in that state for the foreseeable future. That he'd been a Duni backed largely by orcs and goblins in the initial stretch of the war had only added to the perception that Alaya's supporters were hungry outsiders that would throw away all old privileges and influences in order to rise. Few Praesi of authority had been willing to lend their aid to a faction so estranged from traditional avenues of power, not until it became exceedingly clear it would win the war.

"Heard you found the letters of some Proceran spies," Grem said, striding towards a seat.

The one-eyed orc glanced at him first, lips thinning in dismay. Amadeus kept his irritation off his face. He was exhausted, not dying.

"A waystation belonging to the Circle of Thorns," Eudokia specified. "The letters were meant to be carried to Salia at least a week back, but our advance disrupted the journey."

"News from abroad, then," Grem grunted. "Shame. Knowing what the Silver Letters are up to would be a great deal more useful. That's twice we ran into bandit groups fighting over succession, now, and I don't think it's a coincidence."

"Damage control by Hasenbach, most likely," Amadeus agreed. "Yet their correspondence has been... enlightening. Klaus Papenheim is on the march."

The orc's hairless brows rose.

"He's finally willing to chase us?" he said. "I didn't think his niece's position in the Assembly was that weak. Would Iserre falling really unseat her?"

"He's marching north, old friend," Amadeus said. "The letters also mentioned that an eye needed to be kept on the Stairway in case Duchess Kegan decided to raid into Arans. It was deemed unlikely – and I agree – but the implication that there was need of a watch at all is telling."

"It means Malanza's not going to be holding the pass from their end," Grem said. "That's their two largest field armies on the move."

He paused.



"*Shit*," he finally said. "You're sure?"

"We are," Eudokia said.

"Then the entire north is about to be hip-deep in dead men," Grem bluntly said. "I can't think of another reason for Hasenbach to pull out. The Iron Prince only let us burn our way through the heartlands without lifting a finger because he judged toppling Callow as quick as possible was how the war would be turned around. He wouldn't leave the Vales if he had any another choice, not after committing for so long."

"That is my assessment as well," Amadeus said. "And it means our horizons have just expanded a great deal."

"Hainaut's the longer coast, and it's a maze of cliffs and passes," Grem continued, thinking out loud. "No, Malanza won't head there. Your apprentice ripped through her officers, that army's running on fumes and fantassins. If it's spread out for coastal defence half of it will bolt when the Dead King comes out. She'll head for Cleves. It's where Keter aims for, whenever they try to land a force, and it's fortified almost as heavily as a Callowan city. She'll count on the walls to hold the army together and wait until Papenheim makes it north to contest Hainaut."

"Both those forces will not return south for years," the Black Knight said. "That leaves them conscripts and Levantines. The army in Tenerife is unlikely to budge so long as the League doesn't declare for anyone."

"The Dominions has two field armies of thirty thousand," Grem said. "I'm not worried around the one going around the lakes through Salamans, it's not going to pursue unless we tweak their nose. But if we scrap with the one that just made shore, this campaign is finished."

Amadeus had, in a rare flight of fancy, called this war an invasion when speaking to Ranker. It was not, practically speaking. No territory taken had been held, and this entire affair could more accurately be termed a large-scale raid. One pursued in a manner that would shake the First Prince's position in the Highest Assembly while also aiming to damage the Principate's ability to wage war past winter, but those were deeper strategic pursuits. Tactically, the Legions of Terror were behaving as a roving force avoiding field battles and attacking only soft positions. Raiders, by any definition. That the countryside and cities had been emptied by the massive conscription preceding the Tenth Crusade allowed Amadeus' army to draw on its comprehensive siege experience to breach and sack cities a more traditional force would avoid, but that ability should not be mistaken for actual fighting strength. If the Legions engaged a Levantine army outnumbering them twofold, even

a victory would be so costly his forces would be effectively knocked out of the war. That would be the beginning of a death spiral, Amadeus knew: without the strength necessary to forage his army would begin to starve, further slowing and weakening it until even thinned city garrisons would be enough to stamp it out.

"We know for a fact they've slowed down to a crawl," Scribe said. "Even if they began a forced march tonight we should be able to take the city of Iserre and withdraw before they arrive."

"It's a tempting target," Amadeus noted. "The food stores would keep us fed through winter easily and the treasury would allow us to significantly expand the ranks of our auxiliaries. Prince Milenan's capital was spared by the civil war: it's one of the wealthiest cities in Procer at the moment."

"My very point," Grem said. "If it's that good a prize, why is Hasenbach botching its defence so badly?"

"I suspect it is beyond her control," Scribe said. "The Dominion has expressed doubt that the terms of alliance signed cover the defence of Procer itself."

"They can't seriously expect that to hold up," the orc growled. "They'd be stabbing an ally in broad daylight. If they screw another crusader in the middle of a crusade their reputation is *dust*."

"Eudokia is of the opinion that they're shaking down the First Prince for concessions," Amadeus said. "Letting Iserre burn would make her fold quick enough, no matter her objections."

The orc's sole eye turned to him.

"And you?"

"Six months ago, the Ashuran committee liaising with the Grand Alliance formally requested access to the Thalassocracy's most accurate maps of Praes as well as the tally of trade goods compiled by its merchant captains," Amadeus said. "There can be no doubt that the signatories are already debating how best to partition Praes after the crusade. There are also known proponents of the extermination of all humans within Imperial borders in the Dominion's upper ranks, though they remain a loud minority for now. They still represent a significant portion of the Levantine armies we are facing at this very moment, which grants them leverage. The First Prince is currently losing control of the Highest Assembly, desperately in need of reinforcements to face both us and the Dead King and it's an open secret she fought against the results of the conclave in Salia and lost. If Levant was ever going to turn the screws on her for concessions, now is the time. All the stars are aligned."

"Queen Catherine is also still unaccounted for," Scribe said. "In a way she's the most immediate threat of all. She could appear on the outskirts of Salia with the entire Army of Callow, and even if the Augur warns Hasenbach in advance her armies cannot magically cross half of Procer to arrive in time. Every single plan they make has to take that under consideration."

"They can fight a better war than this," Marshal Grem One-Eye said. "I won't deny anything you said, but you both know I'm speaking the truth. There's the scent of hubris in the air, Black. I don't like it."

"So there is," Amadeus murmured. "I suppose there's only one question left to ask, then."

"And what's that?" the orc said, eye narrowed.

"Shall we roll the dice one more time, old friend?" the Carrion Lord smiled, slow and thin and utterly cold.

---

*lupus7*

love it alatrisme jajajajaj thank you so much ERRATICERRATA

*SpeckofStardust*

This is going to be one of those times where we wont have a clue what is going to happen for a long time isn't it?

*NerfContessa*

Wel... Kind of.

Sadly that act of pilgrim coming up, while efficient also gets rid of 2 of my favorite side characters. And is morally almost as black as blacks coat.

*goliath1303*

Screw. You.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[DroughtBringer](#)

Forgive me for I am late!

25 minutes after the chapter posted I was driving, looked at the clock and pulled over as fast as I could to post the link, but alas, I was too late.

*Rosadina R*

You kidding? Thank you for always posting near the top, making it so easy for the rest of us to do what's right and upvote the hell out of this story.

[Screwfloss](#)

Thank you for pulling over as well! Too many people attempt driving while using their phones

[jrperry1993](#)

Dovie'andi se tovy- wait, wrong book.

*Lucas*

What do you think "better war than this" means  
And "roll the dice one more time"?

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Grem is seeing the trap. He doesn't know the shape of it, but this is too easy. The people they have been fighting are smarter than this, can fight a "better war than this." But, a very tempting legit target is still a very tempting target. So the payoff might be worth the risk since A. from their perspective, it might just be an error instead of a trap after all, and B. If it is a trap, they could still get out of it with what they wanted. These are people who've beaten traps before. And Black looks like he wants to take the risk, hence "Roll the dice one more time."

[boballab](#)

The Crusaders could be trying to play a Villain/Hero story angle. One of the things Villains need to learn is to never attack someone that they heavily outnumber if there is a Hero in their midst because that gets the Gods above to knock over the scales. Grem could be suspecting that the city has a band of Hero's in it which plays that traditional story angle. There is even a famous incident where a Dread Empress ordered her Black Knight to attack a smaller group on top of a hill because it would be over by midday, and thus earning the rest of her name: The Technically Correct:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/05/31/warden-ii/>

In one of the chapters it is told the reason they lost is because there was a Hero on that hill and the Gods Above slammed the whole hand onto the scales.

*Thea*

There's a better saying about sudden blunders of competent enemies potentially not being blunders after all... Forgot the particular phrasing though.

*Jonnnney*

"If a clever opponent makes a foolish mistake," Hakram added, "it is either not a mistake or not that opponent's doing."

Chapter 36

[Screwfloss](#)

What trap is Grem seeing? Wasn't the first part of this chapter the First Prince admitting there is no clever trap and the city actually is being abandoned?

[boballab](#)

Keep in mind that the First Prince has for a lot of purposes lost control of the Crusade. The Hero's and the religious orders are running their own agenda as shown by the Gray Pilgrim and the conclave that defied the First Prince and meddled in politics. They could be deliberately setting things in motion, especially if they know she has been talking to the condemned heretic Catherine Foundling.

*naturalnuke*

The die is cast, it will land where it may.

*Someguy*

Dovie'andi se tovyu sagain

*d\_o\_l*

Blood and bloody ashes.

*rangamal thenuwara*

Alea iacta est

*ALazyMonster*

I'm admittedly enjoying the fact that black has started being hammier (even if it's cold ham) throughout this book.

Also, from the way that the Tyrant's letter was described I'm now just thinking of the Tyrant of Helike as Kumagawa from Medaka Box where he is so blatantly insincere that everything he says is in quotation marks. Which is fantastic.

### NZPIEFACE

Yeah, I'm loving him too.

### Euodiachloris

The thought of an entirely new, flowing script with built-in double-quote serif-like qualities and spade-tail curls... XD

### *Milpool*

He's found a way to condense sarcasm into liquid form and use it as ink

### *Author Unknown*

Well, it's nice to see those studies with bottled friendship proved fruitful in some way.

### *superkeaton*

Oh Black, you clever monster.

### *Wry Warudo*

So Cordelia is sacrificing Iserre for some kind of plan, and Black is going for it?

Also, I wonder what Warlock and the other Woe are up to.

---

He's letting Cordelia burn her rival's capital and lands so she has to deal with the reputational damage from that. My bet is that he'll keep going after Amadis' allies, turning to Orne so he doesn't have to fight the Levantines, and dig his way back into Callow.

### *Metrux*

Not Woe, Calamities. Though it has been said he asked to speak with Masego, so as much as it could be lie, he could be with the Empress right now.

### *Wry Warudo*

A late reply, but I meant Woe. Warlock is the only Calamity other than Black plotting anything, so there really isn't

much going on with them other than him, since we're unlikely to get a POV of Assassin and Ranger is doing her own thing.

*Jonnnney*

It seems more likely she is sacrificing the city rather than sacrificing the army that would defend it. She is keeping her options open rather than planning. Procer is never led by heroes so they don't understand how to defend against an army led by a villain. However if black pushes this advantage too far the heavens may just start anointing random heroes to throw at him until he is caught by a larger army.

*Nafram*

Interesting. It seems to me that Procer may be facing its end as a power player in the fate of Calernia. Its capacity to feed it's own people is being systematically erased, Principalities are being broken for decades at the very least and its military strength is dangerously spent already on the eve of an invasion from the Dead King itself, which won't be without very heavy casualties all the while they have to deal with an enemy inside, hordes of bandits all over the Principate and opportunists on all borders ready to pounce on it should any sign of weakness appear. Even if they manage to defeat Black (and with the Pilgrim unaccounted for they actually might on the likely chance he shows up on the nick of time given how invested he seems on making sure Cordelia's dream becomes reality) and save Procer from certain doom, it will take decades of peace to recover. Decades where the Chain of Hunger will be coming to attack again and again and again.

Procer quite literally needs a miracle to survive

*WuseMajor*

Annoyingly, they might well get one, while the Queen of Callow has to go fight yet /another/ goddess just to get enough warm bodies to put in front of her army to maybe blunt the next attack coming at her nation just enough that she can still keep some farmers out in the fields so everyone doesn't starve.

It's rank favoritism I say.

*Jason Ipswitch*

Anyone else thinking that the trap might be throwing Pilgrim and a band of Heroes at Black and his forces? They can do some sort of heroic last stand, and whether they win or lose doesn't really matter, because they heroes will escape unscathed while Black's forces will take enough casualties to wreck them.

*MetruX*

Would be a good plan not something Procerans do, though. Procerans never rely on Heroes to fight their wars, they also are not used to fighting against Villains. At most there would be a Hero or another accompanying an army of their own accord, never something elaborate as this made by 'wordly' powers. Though it is still possible that the Heroes might choose to do this by themselves... Heroes are still rare in the Principate.

### NZPIEFACE

Bigger issues in the state = More heroes

*werafdsaew*

I think you're overestimating how much damage Black has inflicted; he really only touched 1 principality

*RoflCat*

Yet just by touching that 1 principality alone, he's stoking all the paranoia of the rest of them, letting them kill themselves out.

By specifically targeting Cordelia's 'enemy' and avoid fighting her, he's making the rest of Procer think he's in cahoot with Cordelia (after all, they're not above allying with enemies for their own profit)

Then he just have to watch as Cordelia try to protect them even as they try to destroy her, occasionally stoking the fire.

### DroughtBringer

I get the feeling that next chapter will be Masego and Warlock, or following someone else back in Callow.

I'm thinking Abigail will get at least half of a chapter, and the rest of the Woe will probably appear onscreen at least once.

Black straining himself is slightly concerning, but also a masterful strategy, leans slightly on the Heroic idea of weakening yourself for your allies to survive which is always useful.

And poor Cordelia, she is not in the best of places at the moment, lots closing in on her, I do not see her staying First Prince much longer, and do not see her having quite enough will to earn a Name if she does lose her title as First Prince

*Maginot*

I think you're right. I'm dying to see what the Augur's "woe to the south" looks like with Masego and Warlock. One can assume



that Hierarch and the Tyrant will make an appearance, though I'm loving the indirect reference here.

I have a theory about where we are going though. Doesn't the Crusade's whole bit about it being unacceptable for Callow to have a villain sound a great deal like the Catholic Church position toward protestant rulers before the 30 years war. Then the Peace of Ausburg and the Peace of Westphalia said each country could set the religion for their state, despite being loudly decried by the Church, the nations rolled with it.

It certainly seems like all the smart ladies have had similar thoughts. Cat and the Woe with the Liesse accords. Hasenbach and her Friendly League of Upstandings Nations, which the Pilgrim indicated were a very important vision/system for the future. Even Malicia's treatise and her willingness to do business with "Good" cities in the League. I wonder if all three got together it wouldn't be similar scripts they were working from.

God I hope she has some good and smug lines when she rescues Black...

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Now let's talk about the Queen's Gambit.

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen's\\_Gambit](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen's_Gambit)

The Queens gambit can be found in the link above, and is a fairly popular chess opening move set.

In the Queen's gambit, white (who I am assuming is Procer, cause Black \*should\* be black), is putting pieces into position, to control the center of the board.

Now Black has the option to either Accept or Decline the Queen's Gambit.

If accepted it puts black into a much worse scenario, and loses control of the center of the board, but... gives Black a potentially strong setup for the late game.

Now, due to the rolling the dice I do believe that Balck is doing that, he is sacrificing something (not necessarily positioning like in the Chess QG), for a potential to snowball him and his Legions into the Late Game.

### *Rook*

I'm betting he doesn't accept or decline the offer. Option C, respond with your own Black Queen's Gambit

That is to say, a Foundling Gambit. Set it all on fire and run away

*MetruX*

It does appear he want to accept, actually, taking the food from the city, which should "Keep the man fed through the winter". If he can leave this trap without too much losses, he may very well keep the army alive all the time Procer is being hit by the Dead King, a very big advantage on the late game.

*Antoninjohn*

What the First Prince is doing is trapping Black by using Iserre as bait in order to have her armies encircle his, then Cat will hit her army in the back and then Gate Black and his army out

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Not enough time, I think.

*IDKWhoitis*

If Cat murders Sve and takes her Power, Cat may be able to twist the confines of Arcadia to do whatever the hell she wants. If the meta story allows she might be able to pull it off (Larat already hints she could do this already, and Cat has been learning it's mostly her preconceived notions that prevent her from doing the craziest Fae bullshit.)

*Someguy*

I think Black will ignore Iserre and aim to hit Cleves before Malanza can get there, then turn back to hit Iserre once Altraste's forces are chasing in the wrong direction on the wrong momentum. This way, south-east Procer will starve in winter and Altraste & Malanza stuck in Cleves with no fort, no granary and the Dead King able to attack in winter.

*Dainpdf*

Why risk being pincerred by the Malanza army (which is full of heroes) when they are committed to fighting Neshamah for the foreseeable future?

*IDKWhoitis*

Queen's Gambit Offered -> Queen's Gambit Declined ->Procer moves in White Knight and Grey Pilgram -> Black pulls Founding Gambit (Set fire to the board/Hit Malanza army from behind.)

*Dainpdf*

Seems to me like he's moving to accept... And again, why get involved with the Malanza army at all? It poses no threat to him.

*Snowfire1224*

Gotta love that comment about Tyrant's calligraphy being deceptive.

*Berder*

Errata:

Being carried like on a litter an invalid  
(carried on a litter like an invalid)

though under Hasenbach they're curtailed those activities to Praesi agents only  
(they'd)

He wouldn't leave the Vales if he had any another choice  
(any other choice)

[BartHumphries](#)

Just call them typos so I can search for the term more quickly.



[Antony444](#)

Damn, every time Amadeus is discussed or showed, it is pure gold...

I hope you're ready to eat your words now Cordelia. What was it again? I will have the head of the man in a matter of weeks and his army decimated? Well, right now you've lost Cantal and the Black Knight is ravaging Iserre.

Even assuming the Procer plan works perfectly, judging by the devastation described it's two provinces which have been knocked out of the war.

Before the Dead King is about to invade.

Before the ban on dwarven weapons Catherine negotiated is about to come into effect.

Before the Tyrant stops amusing us by swearing everyone 'eternal friendship' and proceeds to set the south of Calernia on fire.

The sun is setting for the Tenth Crusade, and if Cordelia manages to keep her title of First Prince until next year, it's going to be a genuine miracle...

*Dainpdf*

Well, no one expected Malicia to be in talks with Neshamah... Poor Cordelia. I hope she manages to keep her throne – we can't afford for the Chain of Hunger and the Dead King to overrun Procer.

*IDKWhoitis*

I'm putting a bet down that Kairos kills Giants or something.  
Or gets the Gnomes involved.

[TeK](#)

For inventing the Internet.

*IDKWhoitis*

Just so he can meme the hell out of his opponents and allies.

[Fuodiachloris](#)

Steady on: the guy is a bad enough troll without access to something like a magical internet to spread his smugness about.

*Someguy*

"Amadeus had, in a rare flight of fancy, called this war an invasion when speaking to Ranker. It was not, practically speaking. No territory taken had been held, and this entire affair could more accurately be termed a large-scale raid."

To be fair, a Home Invasion is still an invasion and this is done on a larger scale.

[frolamiz](#)

I really love the Hierarch/tyrant duo. I hope we see more of them and that they are not going to be used as the bogeymen in the south for the rest of the story.

But I doubt it, since every other power (except the gnomes) used this way has started moving.

*RanVor*

It would be such a waste, they're among the most interesting characters.

*Novice*

I feel really bad for Cordelia here. She is second only to Catherine when it comes to how fucked her realm is promising to be. I'd almost root for her since she is being practical in all her decisions thus far but alas, she's currently fighting Black. I'd always root for the freaking Carrion Lord (such a badass title).

Although, it's quite a bit worrying since Black is throwing more and more death flags this chapter. Can we at least have one last reunion between master and apprentice before he dies, if he dies?

*Dainpdf*

I think the Drow would disagree. Maybe Alaya, too.

*Novice*

Nah, the Drow has already been fucked even way before the start of the story. Malicia can still hide behind Callow when it comes to ground invasions (especially after the Conclave kerfuffle) and it looks like the enemy naval fleet has stalled after sacking a single coastal city. So yeah Cordelia and Catherine is still on the precipice way more than Praes.

*Dainpdf*

I thought you just meant effed up in general. If you mean specifically "how much more effed up it looks to get during the story, specifically due to invasion"...

Nah, the Drow still take the cake. After all, they're being invaded by "the only nation in Calernia that is not just a regional power" with the intent of extermination.

*Novice*

Thinking on it, yeah you're right. I guess I just ignored them since I don't really see them surviving one way or another. Even without the threat of extermination, they'd still be reduced to irrelevance because of what the Night does to them as a culture.

*grzecho2222*

She would be in less trouble if she didn't invade Callow, also she is arrogant and entitled

*Novice*

If she didn't invade Callow, she wouldn't be able to get to Praes. If the Crusade couldn't get to Praes, the Grand Alliance will fall apart and thus any talks about extending the Alliance beyond the current Crusade.

*RanVor*

Except that's blatantly untrue. They could have accepted Cat's offer and let her gate them directly to Ater. Grey Pilgrim knew the offer was sincere. But they were too arrogant and prejudiced, and now they're paying the price.

*Novice*

Except the Conclave would still happen and Cordelia would then be forced to treat Catherine as hostile. Which if they had accepted the gate, they would then be between a hostile Callow and Praes with no supply lines. They are arrogant and prejudiced, I agree. But they have made the right choice there.

*RanVor*

Did they? The Bard (because of course it was her) would have much harder time pulling off the conclave if the Battle of the Camps didn't happen, and Cordelia would be in much better position to stop it. The House of Light would have to have really solid arguments to declare Cat the Arch-Heretic of the East for nothing.

*RanVor*

And even if they managed to fuck up that monumentally, it would still be *their own fault* that Callow is hostile to them.

I just realized you're arguing that they were right to antagonize Callow because they would do it anyway eventually.

*Novice*

See, I think you're just lumping the entire Crusade into a single monolithic entity when we've already seen the opposite. Cordelia might be the First Prince but she doesn't have the absolute authority in this campaign. We've seen how much she struggles to keep the Crusade from slipping out of her grasp (which I believe she eventually will, if she didn't already). Treating Callow as hostile from the very start is the correct choice in the realpolitik sense.

I'm not saying what she has done is the correct moral choice. Good is not good after all. I'm just saying based on what Cordelia knows, based on her tenuous position and on her goals; she's done better than anyone else in her position could have done.

*RanVor*

Treating Callow as hostile from the very start is the source of almost all of their current problems. That's why I don't feel bad for Cordelia – she really has no one but herself (and her stupid subordinates) to blame.

*Novice*

I don't know about that. Seems to me that expecting rationality from the religious in a Crusade is more likely the culprit. As I've said, they can't go to Praes without going through Callow. And they can't go through Callow peacefully because of the fanatics braying at the edges, waiting for the flimsiest excuse.

*RanVor*

Nobody would mind fanatics if the Crusade was successful. Also, nobody has seen the conclave coming at the time, so it couldn't possibly be a factor in their decision making.

*Novice*

You don't think the leader of the Crusade treating with the villainous Black Queen wouldn't eventually set off the conclave? That the Proceran House of Light wouldn't try to fuck over the First Prince in a bid to restore the political influence they've lost in the aftermath of the Liturgical Wars?

Hells, declaring Cat as the Arch-Heretic instead of the Dread Empress is already grasping at straws. You don't think the House of Light wouldn't find another bullshit excuse to do what they want?

*RanVor*

You seriously think them being unable stop themselves from making enemies is a valid argument? If they're really so stupid, they deserve this.

[Javvies](#)

Cordelia accepting Cat's offer to shortcut the Crusade's forces directly to Praes – and, IIRC offering to help against the Tower and the High Lords – and in the process accepting Callow into the Grand Alliance isn't exactly grounds to move the House of Light.

The Conclave, and what came from it, is not the idea of the priests. It's the idea of an as-yet unidentified Chosen/Hero, presumably Bard.

Sure, it is entirely possible that the Conclave would still have happened and had the result it did when it did. I happen to think it would have been a much harder lift to pull off, and a lot easier to stop. Plus, accepting the shortcut to Praes likely would

have resulted in Malicia expediting her efforts to get the Dead King moving, and Cat likely wouldn't have accepted the invite, which means that the Dead King probably would have invaded Procer before the Conclave could have happened.

It would be far more difficult to successfully label Cat Arch-heretic of the East when she is actively helping you against the Tower and even harder to do so when the Dead King is invading, and Cat is your best hope of getting your armies back from Praes without repeated and massive sealift efforts. Labeling Cat Arch-heretic of the East would likely need to be put on hold. At least for a while – it's still be on Bard's to do list, but it'd drop on the list for everybody else.

*Novice*

You've got a point. We're all just speculating an alternative here. But I still think the unknown entity that moved the current Conclave would still be able to force the Alliance to be antagonistic to Callow in this alternate history. I feel said entity has malicious intent toward Cat here. I don't think they'd give peace with Callow a chance.

Schemers be schemin'.

*RanVor*

The "Unknown Entity", a.k.a. the Wandering Bard (because let's be real, it couldn't be anybody but her) doesn't actually have as much influence as you seem to believe. She can manipulate people, but she needs a foundation to build upon. The Battle of the Camps was that foundation. Without it, she wouldn't have strong enough arguments to enforce prioritizing Cat over Malicia as a target, and Cordelia's position would be much stronger, which would result in her having a much greater freedom in working to stop the conclave.

Besides, if the "correct decision" resulted in the Crusaders being crushed and forced to retreat, the country being counter-invaded and the Dead King moving south for the first time in centuries, then either the Crusade leadership was horrifically incompetent, or the entire enterprise was doomed to fail from the very beginning. Either way, Procer still brought it all on itself.

[Javvies](#)



Oh sure, Bard (it basically has to be her) would still want Cat gone in the worst way. The problem for her would be that it would be far more difficult to get people to put such a high priority on getting rid of Cat when Cat has been helping them against the Praesi. And it would be even harder to pull off if the Dead King had launched his invasion before the Conclave. Remember, Papenheim and Malanza's armies would have been in Praes, with no easy way back except for Cat. And if they went and declared Cat Arch-heretic of the East while they had 100k men in Praes, they'd at best be abandoned by Cat and left to their own devices against the Praesi, which would end poorly for them, while there'd be no way to reinforce the fortified northern border against the dead.

Sure, Bard still would have tried to convince people, but you can only talk people into doing what you want them to do if they are willing to listen to you.

*Dainpdf*

One would hope Black would be more careful, after Sabah...

*Cicero*

I suspect it's the opposite. After Sabah. Black is more willing to take risks than he used to be... at least with his own life. Probably not with his remaining friends.

*Dainpdf*

Such as, say, Grem. Or Eudokia. Or the fate of the Empire.

*IDKWhoitis*

I'm currently guessing Dead King is going to pull some Black-Level shenanigans and use a still living regiment to take Cleves before the Procereans know what's up. He owns enough Procerean corpses, uniforms, banners, and has enough people who could literally be trained for such a thing. The cityguard may just buy the story at face value if a "crusader force" arrives to reinforce the city, since what sort of nutjob would betray the living for the dead?

Also, I'm betting Black is going to go straight for the city, regardless of traps, and go for a Akua's Folly gambit. Probably lure White or Grey into the city to murder them.

*MetruX*

That's really not something he CAN do. I keep seeing people coment that, but from the stairway to north Procer they won't come close to Black, he'd need to move at least twice as fast, maybe thrice, while not fighting for more food and leaving another army to run at their backs. Sure, if it worked would be completely disastrous for the First Prince, same as if a meteor shower destroyed their palace, but none are things Black can do right now.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Amadeus may be driving himself into the ground, but he's so obviously enjoying every minute of this active retirement gig he's got. It's scary-awesome.

Part of me hopes that just by expecting death at the end of it, he gets life just to spite him. He'd probably appreciate the joke, too – after a while. ;P

*grzecho2222*

Given that he seems to copy Lisowski tactics and is ill like him, because of overstraining himself, he would have to die randomly between battles

### [TeK](#)

EE, I have a very important question, dunno if anyone asked that. Do Named have to poop? It's never mentioned in the stories how they do it. Well, Heroes may have to poop, Ashen Priestes did threaten some Heroes with diahrea. But do Villains have to poop, or they can use their vast and terrible powers to fix this? Ok, maybe it depends on the Villain, I don't believe Dead King or WB has to poop. Or the personal perception of the Named, like how they get taller or prettier. But does Catherine has to poop now that she is of Winter? Please, respond, this is very important, I've been holding this question for too long.

*Snowfire1224*

My guess is nobody poops unless it's plot important

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

Cat mentioned offhand at some point that villainy stopped her menstrual cycle, if that helps. More saliently, Winter has stripped her of the need to eat, so she probably doesn't poop even if most villains do.

*Yavandir*

Why would Warlock bind soul of an enemy to chamber pot if he couldn't poop?

## Javvies

I'm half-hoping Black diverts from ripping up Iserre and either goes to punch out Salia or to bushwhack the nearer Levantine army.

On the other hand, if Black can take Iserre without too much damage to the defenses, even if he gets trapped inside the city, the Legions ought to be able to hold the walls for a while – hopefully long enough for Cat to come pull them out.

*Agent J*

Honestly, I don't want Cat to have to come bail him out. He's supposed to be some Machiavellian genius, so I'm fully expecting our lovable bastard to have a brilliant end game. My personal bet is that he's arranging the board to create opportunity, y'know, that thing the Augur can't predict. Kill the Augur and the Proceran threat becomes a great deal more manageable.

If he just smashes and burns things until Cat comes to bail his sorry ass out of the fire, I'll be very disappointed in him. He's cleverer than that.

## Javvies

I'd prefer Cat not need to bail him out either. I'm sure both of them would prefer that too.

Unfortunately, as good as he is, as good as the generals with him are, you can make all the right moves and still run into trouble. In addition, it seems that if Black gets significantly slowed down anywhere, he'll have trouble.

And they know he's moving towards Iserre.

Plus, he's a Villain taking a chance/ rolling the dice while invading/ raiding a Good nation.

With Bard both gunning for him and unaccounted for, and an undetermined number of Heroes with the Levantines. Oh, sure, most of them involved with the Crusade will probably be with Malanza and Papenheim, or with the Ashuran fleets raiding the Praesi coast ... but we know at least one unknown Hero (probably Bard) is in Salia.

Plus, y'know, Augur is around for providing information on what Black is doing and planning.

Black is heavily outnumbered, and even with him using an Aspect to boost the strategic speed of his Legions, there are still physical limits on how much he can dodge around the forces hunting him.

It wouldn't take much for Black to run into enough trouble that he either has to abandon his campaign in Procer or get

into a situation where he'll need Cat's assistance to get out.

For that matter, with the Dead King moving against Procer, Black has a lot less that he needs to do to break the Crusade.

Indeed, there are reasonable arguments for Black abandoning his campaign in Procer, and leaving them to fight the Dead King and get the Crusade's forces gutted by the undead. If Black and his Legions left the Crusade to fought the Dead King in favor of rebuilding the fortifications in the Vales and/or fortifying the Stairway, the bulk of the Crusade would burn itself out on stopping the Dead King. The Dead King conquering a chunk of Procer is probably something that Black wouldn't look forward to – indeed, that could ultimately cause greater national cohesion in Procer, transforming them into a single nation instead of a loose confederation of Principalities.

Besides ... I doubt he'd be happy to learn what Malicia's been up to since the war started – cutting a deal with the Dead King, turning on Cat and Callow. He might not be to the point of actively turning on Malicia, but he'd likely be more than willing to actively refuse to help her against Cat.

*Fern*

...is black implying that the "concessions" the Dominion is pushing for include the genocide of the Soninke and Taghreb? That's not a very Good thing to do, now is it?

*Novice*

Good ≠ good. The whole Good and Evil (and one of the major themes in the Guide) is all about choosing between the Gods Above or Below. The Elves of the Golden Bloom for instance, genocided the original inhabitants of the forest and yet they're still considered a Good nation.

*Oui*

Soo, apparently stories don't matter anymore. Black is doing monstrous, classic villain things straight from the A Villain's Guide to Getting Yo Ass Murdered by the Heavens and there are no consequences at all. Hell, he's also weakening the only nation capable of fighting the Dead King, at least for a while (I'm seriously beginning to doubt that, though, seeing that everyone is walking over their armies). Sure, he's weakened but that seems to be all. Odds are so stacked against him that he should be writing a testament. Neshamah and the Bard have been playing this game for a while now all because of 'the balance', but Cat and Black's plot armour seem to be much stronger and they need not bother.

## crysjal

The Narrative doesn't discriminate. When a situation is brought about the narrative flows as it ought to. As you say, Black is in a perilous position. He's trapped with no hope of escape, running a mysterious plan nobody knows while also enjoying his regained vitality. The narrative won't let him lose because:

A. He's got no hope of escape, therefore logically he will escape.

B. He has a secret plan. It's a secret and therefore must come to fruition, thereby making the suspense worthwhile for a dramatic reveal during said escape.

In addition, supporting points include:

C. The regaining of his vitality has made him more interesting, which compounds the previous two points. He's an interesting character with a good backstory which grants him a basic level of protection via the narrative in general terms.

D. The character itself is badass. Any death would have to be suitably epic and the scene set does not allow for such a death.

E. Major characters who are invested in him are not present to watch him die (Cat and Malicia). Incidentally, Black also promised Malicia to return to the tower at some point which is foreshadowing and so must also be acted out through the narrative.

## *Kel the Seer*

The Crusade was called against Praes, it just "so happened" to go through Callow since it was on the way. "Liberating" Callow from an Evil ruler to divide it up between the Procerans and strengthen the First Prince's position while also removing the threat of unemployed Fantassins is all just a publicly unstated bonus.

It almost seems like Black is pulling a 3 for 1 with his rampage.

1) Protecting Praes by hobbling the Crusade. Even though he and Malicia are on the outs, he still has some sense of duty to the Empire he helped architect.

2) Unofficially help Cat in the short term by also blunting the Crusade so Callow can get its feet back under it.

3) Long term help Cat by making Procer into the new Callow. A weakened kingdom nominally aligned to Good that all the crusades have to march through to get to the Evil kingdoms.

Yeah, Cat gets the better deal, but Amadeus knows his days are numbered, and she is still in his mind his apprentice and the one best suited to carry on with his new way of fighting against the Gods Above.

If Amadeus being stretched so thin leads to his death in a trap, I am curious to see what will happen to Cat. Emotions inside, I think it has been intimated that there might be a few scraps of Squire in Cat that Winter hasn't bothered to devour yet. What happens when a radically weakened transitional Name gets the trigger to Transition?

I don't think she will become the new Black, but given Cat's luck, it will happen either right as she is about to win a fight, or is struggling to deal with the sheer volume of Night that will try to flood her if she kills Sve.

*Rhys*

I love the Hierarch and the Tyrant so much! They're just so deliciously CRAZY I can't wait to see what they do in response to everything that's coming.

That is, assuming they choose to do anything at all. But I can't imagine them taking a backseat for something as monumental as the mobilisation of the Dead King's armies.

*Papalamus*

Can someone remind me what was "the results of the conclave in Salia"?

[Javvies](#)

The short version is,

1. Cat got formally designated Arch-Heretic of the East – the first person other than a currently reigning Dread Emperor/ Empress to be so labeled.
2. The House of Light in Callow got declared heretical for crowning her.

The backlash from that in Callow is, in short, they (the Callowan House of Light) declared the Conclave heretical and fallen into earthly pursuits, and formally designated all Heroes that had trod Callowan soil to have Fallen from Grace (aka, they aren't Heroes, they're Villains). I think they might have declared the 10th Crusade to be not of the Light too.

There are a few more details, but that's the short version. For more details, see Chapter 36: Enchere.

[Screwfloss](#)

FYI this part doesn't make any sense: *it was a popular jest in Procer that to split the difference between the royalty of Cantal and Iserre one would need a very sharp knife*

To "split the difference" means to meet halfway, as in when negotiating. If I offer you \$9,000 for a car that you want \$10,000 for, splitting the difference means we agree at \$9,500. Obviously then, one cannot "split the difference" between two people or anything like that.

*Cicero*

Splitting the difference between Cantal and Iserre royalty would mean taking the differences between the two, and finding the midpoint to split the difference.

For example, if Cantal royalty always wore wide brimmed hats while Iserre always wore no brimmed hats, splitting the difference would mean wearing medium brimmed hats. This analogy can be applied to more intangible traits as well.

This the difficulty in splitting the difference implies that Cantal and Iserre royalty are so alike in both tangible and intangible traits that there really is nothing to split.

[sengachi](#)

Hey so who else thinks that Black might just roll into this heavily fortified city and just, like, take it? There's been a lot of mentions of his army being a raiding party and not taking territory, and clearly Black is going to somehow subvert Cordelia giving him a city. So I think this is building up to him taking a city and just sitting there, threatening massive swathes of Cordelia's holdings by simply existing. Maybe providing de-facto shelter for bandit groups as an added insult to injury.

*abao*

Black remains my favorite character. I don't understand half of what he's doing, even with all the things considered, but he's the only one who despise using plot armor as much as I do.

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## Interlude: Zwischenzug

*"Of course I fear my friends. If they did not scare me, why befriend them at all?"*

– Dread Empress Prudence the First, the Frequently Vanquished

When dawn came to Laure it found Vivienne Dartwick already awake. She'd slept only fitfully on her too-soft bed, the sparse hours of rest broken by regular reports from her Jacks. Now that she'd returned to the capital she was like the spider returned to her web, her thieves and spies passing forward a river of whispers she had not understood how badly she missed before she could drink from it again. It'd been two months since she had last spoken with Catherine, time and distance watering her wine. She still believed most of what she'd said, but the dire state of affairs here had forced her to admit her queen had not been wrong in her predictions: neither she nor Adjutant had been able to afford a full night's sleep since they stepped out of Arcadia. The orc was a work horse like no one she had ever met, yet she knew that if he'd been forced to handle the Jacks as well as the rest he would have buckled under the weight.

Sunlight passed through the open panes of her window as she sat in silence, two scrolls unfurled before her. Neither were pleasant news. Dread Empress Malicia had sent a diplomatic envoy under truce banner and the man was reported to be riding for Laure with all possible haste. His affairs had been looked through, and he carried no letter or instructions. Whatever the Empress wanted to be said would be spoke in person. Reluctantly, Vivienne had passed along orders for the envoy to be allowed use of courier horses and escorted by soldiers from the Summerholm garrison. The second scroll was a matter beyond her own purview to settle. After refugees began pouring into Callow through the Blessed Isle, Catherine had ordered for the farmers of the eastern fields to withdraw back to Summerholm with their grain and cattle. There had been concerns that if the city garrison sallied out to force the refugees back into the Empire it would be walking into a Praesi ambush.

The farmers and villagers closest to Summerholm had obeyed. Those closer to Praesi borders, however, were digging in their heels. They were refusing to abandon their possessions to the inevitable looting from the refugees but lacked the means to carry them westward, and so they'd refused to leave entirely. Already there had been strife between Callowans and refugees, and over a dozen deaths. It would only get worse, Vivienne knew. More refugees would come, and some would carry weapons. Callowan farmers would empty their cellars of dusty old spears and swords to fight for their land and property, and the killings would escalate. The Praesi were sure to exploit the mounting fears and either arm or send troops to help their countrymen. Vivienne's own countrymen would die, and not a damned thing would be done about it. Marshal Juniper, she knew, would be adamant it was not worth risking the garrison to protect farmers who'd refused to obey a royal decree.



There was only one man in the kingdom who could force her, and Hakram Deadhand was not known to smile upon those who disobeyed his mistress.

Vivienne passed a hand through her hair, noting it was beginning to grow long again. She'd need to have it cut soon enough, and it sent a private pang of fear in her that this was the case. The thief had worked with quite a few Named, since the Liesse Rebellion, and she had not known any of them to have such issues. The largest physical change she'd seen in someone with a Role was Masego's noticeable loss of weight after the Observatory was raised – and given that the man had often forgotten to eat unless Indrani saw to it, the explanation was clear. The Hierophant had been wasting away chasing his visions, his thinning had been as much a reflection of that as his lack of meals. What did it mean, that her hair still grew and she tired almost as easily as when she'd been young? She'd never observed the same in any of the Named she'd known. The thought that she might lose her aspects, or even her Name itself, had been the fodder of persistent nightmares.

She was already dead weight as a Named, what would she be without even that?

Vivienne forced herself to breathe in and breathe out slowly, the old calming trick her thief master had taught her when he first took her roof-hopping. Yet she could only think of the pain, oh the pain when the lightning had coursed through her body. Of the searing green heat that engulfed her under the cold gaze of the Duke of Green Orchards. Of the flames that had licked at her body hungrily in the depths of the Doom of Liesse, cracking the gums of her teeth and scorching her tongue. A parade of pain, and what did she have but failures to contrast them with? *How many of my victories were truly mine?* Her hand was trembling with the answer, and the knowledge that followed – all of her defeats had been of her own making. Vivienne snarled and formed a fist with trembling fingers, hitting at the table.

"I will catch up," she whispered, knuckles throbbing with pain. "I *will*."

She breathed in, breathed out. The tremors had not left, but lazing about would not chase them away. She had had yet another losing fight to pick. She left the scrolls behind and left her rooms, grabbing the first palace servant she came across and ordering him to pass the message that Marshal Juniper was summoned to a council in the formal room at Morning Bell. Vivienne had no intention of spending time trading barbed words with the Hellhound as would inevitably ensue if she went herself to seek out the recently-arrived Marshal of Callow. The other whose attendance would be required, though, she would fetch herself. They'd not traded words in three days save through

correspondences, their differing duties and long hours precluding the shared meals that Catherine insisted on the Woe having when she was there to enforce it. Honestly compelled the thief to admit she would not have taken occasion to have one even if there had been one. She'd warmed to some of the Woe more than she had ever thought she would. Masego and Indrani she even counted as friends of a sort, a notion that would have appalled her a few years ago.

She had no such conflicting feelings over Hakram Deadhand.

Adjutant was not difficult to find. The cramped and crooked room that had once belonged to some royal scribe was the orc's office, and he did not leave it unless he was needed for council or court. He must sleep in there, if he even slept. The only distraction the Jacks had found he indulged in were occasional visits from his subordinate Captain Tordis. The other orc's presence, when not required by reports, was followed by the door being locked and the captain emerging with her hair ruffled and her neck red around an hour afterwards. No other such visitors had been noted, which ran against Adjutant's reputation for promiscuity. Vivienne suspected her was simply too tired and busy to chase skirts, even those made of mail. The door to the officer was cracked open, light filtering from inside. Neither candles, as Callowans preferred to use, not the finicky magelights the Praesi were so fond of. A handful of common sprites in bottles, spread around the room. Vivienne found the soft glow of them almost soothing as she rapped her knuckle against the door before opening it entirely. The orc was leaning over his desk, brows creased as he moved his quill against parchment with almost unnatural precision. He finished penning his sentence and blew the ink dry before looking up.

"Thief," Adjutant said, nodding in welcome. "Didn't think you'd still be up."

"It will be Morning Bell within an hour," Vivienne replied, then gestured at the seat across him. "May I?"

"Go ahead," he replied, sounding surprised. "Gods, morning already? I could have sworn it was barely half a bell past midnight."

The thief carefully picked up the handful of parchment sheaths left to pile on the seat, glimpsing a grain reserve tally left mostly open among them, and set them down on the floor. She dropped down into the chair, already wary. She forced herself not to look at his hand of bones, to not remember the sensation of it wrapping around her throat and *squeezing*.

"You look tired," Deadhand gently said, fangs clicking inside his maw. "Don't work yourself to death."

"You're hardly one to talk," Vivienne said, painting a smile.

The kindly visage of the concerned friend, the shoulder all the Woe could lean on. That was to be his face today, then. It was one of many. Catherine's dutiful steward and second, smoothing away every wrinkle. The laughing accomplice, trading jibes and jabs with the lowliest of soldiers. The terrifying giant of muscle and steel, roaring as he tore apart foes with fang and axe. The soft-spoken, cold-eyed thing that had told her mild as milk he would snap her neck if she even considered treachery. *Which is your real face? Are any of them true?* She did not look at the bones. *Dead the hand and dead the man*, the song went. She could not put it out of her head.

"I've set an hour or two aside for the purpose next month," he drily said. "I take it there's a reason for the pleasure of your company?"

"I've word from the Jacks," she said. "The situation east is worsening and something needs to be done before it comes to a head. I've called a council with Marshal Juniper."

"Hopefully Aisha will have gotten some tea into her before she arrives," Adjutant grimaced, baring teeth like ivory knives.

She'd seen them rip into throats, more than once. Gobble down blood and flesh greedily like it was the finest of delicacies. The quickening in her pulse she kept away from her eyes, having learned from Akua Sahelian's example. Diabolist had not quite managed to hide how wary she was of the orc, and though the shade's discomfiture would usually have put a smile on her face Vivienne had been too dismayed to be sharing any opinion with the Butcher of Liesse to take any joy from it. *Snakes know one another*, she'd thought back then. Akua Sahelian was studying the Woe carefully, forging herself into a person they would allow themselves to like, but she'd found another had struck long before her. No wonder the shade feared him: she'd found a man whose face was as changeable as her own patiently watching her. And unlike Diabolist, Vivienne doubted there was anyone alive who knew what Hakram Deadhand truly wanted. The orc leaned back into his seat, rolling his shoulders and loudly cracking his neck with a little exhale of pleasure.

"I could eat," Adjutant said. "Probably should, too. Care to join me on a trip to the kitchens?"

"I already ate," she lied without batting an eye. "Though don't let me stop you."

She could think of few things she desired less than watching that maw at work from across a mere table's width.

"You should get something warm in you," the orc advised, rising to his feet. "You look like death warmed over. Indrani forgot some of her tea leaves in her room, I believe. I'll ask a servant to brew you a pot for the council. Formal room?"

Vivienne agreed with a silent nod. She was not surprised he'd noticed her fondness for Indrani's brews. Those dark eyes missed nothing and forgot even less. They parted ways two corridors further down, and she could not leave soon enough.

—

"So the farmers with spears are fighting the refugees with knives," Marshal Juniper grunted. "There's a surprise: there'd a damned reason they were recalled to Summerholm. The sole ingredient in that stew is desperation."

Staff Tribune Bishara had not, in fact, gotten some tea into the Hellhound before she arrived. The orc's particularly fine mood stood testament to this fact. The Marshal of Callow was of the opinion that she should be overseeing the training camps filled with fresh recruits from all across the kingdom, not cooling her heels at the capital, and had spared no pains in expression that opinion to all those even remotely involved. Adjutant was taking her spleen with at least the semblance of good humour. The constant gruff whining scraped Vivienne's nerves raw, especially when paired with the outcome she already knew was in motion.

"The farmers are defending their lands from looters," she sharply replied. "As is their right."

"Starving looters," Deadhand mildly said. "I doubt there's any great enmity or deep scheme to it. They're cold and hungry people, not a marauding army."

"Leave this alone long enough, and that's exactly what it'll turn into," Vivienne warned. "Blood has been spilled. They'll band together for the safety in numbers, and so will Callowans to deal with it. By the turn of the month it will be skirmishes all across the river banks."

"There wouldn't be corpses on the floor if they'd obeyed Foundling's fucking decree," Marshal Juniper bluntly said. "Which was meant to avoid this very outcome, if you'll remember. Last I checked someone had crowned her Queen of Callow. I'm no jurist, but I was under the impression ignoring royal decrees was some kind of treason."

*She's Queen of Callow, not some eastern tyrant or a damned greenskin warlord, Vivienne thought, fingers tightening under the table. Our rulers know there's limits to what they can order and reasonably expect to have obeyed. It was a losing fight, as she'd*

known from the start. Neither of these two bore any love for the land they'd been charged with ruling, or the people born to it.

"There's no need to go quite that far," Adjutant said. "As Thief noted, all their actions save for ignoring the recall are legal under Callowan law. It would be a mistake to paint all that followed with the same brush as that initial mistake."

Deadhand the diplomat, now: half the friend, half the officer. Vivienne had not wanted the responsibility of the regency of Callow and found the burden of it suffocating, but the way the title seemed to be left at the door in their eyes remained galling. The difference between the authority in name and the authority in truth had grown to worry her, not for what it was but for what it might become. Catherine had come to the throne lawlessly, but that lawlessness could not keep lest the kingdom come apart at the seams. *A few years of this, she thought, and it will be one law for those with swords and another for those without.* If that came to be, the kingdom would burst like an overripe fruit without even need for an invasion. Callowans had long been under Imperial rule, but they were beginning to wake to the old freedoms. Hatred of Procer and Praes was keeping the peace for now, yet how long would that last?

"A decree's a decree," Marshal Juniper growled. "We start making excuses for everyone and this falls apart."

"If you start hanging farmers for defending their land, excuses will be the last of your worries," the thief coldly said. "They are not beast of burdens, to be browbeaten into the latest whim and whipped if they do not immediately obey."

The orc's maw opened, baring a row of sharp fangs. Vivienne forced her shoulders to loosen, affecting nonchalance. Perhaps even contempt. *Show her fear, give her an inch, and it will be the end of you,* she thought.

"You brought this to us," Adjutant spoke before the other could. "And I'm glad you did. Have you already thought of a measure to remedy the issue?"

Always so smooth, so measured. Too perfect. It made her skin crawl. It was no mystery, why she could not make herself trust this one while she'd come to rely on a Praesi warlock and a vicious pupil of the Lady of the Lake. *Masego cannot curb his tongue nor his face and Indrani has never been anything but brutally honest of her indifference to the suffering of others.*

"The reason for their recalcitrance to leave is simple," she said. "They will not abandon their possessions to looters but lack any method of bringing them west of they leave. If the means are provided, the matter will be largely settled."

"Not much road in that region, save for the Imperial highway," Marshal Juniper said, eyes narrowing. "You can't just requisition merchant wagons from Summerholm, the axles will break in rough country."

"The garrison of Summerholm has a large complement Legion-issue supply carts," Vivienne said. "All reinforced with good steel."

"No," the Hellhound immediately said. "That's out of the question. I will not allow military equipment to be doled out to farmers. Anyone could seize them."

"I did not mean for them to be spelled away into the countryside miraculously," she replied scathingly. "The garrison would be escorting the carts. The presence of soldiers will put an end to the skirmishes immediately, which should quicken the process enough the risks will be minimal."

"You must have been struck on the ear in Keter," Marshal Juniper growled. "I just gave you your answer. If I'm unwilling to risk carts why would you think I'm willing to risk the force holding the east?"

"It does not hold the east," Vivienne said through gritted teeth, "it watches from tall walls as the entire eastern stretch slowly goes up in blood and flames."

"All it takes is for Aksum or a pack of lesser lordships to see the garrison coming and we could lose the entire garrison to an ambush," the Hellhound said slowly, as if addressing an idiot. "They have mages, Dartwick. They have household troops and devils. The Empire's interior has been left entirely untouched by the Ashuran raids, they're fresh and at full strength. If the garrison force is gone, they can push forward to Summerholm and there's fuck all we can do about it. Half my army is spread across training camps and the rest guarding the Vales. If the enemy move quick enough, we could actually lose Summerholm itself. Walls mean nothing without men on them. All of this, for a pack of bloody farmers who refused a direct order and are now facing the eminently predictable consequences of that refusal."

"Not your army, Hellhound," the thief said softly. "The *Army of Callow*. Sworn to protect its people, not just turn back invasions or war abroad."

"I know the godsdamned name," Marshal Juniper snarled. "The queen of the place put me in charge of it. You sure you want to have a pissing contest over that? I don't think you'll like the results."

"Enough," Adjutant said.

The voice rang with power. Not quite Speaking, Vivienne thought, yet not too far from it. She'd never mastered that trick herself, but she'd seen Catherine employ it. Felt the ripples shudder through everyone, the air heavy like just before a storm struck. The Black Queen rarely used the tool, but when she did the casual display of power was always terrifying. The way she could snatch the will of anyone in earshot as easy as snapping her fingers, bludgeoning them into obedience with weight and power. Adjutant did not have the talent, and for that Vivienne thanked whatever Gods were listening. It was already terrifying enough to remember he'd been able to fight her before even claiming his Name. Every single conversation they held was tinted by the knowledge that the orc was now in the fullness of his power, capable of tearing apart lords of the fae. He could rip out her throat with but a moment's effort and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

"This bickering helps no one," Deadhand said. "Juniper, there is a difference between having a rough tongue and pouring scorn. One is your character. The other has no place in this room, or in conversation with people who *outrank* you."

The Hellhound lips thinned.

"There was no-"

Adjutant barked out a sentence in Kharsum, too swift and heavily accented for her to understand most of it. The words for oil and fires stood out, and the Marshal of Callow closed her maw with a loud click of fangs. She no longer spoke. Vivienne's eyes remained on the other orc, wondering if she should be expressing her warm gratitude for Deadhand deigning to step in. She found little of that in her heart. The Hellhound's open hostility was nothing new, and this did absolutely nothing to mend it.

"Juniper isn't wrong about the risks," Adjutant finally said, voice calm again.

*Another losing fight lost*, Vivienne bitterly thought. They did not trust her or her judgement. The worst part of it was that she could see why they did not. What had she achieved with the Jacks that required a Name, that could not be done by another spymistress? How had she proved herself the equal of the infamous Black Queen or dauntless Archer, of an orc celebrated in song or a mage who spat in the eye of lesser gods? She'd been enemies with these two, not so long ago. And even then it'd been William who took the hand now made of bones, while she'd been tossed through a window like a sack of radishes by an offhand spell. *I do not belong here*, she thought, the warm memories of laughter by the fire seeming so far away. She did not belong at this table, arguing over the fate of her people and losing inch by inch. She'd joined Catherine for more than this, hadn't she? For something beyond Imperial rule, and there was no mistaking what

this was. It might be orcs speaking, but the words were the harsh teaching of the War College – the Carrion Lord's own.

Vivienne had not turned her cloak to keep living under the laws of the Black Knight. She tried, even now, to keep her eyes ahead. On the Liesse Accords, that single piece dream that could not be called anything but a good for the world. The lone and lonely light in this ugly sea of grey. Yet the Accord were far on the horizon, and the tide was drowning her now.

"We'll need to amend the operational plan," Adjutant said. "Leave some of the garrison behind and keep what we send out in a tight cluster with the Wild Hunt ready to gate them out if the Empire mobilizes."

Vivienne's heart skipped a beat. It was what she'd wanted to hear. What was his angle, here? What did he gain by this? *What does he gain by the Liesse Accords*, the old whisper came, *that he would champion them so ardently?*

"The Hunt is the key to our defence, Hakram," Marshal Juniper said. "If the League or Procer strikes-"

"If," Deadhand repeated. "A possibility. Is it a fact that we're losing people now, Juniper."

"I don't like it," the Hellhound said. "It leaves us fragile."

"You don't have to like it," Adjutant said. "It's an order. Now, Thief. I believe we have a map of the region somewhere around here for proper planning, but I'd like your thoughts on how we should go about the evacuation. I'm leaning towards a circular sweep, but you've people on the ground and I don't."

Vivienne Dartwick leaned forward and spoke, the council stretching for over an hour before the bare bones of a plan had been laid down and a recess was called until they'd all looked into the proper records and logistics.

The patient watchfulness in the orc's eyes never left for a moment, and she never ceased to look for it.

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[DroughtBringer](#)

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<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>



And, believe it or not, I actually have something besides voting!  
Wow! That never happens!

There is a Discord Server for the Guide, that isn't overly active, but if more people show up and start participating, it could be!

So come on, create a discord (if you do not already have one) and join the PracticalGuideToEvil Discord Server: <https://discord.gg/w5pnbqP>

(Side effects may include, but are not limited to: being stabbed by a Black Knight, learning you have Zombies inside your soul, dying, coming back to life probably as one of the zombie in your soul, killing Heroes, Villains, and anything else that gets in your way, forcing an Angel to resurrect you, becoming King Arthur by pulling a Sword from the Stone, breaking said sword, claiming part of the mantle of Winter and then messing things up to the point where your body is ripped apart by a Winter's Storm only to be reforged by Winter, destroying both Winter and Summer courts, nearly killing your mentor, fighting off Gandalf (only slightly less cool), and someone who religiously believes in Swords, having your homeland torn apart by war every other minute, dropping lakes on people, meeting with the closest thing to a True Incarnation of Evil on your continent, finding a bunch of Murder Hobo's, and constantly wondering if you've made the right decision)

*warriormonk19*

Murder Hobos. Yup.

*Drd*

If I were ever to become a boxer/mma fighter (not bloody likely), I want my nickname to be "The Murder Hobo". I feel like it perfectly encapsulates who I am, my true essence. :]

*RanVor*

Well, the Drow aren't exactly "hobos"...

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Murder hobos" is the nickname for the classic adventuring party of D&D and the many videogames patterned after it. Running around killing random people and wildlife, taking anything not nailed down, never having consequences for their actions....

*RanVor*

I know what a murderhobo is, thank you very much.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Hey, two chapters?

[mgmtheo](#)

The first chapter of every month is accompanied by a bonus chapter. You should totally read them if you're new to the story.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

If you have been using the table of contents to read chapters, make sure you go to "extra chapters" and see that you didn't miss any.

I read this for a quarter of a year before I realized that ranger had an interlude I'd missed.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Oh wow man, thanks. Can you tell me which one is the one for ranger? I only remember reading one for Archer a while back.

[erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, and so Extra Chapter. Third and last of the Fatalism chapters, from Cordelia Hasenbach's POV. Can be found in the Extra Chapters tab, as usual.

*stevenneiman*

Cool to see Vivienne's perspective for once. I don't recall if we've ever had a POV chapter from her, but it was interesting seeing how much self-loathing she feels stemming from being the only non-combat member of the Woe. I notice how she carefully omitted things like the fact that she was instrumental to defeating Summer.

I also kinda feel bad for her poor relationship with Hakram, given that in some ways they're very similar. The only real difference is that he wants to help Cat as long as she spits in the eyes of the high and mighty and she wants to help Cat as long as she helps Callow in turn. It might be because we spend most of our time in the POV of the only character he really bares his whole self to, but I actually think he seems like a very straightforward and simple character. He's defined by the willingness to do whatever Cat needs him to do, whether that means brutally slaughtering enemies on the field, scaring the shit out of Vivienne, or doing paperwork 23 hours a day for weeks.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, Viv may be somewhat racist (while not willing to admit it), and is certainly traumatized from when Hakram threatened her.

*Cpt. Obvious*

It isn't that strange really. There she was, named and basically untouchable by anyone mortal. Able to walk up to someone standing alone in the middle of a plaza, pick their pockets and still remain unseen. Able to jump from a tower to land as softly as a cat and walk away unscathed. She could have used her abilities to slip a knife into the neck of anyone just as easily as she stole their valuables. Even dismissing her stealth she's stronger, faster and tougher than any purely mortal human, and still this unnamed orc handled her with about as much ease as a bulldog tearing into its favorite chew toys.

Since then he has not only been named but she's also seen him tear out enemies' throats with his teeth. She's seen him eat the flesh of enemies, delighting in the taste. Enemies just like she was not so long ago. And she realizes that she's alive because he didn't choose to eat her back then when he still lacked a name.

And now she's supposed to be his friend? She's supposed to trust this orc who's gone toe to toe with a demon battling it with shield and axe?

It's no wonder she's terrified of him. The fact that he seems to be the least insane of them is particularly disconcerting.

She would probably have an easier time handling him if he was more, orcish. If he was more of a brute she would have felt she was in control. But instead he's calm and collected, showing more restraint than just about anyone else she's regularly involved with. And he is sharp, terrifyingly so. If there's anything that scares her more than an orc that would have no problem killing her at a whim, who would have no qualms about tearing her arm off and suck the flesh of her fingers before her eyes, it's that same orc playing nice. She can't help but wonder what plans are taking shape in that green head. And every instinct is screaming that it can't end well.

*soonnandnaanssoon*

The zwischenzug (German: pronounced ['tʃvɪfən,tʃu:k] "intermediate move") is a chess tactic in which a player, instead of playing the expected move (commonly a recapture), first interposes another move posing an immediate threat that the opponent must answer, and only then plays the expected move (Hooper & Whyld 1992:460) (Golombek 1977:354). It is a move that has a high degree of "initiative". Ideally, the zwischenzug changes the situation to the player's advantage, such as by

gaining material or avoiding what would otherwise be a strong continuation for the opponent.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zwischenzug>

-From Wikipedia, the true Guide to the Goods and Evils of Humanity.

[DroughtBringer](#)

You said what I was going to say! I literally had the exact same part copied to be able to post...

Although your revelation about Wikipedia greatly surpassed anything I could have posted.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

So this is to mirror the queen's gambit from the previous interlude?

*Raved Thrad*

Knowing Catherine, I'm fully expecting that at some point we'll have a chapter named "Flipping The Board." 🤪

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I'm expecting her to flip the whole table, not just the board.

*Death Knight*

And make it burn green.

*Dainsleif*

Stab the board, flip the table, burn the table with greek fi- i mean goblin fire, ressurect and Take the table. Cat's MO.

*Miles*

Looks like the theme for this arc is chess

[NZPIEFACE](#)

And the moment when Cat comes back... "Castling"

*Andrei*

So I was getting a feeling but seeing the name of the chapter explain confirmed it for me: Thief is the target of the Pilgrims redemption story. I expect he will appear to her at some point in the future and convince her that this whole evil thing isn't good for her or callow and she will betray Cat.

This betrayal will be one more step our dear Cat takes as she's climbing The Tower.

### Screwfloss

I prefer the term *intermezzo* in chess contexts – it's immediately clear what it means – but obviously Zwischenzug makes a better chapter title 😊

### Euodiachloris

Depends. I did German for A-level and wasn't so hot at Music, so..... ;P

### DroughtBringer

I am expecting another few chess-based chapters about what's going on abroad, probably something from the Empire, something from Masego, and then something from Hakram, although Masego/Empire could be combined or just focus on Masego, and Hakram may have been covered here.

There will also probably be something on Tyrant/Hierarchy, and, if we're lucky, the Bard.

I do believe that it is too early for anything on The Dead King. Probably 2 or 3 more chapters, in all, so the rest of this week is probably some more interludes before we hit the main story again, and see the storm that Cat just unsealed.

### Javvies

Thief doubts herself. That's ... realistic, but I'm not sure what options she has for the self-improvement/"catching up" she wants. Also, Hakram could manhandle you before he got his Name because he's big, strong, and a trained and capable combatant. You aren't really any of those, Viv.

Also, Hakram's wants? They're limited with his Name – his wants are linked to what Cat wants.

Cat would've wanted the farmers helped to move, thus Hakram wants to figure out how to best do so.

### NZPIEFACE

She's worried about herself in a more narrative sense.

She's no longer of much importance as a Thief, so what exactly does that make her?

### *IDKWhoitis*

Following the logic she states, a spy mistress (lower case intentional).

And honestly, I'm kinda on board for this transition if it does happen, she herself has started doubting herself to a fatalistic degree. I'm also on board for Akua getting a seat at the table, as horrifying as that sounds.

*Miles*

She has the freaking sun in her storage space. What could she possibly have to catch up on?

*Stormblessed*

Yeah Thief is both way overestimating and way underestimating Adjutant at the same time. His wants aren't very complicated. He's loyal to Cat in almost every sense of the word. If his goals end up being some kind of other plot in a way that goes against Cat I'd be more than shocked. Obviously he can have individual motivations, but betraying Cat just seems off the table narratively (except maybe if mind magic could somehow be involved, but it still feel like a bad story).

That being said, the viewpoint of Hakram's capabilities from Viv's perspective lay is incredibly interesting.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

His role as Adjutant is to make the wishes of Cat reality. He translates her desires into script and ink.

*the verbiage ecstatic*

Keep in mind, though, we don't really know his role. He's the first of his Name, and we've never gotten the story of what "Adjutant" symbolizes for Orc-kind. Roles can have multiple sides, and we've seen one facet of it, but do we know how it ultimately evolves? Vivienne's perspective is interesting, because she's calling out something that we should have seen: Hakram is a little \*too\* perfect as a crutch for Cat. In a world that runs on narratives, that's a tad suspicious...

*RanVor*

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HypercompetentSidekick>

There you go.

*Dancer*

That's a heroic role. Hakram is a Villain.

Cat may be underestimating him.

*RanVor*

You didn't read very carefully, did you? It's actually more of a villainous role since heroes tend to be competent enough not to need those.

*Someguy*

This plan is a half-assed one bound to raise a Name if some Callowan farm boy/girl go through the portals into Arcadia and gets lost/kidnapped. Of course such stories usually end with the boy/girl being toyed with by the fae for eternity but coming out with a magic sword to slay Evil is also likely.

*RanVor*

What? The Fae portals are the emergency plan in case of an ambush. The regular plan is to get people's stuff to Summerholm by mundane measures.

*Someguy*

No plan survives contact with the enemy. Worse, no plan survives contact with stupid, stubborn people who are part of an "escort mission".

*Anon*

Huh. I don't recall Vivienne ever displaying so much....open fear of Hakram before, even in her own memories/past interludes.

I know she'd been quite wary of him, but this seems another level entirely.

I do like how she either doesn't 'get'/recognize Hakram's seeing the Warlord in Catherine, and/or is ignoring the possibility that Cat means different things to different people – and in every case, possible of bringing about change to the world.

I'm also a bit....curious on her feeling like she hasn't accomplished anything? She stole the sun, helped save Cat from Akua, was useful in Keter, etc....I know she's not as combat-focused, and in the time of war she currently finds herself in, thief isn't as useful as Adjutant or even Scribe would be, but it feels like she's suddenly....undergoing a bout of depression, almost?

I can certainly see it happening, mind, but it feels...perhaps a bit sudden/out of the blue?

Otherwise, were I to guess on her Name making her still get tired/grow hair, it's part of being a thief – were she to be 'stuck' in time, she might eventually end up too recognizable. (Or alternatively, potentially a sign she's not on the 'ageless' aspect that the more evil-aligned characters have)

### *Kingbob*

I think this is the Heaven's putting the finger to the scales. the Hero turned repenting and comes back to the light is a dangerous story when you can make it work.

### *IDKWhoitis*

She seems pretty depressed, as she can only see herself doing wrong, having done wrong, and probably only going to commit more wrong in the future. Her losing her figure and losing her "spark" is bound have a cascading effect if she doesn't succeed at some pivot.

### *Jane*

Depression sounds *exactly* like what's happening, to me – she feels like she's being left behind by the power demonstrated by everyone around her, and is unable to properly understand the value that she brings to the team.

And her current impression of Hakram is probably tinted by her own depression, highlighting all of the negatives. As a spymaster, someone who can be all things to all people is probably one of the most significant threats around – someone she genuinely can't understand the core of, when her entire job is to understand others. That he's capable of crushing her in a heartbeat (and, uh, *has*, before), and she just had a near-death experience, probably just makes things worse – kind of like PTSD.

### *Euodiachloris*

Agreed on the Name thing. It's hard to blend into the crowd when needed if you've forgotten what it's like to live as one of them, after all. 😞

### *Azure*

I think Thief is missing the obvious signs that she's transitioning to another name. Doesn't it make you weaker till you get your new Aspects, as you're essentially in limbo? It's definitely some kind of information gathering web type name, Spy Mistress seems too obvious.

Also being away from Catherine seems very bad for Thief, and might be linked to her new name in some way. She pretty much gave up there at the end and only Hakram taking her side, saved the day. Something really weird is going on with her mental state without Catherine around. She feels powerless, so she is becoming powerless, like a vicious self fulfilling prophecy. Catherine really needs to return soon, or Thief might lose her name transition to despair.



*Miles*

You get the new name and as a result get weaker because you don't have your Skills yet, is my understanding.

*Miles*

But I think she's just having a bad time because she's surrounded by only the co-workers she has issues with.

She might also be a bit racist.

*IDKWhoitis*

She is racist, but to be fair, Hak did also threaten to snuff her out if she ever got too problematic.

*Antoninjohn*

It's not all bad after all soon they will receive gold from Cat's deal

*Concerned*

Ya know, she never actually was called Thief with a capital T except by Hakram this chapter...

Combined with her hair thing and self-doubt, that's not good.

Personally I blame Diabolist, but I do that for everything

*MagnaMalusLupus*

Not quite, there was one instance I noticed:

>"You don't have to like it," Adjutant said. "It's an order. Now, Thief. I believe we have a map of the region somewhere around here for proper planning..."

*BLH989*

That was because it was said by a character. Anytime Thief comes up is lower case except when someone is talking.

*IDKWhoitis*

So if I read the timeline correctly, 2 months have passed since the last movements of Cat?

I foresee a sudden and brutal interruption via the Foundling method that will end these Interludes.

Akin to the chessboard combusting into green flames mid game.

*Alivaril*

I'm going to agree with the theory of "Above and/or a narrative pushing poor Thief." This just doesn't seem to match with her past behavior; she was sloooowly getting more comfortable with Hakram years ago (she'd drink and eat with him even if she did sleep with one eye open) with this as a major backslide and Vivienne's analysis of Hierophant and Archer both focused on their moral failings. Depression would explain the focus on perceived failures and failings – I can definitely attest to that – but not the abrupt jerks toward Templar Good or paranoia.

This also has interesting implications with Pilgrim's whole "old traits made more acute" accusation – is it that Villainous leaders change those under them, or do they GUARD said individuals from Above's attempts at mind control?

Jane

\*sigh\*.

See, this is why Cat *really, really* needed to have a proper talk with Vivienne before she went home – Thief's repeated failures are really starting to wear on her. It's obvious *why* they didn't have time for that talk, but they really need a heart to heart before it starts to affect her work.

Cat doesn't *need* another super-Named right now. She has plenty of ways to break an army when she needs to, up to and including dropping the sky on them. What she needs is someone who can act as a competent administrator and who can ferret out Malicia's plots before they lose the other half of their officials. Being able to deal with intrigue has *always* been Cat's weakest point. What good is having a kingdom if you don't actually have anyone who can run it?

Besides, the name of Thief has never (so far as I know) been some ultimate killer who can take on any challenger – if she wanted that, she should have transitioned to Assassin. That doesn't make Thief any less important, however – stealing the Crusader's supplies forced them to the peace table in a way that a direct confrontation never could have, for instance. And she stole the gosh-darned *sun* once! She does know how they talk about *that*, yes?

But when you're standing shoulder-to-shoulder with much flashier legends, I understand how that can leave you feeling inadequate – especially after nearly being killed by a "merely" human mage. That's why Cat really needs to have a talk with her, to help her see her own value.

(Plus, you know, Cat really needs a morality pet given the kind of people she surrounds herself with, but... Well, I doubt pointing that out would help pull Vivienne out of her funk compared to highlighting the value of her accomplishments.)

*mavant*



*Wry Warudo*

Two months have passed? Wonder if Cat killed the Sve yet?  
Maybe we'll be getting a drow army coming to save Callow in its  
hour of need

*Someguy*

I just realized that there's an army that Cat had not tried to  
raise...the Sentient Tiger Army.

[Javvies](#)

Weren't they invisible?

Also, just because they're sentient, that doesn't necessarily  
mean that they can talk or otherwise readily communicate with  
people.

Plus, they didn't want to serve their creator – why would  
they serve Cat? Besides ... I kind of doubt that they have much  
of a hierarchy or organization – they are, after all, based  
on solitary big cats.

*Wry Warudo*

Well, like you said, they are cats after all. They may  
recognise Cat as one of their named and leader.

[Javvies](#)

They're tigers – solitary big cats – not social group cats  
like lions.

Solitary cats aren't exactly big on the whole "leadership/  
following others" thing.

*Someguy*

You conflated the armies. Invisible Army was one project,  
Sentient Tiger was another, as was the Water Breathing one.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I could see any given tiger going all in on the whole "be  
invisible and be able to breathe both water and air" plan  
once given enough sentience to understand whole paragraphs  
of explanation. That's, like, up there with asking "would  
you like extra catnip with that side of mutton?" or  
something. XD

*RanVor*

Two months since the parting, not since Chapter 61.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

They won't be drow anymore; the Queen of Winter has started recruiting.

[TeK](#)

So, did any of you guys noticed that Thief in chapters is no longer starts with a capital T? This is as good as outright admission that she lost her name, coupled with physical changes, and tiredness. And frankly? I can buy it, yeah. Thief has little to do with both her current purpose and burdens, she is spymistress now, not a thief. I wonder to what name she'll transition now, of any at all. Any guesses?

By the way, I honestly adore the way Woe are being flashed out. Never really thought about them, truth be told. Cat, Dead King, WB, Black, Malicia, Cordelia? Yeah sure. Never much pondered how Woe feel though. Took 'em for granted. And EE now have seen fit to remedy this.

First there's Archer's perspective. And it quite simple and direct, really. She was a wild animal and she found a home. I would confess not putting much weight into her assessments of others, just like I won't be putting much in Thief's. She is drawn to Catherine like a wolf, and Woe is her pack. And her adoration to Masego comes from a same place. He has something she respects above all, strength, but he is also safe to be around. In her own words: "dangerous without the edges". For someone raised by the Edge incarnate, Lady Ranger, it is quite the reprieve.

Masego is trickier to parse, partly because he's supposed to be a genius and somewhere on the autistic spectrum, and I am neither of those things. But his explanation, coupled with his Name dream is quite important. He said that he's attracted to Cat quite in the same way the smaller celestial orbs are attracted to large. He does go on mentioning family, so that is where Archer is probably right, kinda. He is drawn to Catherine the same way he is drawn to the centre of mass, but also in the same way you are drawn to a bonfire in the cold night. He was a boy who's seen his world unmade at the age of nine, and that experience defined who he is. The only stable thing he ever had was his family, his fathers and the Calamities proper. And so he is drawn to Cat because she gives him that much needed stability, the starting point, which is what the family is to him. Also, what with Ruin and perceived betrayal of his father, his personality may've yet change. We still don't know what his third aspect as Apprentice

was, so we can't even theorise it, but who's willing to bet we shall see it soon?

Hakram's a bitch to handle. Juniper confesses she thought him to be a "coldblood", basically a psychopath. Also Cat says that "what she took for absence, was just an apathy", Vivi's perspective puts a spin on this, yet again. Also, given what we know of him from his own POVs, I'd refrain from calling him such. Also, I do have my doubts now.

Thief is the latest addition and in the way, the oddest. Unlike others of Woe, she is loyal to Collow firstmost. It was very unsettling to learn about her reactions to her repeated defeats. How I just ignored them entirely. In a way, Thief joined out of desperation, not belonging. Unlike others, she already has a home, which she shares with Cat. In a way, that is adding some deeper connection between them that she lacks with others. Masego sees home in his family, Archer in her pack, Hakram, I suppose sees it like a tribe just like Juniper, although his loyalty is a great deal more personal. Thief and in a way, Cat, does not seek a home, because she already has it. And that estranges her from orcs, for she does not see herself as part of their tribe.

On a side note, we got Masego with autism, Hakram with psychopathy, Vivienne with depression. The pattern is concerning, although I've yet to figure what kind of crazy is Archer.

[TeK](#)

Godsdammit, I am bad English 😞

*Raved Thrad*

I looked back through the text, and you're right. It's an intriguing point, which makes me wonder if we're about to see Vivienne transition into a new Name.

*Wry Warudo*

For all we know Thief may not actually be part of the Woe. Iirc, the queen only explicitly mentioned Cat and referred to Masego as being part of the five. Considering how Summer was also at odds with Diabolist at the time, this may make her a candidate, since she's technically a member of their band now.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

The Woe should be filled with unaging villains fit to terrorize the lands for decades to come.

And the thief is exactly none of that.

*Gunslinger*

Damn that's a good catch. I fear that she's losing her name rather than outright transitioning into a new one.

### Rey d`Tutto

Archer could be Mania.

### Kaleih

I'm looking forward to seeing Vivienne transition hopefully.

Maybe Vicegerent to create a grey Chancellor role. Or possibly Vicereine/Viceroy/Viceregent since she is wealthy, acts as regent, and may end up in a wife type role (which is a common meaning for Vicereine, though all three words can be synonyms) and Vice twine just goes nicely with the name Vivienne.

Or Maybe Guildmistress if she takes on all the dark guilds after Ratface's death. She could have the nickname the Grey Lady or the Black Lady to match Cat.

Or it could be that her watching of Cat and Akua leads to some role like Auditor, or possibly Witness if something happens.

There's also the issue of what will happen with all the night Cat may be about to have access to. Will it all go to Ivah? Or will Vivienne end up having some part of that if Ivah ever feels powerful enough to challenge Cat and inevitably gets the night beaten out of him.

I'm so excited to see where Vivienne ends up.

### *Tobias*

I like your train of thought RE: vicereine, but she should just be called Lesser Queen. Then, if she screws up, she can be demoted to Lesser Lesser Queen.

### *Cthulhu*

I'm sorry thief is depressed but she has an awful job right now and isn't suited to it.

I think she's going through what Cat did when she betrayed her Name. It made her weak and depressed.

But I do have one complaint. Seems to me that Thief is going through this betrayal because she isn't using her power to steal. The task in front of her is to transport a whole bunch of shit from the East to safety.

Rather than send an army .... wouldn't it be better for her to go with some fast horses and just steal the stuff at the border?

Sure, it's a bunch, but she has an infinite bag of holding to grab the stuff.

Get the stuff. The people flee to safety with no stuff left to be lost. She saves her people and avoids using the army and gets to feel good about her power.

Why not do This? Or why not have the Dead Hand suggest it? Is she so depressed she can't even think?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

That, or think of everything she needs to do as a caper. Specifically, keeping her ill-gotten title and role with the hope of future dodgy capers. That, or finding ways to fence part of the responsibility off by conning some useful pigeons into it.

### *Concerned*

They're needed at the capital to make sure the Kingdom doesn't fall apart. She can't run off and steal shit and let the leaderless Jacks die to Malicia.

### *Cthulhu*

But that's why her Name is rebelling. She is acting contrary to its nature.

### *Ezreon*

This got me thinking. What if farmers refused to move even with means to do it, and Thief decided to just appropriate their stuff so they would HAVE to move? And word of it spread and transitioned her.

### [Luxuria Tenebris](#)

One little thing that i only saw on when i read the chapter again is that Vivienne is never referred to as Thief with the exception of conversation with Adjutant where its more a title than a Name. At all other points it's the thief. She is not Thief in the eyes of the story anymore, she is just the thief.

### *sophiasmile09*

I've never commented before and I've just caught up so it's possible I'm about to say things that have already been said. However, two things:

Thing the first: Does anyone think Cat is ever getting another Name? She's pretty clearly rejected the core concept of Names (dichotomy of good/evil, roles, balance etc) so surely there's just no way in hell that the Universe would "reward" her with

another Name? She's sort of transcended them in a way, which is good because it means she's not fettered by them, but bad because she can't benefit from the power a Name brings to the table.

Thing the 2nd: Akua is an Africa Akan word that means "born on a Wednesday." from the rhyme – "Wednesday's child is full of woe". Ya gotta wonder how deep Akua's position with Cat and the Woe is really gonna go... (Akua also means God in Hawaiian so that's interesting too)

Anyway this story is great, I love it and I can't wait to keep up with it forever and ever. #Hakramisbae

### Mental Mouse

Cat will probably be the Black Queen – or possibly the Gray Queen.

### *Dell*

I'm curious as to why Juniper outranks Thief who is Regent. Is this a misunderstanding on Vivienne's part where she lacks confidence to order Juniper around? Thief is also a Named in the Woe, just as much as Hakram is, yet Juniper does not afford her the same respect.

I think this also stems from 'racism' on Vivienne's part and Juniper and the non human members have picked up on this and Vivienne's fear of them, so they just don't respect her.

### *werafdsaew*

No, Thief outranks Juniper. But just because Thief outranks Juniper doesn't mean she can actually get Juniper to do what she wants.

### *Death Knight*

So, let's tally up all the badass shit Vivienne has done:

- \*Dropped an Armada on the Summer Fae

- \*Stole the godsdamned sun from Summer's heaviest hitter, second only to the Queen of Summer herself

- \*Has enough potential that the living embodiment of death offered to train her/take her on as an apprentice

Feel free to add more.

She has no reason to feel inadequate or inferior to the other members of the Woe. They each have their designated Role in the group and hers is soft power and indirect but pivotal actions (Cat and the rest would be ashes now if she had not stolen the Sun) as well as Cat's gatekeeper.



The fact that she's going against her Role in the story is likely the reason she is losing her Name and her hair is growing. Her self image is ruined.

*Dell*

As someone else mentioned she seems to have PTSD from some of the horrific consequences of what's been happening. She got lit on fire and then zapped by lightning. She felt every second of it. It's a huge difference to Catherine who can't feel much of anything anymore, which means she has a serious blind spot to what Vivienne is dealing with. So in Vivienne's mind the pain is overwhelming all the positives she's done in that she feels helpless in comparison to the rest of the Woe who just shrug it off and keep going. I mean even Masego just plucked out his eye like it was nothing. Physical pain in the Woe is not something they even acknowledge.

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## **Interlude: Giuoco Pianissimo**

*"He who trusts no one finds only enemies."*  
– Callowan saying

Back when he'd been an unblooded boy in the middle of nowhere, Hakram had occasionally indulged in a game of his own devising. *Tower-raising*, he'd called it. It'd been a simple thing, at first, more an exercise in fantasy than anything deep. Three piles of ten coloured stones, each led by a lord or a lady, and to win one of them must accumulate twenty stones and so raise their tower. For a stone to be taken from a pile, two other lords must agree on the theft and who received the stone. Hakram had amused himself with elaborate intrigues, a web of vivid alliances and betrayals explaining every acquisition. He'd only ever played alone, in the Steppes, and never once finished a game: no rational alliance could ever last long enough for a winner to emerge, after all. His mother had mistaken his hours staring at rocks as an interest in things spiritual, and so urged him to seek apprenticeship under the shaman of the Howling Wolves clan. He lacked the gift of sorcery, true, but it was rare among orcs and not all rites and rituals required the touch. Most shamans could not actually light a torch without flint and tinder, no matter what was pretended in front of outsiders.

He'd had no reason to refuse her, and the half-hearted attempt had taught him some interesting tricks and stories before he was gently sent back to train with the other warrior younglings.

Hakram had not forgot the game, though, and after he was sent to the War College he spared the odd hour for refining it now and then. Rules had been added. Ways to gift a stone as a bribe to break an alliance or make one, promises that could not be broken and even a way to destroy one's own stones to apply pressure. And still, not a game finished. Not even to one's loss, after losing became a technical possibility. Perhaps it was because he was the only player, he'd thought, and so roped a few humans gullible or ignorant enough to believe it was an old orc game into playing with him. He'd lost coin keeping the drinks coming without any success to show for it. Hakram had first met Robber, he still recalled fondly, when the goblin had found him playing while on watch in a war game and called him a fool before baldly stealing an entire pile.

"It's not clever as you think it is," the other cadet had said. "There's no kingdom without borders, my splendidly ugly and dim-witted friend. Why are they alone building their tower?"

And so, over the months that followed, they'd tinkered with the game together. It had become an experiment for the two of them, one of the few thing that could truly keep his interest throughout the dreariness of the War College. First they'd added another pile of ten stones and called it Callow, from which any of the lords and ladies could take a stone. It'd not ended the stalemate, for as soon as one player pulled ahead the other two allied to steal away what he'd stolen. *There's a fitting metaphor for this glorious empire of ours*, Robber had mused after a particularly well-watered evening. *No crab will ever let another leave the bucket before it does*. Perhaps the issue was that Callow could be taken from with no consequence, Hakram had decided. And so he'd added one more rule: if no tower was raised in thirty turns, the wrathful Callowans would come and hang all three lords. It'd been a naïve thought, in retrospective, and Robber had been right to mock it. Neither of them ever came across a player who would rather another win than all three lose. It'd been Ratface who'd solved the riddle and given the game its final form.

"Your problem," the Taghreb had opined, "is that you two are too honest. Everything's out in the open, the rules are identical for everyone. It's a shit game for the same reason any halfway decent military strategist will laugh if you tell them shatranj is a good metaphor for war."

Robber had been mortally wounded by the assertion of honesty, and promptly demanded a duel to avenge the impugnable dishonour of goblankind. Ratface's immediate denial had been met by threats he would be first up against the wall when the Great Goblin Conspiracy took action, but even as those two bickered Hakram had amended the rules one last time. Three lords, with uneven piles. One with ten stones, one with eight, one with six. Their stones

would remain hidden until they won or lost, and so cold mathematics were diluted with skill at the oldest of Praesi arts: the lie. Even then, most games ended in threefold loss and bitter recriminations. But now and then, oh so rarely, someone managed to raise their tower. Hakram had come into the habit of playing a game at least once a month, afterwards, fascinated by the little details that meant difference between victory and defeat. No one had ever won twice in a row, for example, for one victory meant the specter of suspicion would remain on the victor for a long while.

Aisha, back when she'd still shared a bed with Ratface and so often spent evenings drinking with Rat Company, was the only person he'd ever seen win beginning with six stones. She'd bided her time and kept the game going until everyone was too drunk to remember properly, then bargained her count up until she could steal a victory from the Callow stones. Hakram still thought of those evenings in Ater sometimes, of the reek of smoke and cheap drinks in that winesink they'd whiled away so many hours in. Now Ratface was dead, his grave bought and paid for by the same Empress they'd once served, and he'd spoken to neither Robber nor Aisha in the better part of a year. The game remained, though the last he had played it was years ago. In one of those little ironies of life, it had been the day before he met Catherine. He'd lost along with a roaring-drunk Nauk and an indifferent Pickler.

Callow had taken them all.

He'd put the rules to ink, not long before the Woe left for Keter, and the scroll had been left to wait somewhere in the methodical chaos that was his office ever since. Hakram had mused of writing memoirs, once in a while, as he knew Juniper and Aisha were doing. Juniper's were more commentary and chronicle of these *Uncivil Wars*, as the campaigns from the Liesse Rebellion onwards were beginning to be called by scholars, but then she'd always disdained everything but the military side of matters. There were days Adjutant thought he owed to all that came after him to pen a history of what was taking shape here that was true to the beliefs of the few making the decisions. On others he thought, rather ruefully, that such a work would be the very same kind of manuscript his duties would require him to order burned as a threat to the kingdom's peace. And so instead he found himself, now that he'd been able to wrestle an hour away from his work, penning a short monograph on the subject of tower-raising that was about both much more and much less.

*The foundation of the game, he'd written, is the manipulation of incomplete knowledge. It is possible to win with only loose grip of the arithmetic, so long as one's understanding of their opponents runs contrastingly deep.*

He'd come to see much through that lens in the last few years. It was not, he thought, an unfair way to sum up the way the fractious nations of Calernia were behaving. The rising towers differed in nature and appearance, the stones were made of a hundred different abstract details, but the underlying exchanges obeyed the same overarching rule: for someone to measurably benefit, someone else must lose. Cordelia Hasenbach had birthed the Tenth Crusade by promising benefits to all its participants, leaving unspoken that those benefits would have to be taken from Callow and Praes. Having failed to achieve that plunder, her Grand Alliance was now clawing at itself over their own stones. The Empire remained overlord of Callow only so long as it provided protection by other marauding powers who would take from it. Yet prominent elements of Praes had acted in a hostile manner at Second Liesse, with the tacit allowance of the Empress, and so Callow had pressed for independence. He still believed Malicia had made a reasonable decision in some ways, for if she had succeeded in securing the Diabolist's doomsday weapon she would have made herself too costly a target to plunder.

From that position, all that would have been required of her was to wait for the lack of benefits to break apart the Grand Alliance.

And yet she'd failed, for she had not accounted for the fact that a game was a game and people were people. One could be philosophically correct while being wrong in practice, as she had been when she'd estimated neither the Black Knight nor Catherine would turn on her after the Doom of Liesse. He and Catherine had fallen for the same mistake, Hakram thought, when they'd predicted that military defeats within certain bounds would both force and allow the First Prince to come to the negotiating table. *We did not account for the heroes*, he thought. *We did not account for the priests and the Heavens and the hand behind the hands*. And so the desperate alliances that were the heart of tower-raising had followed, reaching out for the bargain offered by Keter for counterbalance against Proceran intransigence. Which had failed, for the Empress had much less to lose and so could afford to offer better terms. And so Catherine left for the Everdark, intent on making miracle out of misfortune. She might succeed. She was, after all, never more dangerous than when no one believed she could possibly triumph. Or she might not.

If that were the case, what he and Vivienne Dartwick were building in Callow would be the sum total of their assets. He was forced to act with incomplete knowledge, and that ignorance dictated harsh terms: if this was all there was, defeat here of any kind was unacceptable. When Catherine returned, this machine must be well-oiled with every cog in a pristine state. Hakram set aside his quill, suddenly having lost taste for further writing. He blew dry the ink on the mostly-empty parchment and rolled it up before sliding it into a sheath. It would keep. There were

matters that might not, Thief most immediate among them. The orc draped cloths over the bottled sprites that cast the light in his office, knowing it would lull them to sleep and so offer brighter glow when he returned. Not common knowledge, that. It was a secret Masego had nonchalantly shared, forgetting as he always did that there were perhaps ten individuals more learned than him on all of Calernia and that hundreds would cheerfully commit murder just to have a look at his most casual set of notes.

There was a guard waiting outside the door, one of his own. Sergeant Audun, who was broad and covered with tattoos like all adults of the Frost Tread clan. He had the almost-black skin common in the furthest reaches of the Lesser Steppes, where the isolation had prevented the old bloodlines and customs from thinning.

"Sergeant," Hakram greeted him in Kharsum. "Where is she?"

"Sir," Audun acknowledged, keeping his lips tight over his fangs in deference. "Last report had her headed for the Docks. As per orders, we did not tail her out of the palace."

Adjutant nodded and clapped his shoulder before heading out. Tordis kept suggesting that they send a few goblins out to shadow Thief whenever she went into the city, officially to make her easier to reach in case there was sudden council to be had. There was no point to even trying, in Hakram's eyes: in a city, Thief was impossible to find unless she wanted to be found. Assigning her a shadow she would inevitably catch on to would only be tossing another ingredient in what was already turning out to be a dangerous brew. The orc knew the tavern that was her favourite haunt, deep in Guild of Thieves territory, and even if she was not already there she'd hear of his coming long before he got there. Long enough that she'd show up to meet with him, if she was so inclined, though of that there was no guarantee. With Catherine away the pretence of amity had given its death rattle. He would still go. At worse, he'd have a pint of terrible beer and leave one of her Jacks a message before returning to the palace. Not the way he would have preferred to spend what promised to be his only resftul hour for the next few days, but preferences were always the first thing headed for the altar when the going got hard.

He declined an escort when heading out. Malicia's assassins had already emptied their quiver, and there would be few who could truly be a threat to him even if she had not. He almost wished they would try him, in truth. Laure was swimming with Jacks, and further hacking away at the Empire's roster of hired killers would be a long-term boon. He drew gazes when passing through the Whitestone, as much from legionaries as from the locals. Anyone able to afford one of the district's mansions would know him by name and description, if not necessarily by sight. Further into

the city, though, the nature of the gazes changed. Hakram was not known well enough that Callowans would tell him apart from other orcs by sight, not with gloves covering his hands and his burnt plate still in the palace. Unlike Catherine and Indrani, whose Names were an invisible bonfire drawing the eye wherever they stood, his own was a muted thing. Noticeable enough, when it left the sheath, but it had not. The reception he got was, to his perpetual surprise, rather cordial. Now that the last legions in the kingdom had been folded into the Army of Callow, even greenskins who had never served in the Fifteenth found the locals had thawed to their presence.

The same could not be said for Soninke and Taghreb. The freshly-promoted Legate Abigail had passed down the order that all Wasteland legionaries on leave must carry clear indicating mark of their service in the Army of Callow, which had prevented angry killings in the streets after Malicia massacred a third of the royal court, but a handful of altercations had forced her to go even further and order such legionaries to move only in tents and avoid certain parts of the capital entirely. Enterprising Callowan merchants had made a killing by setting up stalls of drinks and food near the army's camps, allowing the soldiers a taste of the luxuries without risking their neck. The orc's lips split in amusement, baring the slightest hint of fangs. It was a rare thing for his kind to be more popular in these parts than humans, even humans from the Wasteland. He passed by a cart near the edge of Mathilda's District – known as the Usurper's Quarter to the locals – and found his steps slowing when he caught scent of the grilled rabbit skewers on it.

It was a ramshackle thing, not even painted as such Callowan carts usually were, and he absent-mindedly noted it was unlikely its owner had paid the proper dues to whatever guild held the rights to sales on these streets. The dark-haired man running it had done well regardless, he thought, for two thirds of the cart were empty and the grease stains left behind made it clear it'd not begun the day that way. Hakram made his way to the skewers and reached for the handful of coins he carried, mostly coppers. The dark-haired man smiled.

"Afternoon. You Legion?" he asked, his Liessen accent thick.

*Refugee, most likely*, the orc decided. Good to see some of them were making their way without needing to rely on the grain handouts.

"Fifteenth," Hakram agreed. "Since the raising. How much for one?"

The man hesitated, and there was movement behind the cart. The orc's head cocked to the side as a little boy no older than nine popped out, fair-haired and not resembling the other human in the slightest.

"Hi," the little creature grinned.

*Meat*, the lizard voice in the back of his head said. *Soft, small, bones easy to crack and get at the marrow.* He ignored it, as all orcs who left the Steppes were taught to. He'd learned well enough there was only silence around his comrades, but it was always harder with strangers. His people had been given rules by the Black Knight and then his successor, and they were good rules. The kind that ran against instinct but helped you grow further. *You can eat foes, you can eat the dead, but you must not touch any other.* Still, he knew the impulse would never entirely go away. The rules were taught, but the impulse came with the blood. Orcs had to learn discipline, he thought, make it as much a part of them as the blood. Or they would forever remain beasts of the steppes, good only for death dealt and received.

"Hello," Hakram replied gently, keeping his fangs behind his lips.

"Albert, get back behind the cart," the man sighed.

"But it's *boring*," the boy whined.

He was unceremoniously dragged back by his collar and the cart-owner offered the orc an apologetic glance. He picked out a skewer and handed it.

"On the house," he said. "They've been out for a while anyway."

Hakram inclined his head in thanks.

"Much appreciated," he said, thick gloved fingers closing around the wooden stick holding the bits of meat together.

"My husband went to enroll last month," the Liessen admitted. "Ended up sent to the training camp near Ankou."

"General Hune's," the orc said. "He'll do well there, especially if he can read and write. There's a pressing need for officers."

"We could use the pay," the man ruefully said. "The only decent rents in this city are Dockside, and even with the Guild of Thieves keeping order that's no place to raise a child."

"You seem to be doing well enough," Hakram said, eyes lingering on the cart before withdrawing.

He popped a bit of savoury meat into his mouth, swallowing it without chewing. Ah, nothing but salt and rabbit. He did enjoy Callowan cooking. Unlike the Praesi they didn't drown every dish with spices, you could still taste the meat.

"No telling how long that'll last," the Liessen replied. "Word is Legate Abigail, bless her soul, told the guilds to take it easy

on the streets for a while. The guards don't enforce permits as heavily as they used to. But now the Lord Adjutant's back in the capital, so it'll be out of her hands. No one's sure when the hammer will come down."

"I've noticed she's popular in these parts," Hakram said, mildly amused at receiving a confession concerning himself.

"She got Laure through the troubles after the Night of Knives," the merchant said. "And without swords coming out or riots wrecking half the city. Mind you, I'm not cussing out the army. They do good work, and I saw in the camps down south how bad it might get if they didn't keep the peace. But there's something reassuring about having one of ours in charge, you know?"

"Lady Thief holds the regency in the queen's absence," the orc pointed out.

The man rolled his eyes.

"You don't spend much time in taverns, do you?" he said. *"The old crown it got split in two, one part green and the other one too. It's not a mystery who runs the kingdom with the Black Queen gone abroad to scare the shit out of Procer."*

It was not to Hakram. Giving Vivienne the regency had been, from the beginning and Catherine's open admission, been a way to avoid the perception greenskins now ruled Callow. Thief did not want the duties, and Adjutant honestly did not believe she would fare well bearing their burden. That the man in the street knew it as well, however, was not a pleasant surprise. *We keep underestimating these people, he thought. Malicia and Hasenbach have, to their ugly surprise, but we do as well and we should know better.*

"She'll be back," the orc said, still too taken aback to muster better response.

"Aye, she will," the Liessen said. "And maybe she'll drop a lake on the western borders, this time. Let them try to invade across *that*."

"We can only hope," Hakram drily said.

"Ah, but I shouldn't blabber," the man said. "Don't let me keep you. It tastes best while still warm."

"Thanks again," Adjutant said, inclining his head.

He stepped back onto the street, already mentally adding another entry to his never-ending tally. There might be others like this one, who'd trade on the streets instead of eating on the crown's dime if they could. Getting the guilds to waive their dues even



as a temporary measure would be like ripping out teeth, and sure to unsettle a city still uneasy, but there were ways around it. The House of Light in Laure had full coffers, according to the Jacks, having entirely recovered from their scarce years under Imperial rule. If they could be talked into paying the dues for merchants as an act of strategic charity, the guilds might even lower their demanded cut out of deference for the priests. Yet another council would be required, he thought tiredly, and with people prone to the kind of squabbling that would make Thief and Juniper seem like beloved sisters. The boy popped out to wave him goodbye and Hakram waved back, waiting until he was out of sight to gobble half the skewer and lick his chops. His good mood did not last, for even as he chewed he was forced to admit the Thief situation was worse than he'd previously believed. If a wander down the streets had him hearing the rumour, how often would the spymistress of Callow have heard it?

Even a small wound could go bad, if salt kept being rubbed into it, and this one was not small. Pride always bit the hardest and Vivienne Dartwick had no lack of that. Sundown was beginning when Hakram finally reached the signless tavern that was Thief's favourite sink, and he'd been feeling eyes on the back of his head for at least half an hour. The Jacks had picked him out and their mistress would have been informed of his coming arrival. She was waiting inside when he entered, tucked away in a little alcove with a tankard in hand and her feet propped up on a chair. As always, she forced herself to not look at his bone hand – even covered – so blatantly she might as well have been staring. The orc lumbered over slowly, making sure to keep the skeletal limb always in her field of sight and moving slowly. He'd noticed it got even worse, when he hid it away from her eyes.

"Adjutant," Thief drawled. "Heard you were looking for me."

He sat down, the wooden frame creaking under him, and nodded.

"I was. Let's have a talk, you and I," Hakram gravelled. "An honest one, for once."

The flare of wariness she poorly hid was not auspicious beginning, but he had no choice. It could not be put off any longer. He needed to be sure they were raising the same tower, for decisions had to be made.

In the game, as in all things, it was always better to be the betrayer than the betrayed.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Go vote!

Also, if you missed it last chapter, there is a Discord server up and running to discuss the Guide!

<https://discord.gg/w5pnbqP>

Nothing creative today, gonna be as bad as Cat at persuasion... do it or I'll stab you? Or maybe I'll just stab you and then do it for you.

Whatever works.

[Javvies](#)

Hmmm. Hakram's game sounds interesting. I wonder if there's a full set of rules for it? I'd play it.

Ouch. Thief being the Regent isn't working out as hoped. That could go poorly.

*Miles*

Guess that's a better ending than Viv departing.

Still it took 2 sentences to go from let's be honest to thinking about betrayal

*Morgenstern*

I don't think the thought about betrayal was about Thief. It was about a united front against the other players on the board, imho... about their bunch betraying the others (Procer, Malicia, etc.) first next time instead of the other way round.

But who knows, I might be totally wrong. I'd be rather disappointed as a reader if Hakram turned out to be \*that way\*, though.

*RanVor*

I personally read it this way: Hakram noticed Vivienne's suspicious behavior and needs to know what game she's playing. If it turns out she intends to betray Cat, he's going to strike first, eliminating her before she has a chance to turn against the Woe.

For Vivi's sake, I hope she's not plotting betrayal.

[taliesinskye](#)

I read the comment as 'if Thief is going to betray Cat because she'll eventually be unable to tolerate the current

situation any longer then Hakram needs to know about it so he can act first'. You could be right, though.

*ArkCthuul*

Well, I was waiting for harkam to die the whole chapter. Just seemed like one of those, especially as soon as he got the rabbit...

[Barthumphries](#)

I don't think Hakram was planning on betraying Viv. I think he recognized the mental anguish she was feeling at having the title but not the authority that went with it, and planning on offering concessions or whatever to lessen the chance of her betraying him.

And if the concessions, etc., didn't go well, then like Batman (who has plans for how to defeat every other superhero in case they go rogue) he has a plan.

*naturalnuke*

I am also interested in a full set of rules, this sounds like something I can get behind.

*jonnnney*

Not working as hoped but probably close to how it was expected. Thieves are only good at ruling other thieves and their skill at that is middling at best. I've a feeling that Abigail has another promotion in her future. With getting the rioters too drunk to actually riot she has certainly embraced the Woe's Modus Operandi of "This is just stupid enough to work". She seems like a good mix of Catherine's no nonsense approach to governance and Indrani's goal to seek personal pleasure from anything that moves. Plus she had received her position through blind luck and her own effort rather than the auspices of above or below. She might be just the person to forge a new story for Callow.

[Javvies](#)

Ehhhh ... it seems that Thief isn't even working as a figurehead Regent – this random street food vendor knows that Thief isn't actually doing the job of Regent, Hakram is, and believe that Thief has neither control nor influence on his decisions.

Thief is supposed to be the figurehead so that Hakram doing most of the work of running/ruling gets overlooked, ignored etc., by regular Callowans. That's not what's happening, and that's potentially a serious problem.

*Rook*

I don't think she's supposed to be only a figurehead. The other half was out of practicality since cloak and dagger work is not one of Adjutant's strengths and he would buckle under the weight of the additional burden if he tried. It was supposed to be division of labor from the start.

Thing is if the Callowans think Adjutant is in charge but actually end up not giving a shit, it's all good anyway. The issue is making sure this doesn't become a crack between Hakram and Vivienne, since it's probably pouring salt in the wound as far as her pride is concerned

[Javvies](#)

I think you're misunderstanding, Thief was supposed to be part figurehead, part spymistress, while Hakram did most everything else.

Thief is formally the Regent, but the problem isn't that Hakram's doing most of the work, it's that the average Callowan doesn't think that Thief being Regent actually means anything.

The "crown was split in two, one part green and the other one too".

*Rook*

The reason a figurehead was thought to be needed is potential discontent among callowans if there's to be too much non-callowan influence in the higher echelons of rule.


But if said greenskins like adjutant end up being accepted by Callowans as one of them, there isn't actually a need to have a figurehead. The concern disappears whether people know the strings are held by adjutant or not.

This is Callow, not Procer. The key is whatever keeps the populace free and happy, not legalities and customs.

[sengachi](#)

If you're interested in similar games, do some googling around game theory. You can find some really fascinating games like this one.

*Rup*

..this game might even have a future in the real world..

*Cthulhu*

Please don't kill Thief, Adjutant.

*Rook*

I feel like he's getting ready to have Callow strike first, rather than always being the one being struck. Not that he's considering chopping Vivienne in half.

I mean if he's going to turn his attention outwards, it only makes sense to make sure Thief's knives are covering his back, rather than being pointed at it.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

He doesn't care as long as it's not cutting Catherine's back.

[taliesinskye](#)

Hopefully he'll resolve this situation by finding a way for Vivian to reclaim some authority so that she is not Regent in name only. That would forestall her feeling like the situation is intolerable and keep her on-side.

*MetruX*

I got the feelin that Vivi is loosing herself as Thief, and has been a while several characters, her included, are worried for her lack of combat potential. My guess is she is going to change Names soon, or die. I hope for the first.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Very interesting. Although I greatly wish to return to Cat raising an army of Winter, it seems like that is a ways off. We probably have the conclusion to the Hakram-Vivi trilogy next, then something with Masego, although it could skip over Masego for now, and just return to Cat next Monday. Whatever happens, it was a good chapter, and an interesting look at Hakram's train of thought, and what all he has been doing.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

"Giuoco Pianissimo (Italian: "Very Quiet Game", a name given by Adolf Anderssen).[12]

White aims for a slow buildup deferring the push to d4 until it can be prepared. By avoiding an immediate confrontation in the centre White prevents the early release of tension through exchanges and enters a positional maneuvering game."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuoco\\_Piano#Giuoco\\_Pianissimo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuoco_Piano#Giuoco_Pianissimo)  
-Wikipedia

[DroughtBringer](#)

Again?!

This time I didn't even get to refresh the page to be able to see that you had posted it!

Nicely done.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Next week I'll be a bit busier at this hour so if the chess chapters continue till next week, perhaps you could take over? I should be able to do it this Friday as well.

### DroughtBringer

Giuoco Pianissimo is a slower opening in chess, that builds towards the mid game, and, hopefully, snowballs you into the late game.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuoco\\_Piano#Giuoco\\_Pianissimo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuoco_Piano#Giuoco_Pianissimo)

### Screwfloss

I hadn't heard of the Giuoco Pianissimo before – I like to play the English opening, not the Italian ♟ ♠♠♠♠ – but it's sound, unlike the more commonly known but obsolete Giuoco Piano.

So basically, I've just spent like 30 minutes studying chess lines that I'll probably never play (as black I always answer 1. e4 with c5 (Sicilian defense), so I'll never see the black side of it either.

In conclusion, I'm a big fan of relating plot events to chess concepts!

*IDKWhoitis*

I don't think Hakram will want to kill Thief, and she can just keep the spy mistress job instead, but Viv's paranoia may not allow Hakram to do what he would prefer...

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

On behalf of the usual people who are running a wee bit late today,

Go Vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*BryceWilliam*

I really want a copy of the rules to this game. it sounds like it be a blast.

*magesbe*

Seeing Hakram's PoV, it's clear just how much Vivienne's fear... no, terror, of him warps her perception of Hakram. She's so scared in general it's sad; she's scared that she's worthless compared to the other members of Woe, she's scared that nothing she does will make Callow a better place, she's scared that she's losing her Name and what little influence she feels she has (and this perception of her being a puppet regent isn't helping), and she scared of Hakram.

She needs to shape up. I wouldn't be surprised if that's why she might be losing her connection to her name. Remember, it's been said that conviction is the source of Named power, and she has very little conviction left.

*Jane*

On the other hand, seeing things from Hakram's point of view really reinforced to me *why* Vivienne's so afraid of him. We didn't see a single *feeling* from him, just a detached assessment of how best to fulfill his duty.

He went to deal with Thief, but didn't have any feelings of anger or concern, or even exasperation – just dealing with it as though it were any other problem, despite the fact that he's still closer to her now than he currently is with any of his old friends. He didn't have any real feelings on how the conflict between Juniper and Thief was undermining the kingdom, or feel like either of them were in the right – just noted how that it *was* undermining the kingdom and affecting Thief's stability, and would need to be dealt with. He paid more thought to how he might use the church to help the refugee problem than he did his own *>personal* reactions to issues that normal people would have feelings about.

To someone who's near-exclusive business is in managing *people*, someone like Hakram must be distinctly unsettling, as he comes across as missing some very key elements of what makes a person a *person* instead of a tool.

And, of course, he made a point of subtly intimidating Thief as they finally met, just as he has in the past. It's little wonder that they have interpersonal issues when he's spent their entire time playing the bad cop to ensure she stays in line, and they've been left alone with each other for months.

She might need to work through her depression and recognize how important she is to the Woe, but her reservations regarding Hakram are entirely reasonable, in my opinion. He might be wholly dedicated to Catherine, but he really *would* snap Thief's neck without a second thought, if he felt it was for the good of Cat's vision.

*SpeckofStardust*

"was not a pleasant surprise. We keep underestimating these people, he thought. Malicia and Hasenbach have, to their ugly surprise, but we do as well and we should know better. "She'll be back," the orc said, still too taken aback to muster better response." This was his largest emotional response in the entire chapter.

*Ali Khan*

"The orc lumbered over slowly, making sure to keep the skeletal limb always in her field of sight and moving slowly. He'd noticed it got even worse, when he hid it away from her eyes."

You didn't read the second sentence did you.

*FactualInsanity*

If by "he made a point of subtly intimidating Thief" you're referring to the bit about always keeping his hand visible, given that the text says "it was even worse when it [the hand] was out of view", I took that to mean the opposite entirely. I.e. he was making a conscious effort to placate her, rather than intimidate her. If you're referring to something else, please point it out, because I've obviously missed it, or its implications.

*Jane*

Oh, hells, you're right; my mind must have skipped over that sentence. My apologies to Hakram.

*FactualInsanity*

I'm sure he will forgive you with characteristic stoicism.



*Jane*

In my defense, I was getting steadily more uncomfortable with him the entire chapter, and he *did* end the chapter by speaking of how it would be better to betray her before she betrayed him :p .

[Screwfloss](#)

I didn't get the creepy vibe. What's there to be creeped out by? Even the kid he had the impulse to eat didn't find him creepy!

I do think Hakram is talking about betraying whomever *with* Vivienne, not betraying Vivienne, though.



### *FactualInsanity*

I thought that too, but after considering what Jane said, I'm no longer as sure whether the ambiguity is not intentional.

Someone is getting betrayed either way and Ol' Hak is just making sure he (and by extension Cat) is not it.

### *Jane*

It's easier to understand when contrasted against the chapters of other characters; when we read a chapter from Cat's perspective as she deals with a problem, we usually feel her frustration and impatience; when we read about Cordelia, we feel her contempt for the short-sightedness of her fellow nobles; when we read about Vivienne, we feel her looming depression, but when we read about Hakram...

That's just not there. To compare it to a more conventional social situation, it's like talking to someone who speaks strictly in monotone, or keeps looking a bit to your side. They don't mean ill, but the whole thing ends up feeling *off*.

"Creepy" might be the wrong word for it, but it's somewhat unsettling compared to looking at the inner world of the other characters.

### [Leonardo Black](#)

You should also consider that he is not human, but an orc. When he saw the boy in the stall his first thought was "PREY" or "SOFT MEAT" or something like that. For what I have read here, they might not have strong empathy on their genetic code.

### *Jane*

Sure, but when we see things from Juniper's perspective, we still see *emotion* from her, whether it's affection for Aisha, irritation toward Thief, or satisfaction in commanding her legion.

It's not the lack of empathy that's offputting, but rather the lack of emotion in general when dealing with concerns that would normally elicit an emotional response.

### [daegone823](#)

This is not a normal orc people.

In Hakram's chapter when he gained the name of Adjutant he first spoke about how even as an orc he was considered "weird". He spoke about how other orcs had fervor for battle and in this chapter even as a child only to appease his mother he became a shaman. When he spoke Chat and her practical plan to fix an empire he finally found a place where he fit.

This is why his name is devoted to serving her purpose whereas emotionally he does not care what she does as long as it furthers her goals he will do what he must whether that involves murder or administration work.

I think each of the Woe can be linked to Id, Ego, and Super Ego  
Archer, Masego-Id  
Vivienne- Ego  
Hakram- Super Ego

*Isa Lumitus*

This chapter made me like Hakram more because of his detached, emotionless outlook. Probably because I find that easy to identify with.

[TeK](#)

Wasn't that about how his bone hand was hidden by clothes?

*Azure*

I agree but how much is his name shaping him into a tool to get the job done? Names may give you power but they also trap you into a set mindset of how to react and respond. The Fae epitomise that as their nature literally forces them to embody their names. Catherine gets a taste of how much Winter warps her mindset every time she draws on it. And Creation is meant to be a watered down reflection of Arcadia, so Named are definitely being altered by the drive of their names. Thief is definitely being effected as she's not fulfilling her role as her Name wants her to, so she's losing her drive and her power. It reminds me a bit of the shards in Worm driving parahumans to conflict. I think Names do the same thing to their bearers.

*Morgenstern*

>> And, of course, he made a point of subtly intimidating Thief as they finally met, just as he has in the past. <<

By doing what? With his hand you mean? I am very sure you misread the paragraph in that case. He states explicitly that Thief's avoiding to look at this hand – aka her FEAR – got WORSE when he tried to hide it from her – implicitly to make her more comfortable!. He is acting like anyone who does NOT want to intimidate when near someone that is totally, reasonlessly fearful – trying to project as little aggression as they can. Thus the slowly, deliberately always keeping potential "weapons" in view for the other person – to show them you do NOT mean to attack them. If they can always keep it in sight, they feel better prepared, because they would be able to see the blow coming, IF some were coming. He's doing all he can to NOT intimidate her currently. He just has no better way and the best he's got is clearly not working as much as he'd want it to. Because the other person is simply irrationally phobic.

*Morgenstern*

(Yeah, I know, not quite as irriational in this case, after the intimidation when she first joined.. but still. Way over the top, really...)

*Morgenstern*

Akh. Sorry. Somehow I did not see the response that pointed out exactly that already... =/

*Yotz*

Well, there is one option to mitigate the rot, it seems. Legat Abigail may be moved from the Army of Callow into, say, the *Black Guard* – an internal paramilitary force reporting to the Queen/Regent only, and made a member of new Council on that premise. That will balance out the power equilibrium at the top, and will allow Hellhound to do her work without wasting her time on refugee situation. Also, can be presented as Callowans watching out for Callowans, and so on.

I wonder, if Viv would find her groove, though – ultimately it all balances on her being able to prove her worth not only to herself, but to her people also.

Ah, well – we shall see soon enough.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Adding thievery as part of things to celebrate in Callowan culture aside from zealously petty time notwithstanding revenge is kinda worrying for a culture though

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

That name is already taken by Black's personal retinue, but yeah.

*Dainpdf*

Could just recreate the Callowan Royal Guard and put her in charge of that, or make her leader of the city watch... But hells, right now I suspect she may end up being Cat's heir.

*Antoninjohn*

Well racial tensions between Orcs, Goblins and Callowens are nice and stable isn't it wonderful what bonds form when facing common enemies

*nick012000*

And soon Catherine's going to be adding Drow to the mix, too!

[TeK](#)

Sounds like that quote about Procer: "It is said that the founding First Prince spoke of Procer as a great tower, every principality a stone raising it to ever greater heights. I have found the sentiment more poetic than accurate. Procer is no single tower but twenty-three of them, and their owners constantly steal each other's stones to rise at the expense of the others."

Also, I found the game still imperfect. You see, it is not given that you really know how many stones you have. Or how many you will need. And it's not given that everyone does not know how many stones you have. So you need to add the special vessel for stones, that will show you your ammount in no clear numbers (say a random number counted from your number +/- two), and you need to add an ability to spy on the amount of stones your enemy has. And, most importantly, you need to give an ability to TAKE the stones.

"Meat, the lizard voice in the back of his head said." What is that lizard voice?

*FactualInsanity*

"The lizard brain" is a popular way of referring to instincts in humans ostensibly stemming back from before our ancestors were even mammals. The most primitive, knee-jerk, fight or flight kind of responses, like "weakness -> hunt", "threat/unknown -> destroy", etc.

I guess erraticerrata just wholesale transplanted the phrase to orc culture, even though it makes even less biological sense there. (Or maybe more, if Orcs in the Guide evolved from actual lizards.)

## Screwfloss

The lizard brain refers to the limbic system, and it is perfectly biologically cromulent to say it that way.

## TeK

Yeah, the lizard voice in the head of magical orc who did not get comprehensive biological education does strike me as cromulent.

I thought it is some deity or his Name voice.

## *Jane*

Personally, I would also say that the game suffers from another critical flaw, one that is almost as ubiquitous in gaming – that they players *know* what the rule are. That performing x action in y circumstance will result in outcome z, with implication q for victory, and that action p isn't actually possible under the rules at all.

Under Tower rules, it doesn't appear possible to invent some brilliant new stratagem that overturns the board entirely; for someone like Malicia or Akua, who can deeply consider all of their possible options and work out what will most reliably take them to victory, that's perfect, but for someone like Cat who specializes in thinking outside of the box, it doesn't allow their strengths to be represented at all.

## *Jakinbandw*

The fix would be to play with cards or something. Where some cards are worth having for raising the tower and others aren't. Say that face cards don't count for raising the tower. Everyone gets a hand of 10, and callow gets a hand of 10 as well. When someone gets 20 none face cards they win.

I might work up a rule set for this.

## Euodiachloris

This sounds like something Vivienne might point out. If she were to be told of Building Towers and not too afraid to mention it. The card game might be called Building and Breaking, since it would be hands (declared and undeclared) as well as stones (your own Tower pot and the common pot of chance-lost stones from losing declared hands) you'd be trying to build, rather than just towers of stones.

Hmmm: poker meets bridge/Jass a a with the option of both permanent or temporary partnership and cut-throat soloing... Maybe some Eucre thrown in? This game could use a changeable Bauer/Joker at contextual points.

Unless trumps are needed to represent Heroes and Villans, instead... wonder if there's a bridge-like version of tarot Triumphs out there... \*starts to Google\*

Or, there's always Cripple Mr Onion with new pot rules. 😊

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Unmentioned: personal pots would have to be rather like essential oil burners that use tea lights: the top pot that everybody can easily see into, but the "stand" under it only allowing glimpses for the other players through small patterned holes with only the player having the one access hole for stones turned towards them.

I imagine the boost in both the pottery and jewellery trades would be welcome, with the sudden need of honest earthen or precious filligree pot stands (with matching pots). Poor common-pool pots: they'd probably be whatever was lying around. 😊

### *Jakinbandw*

How about if during the game each player could spend some stones to make a new rule? It would need some type of veto...

Hmm

Let me work on this

### [TeK](#)

You can fix it by adding the three rules:

- That if you found some pebbles, painted them and persuaded everyone that those pebbles are playable they are;
- That if you persuaded everyone that those playable stones totally aren't, they aren't;
- And number of needed Tower stones to win is random everytime and you can bring some stones from a previous game into new one. And a number of turns until Callow wins is random too.

Also any rule that all three players agreed or disagreed upon is a rule in span of current game. Exceptions are the rules like: you need stones to win, only one can win, you can't stab two other players and take their stone, Callow is always angry.

### [sengachi](#)

Also there's some rules masters who can take away 5 rocks from any side if they don't like who's winning. They make it kind of hard to win in perpetuity.

[TeK](#)

And the most important rule: the Game does not stop after someone wins.

*WuseMajor*

Yeah, Cat's response to being put into check, is to hit the other player with the chessboard. Which, technically, isn't against the rules as long as she could do it without moving the pieces, but only because such behavior is frowned upon by society in general and no-one thinks they actually need a rule for that.

*Decius*

To the contrary. It's a move to overturn the table and punch one of the other players, and it's not easy to predict what the outcome of that action would be.

Adjutant independently developing Game Theory from zeroth principles suggests that he would have become named even if he wasn't in Catherine's story.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

> Adjutant independently developing Game Theory from zeroth principles suggests that he would have become named even if he wasn't in Catherine's story.

I'm not sure that follows. By that reasoning, all philosophers in Guide also become Named.

[TeK](#)

It just changes into another game. The winner is now the Tyrant, and Tyrant can every  $n$  turns tax lords for  $x$  stones. The  $n$  and  $x$  are calculated based on Tyrant stones, unless the "comprehensive tax reform" is done, which is a goal of every Tyrant as it doubles the amount of stones they can tax every time it passed. Of course, the lords can cooperate to steal the stones from Tyrant. It can make for plays like making someone a Tyrant and drowing animosity to him, while slowly building up your base.

And there needs to be more players. Say, everyone who can paint stones and persuade other player to let him enter the game, can enter the game.

[TeK](#)

The game starts anew only if Callow wins and brings down the Tower.

*Micke*

That's every 30th turn.

[TeK](#)

Not in my game!

[TeK](#)

For you see. In my game, you can add stones to Callow, so that it wins, becomes Tyrant, and now is not raising anyone, for it is part of the Game ^\_^

[sengachi](#)

Gods above and below. Hakram basically invented the field of representative game theory from scratch, slowly and carefully building it up with the life lessons he earned and the advice he received, and at the end of the day his models do not have one single solitary rule for true cooperation, only mutually-oriented defections. And apparently it's not that Hakram was unmotivated before meeting Catherine, it's that's he had seen every possible outcome of this defection-oriented madness and it *\*bored\** him.

Gods. That's terrifying. That's possibly the single scariest thing you could have given Hakram as part of his backstory. All of a sudden I realize that Thief's view of Hakram is not an exaggeration, it's a deep, deep underestimation. This is a person who probably could have made his own bid for the Tower in due time, but saw deeper and further than others who would make the climb and said "what's the point?".

*RanVor*

That leaves only one question to ask: what did he see in Cat that made this entire endeavor seem worthwhile?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Cat takes time to slap both paint and googly eyes on some of her stones and turns them into pet rocks. Then she defends all the stones she can get hold of, but especially those which are her pet rocks. And, she doesn't use all her stones just to build a single Tower with: she's going for towers, keeps, cattle byers, forges and tiddlywinks.

Sure, she will spend lives to protect lives and the foundations they live on. But, ultimately, she's trying to grow more of those stone lives to do more than just build Towers with. 😊

[NZPIEFACE](#)

She simply doesn't want to play the game.



## *Isa Lumitus*

Hakram's big revelation was that the only way to get stones was to steal them from other players. It's a zero sum game. The actual Praesi politics are even worse. After all, sometimes a summoned demon will turn a few stones into face-eating monsters.

Cat isn't playing that game, though. What she's doing is a combination of trying to ally with people to conjure more stones into the game, and stabbing everyone trying to steal stones from her.

Case 1: The King of Winter. Cat got what she wanted (invasions ended), and the King of Winter also 'won' (no longer bound to the Summer Vs. Winter cycle). There was a time when she wanted to kill him for being an asshole, though.

Case 2: Akua. She tried playing the standard Praesi way, and got her soul ripped out and bound to a piece of clothing.

## *Dainpdf*

Not exactly a comment on this chapter, but I've started re-reading and I wonder if we'll ever get to see Cat and, say, Hakram or Indrani sparring from the point of view of a normie like we did Amadeus and Sabah way back in the first book, chapter Seven.

As for this chapter... Hakram being Hakram. Let's hope he and Vivienne can work things out.

## *qfeys*

I took a go at writing the rules down. Let me know what you think.

1e version:

3 players, called lords (or ladies), each start with 10 stones. You have a victory when you have 20 stones.

A stone can be stolen when 2 players agree on a theft.

2e version – promises:

A lord can give one or more stones to another lord to make him agree to an unbreakable promise.

A lord can destroy any stone they own.

3e version – Callow:

A fourth pile of 10 stones is added, named Callow.

Any lord can take a stone from Callow whenever they want.

If no tower is raised within 30 turns, Callow will kill all lords (that have taken from Callow – I'm unsure about this one).

(Another variant could be: the timer only starts ticking when the

first stone is taken from Callow.)  
(Btw: What are turns?)

4e version – lies:

You have to hide how many stones you have.

One lord starts with 10 stones, one with 8 and one with 6.

You can not know with how many stones the others started.

*beleester*

3e: I think the Callow timer has to only start when someone takes from Callow. Otherwise, Aisha has only 30 turns to collect 24 stones, which doesn't match up with the statement that she's playing the long game.

(Also, Callow is vengeful. It makes sense that they don't invade until someone pisses them off.)

[TeK](#)

You misread 30 turns for 30 stones, my good friend 😊

*beleester*

The rules are interesting, but I feel Hakram needs to do more playtesting:

1. The lead you need to win seems impossibly far. To win the game, you have to make 20 more captures than anyone else, and possess all but 4 stones in the game! Even if you get all your opponents drunk and they've forgotten how many you started with, they'll surely notice that they've only got 2 or 3 stones apiece. Putting more stones in the game in total might help with this.

2. Callow causing an immediate time limit makes the strategy very limited – the only reason to take from Callow is if you're certain that its stones will allow you to win. But that means that taking from Callow is basically signaling "I'm about to win the game," which paints a big target on your back. It's never a bad idea to plunder someone who took from Callow.

Also, it's impossible for anyone to win *\*without\** plundering Callow (24 stones among the lords, 30 needed to win), but for the Praesi, that's probably a feature, not a bug.

The (unseen) rules for alliances and betrayal might include a fix for these problems, since they might allow you to accumulate enough power to gather a large number of stones in one fell swoop. I'll have to think of some possible mechanics.

[TeK](#)

1. There is Callow so the total is 34, and at worst you need 14 captures.

2. No, Callow comes for you regardless. I think. It's not clear. And you pretty much have to take from Callow. If not, you're leaving the other two lords with 4 stones combined, see how that's gonna turn out.

Oh, I see your problem. You need twenty. "and to win one of them must accumulate twenty stones and so raise their tower".

*Berder*

Typo: "whose Names were an insivible bonfire" -> invisible

[Barthumphries](#)

I don't think Hakram was planning on betraying Viv. I think he recognized the mental anguish she was feeling at having the title but not the authority that went with it, and planning on offering concessions or whatever to lessen the chance of her betraying him.

And if the concessions, etc., didn't go well, then like Batman (who has plans for how to defeat every other superhero in case they go rogue) he has a plan.

*DC*

On a second readthrough, I'd propose just one change to tower-raising: Callow only hangs those who took from Callow.

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## Interlude: Zwischenzug II

*"In the East they say that doubt is the death of men, but I have seen the end of the forking path and reply this: so is certainty, only for others."*

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

Panic blanked Vivienne's mind, for a heartbeat. Her fingers clutched the tankard so tightly she felt like it should break. Was this it, then? The conversation that took place before the Deadhand snatched the life out of her? *I can run*, she thought. But that would be declaring treason, or close enough, and they would hunt her like an animal. How many of the Jacks would stay loyal, if there was a price on her head? Some, but not enough. The guildsmen who'd once answered to Ratface and she'd begun to fold into her own web would turn their cloak without batting an eye. She was still Queen of Thieves until someone took the stolen crown from her, but that was more custom than law and Catherine

had put the fear of her in their bones. Some would sell her out, if the alternative was crossing the Black Queen's right hand. She'd sent all her people away before Deadhand arrived, anyway, leaving the two of them alone with the hearth crackling in the corner. The thief forced herself to drink down some ale, heart still beating against her eardrums. She would, could not fall to pieces so easily. *Let's have a talk, you and I*, the orc had said. He'd phrased it like it was an offer, like there was a decision to make.

They both knew there wasn't.

"Honesty, is it?" she said, affecting a drawl. "I did not know you traded in such luxuries, Adjutant. Ambitious of you."

He did not smile. Unsure where to look – coldly assessing eyes, lips hiding fangs or that *damned* hand even when hidden under a glove – she drank again instead.

"Do you know," Hakram Deadhand mildly said, "I can't remember the last time I was genuinely scared. I've been afraid for us, in fights, but actual terror? No, not even when the Queen of Summer came down. I can't imagine what it would be like, living with that sword always hanging over your head. Colouring every sight and scent, creeping into every corner of me."

Vivienne set down her tankard, slowly and carefully.

"To be afraid of something," she said, "you have to care about something first."

*And do you?* Did he care about a single thing in all of Creation? Sometimes she thought he loved Catherine, though not in a way that would lead to courtship. The Woe were so often like sunflowers, turning to remain facing the burning glare hung up in their common sky, and of them Hakram Deadhand had been the first. The kind of love, perhaps, that a drowning man would have for the shore. But even that could not be the sum whole of anyone, and how could she trust in the words of a creature that treated every moment like one on the stage? Vivienne was not sure which truth would be more dangerous: that there was something buried deep beneath, or that there truly was nothing at all. The orc inclined his head, thoughtful. The gesture and accompanying visage was not common to his kind, the thief had known enough orcs to be certain of that. It was learned. Presented consciously to her eyes.

"I have been thinking of a game, lately," Deadhand said. "I will spare you the details, for they are largely irrelevant to this conversation, but there is one part of it I have been struggling with."

The thief maintained a pleasant smile, letting him speak without interruption though her mind was wheeling. A game? It was questions she had expected, not some delicate metaphor.

"Trust," Adjutant said. "That is the one element I could never quite figure out. The game cannot be won without the players hiding their thoughts, yet it cannot truly advance without trust either. I've tried to make a study of why it fails or emerges but found no success. The same answers rarely apply twice."

"A matter best left to philosophers, perhaps," Vivienne said, too wary to venture blindly into this. "Or theologians, I suppose. Faith and trust have much in common."

"Do they?" the orc curiously asked. "It is my understanding you were raised to the House of Light, but I never learned its teachings in any depth. My people, not unlike the Praesi, see prayer more as bargain than oblation."

And there it was, the itch in the wound. Not the religious matters, but the part he had casually mentioned. My people. The Praesi. As if they were two different things entirely. Perhaps they were, Vivienne thought. She'd entertained the thought often enough in the past. Why would the first orc Named in centuries subordinate himself to a human from a land that was traditional plunder and raiding grounds to his own kind? Oh, his Name lent itself well to obedience. But even if he'd ended up the Shepherd he could have returned to the Steppes and lived like a king until his death. Where was his gain, she had wondered? Her answer had been that by staying at Catherine's side, he could do more than his people than by returning to his desolate home or remaining in true Imperial service. Cat had been, by then, as good as queen of Callow even if there had been the thin pretence of a ruling council. If the Empire was broken apart from the inside, if the Clans were supported by a Callowan sovereign whose closest friend was an orc... And yet there'd been no trace of the steps that should precede that.

There was no greenskin faction at court. There'd been, as far as she knew, no suggestions of diplomacy with the clans of the Steppes or with the powerful officers of his kind in the Legions of Terror. Even when it came to the Army of Callow, he'd been one of the main proponents of investing in training Callowan officers rather than simply relying on the veterans acquired from the wounded legions who'd joined after Second Liesse. His game was not an obvious one. The assertion that he could be driven by personal ambition was laughable. Deadhand could have taken any seat on the queen's council with but a whisper in Catherine's ear, and to be frank even without any formal title he'd held authority so broad and absolute some actual kings would have envied it. How much higher could he rise without holding a crown of his own? Yet Adjutant held no noble title, no lands, no

significant military force of his own. He could commandeer most of these, but he had not cultivated personal loyalties or gathered supporters – even when it would have been almost childishly easy to do so. He was, in essence, the perfect loyal right hand.

That degree of apparent flawlessness in anyone would have made Vivienne's skin crawl, but in so skilled an actor it was more than just *alarming*. As the silence stretched the thief realized she'd allowed the conversation to lapse, and cleared her throat.

"I'm not the best person to explain it," she said. "I never had much interest in priestly matters."

"And yet you fought by the side of a man touched by the Choir of Contrition," the orc said. "Something few priests can boast of. Callowans are a study in contradiction, sometimes. You've birthed as many heroes as the Praesi have villains, but rare is the song sung in your taverns that praises angels or Heavens. Always the kingdom, always rebellion and revenge and old scores settled."

"How often have your people been the invaded instead of the invaders, Adjutant?" Vivienne softly asked. "Curse not walls of your own raising."

"Aye," he said. "We have done that. Yet I find it fascinating, the faces nation will paint over faceless Gods. Praesi hold their Gods Below to be peerless schemers, for that is their favoured art. Goblins call the whole lot the Gobbler, a single crawling thing that will one day devour the same Creation it spewed out. Death is the only certainty they embrace as a race."

"And orcs?" Vivienne asked.

"Below is just what they teach us to call them in the Wasteland," Deadhand said. "We know them as the *Hungry Gods*. We've had our lesser idols, as all other peoples have. But that altar was the first and remains the greatest."

"Kings and shepherds fit the same cookpot," Vivienne quoted, tongue stumbling over the rough syllables of Kharsum.

She was the only one of the Woe who did not speak it fluently. Catherine had been raised in an orphanage and Indrani in the middle of the fucking woods, and still they'd been *surprised* she did not speak orcish. As if it was a given that everyone should.

"Have you ever seen an orc go without meat for long, Thief?" Adjutant said. "An experiment was made by some Soninke lord called Ehioze, a few centuries back, so the process is well documented. He grabbed three hundred orcs in their prime, who'd committed one of those crimes that is only ever a crime when the Praesi need fresh bodies, and locked them up for study."

The thief's eyes narrowed. She did not reply.

"For the first month, it's barely noticeable at all," Deadhand continued. "We'll get irritable, aggressive. Slower in thought. Then at the beginning of the second month, skin will grow tight and muscles melt away. Our bodies start eating themselves alive. By the middle of the third month, we are no longer able to tell faces apart. It's all a thick, red, pulsing *haze*."

Her fingers tightened under the table, not that she remembered putting her hands there.

"Ehioze was a dutiful scholar," the orc mildly said. "Just starving them would not have been enough. He sequestered parts of the three hundred and studied how different manners of feeding would affect the process. He suggested afterwards that it was possible to keep orcs at the beginning of the middle state, before muscles start going, if they are fed two pounds of meat a month along with higher quantity of other provisions. It's true, as it happens. I know this because his suggestions were used as the standard orc rations in the Legions up until the Reforms. They called it *Ehioze's Measure*."

"They wanted you able to fight," Vivienne said.

"But not think," Deadhand finished softly. "Or we might just question why it was never Praesi that faced the charges of your knights."

"I imagine there's quite a few orcs in the Legions, even in the Army of Callow, who have grandfathers and grandmothers that lived under the measure," she said.

He nodded. Not wary, never wary, for that was to be her curse and not his.

"There's another part to that tale, Adjutant," the thief said. "One you forgot to tell. You see, there's quite a few Callowans in the army who have kin that got *eaten* by orcs. Not even thirty years ago. What the Wasteland did to your people is a horror. What they went on to do to mine is a fucking horror as well, and one does not expunge the other."

"I know that too, Thief," Deadhand said. "You asked, in your own roundabout manner, what it is I care about. I have answers you won't care to hear, but this one you will. I care about seeing a world where, when I tell this story, the woman on the other side of the table can't reply the way you did. Where we're more than hunting hounds for those who *measured our starvation*."

And there it was. Everything she had feared – hoped? It was such a blurry line, some days – he would say. The confession that he meant to use Callowan lives to secure orc interests. How long

would it be, until Catherine's fanged Chancellor whispered the right words to have her war for the independence of the Steppes? And yet... *He has not prepared for this*, she thought. The orc was meticulous to a fault, so where was his spadework? Where were the correspondences and the deals, the alliances made in the dark? Where were the mouthpieces for this ugliest of crusades? Part of her wanted to dismiss all the absences as him simply biding his time, but it rang false. It was fear giving answer, and Vivienne despised how seductive those whispers were. She was willing to fear for her life, for her home, but what was she if terror was the sum whole of her? Just another prisoner, yet another Callowan who'd never quite left the days of Imperial occupation. The moment she ceased looking for the truth, she was lost.

"And yet you are here," she said. "In Laure. Working for a kingdom you love not, when you could be raising banner among the clans of your kind. *Why?*"

"Of all of the Woe," Deadhand calmly said, "you should understand that best. I could raise rebel flag, I could give the Tower a war it would remember for a very long time. I might even win it and cast down that peerless tribute to murder. But what would that accomplish, Thief? The head bearing the crown changes, the world moves on and two hundred years from now we'll be right back where we started. You don't cure a sickness by fighting the symptoms. You go after the root, or it will linger until death."

"The Liesse Accords," Vivienne said.

"The Liesse Accords," the orc agreed. "They will not come to be unless we take a hatchet to everything that holds up Praes, beyond repair. And under those rules, that agreement of nations, we change things. Not a dynasty's name or a few battles won or borders on a map. We truly *change things*."

It was perhaps the only argument he could have brought forward that would have appeased her without appeasing her too much. A perfect balance struck. The thief could feel the hair on the back of her neck rising. There were devils in the deepest Hells that did not have half as silver a tongue as Hakram Deadhand.

"And so, I now worry of you," Adjutant said.

"I have been more ardent a defender of them than any of us," Vivienne harshly replied.

"So you have," the orc easily conceded. "And that surprised me, for while Callow will benefit they are not tailored for the primary benefit of the kingdom – and it is Callowans that will bleed to have it signed."

She'd run with heroes once, the thief remembered. Men and women who'd carried the broken pieces of their old lives with them just



as the Woe did, and some nights she wondered how deep the differences truly were. And then there were moments like this, where the killer across from her was surprised that she would embrace salvation extending further than her own little corner of Creation. Like it was expected that the lines on the map delimited the border between people and foes and there could be nothing between. William had been a monster too, in his own way, and Vivienne had neither forgotten nor forgiven what might have taken place in Liesse without Catherine's intervention. Rare was the day where she did not curse herself for having hesitated, having quibbled. Having allowed it to happen without raising a fucking hand. But even William would never have been surprised by someone trying to do good for the sake of doing good. *I discarded those hesitations*, she thought, and threw in my lot with the Woe. *I made a bet on Catherine, and within the year a hundred thousand innocents were dead.*

"I can hate the princes of Procer, for their rapaciousness," she said. "I can hate those who allow themselves to take arms for a morally bankrupt cause and the heroes who would see us burn for a point of philosophy. I can do all that, and not hate the people under them."

"And yet there is an imbalance, isn't there?" Adjutant quietly said. "It is not equal care. Who you hesitate, if the choice was between a Callowan life and a Proceran one?"

"And that makes me a villain?" she hissed, and immediately regretted it.

Panic flared. Was this going to be it, then? The moment where he reached across the table and snapped her neck like kindling?

"You are afraid," Deadhand noted. "There is no need. You have not spoken anything I did not already suspect. And that is my worry, Vivienne. Because deep down you still believe, you still *act*, like you're the same girl who was at the Lone Swordsman's side. You are not."

"And so to keep my throat uncut I must kiss the feet of the Gods Below," she said. "Is that it? Shall I eat a baby to prove my dedication to the *cause*?"

"Your life is in no danger," Deadhand calmly said.

She laughed, right in his face.

"Is that so?" she mocked. "Why, because Catherine would be cross if you killed me? It would pass. She needs you too badly, and you'll be able to tell her you tried before I so regrettably forced your hand."

"Your murder would be seen as a greenskin coup, regardless of context," Adjutant said. "So if you cannot believe in my own intentions, at least believe in the practicalities involved."

"Spot on, Deadhand," she snarled. "There's nothing quite as reassuring as hearing one's death would be politically inconvenient."

"So that's the kernel," the orc said, sounding surprised. "You do not believe you have worth."

She flinched. That had cut too close to home for comfort. The orc's brow creased.

"You stole a sun," he slowly said. "And were instrumental in the killing of several of our most dangerous opponents."

"You do have a talent for the exact," Vivienne said, "Instrumental is precisely the right word."

An instrument, wielded by sharper minds and quicker hands. A bundle of aspects to be used as a surgical tool, perhaps sometimes a discreet pair of eyes. *You are all Named*, she thought. *I am an artefact that breathes*. And the moment she strayed from that function, what came but defeat? By the Grey Pilgrim, by fae, by a *single Praesi mage*. Lightning coursing through her veins, not delivered by some ancient power but a single woman with a speck of sorcery to her. The humiliation of it only deepened the echoes of the pain across her body.

"War is not your Role, Thief," Deadhand said. "Forcing the matter will only result in failure."

"Then what is my damned Role, Adjutant?" she asked quietly. "Because there's no need for a thief, here, and what else can I be used for? I do not rule, I do not lead armies, my judgement is background drone to decisions of import even when Catherine is here. Is that all? Am I just the forced voice of morality that must be sweet-talked before we take yet another plunge. Gods, I am tired of being an obstacle instead of a speaker."

The orc considered that in silence.

"Trust," he said, sounding almost amused. "Always trust. I would offer you a bargain, Vivienne Dartwick."

The deal or the grave, she thought. So it finally came to that, Catherine's little helper tidying up all the loose ends.

"You're right," Adjutant said. "You never spoke the accusation, yet you are right. I have no great love for this kingdom. I see what it takes from her, from all of us, and I wonder how it could be worth it."

The orc's eyes met hers squarely.

"So teach me," he said. "Why I should care for it. Show me."

"I can't squeeze tears out of a stone, Hakram," she tiredly replied.

He nodded, as if he had come to a decision.

"There is nothing I can say that will convince you," Deadhand said. "You are not wrong. Even oaths are just words."

The orc methodically took off his gloves, one after the other. Flesh first, and the scuttling bone. He brought up the skeletal fingers.

"Your knife, please," he said.

Vivienne's pulse quickened. Slowly she palmed her blade, eyes remaining peeled on his face, and she saw only cold determination there. Gods forgive me, she thought. *Hide*. The hand remained there, his eyes on hers. *Hide*, she thought again, panic mounting. She could touch the aspect but it refused to bloom. It was like trying to catch smoke. Gently, the orc took the knife from her sweaty, shaking hand.

"I made a promise to you, once," Adjutant said. "One I have come to regret."

The tip of the blade touched the bone hand with a soft clink, artfully moved to allow it from his grip.

"Only blood can wash away bad blood," he said. "Our peoples have that in common. I should not have forgot it."

The knife came down, hard enough to shake the table beneath, and carved into the orc's only flesh wrist. Blood spurted as Vivienne's blade scraped across bones, fear and astonishment taking hold of her.

"Adjutant, what-"

"My word is of no worth to you," Hakram Deadhand calmly interrupted her, face pale and taught with pain. "That is not unwise. Amends must be made. So when you next doubt your value, I want you to remember this: when the choice came, I judged you well worth a hand."

The orc's wrist pressed down, bone shattered and Adjutant's black blood crept across the table as his hand came fully severed.

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*Zachary*

The funny thing with Hakram is that people always talk about him being a great actor, but clearly he's doing something wrong if so many people come away with the perception that he's some kind of sociopath, lol

*NerfContessa*

Well, most sociopaths are excellent actors. They have to, to work anywhere but as ceo s.

Still, this move?

Absolutely metal :((

*therealgridlock*

I think the point of the comment was to point out that sociopaths rarely get recognized as sociopaths specifically because they are good actors.

So if hakram looks like a sociopath, but isn't doing any of the things a sociopath would do, what does that make him? Why would any great actor convince others they were a sociopath?

I suspect it is to hide that his true motives are always right out in the open, just nobody believes anyone could be that honest.

Or rather, that since nobody believes he could be being truthful, they think he is a great actor instead.

*TheNoremac42*

God damn... Why are half the characters in this series freaking sociopaths?!

*Solomon Midwinter*

I mean... it's not called a practical guide to ethics and mental stability.

*kelioez*

I think someone should write that and give it to the them to follow, also take them to the person who wrote it for long-term psychiatric treatment.

*Cotillion*

Sociopaths, by definition, do not adjust to society. They are frequently practiced in putting on an act to better fit in with it, but their core nature is Other to those who work within the normal bounds. What does that describe but a Named?

*therealgridlock*

Jesus Christ. I mean, i get it, the only way hakram could convince thief that he actually cares about her is to make a literal sacrifice of a pound of flesh

The only way to make the kingdom convinced he cares is to make a literal sacrifice of a pound of flesh

But what the fuck man, lol.

Does he get a second dead hand? I think this one can get glued back on, the only reason the other is fuckt is because of the hashmallim sword.

*aran*

*cut myself into pieces, this is my last resort*

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## **Interlude: Giuoco Pianissimio II**

*"A man could sift through all of Creation and never find so much as a speck of this elusive thing called the greater good. Like all the most dangerous altars, it is entirely of our own raising."*

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"It looks like you shoved the stump in a fire," Fadila Mbafeno sighed.

That was, in fact, exactly what Hakram had done. Blood loss could kill even Named, and while pushing a fresh stump into a hearth fire until the flesh cauterized had been excruciatingly painful it'd still been better than dying in a ratty Laure tavern. Masego's assistant – and nominal head of the Observatory in his absence – had promptly answered the summons after he returned to the palace, and begun to work on healing his wound without quibbling. There were other mages in the capital, of course, and many priests. But Fadila was Praesi, and that had decided his choice of healer. The Soninke had been raised to understand the value of discretion and not inquiring in the affairs of one's social superiors. The dark-skinned woman leaned closer with a

silvery scalpel in hand, cutting slightly into the burned flesh at the end of his stump. No pain, he noted, though that might simply be because he'd grown light-headed enough he no longer felt it. The blade came away red and the sorceress washed it in a bowl of clear water before wiping with a cloth.

"I'll need to cut away the burnt flesh before healing the damage beneath," she informed him. "Healing is not my specialty and burns are trickier than most wounds. Pouring magic into scorched flesh tends to have... unpredictable results."

"Do as you see fit," Adjutant gravelled. "I will defer to your judgement."

She nodded in appreciation.

"You've lost a large amount of blood," Fadila added. "I'd recommend poultry, fish and red meat – which are staples of your people's diets, regardless. Orcs lack the most the issues involved in human blood transfusions, so it's certainly possible if you want to accelerate recovery, but my understanding is that local mores frown upon those kinds of rituals."

"It won't be necessary," Hakram simply said.

The full consequences of his actions must be played out, lest the gesture be robbed of some of its weight. She did not question his answer, as she had not lingered on the subject of reattaching the hand after he'd declined. The Soninke passed her knife under open flame to cleanse it, and then set to the methodical business of prying away the burnt flesh on his stump before healing it. The spell she used for that purpose, he did not recognize. The sorceress used no incantation, and the shape and colour of the magic were different than that used by the Legions of Terror. The pain returned quick enough, a deep ugly throb, and Hakram only then realized she'd discretely numbed his nerves before her early examination. Kind of the Lady Mbafero, he thought. The title occasionally tossed in the foreigner's direction by servants and court officials was a source of mild amusement to him, he could privately admit. It was a Callowan courtesy title, one that would likely have gotten her killed if she'd claimed it while still in the employ of a Wasteland patron – it would have denoted the kind of ambitions Praesi aristocrats disliked finding in their subordinates.

Fadila Mbafero had, after all, once been *mfuasa* to the Sahelians. Servant blood, it meant, a distinction between commoners and those retainers directly in the service of the nobility. Hakram had studied her background in some detail, as it happened. After Masego had snatched her from the gallows and placed her in his service, Catherine had rather bluntly told the orc that if Fadila was a risk she would be getting into an 'accident' as soon as feasible. The investigation had led to an interesting look at

Praesi customs, particularly pertaining mages. Sorcery and political power had been intertwined in the Wasteland since long before the Miezens ever made shore on Calernia, in Praes more than any other region. The lords high and low had bred sorcery into their lines with methodical precision, bringing talented mages into the fold whenever it seemed like the blood thinned, but those were ultimately limited arrangements. Both Soninke and Taghreb saw more mages born than any other human ethnicity on the continent, which meant it was effectively impossible for the nobles to keep the practice of sorcery entirely within their own ranks.

Adjutant had read the appropriate treatises, back in the College, and so he was aware that most people born with the Gift either never realized they had it or died young after an uncontrolled or untrained use of sorcery. Another significant portion had too little talent to be able to practice sorcery beyond a few tricks without extensive tutoring, though when born to wealthy families such types made up the backbone of alchemists and academics in the Empire. It was the smaller portion that had a Gift strong enough for ritual or combat sorcery that had the High Lords and their vassals regularly sifting through their subjects. The treatment those 'lucky' few received varied from region to region. Taghreb, as a rule, treated them like a sort of lesser nobility and created mage lines within their territories that could be called on when there was need for war or marriage. Soninke, as in most things, proved too complex to easily generalize. The policies of Okoro and Nok tended towards bringing agreeable mages into the fold as *mfuasa* and those judged unreliable forced into service with the local noble's household troops. The stubborn and the runners disappeared.

Aksum was the most traditionally hard-line, with any mages not leashed or wedded unceremoniously slain before they could become an issue. Akua Sahelian's own father, famously, had been born with enough talent he could be a threat even as a servant and no spare relative to wed him to. He'd had to flee the region with killers after him, finding refuge in Wolof. The line to which Fadila had once been sworn to, and the last of the great Soninke cities. Wolof was a centre of sorcery rival to Ater itself, and had remained so for millennia by investing heavily in raising and training mages. It was well known to 'acquire' mages from other regions in difficult situations, but Fadila had been born in the city and so fallen under the aegis of its internal policies. Like all children with promising magical talent, she'd been taken from her family while young, the parents being offered a lump sum as redress for the loss of a child, and trained at the High Lady's expense until she reached the age of twelve. Young mages who made it that far – not a given, the mortality rate was one in three – were assigned permanent service to either the Sahelians or one of their vassal families, a highly politicked process that the

ruling family of Wolof used to both reward and slight their subordinates.

The loyal got rising talents, the troublesome only the dregs.

Fadila herself had been judged of sufficient prowess to enter the service of the Sahelians themselves, and cultivated as *mfuasa* to the family. She'd known Diabolist socially but never been in her personal circle, and been considered a likely fit for a teaching or research position after she spent a decade or two fighting as a combat mage for her masters. Her talent as both a ritualist and a theoretician had been noted in Praesi circles – she'd made some waves after proving it was possible to forge a weak artificial sympathetic link in scrying tools – and that reputation was likely the reason Diabolist had picked her as a retainer when she set out to engineer the Doom of Liesse. The amount of work required in turning an entire city into a runic array would have been massive, and she was a natural fit for Akua Sahelian to delegate the lesser tasks to. It was fortunate, Hakram often thought, that she'd been snatched from Diabolist's service before she could serve that purpose. How much faster would the Doom of Liesse have come, with such a helper?

"There," Fadila said, placing her silver knife back into the water. "That is as much as I can do. Should you change your mind about reattaching the hand, it will be necessary to cut off a sliver of the stump and a degree of functionality will be lost. In case you were unaware, limb reattachment attempted more than ten hours after the loss has at most a one in four chance of success. I can't speak for what Lord Hierophant would be capable of, naturally, or even Callowan priests. Their methods are largely beyond my understanding."

"Duly noted," Hakram replied, gaze turning to the stump.

His dead flesh had been carved off, piece by piece, and instead thin green skin now covered his wrist. Almost thin as a human's, he thought, though it would thicken in time.

"Be careful with it, it's fragile even by human standards," the sorceress said. "As it happens, the flesh reached full saturation during the process. I won't be able to touch it again for at least two days, and after that only minor touch-ups. It would be ideal if you could avoid puncturing the skin for a full month."

"I'll be careful with it," Adjutant said, and blinked.

He'd been trying to move fingers that no longer existed, he realized. That would be an adjustment.

"Thank you, Lady Mbafeno," he finally said. "That will be all."

"It was my pleasure, Lord Adjutant," she respectfully replied.



She gathered her affairs and bowed before leaving. She might not have seen the Wasteland in years now, but the manners remained with her. The angle of the bow had been the one court etiquette dictated as required for a High Lord of Praes. Though he found himself in a thoughtful mood, Hakram did not linger in the private room he'd requisitioned for the treatment. This business, after all, was not quite done. His conversation with Thief had been interrupted by the woman's obvious horror at his actions, worsened when he addressed the bleeding with cauterization through the tavern's hearth fire. That was not entirely unexpected. He'd given it better than half odds they would have to take recess while the wound was properly seen to, when deciding his course of action. Hakram usually slept in his office, whenever he could spare time for slumber, but he did have personal rooms of his own in the palace. Amusingly enough, they had once been those of the queen consorts of Callow – he was not certain whether Catherine was unaware of the fact or simply indifferent, though an alternative might be that she knew and it was actually her sardonic sense of humour at work. Regardless, they were the rooms closest to her own. He'd been rather touched by the implications of that, though he still used them only rarely.

Thief would not come to him in his office, he knew. It was, in her eyes, the seat of his power. It was also where he kept his axe, and Vivienne preferred him unarmed when she could stomach to see him at all. A place where he could be expected to go but where his presence was lightly felt would be the most appropriate setting for the last part of their exchange, and so the orc did not waste time dawdling before heading for his quarters. He'd felt eyes on him the moment he passed the threshold of the healing room and twice more while on his way, and so it was no surprise that Thief awaited him inside when he opened the door. Her informants must have been tracking him all the way to here. The personal quarters of the queen consorts of Callow had been luxurious even before Laure and its royal palace fell under the rule of Wastelanders whose own nobility was known to be ostentatious to almost absurd extents. The orc had stripped away most of the decorations, though the furniture itself had been of very good make and so remained intact. The only luxury he'd occasionally partaken in was the large balcony outside overlooking a garden, the closest to a spot of green he'd been able to find in this city. It was there that Thief was awaiting.

She looked small and thin, sitting on an open windowsill and bathed in moonlight. Even for a human. Catherine was shorter, but like her teacher she had enough presence it was barely noticeable when looking at her. Vivienne Dartwick's hair had grown longer, he noticed once more. Hakram did not allow his eyes to linger – his attention would only have worsened whatever issue lay behind that fact – but he'd noticed when it first began. Before the departure for Keter, and for it to have been noticeable even back

then it must have started slightly earlier. Namelore was a muddle of imprecisions and exceptions, he knew, but where there was an effect there would be a cause. If, as Catherine insisted, the appearance of a Named was a reflection of how they saw themselves then such changes in Thief were a warning sign as to her mental state. Worrying, considering her influence and formal charge over the only spy network Callow possessed. Vivienne would not need to rebel to damage the kingdom, only withhold key information at a crucial moment. Or, more likely in his eyes, simply leave. The hole that would be a crippling blow to a kingdom that'd effectively begun being raised from the ground up a mere two years ago.

"Adjutant," she said, flicking a glance at him. "At least you had enough sense to see a mage."

"I would have survived it," he simply said.

Moving slowly, he came at her side. Large as the open window was, there would be no accommodating the both of them if he wished to sit with her. Instead he simply rested his elbows on the windowsill, leaning forward. Though he did not turn to watch, he felt her eyes looking down at the stump. Good. There had been, he'd realized early, no real chance any words from his lips could sway her. She distrusted him too much. Catherine could have a fireside chat with a stranger for half an hour and have them come out willing to murder in her name, but that had never been one of his talents. He could ease and turn currents, but not birth them. It was important for a Named to recognize their limitations, he believed. The costs of arrogance were so much higher for them than anyone else. Knowing that, Hakram had been forced to make a decision. Simply allowing things to unfold as they were was not to be seriously considered. The longer Thief was allowed to consolidate her power – and she already was, by bringing the informants who'd once answered to Ratface under her banner – the costlier her defection or betrayal would become. It might have been possible to draw the matter out until Catherine returned, if he'd had a precise notion of when she would, but he did not. That left killing her before she became an issue or finding a way to stem her doubts.

"The very devise of the Woe," Thief murmured, eyes leaving his absent hand. "*We will survive*. It smacks more of desperation than valour."

"Valour is the game of the winning side," Hakram replied. "If you can afford to worry about appearances, it's not a war to the death. We've known precious little else."

"There comes a time when those excuses grow thin, Adjutant," she said. "I was taught as a child that dark circumstances are a test of character. That the righteous rise above, that the wicked *sink*."

"I was taught as a child that killing a man for a goat was glorious affair, if done on an open field," he said. "We are more than our first lessons. We have to, or we'll only ever be what our ancestors were before us."

"There is worth in old lessons," Thief said. "In old wisdom."

"If they were so wise," Hakram mildly said, "why did we inherit such a debacle of a world from them?"

She went still.

"Those ways kept Callow free for millennia," she said.

"They failed, in the end," the orc said, not unkindly.

"To the Carrion Lord," Thief replied. "How often does Praes spawn a man like that? Calamity was the right name for his band. The kind of catastrophe born once a few centuries."

"Even before him, this kingdom was the battlefield of the continent," Hakram said. "Praes invaded every other decade, Procer whenever the stars were right. How often has this land truly known peace?"

"We have brought many things to Callow, Hakram Deadhand," the Thief soberly said. "*Peace* was not one of them."

"I am told," he said, "that births are rarely gentle affairs."

"And what are we birthing?" she said. "There has been more martial law than actual law, over the last two years. We've assassinated and hanged, sacrificed thousands to make deals and still we tremble in the Tower's shadow. At what point, Adjutant, does a justification become an excuse?"

"We have also fed the starving," Hakram said. "Sheltered the lost. We've built a kingdom and reclaimed its border. The good may not erase the bad, but the bad does not erase the good."

"And yet I wonder," Thief said. "Could others have done what we did, without the costs? Without compromising who they were?"

"If there were such people out there, they have not come," Hakram said. "You compare yourself to ghosts of your own making."

"We're not the best, but we're what there is," she bitterly said. "I've said that myself. To others, and while facing the mirror. That too grows thin with the repeating. Gods, if those people had come I have to ask – would we have killed them? *Did* we, before they ever came into themselves?"

"If they could not face us -"

"They couldn't face Malicia," Thief sharply said. "Or Cordelia Hasenbach, or her heroes, or the Carrion Lord. I know, Gods damn you. I know. And I know, too, that I might as well be shouting into the void when I say this but it needs to be said anyway: we are not the lesser evil. Not anymore, when we seek to make pacts with the fucking Dead King and move armies like pieces on a board for diplomatic gains. The only difference between us and the old evils is that we're newer at this game and nowhere as good. That isn't a distinction to be proud of."

And there was the rub, for Hakram had known this kind of talk before and never put much stock in it. He'd spoken with Juniper, once, and in her own blunt way she'd laid bare the heart of it. Callowans looked at knights and saw chivalry, honour and all those other virtues. Orcs looked at knights and saw killers on horses. Vivienne had championed causes, one after the other, that had been put aside in the name of necessity. Yet they were not unworthy, none of them. She felt discarded and ignored because, frankly, she had been. Her only victories had come by the planning of others, used as a cog in a greater machinery. Hakram rather enjoyed such a role. It was what he'd been taught, what he was good at. But he stood certain of his worth outside that boundary, and Vivienne Dartwick did not.

They had to start listening to her.

Not because they would lose her if they did not, but because she was right – or at least not entirely wrong. They'd all flocked to Catherine's banner because they liked the world she wanted to make, that she made just by being who she was. And Thief, in her own way, was perhaps the most ardent partisan of that. Because she would stick by that vision even when Catherine did not, even if it made her the only objector in a council. An obstacle instead of a speaker, as she'd put it herself. How many of those councils had been true debates, instead of a confirmation of a decision already made? *Too few*, Adjutant thought. *Too few for what we want to be*. He could feel her eyes returned to his stump, and knew the bargain had been worth it. The lessons had been learned well. *Are we not all your students, Catherine? In our own winding ways. You taught us that there is always a way through, if we're willing to bleed*. Words would not convince Thief, but now every time doubt came she could look at the stump and know, know beyond doubt, that she had been judged worthy.

More useful a thing than a handful of fingers.

"So tell me," Adjutant said. "How we can be different."

Her gaze met his, hesitant. Fearing. Assessing. Hope was always a most tempting cup to drink from, even when you knew the chalice might be poisoned.

Vivienne Dartwick spoke, under pale moonlight, and Hakram Deadhand listened.

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### [DroughtBringer](#)

Name: Supoorter

Aspects:

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Role: Supoorter of Erratic Errata and all convincer of others to do the same.

### [DroughtBringer](#)

And it seems like my autocorrect hates the word "Supporter"  
Well that's fun.

### [Jarwain](#)

It looks like the gambit paid off, and Hakram's missing a hand for now. How will the kingdom change?

In other news, you'd better vote! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Here's patreon if you're into that kinda thing: <https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>

### [ClickPause](#)

Is he technically Hakram Deadhands now? Or Hakram Stump'n'Deadhand?

...how about Stumpy?

### *Gunslinger*

Hmm so is this paving the pathway for a Thief Chancellor transition? Or whatever the Callowan equivalent would be.

Also quite enjoyed the surprise Fadila background. I look forward to seeing where she goes

*Gunslinger*

I don't expect the transition to happen anytime soon though. EE has become more stingy with the Name revelations 😊

[daegone823](#)

We are starving for new names

[Javvies](#)

A Callowan equivalent to Chancellor, without the presumed backstabbing connotations with the Praesi, would likely be something along the lines of Castellan, Steward, or Counselor.

*haihappen*

would Cathrine naming Vivienne her successor, like officially, make her a capital p Princess (of Callow)? Something like "Princess of Shadows" or "Black Princess of Night" (kinda redundant with Night and Black...)

But yeah, Vivi's Role in the Story about the future of Callow is very different from her Name. That may influence her deterioration.

*HandyCapped*

That formal successor thing seems intriguing, but "black princess of night" sounds like anime aka. bad writing.

*Zachary*

Welcome to web serial comments, home of some of the worst opinions I've seen in my entire life

I think my favorite is someone who commented that Catherine's third aspect (obviously before it existed) might be CHAOS

*therealgridlock*

I would argue that is her fourth aspect, or rather her zeroth. Insofar as that can't be an aspect, it's instead more a fact of her existence, she has brought chaos and change to the wheel. For a generation before her nothing changed, before that, everything changed in a way it had never been seen, and before that, everything changed in ways that had been seen.

Now it's time for more changes in ways nobody could have seen.

## *Simple Gentleman*

I don't know if thief can transition because her name is not a transition name like squire, heiress, or apprentice. I was thinking her changes are more of like a back lash of her acting more evil. Cat went through the same thing after she let William go.

Then again some names are not really evil or good. For example ranger and archer are but I see them both as people that are apathetic to others concerns which is why their names don't really have a side.

This is not the case with thief. She is very much invested in the ills of the world. Her name is enough in the grey area that she can work with Cat and be on the evil side with out losing it but maybe if things go to far she becomes "weaker" or less stable.

## *Javvies*

I believe that any Name can Transition, especially to a Ruler-type Name, under the right/appropriate circumstances. However, the so-called Transitory Names like Squire, Heiress, and Apprentice have an easier time of building towards and completing a Transition than a "full fledged" non-Transitory Names.

There are probably some Names that are sort of both Transitory and fully fledged Names – and this category would, I think, likely include many of the traditional Names for the Callowan Crown Prince(ss), prior to ascending to the Callowan Throne and getting one of the Names associated with being the crowned king or queen of Callow, and in many ways, the Praesi Chancellor Name is both a fully fledged Name and one that is intended to Transition into Dread Emperor/Empress.

And, of course, going from a Name that isn't Transitory to non-ruler-type Name would be far more difficult, especially the more different it is from your current Name.

Vivienne is likely, IMO, to have a very different sort of Name – after all, she hasn't really been occupying the Role of a Thief much lately.

## *nineran*

Cursed > Captain

Transistions can happen. They just need a strong enough story and role.

## *Liliet*

Cursed is a transitional Name. Its Role is to build up to whatever the Cursed can manage to become when they find a way to overcome / subdue / transcend their curse.

*Kiefler*

Wouldn't a Named "Thief Chancellor" in essence be "Tax Collector"?



*Yardaze*

Gotta hand it to him, Hakram seems to know his business.

*danh3107*

You get one clap.

[Hakurei06](#)

But does it make a sound?

*WuseMajor*

I would like this, if I had an account.

*danh3107*

A bit short, but still an interesting chapter. After reading this I'm not sure if Thief will transition or not, her changes seem to be from her own loss and mental deterioration rather than a transition being eminent. But we'll see.

[Javvies](#)

Hakram's hand isn't coming back the way it was. My money on his new/replacement hand is either one forged from a artificial Miracle by Heirophant, if he comes back first, or, more likely, one forged of Winter by Cat when she gets back.

If this leads to new Name for Vivienne, as seems likely ... right now, from what Hakram is thinking and doing, I'm leaning towards something like Counselor or Advisor, maybe Castellan.

*Someguy*

My money's on a golem hand, an animated gauntlet that he can take on & off with multiple weapon/tool functions.

*Rook*

Most likely artificial, leaving the stump mostly as-is might also be an option depending on how he plays it. Stories do have a tendency to make dramatic physical disabilities



translate into strength or competency. The classic blind master/wounded warrior shenanigans. Eyeless master in Masego's case I suppose.

Cutting off his own hand as a blood oath? That's about as dramatic as it gets. The weight of it might end up allowing him to swing his axe with one arm harder and faster than he previously did with two, the laws of physics be damned.

*Sparsebeard*

Some kind of hook-like appendage perhaps?

That or a shotgun/chainsaw.

*Dainsleif*

How would they get a shotgun or chainsaw? Like, nothing in this universe is that advanced. Maybe the dwarfs. Maybe

[daegone823](#)

Nobody is going to make any disarming jokes, no off hand remarks I guess.

What is this guide coming to.

*Faiir*

Advisor was my first thought, but then we'd have two names in Woe starting with 'Ad', which I doubt.

I'm not sure whether Counselor's similarity to Chancellor is a point in favor of against. It would fit the theme of Cat doing almost but not really something Malicia forbade.

[onedollargum](#)

I have a feeling that Hakram's hand may not be coming back at all. Not if he's going to replace it with Vivienne.

Something "Hand"-related would be a good Name for her now, I think.

*maresther23*

Vivienne might be able to give him a new hand down the road, as a symbolic way to heal the rift between them.

*Jason Ipswitch*

Hand of the Queen?

Fits both the deputy and spymistress roles

### James, Mostly Harmless

If Hakram is Cat's right hand, then Viv could be her Sinister Hand.

*Drd*

Hakram's replacement hand should be a Pickler special me thinks, sure she'd enjoy the challenge.

### Javvies

Pickler could collaborate with Masego/another mage for a golem/clockwork hand, maybe.

But there are limits on how much someone like Pickler can do before getting into Red Letter territory, and that's just not worth it.

*Drd*

Clockwork-mage-punk hand, hmm? Certainly has its merits, and would balance the olde necromantic one from Warlock nicely. Can it charge up on the souls of those Hakram defeats, to unleash a mega combo kill when combined with Rampage? 😊

### Javvies

That's certainly a possibility, but I suspect that it is more likely that Cat will make him a new hand, forged of Winter, before Hakram is in a position to get a replacement hand from Masego, and I think that it is unlikely anyone else currently in Callow will be able/allowed to get Hakram a new hand.

*Miles*

He's not getting a replacement hand – that's the whole point of this chapter.

### Javvies

No, the point of this chapter is that he's not going to get his hand reattached/healed.

He cut his hand off to create a Pivot for Vivienne, simply reattaching his hand would ruin it.

An artificial replacement – later, after he's worked things out with Vivienne – has not yet been ruled out, and would likely be insisted on by Cat, if no one else.

*antoninjohn*

So he is not keeping a flesh hand, good there is no certainty in flesh only betrayal

*Jane*

Interesting, how Vivienne's concerns mirrors Cat's during her conversation with Akua. I wonder how a similar conversation would have gone between the two of them, instead of with Hakram and Akua? Or a conversation between Cat, Vivienne, and Akua? I can't help but think that all three would have ended up in the same place, but by different paths – Vivienne might be able to talk like this on her own, but I feel like she would feel driven to justify Cat's course. Maybe making some real course corrections if they were actually possible, but no talk of just giving up, because, as she says... There *is* no one else who can take their place, be it their fault or not.

*Rook*

I see it as Hakram being the enabler and Vivienne being the conscience. Hakram is the guy that helps push you forward when shit gets hard. Vivienne is the girl that pushes back on you when you start going the wrong way.

Both of them have their place in different contexts, Hakram could enable Cat into making a mistake, just as easily as Vivienne could cause her to flinch when she shouldn't. Cat needs to learn when to listen to whom as she grows, and Hakram isn't wrong at the end. She has been listening more to her enablers than her conscience recently. He isn't necessarily wrong in taking a step back here, although the devil will be in the details of it as usual.

The goal, after all, is to be fundamentally different than the Calamities or the Heroes or whoever else that came before, not just to be a stronger version of the same.

*Azure*

I think this conversation should have been something Catherine had with Thief, not Hakram, because again it's going to be Hakram pushing for what Thief wants as opposed to her doing it on her own two feet. It does not address the issue of Thief being devalued as Hakram is basically lending his influence to her. This is my main dissapointment with how this played out. In the end, she's still going to have to rely on Hakram's sufferance to be heard. It's nothing but a bandaid fix.

*Jane*

I don't know that I agree with that... One thing I've taken away from the last few chapters is how much the Woe needs each other; Indrani needs a surrogate family, Hakram needs to be part of something greater, Masego needs something to prod him out of his tower, and Vivienne needs people to listen to her.

Cat *can* provide these things on her own, at least to a degree, but it is better if they can work together without *needing* her; if Hakram starts to listen to Vivienne as well, if she can act as a moral voice for the group as a whole instead of just Cat, it creates a much healthier dynamic overall. I mean, if the rest of the group still tunes her out when they're talking, that's not really that much of an improvement, is it?

It's a conversation that Cat and Vivienne should have as well, but the conversation between Vivienne and Hakram was a necessary one as well.

*usernamesbco*

Seconded. Viv is wallowing in paranoia and fear paralysis almost entirely of her own making, and it paints her as weak and indecisive. A lot of her actions do that, actually. She tacitly allowed William's mind control angel plan even when she disapproved of it. Even after breaking from the heroes she was openly hostile to Cat, undermining her efforts without presenting a better option, but crumpled like paper during her confrontation with Hakram. Then she obsessed over him instead of examining herself or her own purpose and goals.

Hakram's grand gesture to put her mind at ease doesn't address the underlying issue. She needs to grow a spine.

She's probably my least favorite character. Zealotry is bad, but dithering is not better. All she does is dither and encourage Cat to do the same.

[ayon96](#)

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[sengachi](#)

This story does a fantastic job handling the delicate issue of "okay so now we've (justly?ish?) murdered our way to the top for the 'greater good', how do we actually go about leaving behind a kingdom which doesn't just de-facto fall under the rule of the most powerful warlord around?". It's really interesting to read, and thought provoking in all the right ways.

*muffin*

It was never for good. It was only for Callow an their people. Because neither good not evil ever cared about their destiny.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Aye, they're finally going to work on Cat's biggest issues.

*Rook*

A dismal fashion sense, an utter lack of subtlety, and the tendency to solve major problems by bleeding at it until it goes away?

*Novice*

Don't forget about her perceived height inferiority.

*Fern*

dismal fashion sense? if a cape sewn with the souls of your enemies was in the Gucci catalogue it'd be some hot shit. Kylie Jenner would have a Catherine Foundling Court Outfit within the hour.

*Berder*

Typo: "have the come out willing to murder in her name"  
"have them come out willing to murder in her name"

*IDKWhoitis*

I'm starting to wonder about how far we are in the Book. Each book seems to get longer, so it wouldn't be weird if there was still ~30 chapters left. Story wise, I don't see an end point for this Book yet, and I'm not sure how I feel about it. Even in the middle of Book 3, we knew that Cat trying to murder Akua was really the only way that was going to end. By Chapter 47, we even knew the place, Liesse.

Book 3: Deal with Fae -> End the Fae issue -> Gather power to deal with Akua -> Deal with Akua.

I'm not quite sure where this Book is ending, is it with Cat breaking the Crusade? Maybe killing Malica? Getting the Liesse Accords signed? Like it's been 60ish chapters, and Cat still hasn't powered up from dealing with the Sve of Night, or chosen a specific direction from there. Like there's a lot of character development and movement going on, but no general current moving things along.

Book 4: Deal with invasion -> Fight Pitched Battle -> Deal with Dead King -> Deal with Drow?! -> Deal with Dwarves -> Deal with Sve -> ???????????? -> Profit! (Malica dead? Liesse Accords? Maybe Book 5? Tyrant?). This isn't even including all the side plots of what Hasenbach, Black, or DK/Malica are up to.

---

I do like Thief being Named again, but man, I hope she transitions.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Imo, with the way how the plot is progressing on the inclusion of non-human species (drow & dwarves) as well as how the Wandering Bard hasn't been set on stage as the official Big Bad yet, I think book 4 will end with Procer being defeated by the Dead King, which essentially flips the continent to Evil. This would set the stage for the Elves & Giants to come into play in Book 5 as they are considered the Elite Mooks of Good and would be Above-driven to fight against Cat in the next book. Cue the Elven King & Giant Monarch also being against the Bard because fuck her (seriously) + it seems likely that she'd somehow fuck them over before and we have the continent vs Wandering Bard kinda scenario.

*IDKWhoitis*

I feel like we should worry about possible Gnome involvement before Giants. Cat's reforms may be dangerous by their standards, while the Giants seem to hate the idea of working with Procer on principle. I can see Procer devolving into a shitshow with Dead King pulling out every trick and plan he has, while Cat goes to figure out how to deal with Malica.

The antagonist of this Book has been Malica, and only the threat of Procer crashing through was what kept Cat from doing something to her. Now that both Procer and Dead King are too busy to intervene, now is the optimal time for Cat to make a play. It would also fit the whole "Will Cat climb the Tower dynamic" between Akua and Thief.

I can see Procer losing, badly. The Dead King has been accumulating supplies for way too long (+/- at least 800 years.) He has probably bred at least ~20 generations of people in Hell, With a starting size of ~10,000. and if each one of those people are converted to troops (with endless morale and no need for supplies or rest) That's easily an army +1,000,000 strong. If he boosted population growth rates with incentives for larger families, and maybe efficient farming practices that the Gnomes couldn't detect or stop, that number may doubled the rate of growth.

He might have been dicking around with small raids every so often just so he could map out defenses and see defensive protocols.

*Wry Warudo*

After the dwarves showed up, I thought Book Five would be about the Bard, the Tyrant (and our good friend the Hierarch), the Ratlings, the Elves and the Gnomes, but it seems pretty likely we'll be seeing Neshamah as well since it's seriously doubtful Cat or the heroes will beat him by Book 4.

*Yeah Nah Yeah*

If I recall correctly, I read somewhere that EE intends book 4 to be 7 arcs, with the Drow arc being the third (Camps, Keter, Drow, ...). So strap in, we're in for the long haul.

*Allafterme*

My body is ready...

*Yotz*

Tangential as always my RAC (random associative comments) go, but once I stopped following a series after the author declared that next month the next book will be published. The second part of the third tome of the fifth book of trilogy. First trilogy, it seemed.

Me quitting was more related with quality of the writing in the said series dropping to overblown shite of distinctly ultra-purple pseudophilosophical kind than amount of words spewed, though – and that's coming from someone who *thrives* on purple prose and ice-cream kōans.

But then again – I consider Leo Tolstoy a talentless graphomaniac, so there's that, and a grain of salt.

Then there's Jordan, who once remarked that WoT would be a decalogy, for he knows only how the story started, and how it will end, but not what happened in between. But ten books would be more than enough to find out. Funny how it went.

And *then* was a rebirth of serialized literature with the spreading of Wild Weird West, which will be tamed all too soon...

What I am leaning to.

Different mediums, different ways to tell stories.

In the print form, end of the book would be with Cat deciding to venture for Keter, with it, Everdark, and so on being the next book... Maybe, mind you, or maybe not – professional editor is not I am.

So long as writing is to my taste, I honestly do not care for the standard template constraints beyond those that were implemented directly by the author for the benefit of the story.

For everything else – we shall see in due time.

*Nafram*

This looks like a turning point to me. The kind where things start to take a turn for the slightly better.

Despite everything that The Woe has done, Callow and its people have repeatedly been struck by disaster after disaster, danger after danger, and in the face of that they've barely managed to

keep it standing.

Its finances are in poor shape after having to sustain war after war and rebuilding in between, its people hungry and its armies spent time and again. Public sentiment divided in regards to Catherine, her policies, the Greenskins, etc, and enemies and false friends everywhere. In a few words, they just can't catch a break.

But now, maybe, just maybe, the use of the added perspective from Vivienne will help make things a little bit better, and those little improvements will pile up until Callow finally knows peace and prosperity. For Vivienne Dartwick knows the heart of the Callowan people, and while the Named may lead the stories of kingdoms like a sailor might lead a ship, the sailor cannot sail without a ship. And so, now The Woe is finally in a position to properly steer the ship that is Callow.

*Fern*

It's all about building the kind of infrastructure that will let Callow become a regional powerhouse, not the battlefield of the continent. At the top level are partisans loyal to Callow and Cat, with Named assisting with matters both military and domestic. Juniper, the finest strategic mind of her generation, is creating an army that will secure all Callow's interests for the foreseeable future. Ratface was working on constructing the kind of beauracracy that would let this monolith even function, but it looks like that weight has fallen to Thief now.

In this world especially, great change cannot come without great power. They have the power, now it's time to see what changes they'll make.

*FactualInsanity*

Well, I stand corrected.

Both about not getting the resolution to this interlude arc for a while and about Thief making Hakram fix his hand. I wonder if Adjutant will be sporting a stump permanently, or get some sort of prosthetic replacement.

*Storm blessed*

You probably noticed, but the names at the end switched from their titles, their Names, to their actual names. It shows that they are moving past that boundary between them solely by name and Catherine's band, to understanding each other.

*fbt*

great bit. I do want to see more of abigail, i really liked her and now she's been hoist by the peter principle at it's finest..but this was a fabulous bit. TY



*Someguy*

There has to be an Underwater Empire of Merfolk/Cecaelias/Locathah/Deep Ones for Cat to “negotiate” with to counter the Invaders domination of surface Naval Combat right?

*Yotz*

Wgah’nagl?

*Nafram*

Does Callow even have port cities?

*IDKWhoitis*

If we are not counting Rivers/Lakes, then no, not really.

There are ports on the Lake, but it’s also been established Callow does not know how to Navy.

*grzecho2222*

Icebergs manned with undead

*IDKWhoitis*

Icebergs with hidden undead.

Imagine hitting an iceberg, you’re sinking, then zombies start boarding, one hell of a way to go.

*Yotz*

Dungeon Keeper Ami?

*Letouriste*

Uh, I was wrong last chapter. Vivienne will not give him a hand back later in the story, I guess now she will become that hand somehow.

Hakram was a frontline combattant until now but his role was all about support so there is a little contradiction, he could be stronger if he relie more on team play,metaphorically.

*Yotz*

My guess would be – she was kind of shell-shocked with his actions to act on spot, and by the point where she would muster enough will/trust to force him into that option, it would be too late. A prosthetic is still on the cards, though. Probably, some form of automatic scribe with a place to hold scrolls – a form of PDA to replace the palm.

The pen is mightier than the sword, as one extremely lewd punmaister once said.

*Novice*

"A man could sift through all of Creation and never find so much as a speck of this elusive thing called the greater good. Like all the most dangerous altars, it is entirely of our own raising."

I see that Terry Pratchett reference. And if it's not, well kudos because this reminds me of Death's speech in 'Hogfather'.

*Snowfire1224*

About how one can't find a molecule of Mercy, justice, hope (I think it was hope)? Interesting that the quote in the guide takes a more cynical look at it (that the idea of greater good can be dangerous) and Hogfather takes a more optimistic approach (that we need these things be human.)

[ChillyPepper](#)

Love the diskworld reference at the beginning. 🤪

*chrono17*

This makes me really happy. Now Catherine just needs to not screw it up bringing a horde of Drow back home with her.

*IDKWhoitis*

If Cat either "negotiates" with the Sve or flat out murders her for a greater hold on Night, she might not need much Drow if she could empower Callows to be the same level. Imagine a whole army with Eldritch abilities like the Watch on steroids.

I mean it could backfire horrifically, or it would be the laying of a winning hand. Cat always walks the line between those.

[saiman92](#)

Nice chapter! I didn't think the loss of the hand would be permanent... Also there's a typo in the title: it' giuoco pianissimo, not giouco pianissimio.

*superkeaton*

The background on mages was unexpected, but not unwanted, and it's nice to see them finally getting alone.

*Death Knight*

These interludes have been very boring.

May we please return to Black v Cordelia, Cat v Sve or if another interlude has to be delivered, Masego v Wekesa.

Thank you.

*Jane*

I really can't agree at all when you describe them as boring; these interludes have done a wonderful job of developing Cat's supporters as characters with their own concerns and goals. And as those closest to her, I would think such development is quite necessary.

*Kel the Seer*

I could see Thief transitioning into a name like Viceroy in a "Master of the Queen's Vices" sort of way. Something straddling Scribe and Chancellor without the same level of unobtrusiveness of the former or the ambition of the latter. If she is taking over Ratface's people, she would be in charge of those things, wouldn't she? It also doesn't rule out her keeping up the spy network to also enforce the Queen's law as part of her duties.

Also allows an easy pivot for the more accepted meaning if she takes over any satellite areas that Cat claims later.

Plus Viceroy (or Vicereine) Vivienne is alliteratively pleasing.



*JJR*

Did someone say 'viceroy'?

[Screwfloss](#)

*Hope was always a most tempting cup to drink from, even when you knew the chalice might be poisoned.*

Aha, you've captured what it feels like to root for a doomed sports franchise, like the Washington R-skins

*NotQuiteHere*

Can Cat still use her aspects? Or has she just lost the name she had in exchange for Duchess Of Moonless Nights? Is she the Black Queen? What's her Role right now?

(Sorry if I missed something obvious just kinda forgotten)

[Javvies](#)

It's unclear as to Aspect use – Cat has something very much like Fall still, but we haven't seen her use Take or Break since Liesse.

However ... she also has something similar to Take, in that she can, at least, take fallen enemies and turn their aspects into items.

As for Cat having a Name, technically speaking, she still has the Name of Squire, but it's largely been subsumed by Winter and two broken/failed/rejected Transitions from Squire. IIRC, the Name of Squire in Cat was said to be little but the gnawed on bones of a Name.

*NotQuiteHere*

Thx

*Mike E.*

That last line evokes images from King's Gunslinger series:

"Vivienne Dartwick spoke, under pale moonlight, and Hakram Deadhand listened."

"The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."

[sport102blog2017](#)

this and the previous one were really powerful chapters :0

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## **Interlude: Queen's Gambit, Declined**

*"Fifty-nine: it is always better to interrupt a plan than carry one out. Your finest successes will always be the failures of your enemy."*

- 'Two Hundred Heroic Axioms', author unknown

"You're in a damned fine mood, for a man who can barely stand," Ranker muttered.

Most would not have been to pick up on it, Amadeus thought, but the goblin marshal had been his friend for a very long time. Longer than the common understanding of goblin lifespan should allow for, but that was one of the subjects they did not speak of. Ranker had a right to her secrets, as he did his. The Black Knight tightened the woolen blanket draped over his frame,

looking up at the night sky with the barest trace of a smile on his face.

"It's nostalgic, isn't it?" he said. "The few of us huddling in the dark, surrounded by a realm that would kill us all."

His detached force numbered two thousand, with Marshal Ranker in overall command as her sappers and scouts would be more valuable to their purposes than regulars or heavies. Cooking fires had been judged too much of a liability to be allowed even after a days of marching under his aspect that should have left any would-be pursuers in the dust: the legionaries had dropped their kits and made their beds on rough ground, not even bothering to raise fortifications beforehand. Ranker's decision, and one he'd approved of. Their pace was already taking the soldiers dangerously close to their breaking point, aspect or not.

"It hasn't been like this since the civil war," Ranker conceded. "The Conquest was orderly campaign, nothing like this one. Feels like we're making it up as we're going along."

"Planning too deep will be seen through by the Augur," Amadeus reminded her. "We stay a step ahead so long as we make short-term decisions backed by superior pace."

It was a little more complex than that, in practice. Thrice now the First Prince's fresh mage order had passed along auguries of where his legions would be headed, though their very interception meant that they were effectively worthless. Prediction and prophecy were different matters, after all. The former was very much avoidable, if known, while the latter tended to be like a sandpit: the harder you struggled, the swifter you drowned. Even those could be broken, of course. Prophecy was only ever the writ of one side of the Great Game, and if outcomes were so absolute there would be no need for Creation at all – according to the Book of All Things, anyway. Still, even the predictions of the Augur were an exceedingly dangerous tool for the opposition. Considering how sparsely it had been used and the recent revelations as to the forces stirring up north, Amadeus suspected that if the Dead King had not been on the move and requiring the soothsayer's attentions this campaign would have been much more troublesome.

"I'm aware," she flatly replied. "And I have some fond memories of the old days, do not misunderstand me. But back then we were still young. To our places, to our powers, to our stories. It's been a long time since we were any of that."

"*Sing we of foe,*" he softly hummed. "*Of victories won, and that first woe, tyranny of the sun.*"

"You know I hate that song, Amadeus," Ranker grunted. "It's the anthem of old defeats, a ballad of ruin."

"It was a cold, clear look at what we were when it was written," the Black Knight said. "We are no longer that, yet I suspect we never truly outgrew the sentiment."

Like a poisonous old friend, it had been clutched tight even as the fangs sunk in and venom spread. *The Tyranny of the Sun*, for the most famous verse of the song was the title as well, had been written near the end of the Sixty Years War. Arguably the most brutal slugging match between two sovereign powers in the history of Calernia, and it had left both Callow and Praes smoking ruins in its aftermath, peace coming largely because neither side was still capable of continuing the war. Dread Emperor Nihilis had retreated to the Blessed Isle with his armies and ended it without ever signing formal treaty, but he'd died failing to rebuild the Empire and a hundred years of murderous mediocrity had followed until Praes recovered enough to embark in its disastrous waging of the Secret Wars. In some ways he suspected the Sixty Years War had been more traumatic an experience to Praesi culture than the collapse of Triumphant's empire a century and a half earlier. Triumphant had known success before meeting her doom. The parade of Emperors and Empresses who'd waged war on Callow for sixty years had known much of the latter and little of the former.

"We," the goblin chuckled. "There's a word growing thinner by the year. We are exiles in more way than one, Amadeus. You saw to that after Akua's Folly."

"It is not the first time I've been told I should have tried to climb the Tower," the man shrugged. "It will not be the last, I expect. It would have been a self-defeating enterprise to wage civil war in the Wasteland with Procer assembling its armies just across the border."

"The Clans would have come out for you," Ranker said. "Most likely the Tribes as well. The Matrons smell weakness, Black, and there's only ever one way they react to that."

"I can think of few things more foolish than to underestimate Alaya," he quietly said. "Even now. She's never been one to act without a plan, and that we do not understand her moves should be source of fear and not contempt."

"Odds are she's the one who made a pact with the Dead King," Ranker said.

"It could have been Catherine as well," Amadeus frankly admitted. "She thrives in chaotic situations. It's led her to the bad habit of creating them knowing it improves her chances of victory even if it significantly increases collateral damage as well."

"The Black Queen," the goblin mused. "There's another trash fire of a situation. One you've stepped lightly around."

"The Conquest was a way to achieve objectives," Amadeus said. "The annexation was ultimately a consequence, not the purpose itself. I hardly mind surrendering unnecessary gains if the actual objectives are met through the gesture."

"The arithmetic holds," Ranker sighed. "It always does with you. But there's more to this than the numbers, old friend. We made an order of things, and now it's crumbling."

"And now you wonder what will replace it," Amadeus said. "And if in that new order, we will still have a place."

"Some might say it's too early to start thinking about after the war," she said. "You and I know better. No point in even seeking a victory if when achieved it leads nowhere."

"A better world," the Black Knight murmured, looking up at stars that were not those he'd been born under. "Oh, I have wondered. What it might mean, what it would look like."

"We made one," Ranker said. "It's on fire now."

"And who set the flames?" he smiled. "Cordelia Hasenbach. Catherine Foundling. Kairos Theodosian. Children, in our eyes. Yet is it not the right of the younger generation to look at the work of that which came before it and judge it *insufficient*?"

"So they're right, and we'll be swept away like dust by the new age," Ranker said, sounding distinctly unimpressed.

"I still do not believe," Amadeus of the Green Stretch murmured, "that I am wrong. That our methods, our works, are to be so easily discarded. If these younglings want to prove themselves worthy of shaping the world, well..."

He bared his teeth.

"Let them come," he said. "Let them earn it. If they can surpass us, then the sin is ours."

"And if they can't?" Ranker asked.

"Then they fall into line, or face destruction, and we fight one last great war," he said. "The one that will *matter*."

The two of them remained silent for a long time, seated at the edge of the camp. In the distance, the barest glimpse of the town of Saudant could be made out. Just a lakeside township, one of hundreds in the region. Amadeus doubted the name of it would be remembered as more than a footnote in histories, for no battle would take place there even if he'd been wrong. Under the light of the stars, the Black Knight pondered Providence and the coward's wager that was Fate. He did not sleep, even tired as he had become.

With dawn he would know if he had once more cheated the Heavens at dice.

—

Gauthier Legrand had served as ranking captain of the guard of Iserre for thirty years now. He'd served Prince Merlaux before Prince Amadis ascended the throne and been appointed to his title by the old prince, but there'd been no talk of having him replaced even when the young prince took over and began inserting his own partisans in posts of influence. This he attributed to the fact that he'd carried out his work steadily and honestly, avoiding court politics and the intrigues intrinsic to any of Procer's royal seats. He was not unaware that his occasional bluntness and refusal to earn favours by offering plum positions to the kin of the influential had led some to consider him simple, though the more polite phrased it as him having 'a soldier's spirit'. Gauthier did not mind. As long as they considered him an idiot they would not attempt to involve him in their little schemes, and he rather preferred it that way. Iserre had only grown larger and wealthier under Prince Amadis, but that rise had come with the troubles inevitably associated with a city expanding. Maintaining order and the rule of law was toil without end, especially in a land where both could change face at the whims of the ruling prince.

Amadis had done well by the city, he'd always thought, and the principality as well. Their prince had kept them out of the worst of the Great War with cunning diplomacy and duly reaped the benefits of Iserre's rising prominence when the steel returned to the sheath. Old Prince Merlaux had shown a better touch with the commons, that much was true, but his son was a much more able administrator. The guard's funding had swelled under Amadis, and their equipment was now match for many of the fantassin companies out there making a trade of war. It'd seemed an unquestionable boon at the time, but now Captain Gauthier was forced to question. Not a state of affairs to his liking. The principality was under assault by wicked Easterners from the Wasteland, and to everyone's dismay the general levies that had preceded Prince Amadis going on campaign had bled the land dry of men in fighting fit. Iserre itself was the capital of the eponymous principality, and so had kept a garrison of two thousand professional soldiers, but the guard's equipment was only marginally inferior and it numbered five thousand.

In principle the defence of the city was the responsibility of the commander of that garrison, Antonine Milenan. In practice, their leader was middle-aged drunk whose entire experience with martial life was a span of three years with a fantassin company that had never left Iserran borders during the Great War. She had, allegedly, commanded a victorious skirmish against bandits. Rumour had it they'd actually been terrified refugees from



Salamans but that in her drunken rage she'd refused to see a difference. There was a reason that Antonine had not been given a command in the crusading host, and Gauthier supposed that a few months ago giving her command of a garrison that would never see combat had seemed a discreet way to set aside a cumbersome relative for his prince. Now that the Wastelanders had come, however, it meant that the woman had been quietly placed under guard in the palace where she could make no trouble. An unfortunate measure prompted by a well-lubricated evening where she'd decided to order the garrison of Iserre to sally out and 'disperse the foreign rabble on the field'.

And so Captain Gauthier Legrand now led the defence of Iserre.

The responsibility alone would have been difficult to bear, but as the effective commander he'd been the one to receive the secret orders from the First Prince of Procer. Penned by a scribe, most likely, and the content would have been decided by her officers – Hasenbach was a well-known oddity, a Lycaonese with little taste or affinity for war. Gauthier saw the cold sense in the letter he'd been delivered. With only two thousand soldiers, his guardsmen and whatever peasantry he could arm and send to stand on the walls his defence of Iserre was a risky enterprise. The easterners might be impious demon-worshippers, but the Legions of Terror were known to be one of the finest armies on the continent and their generals were of high renown. The captain knew himself to be no great tactician, and hardly a soldier besides. He had dwarven engines on the walls, due to his prince's foresight, but few and few men trained to use them. The devices were well-known to be finicky and prone to breaking anyway, rarely lasting more than five years under regular use. Rough handling might see a few unmade before they could even be properly put to work.

And yet here he was, reading a report stating the Legions were but a day's march away and considering treason.

There were no two ways about it, disobeying the First Prince's orders would be high treason. The Principate had declared a crusade, her authority in military matters was absolute. Gauthier was not a soldier, which in different times might have provided him a way out, but as the commander of the city's defence he was charged to obey any and all orders bearing the seal of Cordelia Hasenbach. The actual text of those was delicate and regretful, but the heart of it a brutal thing: after short defence on the walls, he was to draw the Praesi inside Iserre and set the city on fire around them. His troops were then to evacuate and join the relief forces sent by the Dominion, to fall upon the easterners while they were freshly bloodied. Iserre, as of Prince Milenan's last royal census, counted over a hundred thousand souls between its walls. Gauthier knew it was more than that, perhaps as much as ten thousand more who were foreigners and so

unrecorded or too estranged from the law to want their presence noted in anything as official as a census.

He would not be allowed to evacuate them. Their panic, the letter noted, would prevent the Praesi from pulling out their forces in time by clogging up the streets.

He wrestled with the decision throughout the night. Handpicked men discretely prepared the blazes, for he did not give the order now it would be too late afterwards, and when dawn came Iserre had been turned into a pyre. It was the arithmetic of it that stayed with him. There were, according to reports, perhaps fifteen thousand easterners and not even half that many bandits with them. A host of twenty thousand at most. And his orders were to burn alive five times that many to wound the Praesi. He would be damned in the eyes of the Gods, if he did this. Yet how many more would die in towns and villages, if he did not? Not merely in Iserre, but all over the realm. Duty and faith tugged him different ways. Midmorning saw a Praesi envoy reached the city. The offer made was as brutal as the orders of the First Prince: should Iserre surrender its granaries and treasury, the city would be spared a sack. If it resisted, all armed inside the walls would be put to the sword. Gauthier rode out himself to speak with the envoy, to the gaze of Evil with his own eyes.

The thing across him was green of skin, one of those creatures they called orc. A barbarous monster that ate human flesh and lived only for blood and rapine. There was nothing in its eyes but hunger, Gauthier saw. A small woman with ink-stained hands and the colouring of the Free Cities stood by its side, though she remained silent. Some kind of servant, he suspected.

"The terms will remain as offered," the orc said. "Negotiation is not on the table."

"You're a long way from home, greenskin," Gauthier said. "Fighting the wars of humans."

"We go," the envoy said, "where the banner goes."

"Your banner has come to the Principality of Iserre, Gods take you all," the captain said. "We do not bow to foreigners. We do not bow to servants of the *Hellgods*. If you want your fucking loot, come and take it."

"A respectable choice," the orc said. "But you may come to regret it."

"Tell your masters this is Procer, not one of their slave cities," he spat out. "Test our walls at your peril. We were there, when the Tower fell. We will be again."

The words, though defiant, were as ashes in his mouth as he rode back to Iserre. He'd just ensured the city he'd spent his entire life guarding would either suffer fire or a bloody sack. The Legions of Terror arrived past noon, and he watched them spread out from atop the walls. Dwarven engines stolen from other cities and armories were brought to the fore, their shapes changed by the devious goblins – which rumour said were dwarves corrupted into foul form by the touch of the Gods Below. The easterners and their traitor auxiliaries built their camps and only began bombardment under cover of nightfall. The city's walls had been rebuilt fully early in the Great War, and so they suffered but did not break. Gauthier feared not the stones, only the assault of the steel-clad soldiers. Two more days passed, with only one breach to show for it – quickly filled by sacks of sand and gravel at his order – but time was running out. The assault would come soon, he knew, and the decision he must make with it. Duty or good? Gods forgive him, but as the fourth night fell Captain Gauthier made his decision. Better he be known a traitor than a butcher. When the assault came, he would empty the city and ride to Salia for his trial.

Then dawn came, and with first light came the realization that the Praesi were *gone*.

—

"Steady," Amadeus ordered. "I want no incidents."

The town of Saudant's entire defending force had been a sum of thirty militiamen, who immediately folded when they realized how heavily outnumbered they were. There'd been actual soldiers behind them, though, who had fought: the Levantines had left four hundred soldiers to guard the fleet of barges that had ferried them across the lakes at the heart of Procer. None had surrendered, even when such an outcome was offered on rather lenient terms, and five barges had been lost to fire and fighting before they could be eradicated. A regrettable loss, but Amadeus had burned ships himself not a day later. The barges had carried thirty thousand Dominion infantry, while he would at most move twenty thousand soldiers himself. Having no intention of leaving Procer with any ships after he passed, the surplus had been put to the torch.

The sailors and captains to which they belonged had been furious, but they were not armed and so in no position to contest his orders. The First Prince had assembled this fleet by requisitioning merchant trade, not building warships, and considering piracy was night-inexistent in Proceran waters the merchant sailors had rarely carried anything larger than a knife. They were also less than eager to die for the sake of the Lycaonese ruling Salia who'd pressed them into service, which meant his assurances that the sailors would be released unharmed

after ferrying his own troops where he wished had been received with more gratitude than hostility. Amadeus had taken pains to be accommodating with them, as Praesi were poor sailors as a rule and the Legions largely unfit for sailing ships. Some Thalassinans in the ranks had middling experience at sea, but too few and those few had too little practical experience to properly captain barges. It might be possible to proceed without the sailors, but only at a snail's pace – which would rather defeat the purpose of acquiring the fleet in the first place.

The legionaries he'd called out after nodded at his order, moderating the language they used when speaking at the locals loading the ships. Finding out there were still supplies in the town meant for the already-departed Levantine army had been a pleasant surprise, implying he'd caught the very end of the enemy supply train without meaning to do so. He was not a fool, of course, and so he'd checked the grain and foodstuffs for poison. Hasenbach might have grown desperate enough for such a stratagem, even if the Levantines were not. None had been found, and he'd been pleased enough at the discovery to dole out a portion to the inhabitants of Saudant as incentive to load the rest more quickly. Barely more than a thousand people overall, and so easily appeased by the notion of being assured of plentiful stores throughout winter. Sadly the general levy by the prince of Iserre had meant few capable of hard labour remained, but he'd assigned a few legionary companies to help matters along.

Leaving the docks – and the friendly shore around them, where lack of space had dictated most barges would actually end up – Amadeus found Ranker awaiting him at the nearby tavern he'd appropriated as temporary headquarters.

"They have fishing boats," the goblin marshal informed him immediately. "At least a dozen."

"Not enough to ferry a significant amount of men," the Black Knight noted. "Sinking them brings little profit and antagonizes the locals. Leave them be."

"At least order them beach for a few weeks," Ranker said. "Otherwise some enterprising soul might try to find out where we're headed."

He nodded after a moment, though in truth he doubted their destination would be much of a mystery. Even if the Augur did not divine it, the strategic situation would make it obvious. By now Grem and Scribe should have lifted their 'siege' of Iserre, having remained there long enough to draw in whatever forces had been sent to relieve it. They'd hurry towards the nearest shore, where the fleet Amadeus has just seized would be awaiting them. From there, they could leave their pursuers to stew impotently on the wrong side of the Principate while they struck at easier targets.

"Have you decided where we'll be headed, after?" Ranker asked.

"Still a matter of debate," Amadeus admitted. "Segovia would allow us to finalize our savaging of the First Prince's opposition, properly damaging her position."

"But you're thinking of Salia," the goblin said knowingly.

"We can't take the capital," he said, stating the obvious. "Even arming a third of that hive would allow her to drown us in numbers. But if we torch our way through its outlying territories, the sheer loss of prestige might see her unseated."

"Grem will call it risky," Ranker predicted. "I don't disagree."

"And so it remains a matter of debate," the Black Knight said. "We will discuss in depth when reunited with him and Eudokia."

There was a beat, during which the goblin studied him thoughtfully and openly.

"It's been two days since you last used an aspect," she said. "I expected you to be in better shape by now."

"I drew deeper than I have in decades," he candidly admitted. "And you know my well is shallower than most. I expect within a fortnight I'll have recuperated."

She nodded, after a beat.

"Gods, at least it worked," she sighed. "I half-expected a band of heroes to be awaiting."

"There are over a hundred thousand souls in Iserre," Amadeus said, avoiding even the slightest hint of smugness. "Souls at risk of slaughter, if left unprotected. So long as we were willing to carry out that ugly work, it was possible to dictate where the heroic intervention would take place. I expect Grem found the place swarming with their like. It would have been a beacon lit for every sword of the Heavens not gone north to fight the Dead King."

"There's no need to get smug," Ranker told him, eyes squinting.

Alas, sometimes there was no winning a battle. By the fourth day, they'd departed the charming little town of Saudant on surprisingly good terms with the locals. Legionaries were spread too thinly across the fleet for Amadeus' tastes, but there were enough mages along that any sailors with notions of patriotic resistance would be forced into restraint by their more fearful fellows. The fleet made good pace, for the first three days.

Then the sickness started.

It showed in the sailors first. Fever, sweat, weakness of the limbs and after twelve hours they were dead. Amadeus ordered any with the symptoms thrown overboard as soon as he first saw the disease. It was too clean and too sudden: there had been no sign at all before the fevers, the sailors being in perfect health. It was not a natural disease. Reluctantly, he ordered every Proceran sailor disposed of after the first legionary showed symptoms. It was too late, by then.

On the sixth day, Amadeus of the Green Stretch found he was the only person left alive of the entire fleet.

—

Tariq let out a panting breath when the last of the victims died.

There were Choirs, he knew, that treated their relationships with heroes as a sort of subjugation. The Hashmallim of Contrition, in particular, were known to be heavy-handed – though to this day he was uncertain whether it was because they bestowed upon only the desperate, or because such was their nature. As a young man, the Pilgrim had found that the Choir of Mercy demanded nothing of him. He'd simply been found to be of a like mind with the Ophanim, and so found them at his side. As if they had been there all along. They were more like old friends than patrons, never far from his thoughts. Always there with a whisper of comfort in hard times, a reassurance when the world seemed dark. They shared, after all, the same mandate.

The alleviation of suffering.

Tariq had no longer been a young man when he'd understood the frightful depths of that simple sentence. He'd thought, as mortals often did, that angels saw through his eyes. Understood his thoughts, his beliefs and his choices. The first, he thought, was perhaps true. The rest was not. The Ophanim were absolute, in nature and mandate. There were no shades to their perspectives, and while they might fondly tolerate them in one sworn to the Choir of Mercy that indulgence should never be confused for *approval*. The Grey Pilgrim had first understood this when he'd smothered his young nephew in his sleep, knowing the boy was charismatic enough to unite the Dominion and lead to war against Procer. He'd tried, first, to reason with him. To show him the pursuit of old grudges through blood could not redeem a single thing.

The young never listened, he'd learned. And so old fools like him had to smooth out the sharp edges of Creation.

Praesi, he'd been told, believed that Good only came in certain shapes. That it must obey strict boundaries and rules, that it must rely on little tricks like Providence or angelic intervention. An understandable misunderstanding. For all that

the raving Tyrants who climbed the Tower liked to style themselves anathema to all children of the Heavens, they'd rarely fought opponents beyond Callow – where heroism was so deeply linked to war that a villain waging one was now seen as good. Praesi had learned to bury and defeat a certain breed of stories, after millennia of butting heads against them. But oh, that was such a shallow understanding. The world was large, and so few ever saw more than a speck of it. There were as many stories as there were peoples, and to build one's understanding on but a fraction was to raise a tower on quicksand. The Black Knight, Tariq thought, was not a stupid man. But he'd been arrogant enough to think he saw all the rules of his world, and arrogance was ever the death of villains.

Crafting the plague had been easy as snapping his fingers, and mayhaps that was the most distressing part of it. The Enemy delighted in displaying its power, raising massive contraptions or weaving elaborate schemes to praise its own cunning and cleverness. Like it was the only side capable of doing those things, like it wasn't a *choice* to turn away from the unsightly means of the Gods Below. The Grey Pilgrim could have birthed diseases and disasters that would raise the hair on the Warlock's neck, if he so wished. But power had to be used responsibly, turned to moral purpose, else it could only ever be a form of tyranny. And so Tariq had wept, and asked for the guidance of the Ophanim to create a disease that would undo the Black Knight and all his murderous designs. It was not so far removed from healing, to make someone's body turn on itself. To allow it to spread had required learning deeper than his, but as always the Choir had provided.

At a small price, a reminder of what he wrought. He would feel the agony of all taken by the disease.

He'd come to Saudant a stranger on a dark night, and seeded this foul miracle in a single man before taking his leave. Ten days and ten nights it would wait, before beginning to kill. That the Black Knight would come to the sleepy little town had never been in doubt. By the man's perspective, heroes could only go to Iserre. He was making sport of decency by forcing their hand with a threat before stealing away a fleet to spread even more death. *Where was it written*, Tariq had thought then, *that Evil will have monopoly on ruthlessness?* He'd awaited close, with Laurence and four other heroes for company. Far enough such a small party would not be noticed, close enough he could ensure none of the sick would leave Saudant and spread the sickness to the rest of Procer. The Praesi had come, the Praesi had gone, and he'd followed in their wake. Laurence, in her own kind way, had offered to purge the town for him. He'd refused, and offered the Last Mercy himself.

This would be his own sin, from beginning to end.

They followed the villain after, taking fishing boats. No need for anything as gaudy as a barge, when they were only a handful. It was not difficult to find the Black Knight. He was at the centre of a fleet of dead men, a ring of ships adrift in the lake. Tariq was the first to climb aboard, though Laurence was not far behind, and they found him awaiting on the deck. Standing straight-backed, armoured in old plate without having bothered with a helmet. He watched them approach in silence, pale green eyes emotionless.

"We finally meet, Black Knight," the Grey Pilgrim said.

The man did not reply. He was eyeing the others, gaze lingering on armaments and armour. Guessing at Names, guessing at powers. Already planning the span of his last stand. Yet Tariq felt no power coming from him, no presence. As if his Name had been snuffed out. It might very well have been, the old man thought. The Gods Below reserved only one fate for a lame horse.

"Surrender," the Pilgrim said. "This will not end well for you."

"It was never going to end well," the green-eye man smiled. "That was rather the point."

His sword cleared the scabbard with a ringing sound.

"Let's see," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, "if I can at least leave a mark."

---

*JD*

So, I'm quite impressed by Grey Pilgrim's plan here, but is it possible that this is another fetch of the Black Knight? Similar to how he fooled the White Knight?

Like seriously, what are the odds that Ranker was the traitor (arranged for the killing of the generals at the end of Book 3), and so when Black saw the potential for this plot he took his "surplus" marshall, enough troops to spring the trap, and sent a fetch that Ranker didn't know about?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Low as shit

[tizzio caio](#)



if he goes i want this all conflict get serious with all rest creation/continents involved, or at least time to kick on some hive ass myth creatures like gnomes

[Javvies](#)

No, my money is on Malicia for the killings of the generals at Liesse.

It weakened Black and the Legions, preventing them from carrying out the final purging of the High Lords. In addition, Malicia was planning on capturing Diabolist's work intact and useable, if more limited, by Warlock. She expected Liesse to become her nuclear weapon/enforcer of peace through superior firepower/superweapons/Hellgate generator, rendering the Legions (and Black) irrelevant to the strategic security of Praes.

*Anonymouse*

Or maybe it was Catherine all along, killing Juniper's mother so she wouldn't have any second thoughts about going against Praes

[Javvies](#)

...

Cat as a suspect is a ridiculous hypothesis. On so many levels. I'm not even sure where to start.

I must therefore assume that you're trying to be funny for some reason, and must inform you that your attempt at humor has failed rather miserably.

[Barthumphries](#)

We must suspect Cat at least so we can better see how someone might attempt to frame her for it.

[Javvies](#)

Except nobody who could've done it is dumb enough to try to frame Cat for it. Especially when an obvious suspect like Akua is available. For that matter, Akua would've been the prime suspect and stayed the only real suspect without the break between Malicia and Black.

Hell, framing Cat for it just makes it obvious that somebody deliberately assassinated Istrid and the others and wants to point blame somewhere, instead of it being the misfortunes of combat.

*kelioez*

eeeeee

*Author Unknown*

It was stated in an earlier chapter that Grey Pilgrim has never lost a fight, and here we see why: He is perfectly in tune with his choir, not letting mortal morality color his actions.

*Outsomniac*

There's nothing above loves more than a very high body count.

How can Tariq claim any kind of moral highground when neck deep in a diseased swamp like this without realising "well I didn't murder many innocents" and "I'll feel everyone's suffering" just don't cut it?

*Dancer*

Is he really trying to claim a moral highground? That's Black's conception of the world- a narrow and simplistic one, as suggested this chapter.

He's the "Grey" Pilgrim.

*Jeffery Wells*

He claims to do it for moral purposes. That is claiming the moral high ground.

To my mind, he and Laurence are at least as evil as Malicia, if not more so. Above is just as evil as Below, they just go about their evil in a more palatable way.

*mavant*

N0000000

[tizzio caio](#)

Fuck NO, dont you dare there to do it like this!

*edrey*

i would rather l8ke see cat saving him with the power of night, after all the middle of a lake is perfect for the queen winter but that doesnt look likely, that should be the reason for malicia envoy to callow

*Novice*

Gods damnit, of course Black dies without that last reunion with Cat. I don't even know why I expected otherwise.

*SilentWatcher*

Assuming Black dies, what are the consequences? a whole lot of angry villains like Cat, Ranger, Scribe, Warlock maybe even Malicia. This could lead to a "Lone Swordsman Truce" between Cat and Malicia and lets not forget the Curse of the dying Breath when a villain dies. They would doom themselves with killing Black.

Still i hope he fights an epic Battle and escape to Grem and Scribe. His Chances should be good, because hes facing 5 heroes ("Heroes" which sacrifice a Town to kill an enemy LOL)

*SilentWatcher*

Where is that guy who always urges you to vote? Probably did not like this chapter. Go vote!

*Allafterme*

I think he is traumatized like the rest of us...

*ArkhCthuul*

Likely.

I mean that was so much anticlimax for black its almost insulting.

And Grey. A pilgrim is the more. Ruthless and deadly of the 2. And Sword Saint the kind one.  
Ouch. Choir of mercy...

*MetruX*

cat and Malicia won't make peace especially with his death, both will be blaming the other for what happened after the doomsday device. And if the curse was trully that powerfull both the Pilgrim and the Saint would be dead already, they have killed plenty of Villains.

But more than that, being a Hero in this setting is merely conforming with Above, it really doesn't matter anything else. They only like to say they are better people.

*Fern*

oh shit, I never thought about that. If the hated enementor kills Black he's probably going to have a hopped up and pissed of Ranger on his tail

on that note, could the Saint take on Ranger? I remember Cat mentioning that her power reminded her of Ranger's, but I don't know if that was guesswork or if they're actually in the same league.

## Javvies

Cat called Saint just like Ranger, except with a somewhat more socially acceptable reason for killing and a shinier coat of paint/ better PR. And as such, there was no point talking to her. It was one of the parley attempts. I think either the one before the first battle, or the one after Cat woke back up.

That said ... while Saint could, perhaps, hold her own, at least briefly, against Ranger in a straight swordfight, if Ranger goes after Saint for vengeance for killing Black, it's not going to be a straight fight, it's probably going to be more akin to an assassination/execution. Plus, Saint is old, and no longer in her prime – she doesn't have the endurance to last long against Ranger, even with a heroic second wind. Heroes don't get the non-aging benefits that come with a Villain Name.

Ranger is both a Villain, so she doesn't age, and she's a half-elf, with literally centuries of experience, and remember Ranger's Aspects – Learn, Perfect, and Transcend. Saint is good, sure, and has Hero-cheats, but if Ranger wants Saint dead for serious, rather than just a good fight, Saint is dead meat waiting to happen.

*eaglejarl*

I really, really hope that Ranger takes notice and makes the Grey Pilgrim eat himself.

## *NerfGlaistigUaine*

Outplayed. That was the only way it was going to end, eventually, for Black and he knew it. I thought this might happen when the dice metaphors came in – you can only beat the odds so many times after all. I only wish Black had managed to take a bigger chunk out of Procer before biting it as one final F\*\*\* you to the Heavens

*Metrux*

There is still a Scribe, a general and a dragon on the loose, I rather think they can do some destruction after Black is gone.

## Euodiachloris

Taking a chunk out of the Heroes will have to do. Hopefully, a chunk Bard wasn't calculating for. <\_<

*NerfEidolon*

Hello there fellow name brother.

*NerfGlaistigUaine*

Brilliant, brother. I see you are a man of culture as well.  
Now we only need NerfContessa to show up and we will be complete

*NerfContessa*

You called for a Door?  
^^

[shieldredblog](#)

I feel like this whole plague thing might be a mistake.  
Especially considering the grey Pilgrim doesn't actually control it.

Black: Sends infected zombies underwater to major Proceran cities.

Dead King: "Oh, hey. Free plague."

*Exec*

Procer: \*exists\*

Dead King: It's free real estate.

*Greg*

That seems like a fitting last "screw you" from the chief Calamity, "forcing" the heroes to give him a tool to murder a country with.

Bonus points for his last words being something that throws Tariq's musings on how Above is just as good at being ruthless back in his teeth. "You finally showed your true colors ... pity you forgot how much more practice than you we have at swimming in the deep end."

I hope this isn't actually Black's end, but if it is, well, they provided him the power his Name lacked to make a fitting dying curse.

*werafdsaew*

Thief's admonition of Lone Swordsman in Book 2 comes to mind: you cannot win by fighting Evil with evil because Evil is a lot better at it than Good, and Good wins by being the underdog anyways.

*LM*

This is a satisfying death for the Black Knight. I didn't think it was possible to write one, great job!

*Morgenstern*

Really? I would feel overly UN-satisfied if THIS were "it".

*Letouriste*

Same. Pretty sure this is not the end. These opponents don't have any drama with black. There is no real story here and I doubt this fight is not in black plan

[TeK](#)

Hey, chessmasters. I'm more of a Go guy. So tell me. Queen's gambit is declined and the white bishop threatens the black knight. What's the next move by Black?

*Itaywex*

I'm not much of a chess master, but I did read a bit about this specific state.

The Queen gambit has been offered by the first Prince (presumably taking that city), and has been declined by the black Knight via trying to manouver around.

If it is indeed a chess move allegory it means that now it is Black's move with the black Knight between a white Bishop and the black queen.

If the black Knight moves out of the way, the Bishop can take the queen. But if he doesn't, the Bishop takes the black Knight, but will be taken by a pawn a turn after that.

It seems like black is allowing himself to be taken. So does it mean he has a plan for the rest of his armies to hurt the first Prince (or the grey pilgrim's group) another way? Or does he have another (mundane) tool up his sleeve that can count as a pawn that would take out the grey pilgrim and his group?

*Dainsleif*

Mind you that the Black Knight is supposedly guarding the Black Queen in the chess move, funny how despite his "Let the younger ones try" comment earlier, he would (i assume) rather see to his own death than let Cat fail. Fucking Amadeus, bitch all you want about how adresssing the parental relationship between you two would be bad, youre an awesome father to the fucking end.

*Morgenstern*

I wonder if the sickness GP send can actually take him and the other heroes, too.... if that's truly according to those chess moves. Which would still be rather disappointing imho. I've come to much to hope for seeing Black living out some

mundane remaining years, aging to an old man, peacefully, after Cat has turned over the whole board.

*Zachary*

I don't know if it's intended, but this metaphor is actually remarkably accurate.

*Daniel Gazizov*

Semi-slav defense is a continuation of Queen's Gambit Declined, and ends with the black knight trapped.

*beleester*

The Queen's Gambit Declined is so early in the game that the bishop and knight aren't developed yet, so the answer is basically `^\_( )_/`.

Although Wikipedia does list one common variation of QGD that ends with a white bishop taking a black knight and then getting captured in turn.

[Barthumphries](#)

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen%27s\\_Gambit\\_Declined](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen%27s_Gambit_Declined)

It would depend on how the Bishop threatened the Knight because in that initial position the Bishop hadn't been brought out yet.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Flip pieces, flip the board, flip Pilgrim and Bard the bird...

*Mike E.*

Damn. RIP Ranker.

I refused to believe Black is gone until it is confirmed elsewhere (though I don't see GP and Regicide going out like this...)

*KageLupus*

That was honestly the hardest part of this whole chapter for me. Ranker had been through so much and lived so much longer than any goblin should have. Then she doesn't even get mentioned by name when she dies, just lumped in with everyone else who wasn't Black.

This chapter is also a really good example of how the forces of Good are not actually good or nice. Everything about the Pilgrim shows him to be a tool for things that do not care

about humanity at all. Infecting even a small town with a plague just because it is convenient sounds very much like something that the other team would get condemned for, but since the Pilgrim felt bad about it it ends up just being a ruthless necessity.

It really is no wonder that Black and Cat are both so jaded and disgusted by the whole system. The “good” guys get to do the same things that the bad guys get called out for, but they do it without half the effort and still think they are on the moral high ground.

### *Passing\_Through*

It's not coincidence that the other half of the chapter is about an average Joe refusing to do the same thing. You could point out that the exact numbers are different, that Legrand refuses to burn a major city to damage the army while the Pilgrim infects a small village to destroy it, but it's still quite explicitly described as a decision between the right choice and the arithmetically prudent choice.

### *Decius*

It's a victory for Evil that the order to burn the city was given.

It's a greater victory for evil that the plague was used.

It will be a victory for Black when the heroes learn that the order to burn the city was given, and that a village was given to the plague to infect the army. Maximum points if, the day after the siege is lifted, the presence of the preparations to burn the city is revealed (either by an accidental fire or by a fire marshal who isn't in on the order).

### *Dancer*

It's almost as if it's not Heroes vs Villains – it's free people vs the people taking the easy route to power.

TLDR: I'm on Cordelia/Procer's side, and have been for a while.

### *John Galt*

In the initial introduction, the Book of All Things states that the fundamental disagreement between the gods is whether mortals should be allowed to govern themselves/dictate their own actions. Quick hint: Evil/the gods below are the pro-freedom/choice camp. The heavens want automatons (just like their angels). “Good” and “Evil” are just the names that get



assigned. That's right boys and girls, for those of you that haven't already realized it, "Good" is pro-slavery.

*Dylan Tullos*

John Galt:

Evil stands for "freedom" in the sense that they support the freedom of wolves. The strong will be free to do as they like with the weak.

*Decius*

The strong are always free to do what they want to the weak. That's what being strong and weak actually are.

Freedom is the right of the weak to try to oppose the strong; to rebel against their slaveowners and climb the tower.

*Dylan Tullos*

Decius:

"Climbing the Tower" simply means setting yourself up as the new tyrant. The oppressed become the oppressors, the subject becomes the master, but the Tower remains the same.

Evil basically involves worshiping individual "freedom" to the point that you become more important than anyone and everyone else. Good is not Good, but let's not pretend that Evil isn't evil.

*Mike E.*

I think that was done to emphasize that for all of the baddassness that Ranker embodied, in the end there are only Named, and everyone else.

*Styn*

Yep same ole same ole with the offscreening of beloved supporting characters. I'm once again appalled and disappointed.

*Morgenstern*

Me, too. If Ranker really shouldnd't get some continuation / fade-out in another chapter, revealing more of the background to the last situation in this chapter.

*JackbeThimble*

I'm honestly not sure if Ranker counts as 'Alive'. Anyway someone has to set off the goblinfire and give The Carrion Lord a badass funeral pyre.

*grttt*

I mean, Ranker wouldn't be a "man" so perhaps she's still about.

[Euodiachloris](#)

"No man of woman born: because female, because goblin, because you can go die in a fire." ;P

*James*

We don't know if Ranker is dead. It's confirmed that she has lived longer than a goblin's lifespan. So could be a goblin with a Name...since they don't dies from old age.

[Miles](#)

I think the point of that was that she's of a matron line (which live longer) or some other goblin secret like that

*werafdsaew*

We haven't seen her corpse yet, and there's no indication that she boarded the same ship as Black, or that she boarded any ship at all. There's still hope.

[sugarrollblog](#)

I don't think the Black Knight is going to die here. This is him cheating the heavens again with an Assassin clone and a small sacrifice of troops. We've seen this tactic from them multiple times already and it's in line with the narrative.

This is just like the Black Knight—taking a tactical loss for a bigger strategic gain. Grem's instincts were tingling before the attack on Iserre and it would be disappointing if Amadeus, a person known for his craftiness, dies by ignoring his most decorated general's intuition. This should have been obvious to him from where he stood.

The title of the chapter is also a clue. This is a gambit and the Black Knight is declining a major confrontation and is concentrating on the bigger picture.

*Amoonymous*

Agreed. The lack of name power coming from him could be as he said (running dry), or he could be playing another body-double

style trick. It was also said Black wasn't using his Aspects for 2 days, so that's 2 days of time he could have slipped out.

I'm honestly like 50/50 on which happened and suppose we'll find out later. I'd be surprised if it's revealed next chapter; this seems like the kind of cliffhanger where it's only revealed in like 15-20 chapters whether he actually died or survived.

*JackbeThimble*

I think Black probably does die, but not without a parting fuck-you to the heroes. Either they're all about to go up in Goblinfire (who would have expected Black to take Triumphant's way out?) or he sent Ranker off with some plague samples and she's going to poison Salia's water supply or something similar.

*maresther23*

Leave a mark, go vote. <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Dainpdf*

You know, when I read this my first thought was "oh man, this is going to complicate the truce between Cat and Procer."

Because Black was like a dad to her.

Then I thought "Oh man, Scribe is going to have a fit over this. I hope dear Pilgrim is prepared for an angry Eudokia."

Because she is to Black what Page was to the Exiled Prince, in a way.

Then I remembered Warlock, and oh man all the shit in the Dark Day protocol. Pilgrim thinks his plague is bad, wait until Wekesa gets started.

I mean, he was ready to throw Cat's soul into some sort of timeless abyss if she betrayed the man.

And that was it for a while. I went about my day.

Just now, though, a single thought crossed my mind. "Oh shit, Ranger."

Farewell, Pilgrim. I shall remember you, everyone you love, your country, and the surrounding areas fondly.

PS: Poor Ranker and One Eye. They deserved better than to die offscreen. Or did I misinterpret and they escaped?

*Novice*

I believe Grem and Scribe was with the part of the Legion that was 'fake' sieging Iserre.

*Dainpdf*

Yeah, I wasn't sure if they had rejoined Black by then. Well, maybe they get to come back and rescue Amadeus =)  
...yeah right. None of them are heroes, and Pilgrim has a full retinue. No such luck.

[\*frolamiz\*](#)

Yeah, what a good idea to use an uncontrollable plague in the middle of allied territory.

We know the Dead King is experienced with them and he could probably easily make use of it, but it may also be a trap from the Wandering Bard against him. I doubt she didn't know the Grey Pilgrim was planning it, and remember, she has her greasy hands everywhere.

Anyway, if I were Black, I would reanimate as much undeads as I can and send them in every directions (ok, maybe not into Callow's direction) to spread it. Remember, the Grey pilgrim did not feel any power from him even though he had some time to recover, so he had to use it before they came.

*beleester*

The Pilgrim's monologue specifically mentions that he kept the other heroes close to the town, so that anyone who left would be caught before they could spread the plague further. He has a plan to keep it contained.

*Amoonymous*

Black also threw a lot of corpses and living infected off the ship. Who knows where the currents will take them, or if when the numbers started dwindling he made zombies from the infected and sent them out (as frolamiz said).

*Morgenstern*

Yep, that, too...

[\*frolamiz\*](#)

Yes, they cleaned the town to prevent spreading. The thing is that Black has left it for days and the lake is really big. Around the size of a principality. And in the scenario I spoke of, Black would send undeads from his fleet, not the town.

*Dylan Tullos*

frolamiz:

Praes has tried to use magical plagues as weapons before.

It never works because priests have supernatural healing powers granted by the Gods Above, and they can simply cure the disease. Black's Legions were only vulnerable to the plague because they have no healing priests.

*Metrux*

Actually, I don't think this applies in this case. There has been countries destroyed by natural plagues before, only the ones made by Bellow have ben stopped by priests. And this one was made by divine intervention, Pilgrim himself said he needed the choirs help. I don't think the priests can stop this if they wanted to, which is why Pilgrim had a containment prepared. I mean, he has priestly powers, he could've cleansed them after the boats left, if it was that easy.

*ketura*

This one has no symptoms until you keel over ten hours after exposure. I'm not sure that Procer has enough priests to be able to just heal every single person as a matter of course.

*ketura*

\* ten days

*Shaerick 68*

And once more we see that the only real difference between Heroes and Villians is a superiority complex and the names of their Gods.

*SMHF*

Losing all your men and being surrounded by a band of heroes; two of which are Pilgrim and Saint; when you've ran out of Name juice (is that the correct term?) is scary!

But what I find more scary is giving Black six days to plan...

[Switch](#)

I still don't see why Pilgrim and Saint are dumb enough to push this fight. A weaken villain surrounded by heroes is the story of the villain escaping and most likely taking one of the stronger heroes out first.

*Letouriste*

Uh what? I can't believe that wasn't part of black plan all along. I don't Think he will die, not to the hands of these guys at least. Storywise, i expect him to die after taking revenge for Captain or against someone like the white knight who has fate

with him. The Grey pilgrim and the saint of stupidity are outsiders to any story related to him and I seriously doubt black can be brought down without a story. I expect the whole fleet to be a trick, that's a little too big and flashy by black standards... maybe that's not black but Assassin? Scribe never leave his side after all and she is with grem

*stevenneiman*

The whole point of everything he's been doing since at least when he met Cat was getting her ready to stand on her own once he was out of the picture, and it's pretty well-established that he regards his own life as a lower priority than his goals. If he's nearing his endgame it's entirely likely that he would arrange to sacrifice himself in exchange for doing something useful with the Grey Pilgrim, the Saint of Swords and their three cronies. That thing he does to them might be taking them with him, or planting a crippling weakness that Cat can exploit later, or even planting an idea that will manipulate their future behavior, but I'm sure he's up to something. Also, I'd say that the Grey Pilgrim is his closest equivalent, and he safely discharged whatever fate he had with Hanno with the "cheat providence at dice" showdown. Of note, the Queen's Gambit Declined is a move in which Black starts a slugging match at the center rather than ceding control to develop the rest of the board. Considering Cat's nickname, it would fit the analogy as well as the situation that it's to her advantage to clear off blocking pieces to give her greater personal freedom.

*Letouriste*

Black tricked them there. That was part of his plan, i'm sure of it. Weird we got to see that from his perspective tho. I really hope ranker is alive and well and...UNHOLY SHIT I GOT IT, black said he drew way deeper than he did for decades on his pool of power and i think he could have used it on something else than raising the troops speed and stamina...yeah, just a theory but maybe the whole army who stole the boats is fake? Some shadow power than black can only use in war situation, when all his aspects are in full burst! ...or maybe only the officers are protected

*stevenneiman*

My personal bet is goblinfire. Once they're all grouped up he sets off a mess of the stuff, and possibly arranges things such that Tariq has to choose between saving himself and protecting the three minor characters. To keep with his own story, he has to make a sacrifice, and even for someone with his skill and experience, goblinfire means even an unavoidable mistake means death. Of course, Black himself would go down in the blaze, but if it meant bringing down the two heroes who can match Cat's power AND forcing Levant out of the alliance (basically

starting a chain reaction which will disintegrate the whole Crusade), I think Amadeus would happily take that trade. Assuming he wants something like the Liesse Accords, this (plus Cat returning to the surface with Drow fae troops, her cut of the Svae Noctis' power, and the partial support of the dwarves, will mean that she has the power to dictate them.

*NotQuiteHere*

And everybody dies.

*Hastien*

Welcome to Uncle Maddy's Pleasure Cruise, the most restful ferry this side of Salia. Entertainment lurks in every cargo hold, and our attentive staff of repurposed corpses will never be far. We have the best fireworks displays of the Grey Eyries brought to you when you least expect it. Be sure to try our one of a kind Goblinfire Baked Alaska, and end your days in our luxurious cabins at the bottom of the lake.

It might just be that I refuse to consider the alternative but I'm fairly confident we'll see Black rowing away from a flaming wreck with a donkey and jug of wine. If not could we at least have a on-screen death? A chapter of our merry band of heroes being brutalized by whatever he prepared for them would make me feel a little better about losing such an excellent character.

[Switch](#)

A rowboat, a donkey, and a pair of broken shovels.

*Feanor*

Gray Pilgrim just went full retard. What could possibly possess a man to literally hand a heaven sent biological weapon of mass destruction to THE CARRION LORD of all people? The Black Knight's whole point of invading Procer was to destabilize and wreak havoc inside the borders of the Principate. I think an unstoppable plague might just accomplish that better than an army of 20,000 legionaries. And it's pretty telling that one Ranker wasn't mentioned. She's probably leading a small group of barges to shore to unleash the Gray Pilgrim's Folly. And two, the quote at the top says wait for your enemy to lay a plan and then just throw a spanner in the works as every hero somehow innately knows how. But the Gray Pilgrim was without a doubt not the hero in this chapter.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I just realized his name has fucking "carrion" in it. Ahahahahah, the GP is such a fucking retard. Sure, this worked, but at what cost?

Also, pretty sure Ranker is dead. No one escaped the plague.

*Morgenstern*

Yeah, it does feel like he should be fully powered up now. Or rather even over-powered...

*LuL*

Was there anything stopping them from going to the land and spreading the disease to Procer out of petty revenge?

Cause this seems like the obvious next step;  
Take those that are still ok to the land.  
Use Blacks aspect to make them march faster and split them into small forces.  
Make each small group find a village and blend in and live normally, make a few other teams dress up as civilians and make them rush into big cities and spread it.  
Sit back and enjoy the apocalypse.

Hey if that's not possible resurrect their corpses as undead give those undead to the few mages still alive and make them attack villages and cities instead, contact with diseased corpses would still doom Procer.

[Miles](#)

That's probably how they take the capital.

Send in infected soldiers or zombies, and let the infection spread to the general populace. The priests can't stop it because it's an act of the choir of Mercy

[Tohron](#)

Given that Black has avoided attacking civilians, I think the Pilgrim has now killed more Proceran civilians than Black did across his entire campaign.

*Dylan Tullos*

Tohron:

Black's Legions burn crops and granaries everywhere they go.

He's already killed thousands of peasants through famine. If he was allowed to reach central Procer, that number would grow to the tens of thousands, if not hundreds.

*Goobinator*

AFAIK, Procer was already playing with fire by conscripting so many able bodied peasants to begin with. It was already



predicted that Procer would suffer food shortages because they went all in with the Tenth Crusade, thinking it would be a relatively easy and short term affair. Starvation was already going to happen, regardless of Black's actions.

*Dylan Tullos*

Goobinator:

You are correct. Black's actions were meant to make the situation much worse, turning a major food shortage into a famine.

If his Legions weren't stopped, they would have burned their way across Procer and left hundreds of thousands to starve. Grey Pilgrim's decision to sacrifice one town makes sense when we consider the alternative.

*Miles*

The town militia was 30 people. The full population can't be more than a hundred or 2 with a militia that small.

*Morgenstern*

The text said one thousand.

*Morgenstern*

The small number of militia was meant to show how Cordelia has ordered everyone into the army for the Crusade.

*Anony*

I'm gonna have to press X to doubt on this one. Black is slippery as fuck. He fooled White Knight with a distraction, seems likely he would pull the same ploy again. Especially with the whole Pilgrim not feeling any power from him thing.

What I find weird is that Grey is just going in there seemingly convinced he has won. Unless his contingencies are only to be revealed later I guess, but that's a bit cheap considering this was his pov.

If Black really dies here that will be seriously disappointing.

*Cthulhu*

Hi, I've spent the last three decades cheating against The Powers that Be, and then there's a fast-acting plague which kills my troops in 10 days and leaves me with no options and I can't do anything to try to escape.

I don't try to use my mages to call any of my allies or even people who will help me.

I don't try to contact Scribe. who could get a message to anyone

almost immediately.

I don't trap the boats and blow everyone up.

I don't scatter my forces so that the disease hits everywhere.

I don't just try to flee.

Nope, instead I calmly split my forces, sail myself into a dead end, take no steps to protect myself, don't get help from any of the Calamities, and then try to kill six heros one-on-one.

This is a shit ending for Black. I hope there's an explanation.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

More like "don't give Amadeus a good six-to-eight days of warning as the symptoms showed up during which he can plot".

Sure, Pilgrim *might* kill the guy. Maybe. But... his game won't have finished playing out.

### *Alivaril*

I actually think Black is going to die here, barring that being a decoy (which is itself likely), but I certainly hope he at least spreads the plague if he does go down. Leaves a mark, as it were. I assume priests only have so much power to burn, and a disease with a longer incubation time means more carriers and more time to spread before it's noticed.

To quote the Dead King, plagues are not a valid strategy.

### [frolamiz](#)

Well, plagues from Bellow. This one is from above, it may work =)

### *d0m1n1c*

Pilgrim enacts overtly villainous plot that kills a city in order to get the black knight alone, then ambushes him with four other heroes.

If this is something that can work for "Heroes," then "Villains" shouldn't exist; why hasn't the pilgrim released a plague on the tower, or to prevent Callow from turning evil.

I think the pilgrim has grown a little big headed, and his choir is using Black to clean house.

### *Anony*

Personally I'm hoping it spreads and Pilgrim gets functionally crippled by it as millions die in procer.

You know, the exact think that would happen if a villain unleashed an OP plague with such an obvious drawback.

grzecho2222

So nobody will talk about that even if Black dies, there is Someone Who Will Return and who says that She will return alone and not with something like Every Praesi Dead Villain Ever

*Dylan Tullos*

grzecho2222:

Black hates Triumphant and would never work for her.

grzecho2222

Not working under Her, but more like "Hey guys there is nice Hellgate over there, who wants to escape Hells and wreak havoc?". Less like one army, more like horde of them.

*Dylan Tullos*

grzecho2222:

A group of Heroes is called a "band". A group of Villains is called a "murder".

Most Villains murder each other in endless power struggles, even when they're supposed to be fighting Good. It's probably the single biggest reason why Praes practically always lost to Callow.

*Pantasy*

I hate to say it, I love Amadeus of the Green Stretch, but I think that's the end of the Black Knight. Pilgrim didn't use a story to enact his plan – just cunning and god-given gifts. It's as much a subversion of story as the previous Black Knights dying in anti-climactic ways.

It bothers me, because it feels like a prelude to the way the characters I/we've come to cherish are likely to go. Ratface died in the night of knives, Nauk's buddy died in ordinary fighting – sometimes Named die in a storyline, and sometimes they are just ended. The same goes for other named characters we like.

T\_T

Goodbye, Black.

[Switch](#)

Except there is a story here. The story of a weaken villain confronted by a band of overconfident heroes. The kind of story that ends with the villain escaping and taking out one of the stronger heroes, most likely the wise old hero aka Pilgrim.

Miles

How does Pilgrim not see that?

Miles

Maybe he plans to be defeated and then come back as the Pilgrim of Many Colors

*RanVor*

Are you saying he secretly wants to be a bad guy? ...Yeah, that would fit alright.

*Stuart Bernholc*

If this is the end, it's too stupid for Black.

That's what this boils down to. He had tons of time to plan. He had mages that can scry. He can swim. He can raise the dead. There are all sorts of things he could have done to get away. It doesn't even require him to be that smart. He realized that this plague wasn't natural. If he's just one more in a sea of thrown-overboard victims, how are they gonna check every body.

There are hundreds of ways he could get away, put up a good fight, or both with his capabilities, even not knowing what's coming. This is too stupid a death.

*Stuart Bernholc*

It's out of character besides, so I hope that this isn't one.

*warriormonk19*

You're not wrong, but Black is far from invincible and he knows it. He knew that he would likely die in the hands of a hero, and very few heroes are as well traveled and versed in the ways of the Game as the Grey Pilgrim.

Also, Black has been exhausted this whole time, having had to stretch out his aspect over 15,000 freaking soldiers and prancing around Procer wreaking havoc on one of the greatest empires on the surface of Calernia singlehandedly. Necromancy at any scale that may have mattered may be beyond him at this point, and him getting caught in the plan of the Grey Pilgrim may have damaged his favor with the Gods Below, which in turn may have damaged his ability to draw on his Role or Name, as described by the Grey Pilgrim himself.

I will also be sad to see Black go, if he does. I guess we'll find out soon enough.

Thanks for the great chapter erratic!

## NZPIEFACE

What's the point though? Even if he scries his allies, they'll just get infected by the plague. Even if he runs away, they'll just catch up.

They fucking got him. Might as well stay where he is and blow literally everything up.

*Cthulhu*

No, I don't think so. Scry W. Say, "Hello Old Friend? I've gotten hit with some sort of fucking plague. No, I'm OK, just worn out, but everyone else is going to die and I need to get the fuck out of here. Could you please come get me"

It cannot be that disease is a trump card that no one on the Evil side can cure. If that was the case, the Empire would have fallen ages ago. Hell, the mages were able to cure Cat with blood magic when she got stabbed. Sure, its not as clean as "divine" healing, but it works well enough.

## NZPIEFACE

I have a feeling Praes is the type of place to burn the whole city to the ground to stop the spread of the plague.

And yeah, that might work, but Warlock is pretty preoccupied, otherwise he'd be with Black anyways. Also, what's the point of leaving if the only thing left is Black?

*Jarthon1*

Sve of night lay broken before her, power oozing and coiling like a snake. Cathrine turned and began to walk away. That power could be used, taken if she wanted, but the cost of dealing with the gods below was never cheap.

As she began to step down the delicately carved passageway a shudder ran through the world and it hit her harder than the corpse behind her ever could have. Black was dead.

Not believing it, even as she felt it in what passed for her soul, she whirled around, world moving for her rather than she for it. Night was ripped away from the corpse and woven into her mantle in a heartbeat. She barely felt it.

Half an eternity spanned the second that it took her to open a portal. Archer was calling out to her, but words were meaningless now. A giant hand of ice and glamor grabbed her companion and dragged her into Arcadia with her. The ice that should be locking her mind to that of a fay burned away in the face of her rage. The queen of winter demanded that her domain obey, and obey it did. Leagues fell away like footsteps and in seconds the gate was ripped open once more.

There he lay. There were heroes around him, and dangerous ones at that, but she could see nothing. Nothing but the face of the closest thing she had ever had to a father, cold and slack upon a boat deck. She sunk to the ground and cradled that face.

"I'm sorry child, but it had to be done." Said the gray pilgrim in a weary tone. "You shouldn't have come here. Now his fate must be yours as well. Grace is so often a heavy burden"

She whispered something to the wind.

"What did you say, child?" he asked

"Don't you know?" She whispered, voice hoarse "There is only one sin . . . One grace . . . And what I do today shall be nothing but grace"

Then she rose, and every body that had ever sunk to the bottom of this lake rose with her, eyes burning cold and blue.

*Angel Botha*

Actually gave me the shivers. 8/8

*Skeptical Silver*

I don't think Black is getting out of this one.

There's tons of foreshadowing that it's the end for Black, no matter how much we liked him. The quote at the beginning hints the best way to take down a villain is to interrupt their plan (exactly what Pilgrim did). Black tells One Eye and Co. he wants to "roll the dice one last time" (emphasis on last). There's also the talk with Ranker about how the "Tyranny of the Sun" song doesn't apply to them anymore. Lastly there is all this talk about how the "children" like Cordelia and Catherine will succeed them.

While it is possible its another Assassin clone, I just don't see it happening...using the same trick every time is lazy storywriting. Finally, I definitely don't see either Grey Pilgrim or Saint dying from this encounter-they have a much more important role in the larger story, hinted at several chapters before, where they will fight in one big conflict with the side of Good being led by the White Knight. Storywise, they can't die here. However unsatisfying this may be, its likely the end of the Black Knight, even named may not get satisfying deaths-just look at Captain.

*Helirous*

Not completely true. The saint received the call, the grey pilgrim however did not. So the pilgrim could have a potential red flag

[Javvies](#)

I kinda hate to say it, but Pilgrim is surviving this one – he still needs to have a reckoning with Cat for violating their deal and the oaths he swore.

Also, there will need to be some sort of internal reckoning amongst the Heroes/Crusaders – those who would prefer to win and by extension preserve the current status quo/Procer and “liberate” Callow from Evil, and those who want to set fire to the board and go for a Heavens-induced reset of Calernian power structures however far down the line it takes to get out from under the Dead King like Laurence and apparently Bard. Pilgrim will probably be needed for that too, since he claims to want to preserve Procer and the status quo.

That said, there are a number of unidentified Heroes with Saint and Pilgrim – those guys are in serious trouble. Although, since Pilgrim can resurrect them, they might not stay down permanently.

Plus ... Black would have had more than enough time to rig the ship he's on to blow with goblin munitions.

I expect that there'll be a couple bodies (unnamed Heroes), but Saint, Pilgrim, and Black will either survive outright or be missing presumed dead (and therefore definitively alive somewhere) after the inevitable explosion.

### *Goobinator*

I don't think anyone should panic yet, I can't put a finger on it but this encounter doesn't *\*feel\** right. I don't think Black is going to die here. Even if he does, I doubt his killers would have the last laugh.

### [sivarajan](#)

Next time: Hey, I bet you're all wondering what Abigail is up to, right?

### *Berder*

typo: But power had to used responsibly (had to be)  
The Praesi had came, the Praesi had gone (The Praesi had come)

### *Kel the Seer*

Ten will get you twenty that the “envoy” was Black in disguise. Why else would Scribe be standing next to him silently during that exchange?

After all, baiting all the heroes to one location gaurantees that the Heavens will smash a meaty fist on the scales to get their way. Hence Black actually being at the supposed distraction in case the Choirs get wise and have one of their heroes there try

to take out the army. Grem is good, but pitting him and half the army against almost all the heroes isn't a winning plan.

Putting Ranker, a likely traitor with the group that will draw the Heavens wrath is just two birds with one stone.

*DocTao*

Wow, outdone yourself once again, I'm shocked and amazed and still(!) hopeful, amazing storytelling! Thanks so much!

*Komploding*

I'm sure it's significant that he hasn't been able call on his name for days and at the very end he is referred to as Amadeus of the Green stretch rather than the Black Knight, of what I don't know, it suggests that he's lost his name but we've been given no examples of that happen ending anywhere, other than when cat brought herself back from the dead, that seems unlike as it was lost due to the battle royale between claimants to that name, here it suggests either that below has abandoned him and he has been stripped of his name or that Amadeus and Black are two different entities

*Komploding*

Something possibly relevant could be when Winter king was transformed due to the story, but that was more of a metamorphosis, and Amadeus was not referred to as a different name just Amadeus and his place of origin

*Jim*

It never said Ranker was with him. It says they departed after 4 days and the legion is spread thin among the ships. The Black knight has made it a point to manipulate the story itself to create circumstances with which he can win. Alone on a boat faced down with by heroes aspect having possibly abandoned him (or one of his clones that his power allows him to create) is exactly the kind of Gambit that would allow a villain to triumph killing the old heroes off (the ones that have done things to fall from grace) and wounding the other heroes that they have to retreat and come back later. I would also like to point out we have heard nothing of Masego and Wakesa. How better for the powers from below to put their hand to the scale than a sudden intervention by the heirophant AND the sovereign of the red skies to show up at an opportune moment?

*Nobody*

Has anyone thought that maybe Black dies and the DK resurrects him?



[Barthumphries](#)

The Donkey Kong?

[desuworks](#)

Irony. The Black Knight was killed using the most valuable lesson he taught Cat. When she asked how do you beat someone who's better at the game than you while she was trying to beat Juniper and he responded with something along the lines of don't play by the same rules. Here the Black Knight set up the game and rules for his pillaging of Procer and everyone played by the same rules until the Grey Pilgrim decided to cheat. If you know you can't beat someone in a straight up contest but you need to win, Cheat, Lie, Change the nature of the game. This was the Black Knight's most valuable lesson to Cat. And it's the same one that killed him.

[Barthumphries](#)

Black dumped all the dead bodies overboard, where they infected the fish. A week from now, all the fish will die and the lake will turn into a stinking morass of dead things. Far more people will die because of the resulting famine.

Meanwhile, just as he's about to die, Black will jump overboard. His body will never be recovered and he'll be a Boogeyman for Procer for the next hundred years.

[Tek](#)

Holy fuck that is many comments.

*Tab*

I bet that Black passed his Name onto Grem or something along those lines so while he may die the raid of Procer will continue.

*Aotrs Commander*

Grey dead man walking; you ain't good, sunshine, no matter what lies you and your equally not-even-remotely-good bosses tell yourselves.

Somebody really needs to go invade a few heavens and raze them conceptually to the ground.

*burguulkodar*

Grey Pilgrim is too OP, plz nerf.

But seriously, if he could plague and destroy whole armies like that, then he could've just do that freaking miracle with Cat's army and it would have collapsed and they won the war. Which

means he can't do that SO easily as he claims. Or the plague can somehow escape his control easily and spread to a whole country, killing hundreds of thousands.

I don't know, I don't like it. This guy feels like he has god-like powers, and we still have NO idea about his aspects, besides the one that he used to destroy cat's portal.

*Zachary*

He mentions that they had to stand watch to make sure no one left and spread the disease. This would have been impossible with a group of people as large as Cat's army.

There are also likely story reasons that wouldn't have gone over well.

*Olisch*

You can only win at dice so often before your luck runs out. It's hard to believe Black dies, but we've been shown he's not part of the same league as the true Horrors and doesn't have a purpose in that coming war, so I say he dies.

The bodies have been racking up lately, with Ratface dead and now Black and Ranker.

I wonder if the Pilgrim killing Cat's mentor could become part of a story, though probably not so easy one for villains to come out on top. Any chance they take Black Hostage? Probably not, those Heroes seem to deal in absolutes only, though the more I think about it the more the emotional fallout of his death strikes me.

Also, we haven't heard about Masego in a while and that worries me.

*charl X*

Ranker should have gotten a better death than this, all the interesting side characters from before seem to fade into unimportance or just... die

The veterans other than amadeus all dying in pathetic ways off screen, no one last scene of defiance against the gods and fate that they deserved

The fun of this story in the beginning was how personal it was  
Now it seems clinical and nihilist

[vuthuha912](#)

You know this whole march has been a suicidal run. He was obviously risking the consequence of doing evil to deal a blow to the entire Crusade. Burning crop is such a great tactic to deal with Miss "getting rid of her unemployed workers by a Crusade"

Cordelia. Now, she has to get the army back from Callow and start boosting the agriculture sector fast before her emergency grain reserve run out. And the fact that Amadeus just burn her opposition granaries means she needs to use the grain from her allies to save the one opposing her. It is great. Aside from that, she would lose a ton of money buying up land just to pass it to the unemployed workers that she is trying to get rid of. The negotiation for land is going to take a long time – time she doesn't have due to the bomb that Amadeus just set.

This entire Crusade is a poorly done rush job. It is exactly like the Joseon court during the fight with Japan. Unfortunately for her, she has no Yi Sun Sin to bring miracles.

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## Chapter 62: Impulse

*"I don't care if they've been training, it's only been two months. What could they possibly have learned that would threaten me?"*

– Dread Empress Sinistra IV, the Erroneous

"The Mighty Berelun is willing to allow passage, but only for a tithe," Ivah translated.

The Mighty Berelun was full of shit, I decided. That it had accepted an envoy instead of sending a warband the moment we entered its territory had been an auspicious start, especially when it'd proposed one of the large caverns of the region as a meeting place. The Mighty, I had learned, preferred to lay their ambushes in small passages where they could best leverage their superior speed and reflexes without the risk of being swarmed by 'lesser' drow. Sadly, it looked like this was going to be a repeat of our aborted talks with the Purka Sigil. The cavern surrounding us might have been broad and high-ceilinged, but there were discreet little paths on an upper level where I could hear drow scuttling around like rats. Berelun had been smart enough to listen to the rumours already making their way through the outer ring but not quite smart enough to decide picking a fight wouldn't be in its favour. I was almost insulted by how few it had mobilized for the ambush: by the sounds of it, there couldn't be more than twenty.

Most of those would be ispe, the lowest rung of the Mighty. In practice, those were fighters with a handful of interesting tricks but none of the dangerous Secrets out there. As dangerous in melee as your average fae soldier, if much less mobile for the

lack of wings. They were the kind of enterprising souls that joined up with a sigil as much for the protection as because the quickest way for them to grow in power was to slay and harvest other ispe – either those of an enemy sigil or that of their own. Mighty Berelun itself had prudently shown up with an escort, a pair of rylleh. Ivah's old rank, and one I'd begun to understand was higher up the ladder than my guide had previously implied. Rylleh were the drow just beneath whatever drow the sigil was named after, called the sigil-holder, and considered the most likely contenders to eventually run through their leader and take the clan for themselves. They were also usually the heavy hitters in a sigil apart from the chief, which meant Berelun was taking us seriously. It would not have brought both its most dangerous rivals and strongest fighters to meet with us on the ground floor otherwise.

That *had* seemed promising, until I'd heard the ambush setting up.

"What kind of tithe?" I asked.

I had no intention of paying anything of the sort, but stringing this out a little longer would allow for a cleaner resolution. As if prompted by my thought, my ears caught the sound of a blade slicing open a throat. There was a muted gurgle and a body was quietly lowered to the ground. One down. Ivah addressed the Mighty in Crepuscular and I kept my eyes on its own. Deep, perfect silver set in a dark grey face that looked like it'd been carved with a knife. Berelun was larger than most drow I'd seen, broad-shouldered and heavily muscled. The obsidian blade strapped to its back could not be called anything but a greatsword.

"One in ten of your sigil, my queen," Ivah said. "With no fewer than six ispe among them."

My sigil, huh. That was one way to call the gathering throng of the desperate and the ambitious Akua was keeping an eye on. Two thousand, by now, though we were still thin on Mighty. Few of those were willing to take my bargain when it was extended. I'd already made my peace with the fact that we'd have to grow our own pack through harvest, and truth be told that might make them slightly more reliable in the long term. Another gurgle above, another drop. Berelun had dispersed its ambushers to make sure they'd be able to fire from all angles, looked like. It would have been decent tactics if I hadn't seen it coming. But I had, and their isolation meant they were easy prey for my own hunter on the prowl.

"Ivah," I said. "Ask the Mighty Berelun if it heard what took place between us and the Purka."

My guide's deep blue eyes crinkled in amusement, but it nodded. The exchange of words was swift, but not so swift that I did not hear another two throats cut.

"The Mighty knows of the destruction that was delivered unto the Purka," Ivah said. "It cautions you not to believe the Berelun to be weak or lacking in cunning. It says tithe will be paid, one way or another, and that pretending otherwise is foolish."

"So it thinks I'm speaking a threat," I mused. "When I was, in fact, delivering a warning. They might have been sloppier about their ambush, but the plan was quite similar."

Fifth death, then a pause. The sixth and seventh were nearly simultaneous. She was having fun with it, if she was getting that fancy.

"Is there to be fighting then, my queen?" Ivah asked, sounding less than worried.

"Eventually," I agreed. "Let's keep stringing them along for a bit longer. Quibble over the numbers, make it look like I'm considering the offer."

"By your will," the drow agreed, head inclining in deference.

By my final count, there were eighteen ispe who'd been hiding upstairs. My eyes remained on Berelun all the while, and I saw it getting increasingly impatient as moments passed. Not because of the negotiations, I thought. We both knew those were going nowhere. Most likely it was awaiting a signal before attacking and growing restless because it wasn't coming. After thirty heartbeats passed without another throat being cut, I elected to call down the curtains on the farce. Ivah was in the middle of a sentence, but paused when I raised my hand.

"I will offer them the same terms I offered the Purka," I said. "And the Trovod, and the Hilaron. They can kneel and take oaths, be granted power as you have been. Their forces will be folded into mine. Or they can be unmade. There will be no middle ground."

"They will refuse," Ivah said.

"I expect they will," I replied. "So here's a gift to help them understand the situation – Archer!"

My voice sounded loud and clear in the cavern. A moment later there was a mocking cackle and Indrani kicked down a drow's corpse from the upper levels. The throat was still bleeding, and after the cadaver landed with a dull thump blood pooled around it. Berelun and its bodyguards stilled, eyes moving back and forth. Ivah spoke to them, slow and cadenced. I'd heard enough Crepuscular I could begin to make out individual words, and knew the meaning of a few, but even spoken so slowly the language was difficult. Unlike any other I'd been taught on the surface. No

matter: I'd set Diabolist to learning it, and when she was done I'd rip the knowledge out of her mind.

"The Mighty Berelun refuses your offer," Ivah said. "And demands your submission. I've also been offered admittance as fourth under the Sigil, should I turn on you."

"Well, it's a tempting offer," I drawled. "Have you duly considered it?"

"Alas for the Mighty Berelun," the drow said, "I much prefer being your Lord of Silent Steps."

The title rippled in the air, after being spoken, and Ivah no longer seemed to be Ivah at all. I could feel the shard of Winter in its soul, the way it spread through its veins with every breath and intertwined with the Night. It was not fae, but oh how close it had become. And all it'd taken was will and oaths, traded in the dark. Berelun caught on to the fact that negotiations had come to an end, ripping its obsidian greatsword free from leather bindings, and the attending rylleh followed suit. A steel-tipped spear to the left, a long ornate stone knife to the right.

"The usual arrangement stands," I calmly said. "Anything you kill is yours. The rest goes to auction."

The curved obsidian sword the Lord of Silent Steps had wrested from the corpse of the Mighty Trovod left its sheath with a pretty little flourish.

"May my hunt be fruitful, then," Ivah grinned. "I yet hunger."

Without another word, it vanished. Glamour, which of all the fae arts the drow seemed to take to the easiest. There were ways to use the Night not too dissimilar. I turned my eyes to the Berelun, whose earlier confidence had been shaken by the open use of power they did not recognize. It would be the least of their surprises today, I thought. They opened the dance with what I'd come to call the Hunter's Triangle. It was a tactic Mighty seemed to favour when facing an entity they suspected to be stronger than themselves but not by too broad a margin. Berelun itself advanced fluidly, greatsword raised above its head, while the other two flickered and dissolved into shadow. They would slither across the ground to flank me on both sides from the back while their chief kept my attention, all going for crippling blows instead of an outright kill. It was a tactic meant to get me slow and bleeding, not take my head. Drow fighting tactics were heavily influenced by the fact that the one amongst them to make the kill had the best claim to the body and Night therein. In single combat they immediately went for the kill, but when in a group they tended to go for the legs or the arms first.

The two rylleh flickered back into silhouettes with admirable timing. It was easy to see the three of them had fought opponents together before: the coordination was impeccable. The spear, knife and greatsword struck within a heartbeat of each other. They passed through mist, dispersing chunks of my body, and only then did I act. I returned to entirely solid form and my hand snatched the extended arm of the spear-wielder. My physical strength might have grown beyond natural boundaries but laws of momentum still applied to my action, which had required an adjustment I was only now beginning to get a handle on. My footing shifted, my torso pivoted and I swung the drow at Berelun's head. Silver eyes widened in surprise and I merely clenched my fingers before releasing the rylleh's wrist, crushing the bones in my grip. The last drow had kept its wits, and flickered back into a pool of shadow before I could strike it. Scoffing, I shaped and released a spike of ice that nailed the tendrils and forced the drow to flicker back into a silhouette. Wounded to boot, as the spike had gone through its leg, but Night flowed into the wound and the ice was forced out as the flesh beneath reformed. Neat trick, that one, but I'd seen it before. I backhanded the rylleh and sent it tumbling away, turning in time to see the other two drow extricate themselves and rise to their feet.

"Come now," I said. "Show me a few Secrets worth stealing."

Berelun snarled something in Crepuscular, the other grimly nodding. The Night pulsed and a supernatural darkness fell over me.

"Disappointing," I said. "Hilaron did it right at the start and it was much more effective."

The working was anchored around my neck, not a veil of darkness but a bubble meant entirely to blind me. It required flesh to be anchored to, however. I stepped back, feeling myself... slip. Grow vague and muted. The mist thickened back into myself one step removed from the now-pointless bubble, revealing the sight of the two of them slithering along the floor in shadow-form. Irritated, I smashed my boot down. The ground shook, stone splintered and the two of them were thrown out in drow-shape. I saw fear in the rylleh's silvery eyes as it realized what its chief had not. This was not a fight, not for me. It was a spar through which I was mastering the use my mantle. This entire cursed ruin of an empire was. The last drow had already gotten back on its feet, but it had other troubles. The Lord of Silent Steps had cut through the muscles on the back of its knee, and was now weaving one glamour after another to keep it striking at illusions while it methodically ruined its arms and legs.

The Night, it had once told me, felt deeper when taken with an enemy's last breath.

Berelun snarled once more and I rolled my eyes. It had yet to impress me. Six tendrils of shadow rose from its back, each forming a few fingers at the end that took obsidian knives to wield, and with its sword raised high it came for me again. The other drow actually bothered to be interesting, flickering into shadow-form but remaining a silhouette. That was a new one, and worth exploring. I formed a blade of ice and set out against the rylleh, ignoring Berelun. The shadowed drow shot forward, and only then did I notice the shadow had extended to its spear as well. Promising. I ducked under the tip of the spear and scythed through its ankles, but parted only shadow that reformed anew the moment my blade passed. It spun and smashed the butt of its spear against my armour, hitting above where my spine was. An exertion of will had frost keeping it stuck and when I turned the weapon was snatched out of its grasp. Curious, I plunged my sword through its throat and left it there. The drow panicked, wrenching it out, and my brow rose. Behind me I heard Berelun howl in pain when Archer's arrow took him in the back of the knee. Simply because she hadn't deigned to come down did not mean she was not keeping an eye on the proceedings.

I caught the rylleh's left shoulder but the shadows wriggled out of my grasp and it kicked me in the stomach. My plate took the blow without trouble and I frowned, punching it in the face. It rocked back, though with no visible damage. *Shadows are constantly moving and distributing any impact or cutting force across the entire body, so anything that doesn't last is ineffective*, I thought. On the flipside anything that lasted would do a lot more damage than it should. Too flawed a trick to be worth replicating, I assessed. The ice blade still in its hand turned to mist and formed again as a collar around its neck, tightening with but a thought. I left it to choke, returning my attention to Berelun. The Mighty was bound to have a few Secrets it'd yet to pull out. Archer's arrow had gone straight through the knee, steel tip coming out bloody, and it appeared that pain was enough to get rid of the shadow tendrils it's been wielding earlier. No great loss there. I could already do the same thing, more or less.

"So," I meaningfully said. "Bleeding and desperate. Now's about time to pull out the fancy tricks, don't you think?"

It replied in Crepuscular.

"I don't speak that," I said, and shot a spear of ice at it to hurry things along.

It dodged effortlessly. Drow with that much Night swimming around their bodies had reflexes far beyond anything a human could muster even on their best day – even the Watch. I closed the distance, noting it'd ceased retreating and learning why a



heartbeat later. Shadows roiled across its entire body and sprouted in seemingly solid spikes.

"Seen it before," I sighed.

I hardened my hand to be solid as stone and struck at the spikes, shattering them and sending the drow reeling back. Berelun's face was the picture of pained surprise, but it gathered its bearings long enough for one more trick. Night dripped down its body in thick rivulets, then shot out like arrows. One would have gone through my chest, but that was seen to with a half-step to the side. Yet the Night was hovering in the air all around us, I saw, forming some kind of spotty dome. Berelun smirked and stabbed its sword into the closest spot of Night. To my surprise, it came out behind me and carved into my plate. I moved forward, ensuring it wouldn't bite too deep, but that'd been rather unexpected. I felt it safe to assume a blow could come out of any chunk of Night, which left him quite a few angles to attack from. *Interesting*. I wove glamour over myself, leaving my illusion weaving around blows even as I left the makeshift dome myself, and reached for Winter. Perfectly reproducing this was probably beyond my ability. Maybe by using my domain I could do something similar, assuming the Night really was Sve Noc's own domain manifest, but it would require too much concentration to be worth it. If I was to wield my domain in combat there were better alternatives.

Using purely Winter, thought? This was a trick worth stealing.

I went about it methodically, since it was my first time. I formed frost at regular intervals around it on the ground in a loose circle, slight marks I could strengthen with barely a thought. Making frost marks that hung in the air proved trickier, until I started weaving them the same way I did platforms. Not trying to hang them up on something that did not exist, but interposing them between layers of Creation. Even then, I saw with mild irritation that the moment I tried using one of the hovering marks again it fell. The sound of frost breaking on stone caught Berelun's attention, and its eyes widened in fear and surprise when it saw the other marks. Time to wrap this up, then. I let Winter loose, shunting off the alienation into the others who drew on the stuff of my mantle – Diabolist, as always, but now Ivah as well. Spears of pure ice shot out from over thirty directions, puncturing Mighty Berelun's body like a rag doll. I withdrew them with a flick of the wrist, forcing them back into the initial marks, and the drow dropped to the floor listlessly.

Then an arrow went through the back of its neck, because Archer had a horrid sense of humour.

"That one was mine," she called out from above.

I gestured obscenely at her, earning only laughter in response. A glance told me that the rylleh I'd left a collar on had choked to death and Ivah was already harvesting the other's Night, kneeling over the dying body. Indrani came down, leaping from handhold to handhold on the cavern wall like some sort of demented grasshopper before landing in an unnecessarily elaborate roll.

"Diplomacy's a lot simpler than I used to think, Cat," Archer noted. "I'm finally getting the hang of it."

I sighed.

"Keep an eye on the corpses," I said. "Ivah will stay with you. We're moving in on the Berelun camp after Akua's people pick up the bodies for an auction."

"Sure, sure," she dismissed. "Look on the bright side, this isn't the kind of neighbourhood where people will ask questions if they run into us standing over a bunch of corpses."

I refused to dignify that with a response and left them with dead drow, beginning the trek back to what their kind had taken to calling my sigil. The auction would delay us by an hour or two, but no more. We'd crafted the system with our time constraints in mind.

It'd been Diabolist's idea. There'd been no issue at first, as the first sigil we'd run into was the Trovod. Ivah, fresh off its title as my first Lord of Winter, had single-handedly slaughtered the sigil's upper ranks and harvested all of them. It'd later admitted that even the sigil-holder would barely have qualified as a rylleh outside of the outer rings and it'd been more an execution than a battle. The two hundred meat – *nisi*, in Crepuscular – who'd belonged to the drow of the Trovod had been eager to follow us even before I made clear that the dwarves would be close behind. Nisi that were not under a sigil were fair game for any drow looking to accumulate a bit of Night, and all it would take was a single Mighty coming across them for a massacre to ensue. At best they might end up taken by another sigil and any among them with useful skills harvested. But then we'd run into Purka territory, and those had been tougher meat. Ivah had partaken, but eventually admitted it no longer gained much out of harvesting Night from lower rungs of the Mighty like the ispe. To continue feeding it the corpses would not significantly improve its combat capacity.

That revelation came right on the back of the fact I now had about one thousand nisi who wanted to follow us on our journey, along with a smaller contingent of two hundred *dzulu* – meaning person, more or less – which was what drow were called when they had enough Night to no longer be meat but not enough to qualify as even the lowest of the Mighty. Most of the dzulu were smart enough to surrender when people still covered with the blood of

their overlords strolled into their camp, but they tended to be the ones that chafed under my rules the most. The prohibition on killing each other in particular: now that the old order was gone, they believed it was their chance to rise. I'd been inclined to just cut them loose, but Akua had talked me out of it. She'd pointed out that the nisi were largely incapable of fighting, but that the dzulu usually knew their way around a weapon. If I was to recruit an army in the Everdark, it would not be from the Mighty or the nisi. It'd be from the hungry dzulu, who'd be willing to take oaths in exchange for enough Night to no longer be arrow fodder. They'd spent long enough near the corridors of power to be willing to do quite a bit if the deal allowed them to walk those corridors in their own right.

And so we had created the auction.

We took the corpses of the Mighty and allowed any and all to bid for the right to harvest their Night. Akua had been inclined to limit bidding rights to the dzulu so that a warrior class would be created quickly, but I'd been of a different opinion. The nisi were, in my eyes, the closest thing to sane people that could be found among the drow. Most of them had spent their lives being slaves in all but name and while they paid lip service to the ways of the Everdark their hearts weren't really in it. It was hard to love customs that saw you used as tools and beasts of burdens, killed at a whim. I'd rather have slightly less effective soldiers that *weren't* ardent partisans of metaphysical cannibalism. What would be bid, however, had never been in doubt. Coin would be useful, if I could bring it back to Callow, but drow society ran on barter and somewhat communal slave labour – nisi were the property of the sigil as a whole, not individuals, but what they made was distributed at the discretion of the sigil-holder. There were precious few easy riches to be had, down here, and unlike the dwarves I didn't have a legion of workers to mine every shaft full of metals and precious stones we came across. I'd not come to the Everdark for wealth anyway. I'd come here for an army, and so the bidding was done with *oaths*. Years in my service, enforced by blood and Winter. I was willing to empower the drow if it was on my terms. Two more sigils, I thought as I made my way through the tunnels, only two more sigils and we'd have enough numbers.

Then we'd hit the city of Lotow, and the boulder would start rolling down the hill.

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Here's a link to the guide discord:

<https://discord.gg/CQRZBFM>

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Guide leads in the week and month rankings, but is still about 1000 votes behind Ward in the year rankings. So keep voting!

[Barthumphries](#)

Where do we see the year rankings?

*Yavandir*

you've got the option list thingy on top of the ranking  
*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Thank you EE for not making this chapter a Masego interlude or we'll be getting blue-balled by another cliffhanger.

*Gunslinger*

But I want to know what happens to Masego ...

*Dainpdf*

I wanted the Pilgrim interlude when Ranger comes knocking...

*Wooper*

I would've preferred more information on Ivah's change.

*naturalnuke*

Next comes the landslide.

*Jane*

Leave it to Cat to end an ages-old empire as a *training run*.

*naturalnuke*

No no no, it's all about framing. This isn't a training run at all! No no, this is an experiment on the destruction of empires and the usurpation of a culture for one's own benefit.

The Tower would be proud.

## Javvies

To be fair, the Drow are basically a failed state devolved into petty town-state (can't honestly call them city-states) warlordism, not a proper empire.

They're less unified than Procer at the height of the Proceran Civil War or the League during its internal warfare.

Presumably unless/until the Sve gives clear, unambiguous orders to do something.

*Dainpdf*

She's not just training, she's stealing their knowledge.

*haihappen*

And people. Or what counts as 'people' for Drow. She is also collecting an army. Or a warband of oathbound warriors. They are basically her new Forlorn Hope, just on a different footing.

Funny thing is that her recruitment drive will probably be the last remaining drow after the dwarfs are done.

*Wooper*

Maybe she can make a friend colony in Callow.

*Dainpdf*

Well, yeah, but that was the original intent.

:)

Where else is the black queen supposed to gather a black pawn for declination?

*Xinci*

Hmm does it count as a empire though? This is but a gestalt of various microcosms kept that way to get that power into a select few individuals bound to a single..."unit(Sevi, still unsure on what one might call her interconnected state at the moment)". If she started to figure out how to properly deconstruct the dwarves I would consider it as such though. This is more of plain ol'cultural usurpation, a choice as old as her name.

## Javvies

Heh.

That's an effective way to bind drow minions. Binding oaths in exchange for power.

Also, the Dead King definitely had a hand in Cat going to the Drow. It's part training exercise, part learning experience, part source of the troops and bodies she needs to survive the Crusade and Malicia and have the opportunity to continue playing the Game as a functional immortal, one step closer to the true apotheosis that is her potential.

Also, Winter empowered drow are going to ruin a bunch of plans for everyone except the Dead King, and possibly Bard, but I'd like to think this will be a move Bard didn't see coming. At least, when Cat started. Of course, by the time Cat gets back to Callow, Bard will probably have gotten an update from Upstairs.

### *Insanenoodlyguy*

It's the best kind of slavery as well: Voluntary indentured servitude. They literally are competing to serve her longer. And since she delivers everything she promises in the deal, they are the types that, like Ivah, will more or less find they enjoy the price paid. I doubt she can make them too unlike Drow, in that they would still stab her in the back if they thought it would A. Take and B. would benefit them enough, but they'll spend a lot less time and energy looking for that sort of opportunity than they might otherwise.

### *Rook*

The genius of it is that it's not slavery, it's servitude. The whole system is set up so that the drow that get to harvest the most Night are the same ones that are more willing to kneel.

The key is in the willingness to be bound under the oath, not the oath itself. Making it voluntary automatically picks out the ones with the least pride or the most cunning to sit at the top of the food chain, since that's essentially the factor that decides how many 'years of servitude' a drow is willing to barter. The supersoldiers that float to the top end up loyal, dangerously competent, or both.

Even better is the fact that the currency is time. There's little risk of overinvesting into a turncoat for the cream of the crop, because after enough years the oath barely matters. Side characters that stand in the influence of a Charismatic Main Character for a long enough time almost inevitably become bound to them in an entirely different, more fundamental kind of way.

### *Dainpdf*

Well, the Gallowborne are always recruiting. And I guess she is saving them from a noose of sorts, if the dwarves won't kill me for comparing them to death by hanging.

## *Alivaril*

It's also worth remembering that the Drow don't normally do oaths. So I expect there will be treacherous little buggers those who think they can just blow off the terms and vastly overbid in the pursuit of easy power. They will serve regardless of their original intentions.

## *SpeckofStardust*

At this point Bard might get updates from downstairs to. She does after technically work for both.

## *crysjal*

You're assuming the Dead King is actually interested in seeing Cat actually grow and interfering with it himself. He didn't indicate he had any interest in any of the other potential immortals. Beyond his initial interaction with Cat there's nothing to say he's interested in her beyond an initial curiosity. He outright stated he's pretty ambivalent towards her and not to take stuff personally down the road.

## *Javvies*

The other immortals are elves, Bard, and Ranger. Oh, and probably Drow and the ratling elders. Elves, drow, and ratlings aren't exactly peers worth friendly conversation.

Bard is Bard, and Ranger only drops by periodically to break in, kill some of his (irreplaceable) undead Heroes, and drink his booze.

And they've been around for centuries.

Cat is new. And she managed to impose a permanent alteration on the the Cycle of Arcadia – ending it. She's going to be an interesting addition to the Game, if she lasts long enough.

He's not personally invested in Cat or in her success, but my impression is that he wants her to succeed in reaching/attaining apotheosis – if she can prove herself worthy and earn it.

To that end, I see no reason to think that he wouldn't point her in the direction of something that would serve to challenge and test her, but also advance her on the path to true apotheosis and strengthen her position if she were successful, but would have serious negative consequences were she to falter or fail.

For that matter, he probably did not need to pull pull troops back from his subsurface border regions to invade Procer.

I don't think he needed to give the dwarves the opening to move on the drow that he did. But the dwarves moving on the drow are a test for Cat to deal with – and I'd say Cat has done rather well in her encounters with the dwarves.

And it costs the Dead King nothing, just some internal troop movements.

*lupus7*

terror queen invictus

*Jack*

Dread Empress Victorious

*Antoninjohn*

Cat's army is bound by Fea oaths and so counts as a Winter force not God's Below so if the Heroes get support against it from Above the God's Below can skew with them elsewhere

[Euodiachloris](#)

I almost feel sorry for the next white mage type who tries tossing blessings about. Or the less white ones who try binding those they perceive as being pure fae, for that matter.

It'll not go well.

*Nafram*

And back to Cat. I imagine it'll be a while before we see what was of Black's last dance, and what nasty surprise he left behind as a final act.

The auction system is clever, that way the Drow that will become her army gain power directly proportional to how much they bind themselves to Cat through magically enforced oaths.

I also like that Cat, despite refusing to allow herself or Akua to absorb the Night, is still profitting and becoming stronger as she goes. She's had immense raw power comparable to the strongest characters in the setting, but she lacked the know-how to properly use it. Now, that is changing, and if they meet again, Laurence and the thrice damned Tariq will find her more than their match

*Gunslinger*

Jesus Cat you're being scary. I have to admit after coming this far I love seeing Cat wreck shit on these sorry mobs. All the joy and promise of the Epic Levels. The Night too has a lot of promise as an interesting power source, so the stronger Mighty fights will be one hell of a thing to read.

*SMHF*

It's a nice parallel between what Cat's doing to the Drow and what Black was doing to Callow.



She's an invading force... using heavy handed strategies to make them fall in line, changing their culture in the process. And while you can argue she's improving their lives in doing so, Cat's just doing this so she can use them for her own purpose... Black would be proud(er)!

### NZPIEFACE

No, she's reforming the Drow into a respectable race like the Orcs.

### taliesinskye

Come to think of it, she's doing to the Drow what Black did to the Orcs when he taught them how to fight as legions, isn't she? In the end the Orcs loved Black for it, too. Perhaps the Drow will one day be her most fervent supporters.

### Euodiachloris

"We thought we knew the meaning of darkness and night, she showed us deep polar winter nights with no moon, but all the many cold, distant stars. And, how to snuff out, bend or use the aurora and heartbroken according to our wills."

### Euodiachloris

Meant hearthfire... But, hey. Sometimes, the autocorrect throws you a bone, nè?

*Yavandir*

Army of moonless night

*Someguy*

I have to wonder if the Winter Drow will be useful enough to be Canon Fodder to "assist" Duchess Kegan in seizing the Golden Bloom from the Elves? Having Fae Titles now mean that even if the Elves phase into Arcadia, there is no escape.

A land-swap deal to trade Daoine for their ancestral homeland. Cat can then trade Daoine to the Orc Clans for ownership and legal recognition of Lordly Titles to give them what the Tower would not, undercutting Malicia's hold on them.

*Unknown*

Seems unlikely since the Elves are outside normal space right now. I suppose Masego could force them into normal space but eh not really in a position for another fight.

*IDKWhoitis*

I'd like to think the Orcs would almost do it for free given how shit they are treated. Giving them land and lord titles would really just be glazing on the lamb.

### Javvies

Not happening. The Duchy of Daoine is the last bit of the Deoraithe ancestral homeland under their control.

That said, they may well be useful assets against the elves, but at the moment, invading the Golden Bloom to liberate it from the elves for the Deoraithe is pretty far down the priority list for Cat and everyone else on her side, including the Deoraithe themselves.

The Elves will keep – with as long as it's been, reclaiming the Golden Bloom is not a time sensitive matter.

The Deoraithe rather dislike the Procerans, and seem to be relatively on board with Cat being Queen of Callow – she's certainly far more preferable than whatever the Crusade would have left in its wake, plus, the Conclave in Salia just declared them heretics.

Also, the Dead King is invading Procer after making a deal with Malicia.

The Deoraithe are more than willing to hold off on their desire to reclaim the Golden Bloom – they have more immediate matters to attend to. Like the Crusade, the Dead King, and Praes/Malicia.

That said, Cat doesn't need to give Daoine to the orcs to get them to follow her. She has Hakram – the first Named orc since the Miezian conquest – and he got his Name through her, in large part. And she wants to kill the High Lords and their allies. She's Black's de facto chosen successor.

She's a proven and capable fighter, not some talker with soft hands and soft muscles.

She's got about as many of the qualities orcs look for in their leadership as someone who isn't an orc can.

### Euodiachloris

The orcs are kind of gaining all of Callow as it is: the population is slowly learning not to see them as the half-starved machines the Empire once turned them into, but people. People you can deal with and even call neighbour, should some move their businesses (and homes) nearby.

That's big.

### Javvies

While becoming accepted as citizens in Callow is a big deal – and definitely a positive development – that's orders of magnitude different from what Someguy was suggesting. What was suggested was giving the Duchy of Daoine in its entirety to the orcs. I think it's fairly safe to say that the difference between the two positions is not insignificant and is a distinction that matters.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Yeah, I know. Which is why I said what I did: there's no need to cede any land to a people who already have their own. The Steppes are where the orcs come from, and it is already theirs (whatever the Tower thinks).

They really don't need any more, particular not any taken from an ally/ a rather critical part of Callow.

Rights to trade within Callow as just normal people? Priceless – for the chickens, ducks, geese, cows, pigs, sheep, deer and horses Callow grows taste *good*. Not sure what orcs think of pike, but I'm pretty sure salmon would go down well. 😊

*nick012000*

I suspect that the Elves are basically just Fae that moved to live in Creation on a permanent basis. If that's the case, then it's possible that Cat might be able to turn the Deoraithe themselves into elves and regain the Deoraithe's homeland through peaceful means (possibly a political marriage to the Elven king).

Or that she can turn the Deoraithe into elves with a better claim on the forest than the elves who currently live there, and get the forest to evict said elves in favor of its old masters.

*Rook*

"Lord of silent steps" huh. I guess she's making her own Assassin? Even has the whole "I'm actually a thousand different people at the same time" thing going on, what with all the Night it's going to be eating.

Although in a very Catherine type of way, it seems like it's only going to be an assassin as far as sneaking up quietly before breaking into the inevitable brawl

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

So uh, what's thief now.

*Rook*

New Thief, shit at killing. Same as old Thief, but less insecure.

[Javvies](#)

Vivienne might be headed for a Transition to a new Name – she has not, after all, exactly been doing that much of the Role that contributed to her getting her Name originally.

The question then is, what would her new Name be. Her current Role, were she to be properly doing what Cat sent her to Callow to do, would likely send her towards a non-combat Name in the vein of Regent, Castellan, Steward, Counselor, Councilor, etc., or something along the lines of Spymistress, Spy, etc., or maybe a Thief evolution to something like Thief of Knowledge or Queen of Thieves, etc. At any rate ... we will likely have to wait until Cat gets back to Callow to learn what happened with Vivienne, Namewise.

*Argentorum*

My guess?  
The Queen's Hand.

Hakram's gesture was just that thematic. Plus, it plays into her taking a more active roll as the ruler of Callow in Catherine's stead, which allows Adjutant to be, as his name suggests, an administrator again.

*Wooper*

She isn't Barristan Selmy

[Euodiachloris](#)

Good. He's one of the best that Dany has, but he's out of his depth in both politics and Essos. It's likely to get him killed.

*mavant*

Speaking of which, is he getting another dead hand mechanism or are we just gonna graft a boomstick on the end of it?

*JJR*

No Boomsticks.

Boomsticks make Gnomes angry.

*mavant*

It'd be so groovy, though.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I can't see that happening. Not for quite a while.  
Otherwise the sacrifice loses its power.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Goblinfire Flamethrower.

*GuidingMoonlight*

Blue balls, we meet again

*IDKWhoitis*

I foresee a moment in the future where Anti Fae measures are just laughed at and stabbed in the throat.

*Dainpdf*

I assume she's still not got as many tricks as Larat had as prince... But who knows, fae are static.

*IDKWhoitis*

I mean this applies for both Cat and her Army. If the crusaders or Malica deploy anti fae weapons and tactics, the Drow shock troops will just crash through. If they try to contain Catherine through a ward, I imagine the fire in a box metaphor will return. It'll look like it's working until the whole box catches on fire.

*Dainpdf*

Malicia has proven she can contain Cat. I imagine someone with access to priests can likely achieve something similar. As for the army, well... I assume it'll work like any other army: weak to goblin fire.

[crysjal](#)

Yeah but as the premise goes. Trying to imprison a powerful foe is just asking the Narrativr to let them escape and fuck you up somehow. Unless the capture is a direct product of a significant victory then the longer you actually succeed the worse the outcome when said box burns down. Or in Cat's case, freezes and shatters.

*Dainpdf*

Depends a lot on what the story is. There are stories about mighty otherworldly beings being bound and spent.

I mean, if binding something always ended in it escaping the Tower would never have stood as long as it has. Nor would Akua's weapon have been completed.

*Xinci*

Well there are multiple ways of getting out. Rhetoric is important..for example I "free you...from your shoulders". Technically the tower was possibly free during the few times it got taken down but it came back. Generally if you cage something it gets out one way or another, now if and how it comes back are more due to its circumstances. Most otherworldly beings get freed just in a different time-span than their prisoner. Just read some stories about sealed demons and devils(Theres a nice example in a Twilight Zone episode actually).

*Dainpdf*

Well... There are stories of things that just get bound and don't escape, or don't until the end of the world. First that comes to mind is Merlin, but there's Lucifer in the original version, Fenrir, the Greek Titans...

*JackbeThimble*

I bet when she meets the priestess of night she discovers that she's actually a Behavioral Economics grad student whose pHd thesis went badly out of hand.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

I laughed at this more than I should have.

*haihappen*

thats the thing: Scientists always insist that you prove your hypothesis with experiments... but nobody is happy if the economics people actually DO it. I imagine the world of Hunger Games started out as an economics model like "wouldn't it be very efficient if you gave a small number of people all the power?"

[Euodiachloris](#)

That's why you snooze the developers of MMOs and data mine those puppies.

Also, it's cheaper than growing an actual banana republic.  
;P

[Euodiachloris](#)

Smooze – seriously, autocorrect? What have you got against wine and cheese?

lol

I think it's schmooze

*Andrew Mitchell*

Agreed.

*Shequi*

They actually did that with Eve Online, which to all intents and purposes is an economics simulation for proving that completely libertarian economics doesn't work.

[BarthHumphries](#)

I'm curious about this. Where can I read more?

[Rey d'Tutto](#)

And the sample size has now much to do with the results? A teacup full of ocean water holds no whales.

*Unorginal*

In 2013 Eve had 500000 concurrent subscribers, its only gone further up.

It is also a true no holds barred player driven economy. There are no NPCs no banks but the player made ones, delivery services are just trusted guilds with blockade runner ships etc.

*Unorginal*

Actually there are safe systems in game protected by Concord ships who are the only NPCs that you ever have to interact with but mostly they are there to protect newbie players from being sniped by large player companies

*Unorginal*

Also hostile takeovers of player companies (guilds) is an encouraged part of gameplay result in overnight disappearances of major players occasionally.

*mavant*

#gladidroppedoutofgradschool

*Xinci*

She has been successful as far as I have seen. She just hasn't done enough to reform her classes. The lower portions need reforming and their relationship entangling them with her highest tiers also needs some reworking. A new leader is totally capable of making them into something more(a'la Cat). Well long as she doesn't waste them...and if she can manage to keep them flexible though this next transition(metaphysically and physically).

*JackbeThimble*

Hakram (Seeing Cat arrive from Arcadia with her drow host trailing behind): Where'd you get all the scimitars?  
Catherine: Oh the Dwarves offered me a discount on a shipment they had to unload. Something about them being nerfed in 5e. Last I saw they were haggling with an envoy from Helike for a rapier.  
Hakram: And the Panthers?

*Daemion*

Hahaha... Drizzt...

... but these drow will still be evil. 😊

*danh3107*

Scimitars being a d6 is so dumb.

*beleester*

They trade damage for a larger threat range. If they were 1d8 18-20 they'd be strictly better than longswords.

*mavant*

Don't longswords have versatile in 5e? The offhand dagger is pretty useful.

*JackbeThimble*

Yeah but that's why they were 'nerfed' in 5e- they took the whole concept of threat ranges out. So scimitars are now essentially just shortwords that do slashing damage.

*Berder*

Can't wait for Cat to fight The Mighty Boosh.

Typo: methaphysical



[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Just say No to Meth.  
It's a he'll of a drug.

*Dainpdf*

Interesting. Trick stealing is a great idea. It's a way to improve from this incursion without taking the obvious (and trapped) shortcut of taking Night.

*werafdsaew*

Aw... I want to find out what happened to Black

---

He's getting offscreened the same way Capitain was. It's scary, really, how a single tidbit of reliable information (Catherine's "My teacher dedicated his entire life to breaking this game, but that's a reflection of his flaw – he can't conceive a world where he doesn't win") allowed the Grey Pilgrim to come up with an Amadeus-proof plan where hero-collected intel of White Knight failed.

*werafdsaew*

I think you're reading too much into it. Also until there's onscreen confirmation, he's not dead.

*RanVor*

"Alive until proven dead" is a new rule in Guide.

[Barthumphries](#)

That's always true for Named.

*RanVor*

Black has too many unresolved plotlines tied to him to die now. EE isn't a writer who wastes potential like that. Besides, his death has been "ensured" for so long I don't even believe he's going to die anymore.

*Snowfire1224*

Interesting, but if Ivah is a lord of winter is he admitting that he has a gender or did it simply accept the title of Lord because there was no gender neutral term for lord/lady? I mean that is a big part of the drow culture, having no gender.

*mavant*

Ey's really saying "Radchaai of Silent Steps", but it doesn't translate well.

[sengachi](#)

A+ reference

*mavant*

That was such a good trilogy. I still want to know what's going on with the Presger.

[crysjal](#)

I think as a Drow you don't have a gender until you acquire enough Night to earn/deserve one. Somewhat like having a name at all or being seen as a person.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Wait a fucking second. Instead of stealing the Night, she's slowly torturing the people who won't follow her into letting them reveal the secrets of the Night so she can appropriate it for herself?

*Novice*

Yep. She's following her time-honored philosophy. Dear ol' Cat takes what she can't break and breaks what she can't take.

*mavant*

I suppose her objection to taking the Night was not a moral one so much as a practical one.

22. No matter how tempted I am with the prospect of unlimited power, I will not consume any energy field bigger than my head.

[ftaku](#)

Torturing implied she is strapping innocents to a table to cause pain. This is her fighting people who planned to attack her first and drawing out the fight to learn.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Otherwise known as playing with your food...

[taborask](#)

I think Dread Empress Sinestra might be in strong competition with Traitorous for favorite tyrant

[Euodiachloris](#)

\*clutches pearls\* How can you even say that?! ;P

*Anonymouse*

What about Irritant

*mavant*

Irritant is rather fun as well.

*SMHF*

Also it's a nice change to watch Cat use Winter in creative ways rather than her old strategy of "burying them under my severed limbs till they give up"!

*ereshkigala*

At least Cat is learning to use Winter. Akua curbstomping a dozen heroes at once with her own power must have showed her just how stupid she was being not training with it.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I think what motivates her here is the fact she almost died to a giant pet rat.

[ChillyPepper](#)

So... when's Larat taking Catherine's cloak?

*Aston W*

Cat now has minions.

She is officially a Bad boss.

Love how it's all a training routine.

*Author Unknown*

Traipsing through the Underdark with a bunch of (literal) murder hoboes. Good Times.

*Decius*

When none of the buyers at an auction has literally any maximum allowable bid, but can just bid "more", the prices for motivated buyers will be quite high.

Cat doesn't have to worry about the oaths running out. After all, the bids for the top night are going to start in the eons and go up many orders of magnitude from there.

The bids for the trash are going to start in decades, because the alternative is /not getting ANY/.

*fbt*

great, great bit, lovely to see cat chewing gum and kicking butt..and growing. And i love the snark, as always. "That one was mine!" lol. good comments and a lot of interesting hints in this one, I enjoyed it very much. I do worry about Black, he's one of my favorite characters in any series. He reminds me of Kerr Avon, who I loved. If GP did indeed off Black, i hope Cat makes a legendary example of him (he's certainly earned it, in many ways).

*WuseMajor*

So... No comments on the whole "Mighty Berelun used to be a sigil holder until he took an arrow to the knee" thing?

How about comments on just how often "Akua did this helpful thing and I don't really even think about how much leverage it's giving her anymore" came up? Admittedly, right now, Archer is the only lieutenant who isn't dangerously treacherous that Cat has with her, but it seems like Akua might have gained a worrying level of trust from this one.

*Daemion*

Akua is trusted to behave according to her nature, which means Cat fully expects her to try to weasel out of the situation even if that means lies, betrayal, murder and unspeakable horrors unleashed upon the innocent.

I doubt anyone trusts Akua to have Cat's best interests at heart, she's a very selfish creature after all. But as long as her desires line up with Cat's goals...

*NotQuiteHere*

Where does it explicitly say that Bard is working for both side?

[crysjal](#)

It's indicated during the history scene during the journey in Arcadia to TDK when Bard is discussing her empowerment with him. She indicates she was the first empowered individual and that she was given power by both sides. Her original role was to maintain Calernia as a vehicle for the God's argument about free will. Exactly how she goes about that or whether she actually still is following her role is anyone's guess.

*fbt*

in the visions of the past on the way to see the dead king, tdk asks which side she's working for at the moment when she visits, implying she does both. there are quite a few other important seeming hints in that bit, worth a re-read.

[sengachi](#)

There's no way Cat coming to rely on dumping the principal alienation on her minions isn't going to backfire horribly one day.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Yes, we'll need to keep an eye out for that and try to guess when & where it's going to happen before EE shows us.

*Anony*

"methaphysical cannibalism".  
Now that's something I can get behind.

*Xinci*

Its a start. Theres a huge amount of potential in their structure, they only serve like they do now because of their ruler. She can shift them into something more in many ways. Grafting them into various metaphysical concepts to learn and become more herself. It'll be a while before she makes such a decision I suppose though, she doesnt have the perspective or the love right now. Doesnt understand the Night enough.,,

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## **Chapter 63: Initiation**

*"Blood sacrifice is such an ugly term. I prefer to think of it a 'blood redistribution', a thriving new form of Imperial enterprise."*

– Dread Empress Sinistra II, the Coy

"One hundred and sixty years, subjected to the full breadth of lesser and greater oaths," Akua said.

The nisi at her side, a one-eyed drow named Centon, repeated her words in Crepuscular loudly enough all those assembled below would hear them. Nearly seven hundred drow were seated respectfully on their knees, packed tightly on the cavern floor, but they were the most orderly crowd I'd ever seen. That many humans in a room would carry out hushed conversations among each

other, even if there was a devil looking over them, and neither orcs nor goblins were very different. Goblins, in fact, might try to talk with the bloody devil. Not a single one of the drow had so much as let out a grunt except when bidding. The difference here, I thought, was cultural. Most surface people had an expectation they would not have their throat cut on a whim, while drow had lived their whole lives under a different set of unspoken rules. Life was the cheapest form of currency in the Everdark. Centon's words were not followed by another bid, though in truth I'd not expected one. One hundred and sixty years was fairly high for a rylleh. A sigil-holder's corpse could easily fetch as much as five centuries, but then it came with the understanding that a drow harvesting that much Night should easily be capable of living that long.

Diabolist and I both knew why the bidding for lesser corpses had risen. After it'd been made clear that titles like the one bestowed upon Ivah would only ever be considered for people who'd fought under me and sworn the full breadth of oaths, interest in even the lesser Mighty had significantly increased. The most ambitious among the dzulu wanted to be worth bringing along for the fight when we hit Great Lotow, judging the comprehensive oaths an acceptable shackle if it could lead to that greater ultimate payoff. The Lord of Silent Steps had made something of an impression when it'd gone through the upper ranks of the Trovod like a hot knife through butter, and the lingering tales of that had led to regular polite inquiries on the subject of titles from both dzulu and the occasional nisi.

"Then Sekoran may rise to take the oaths, and this auction has come to an end," Akua said, after the silence continued for a full sixty heartbeats. "You may disperse."

Centon translated her words, and without a sound the drow below us knelt forward until their foreheads touched the floor. Not one rose before the winner – named Sekoran, apparently – was climbing up. They left in orderly files after that, neither jostling nor hurrying. Even though I'd made it clear that as far as I was concerned all of their kind were equal under my rules, the nisi still allowed the dzulu to leave ahead of them while expressing deference through tilts of the head lowering their gaze to the floor and presenting their neck. It meant, Akua had told me, that the nisi in question were offering their life and Night for harvest should their social superior wish it. Mostly a courtesy, as nisi were communal property of the sigil and not to be touched unless allowed by the sigil-holder, but here in the outer rings those customs were more loosely kept to. When the difference in power between rylleh and sigil-holder was thin, order tended to break down and killing nisi was often used as statement of rising or descending influence. The drow, I'd learned, made the Praesi fondness intrigue and blood sport look positively mild in

comparison. Sekoran climbed up the rocky outcropping that'd served as our seat for the auction with poorly-hidden eagerness.

It was young, though it was hard to tell with drow. Sekoran did lack the kind of agelessly young look most Mighty had, though, its features still soft and lacking the harsh angles of a mature drow. The lifespan of their species was a headache and a half to understand. It was known that those who held no Night save that which they were born to would live exactly sixty years, much too clear-cut a lifespan to be natural. They called it the Three Faces: drow reached maturity at twenty and began their decline at forty, their bodies breaking down over those last twenty years until death took them at the exact age of sixty. Dzulu, like Sekoran's silver-touched eyes betrayed he was, could expect to live over a hundred years old. It was unheard of for even the lowest of the Mighty to die of old age, but some of the worst monsters in the inner ring were alleged to have lived over a millenium. The kid bowed after finishing the climb, first towards me then towards Akua. It allowed Centon to speak to it with contemptuous patience, though more than once I caught it glancing at the banner at my side while the nisi spoke. It'd made an impression, as it'd been meant to.

Drow did not take oaths, or make them, and so a few of the first dzulu to secure a corpse in the auction had treated their word a little too lightly. Three, to be precise. They'd tried to slay other drow under my banner, or hurt them. Their hideously twisted and frozen corpses had been hung from the long metal pole at my side, dangling softly back and forth. I'd not had to lift so much as a finger to see them die. The oaths had seen to that, the sliver of Winter I'd put inside them devouring their bodies from the inside the moment they acted in a manner breaking their word. The Night they'd taken was still there, stirring as they dangled.

They'd started taking the oaths seriously after that.

"It is ready for the ceremony," Akua said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I glanced at the shade and nodded. She'd helped me with both the ritual and the wording of the oaths, putting her extensive experience with diabolism to slightly more acceptable use. As a sorcerous discipline, diabolism was as much about wordcraft as it was rituals: a binding could be technically flawless and still turn out to be completely worthless if there was a loophole in the protections it carried. There was a reason Praesi preferred summoning lesser devils when they could get away with it: the risks rose sharply when the devil was capable of thought. I'd agreed that making the oaths in Lower Miezana would be to our advantage, since neither of us mastered Crespuscular well enough to be able to understand all the nuances – or, to be frank, trusted any of our translators enough to let them shape the oaths

in our stead. Centon would translate the words as well as it could, but the oaths and answers would be in my own native tongue. The ritual tools involved were, to Akua's open despair, rather crude and simple. A sharp obsidian knife, unadorned save for the leather grip, and a rough bowl of sandstone. More than once I'd caught her complaining under her breath that only a Callowan would 'try to subvert an entire civilization with kitchen utilities', but she'd get over it.

Or not, I didn't care either way. Her continued genteel horror was always good for a laugh.

The ceremony, if it could even be called that, was rather simple. I sliced the knife across my palm – normally I'd consider that horribly inconvenient, but my unusual physiology allowed me such dramatic liberties – and let the blood flow into the bowl. I handed the knife to Akua, who then passed it on to Sekoran. It followed suit, cutting too deep in its eagerness. There was no need to slide a piece of Winter into the mixture. My blood itself, I'd been forced to admit, was the stuff of Winter manifest.

"Sekoran of the Everdark, under this name and any name you have ever borne or will ever bear I bind you by these oaths," I said. "May they hold true for one hundred and sixty years, lest the power now bestowed devour you whole."

"I so swear," Sekoran spoke in heavily accented Lower Miezani after Centon translated for it.

"You will never slay nor harm nor hinder any in the service of the Sovereign of Moonless Nights, or dwelling within Callow, save in your own defence or the pursuit of its laws," I said.

"I so swear."

"For the duration of one hundred and sixty years, you will follow the orders of the Sovereign of Moonless Nights without intent to subvert or pervert the spirit in which they were given," I said.

"I so swear."

There were sixteen lesser oaths, all in all, and we moved through them briskly. Most of them were practical boundaries I needed to set before turning loose the murderous drow equivalent of the Watch on the surface for my campaigns. There would be no rape or wanton slaughter, protection of civilians would be enforced by magical oath and standards of decent behaviour thrust upon them. Akua had called it forging a facsimile of Callowan honour through threat of death. I called it refusing to create another batch of fae nobility if they weren't bound to behave the way nobility supposedly did. The greater oaths were only three, and it wouldn't be inaccurate to call them my *contingencies*. Black had



taught me that there was always a point of failure hidden away in even the most stringent of plans, something unseen and unexpected that would come back to bite you at the worst possible time. Given the scope of what I was undertaking here, the sting of that bite would be equivalently brutal. If – when – this turned south on me, I needed levers to either sideline or end them. Fortunately, this time I was not negotiating with the most powerful woman on the continent while she was arguably at the height of her power. I was dealing with eager, desperate drow who craved what I had to offer so badly they could taste it.

The kind of people willing to make dangerous bargains.

“Until death, you will obey and enforce any and all terms of the Liesse Accords,” I said.

“I so swear.”

“The Sovereign of Moonless Night will once name a foe you must fight until it and all it commands is utterly destroyed,” I said.

“I so swear.”

“The Sovereign of Moonless Night will have right to ask one boon of you, to be carried out at all costs, and that right if unused can be passed down to others at its discretion,” I said.

“I so swear.”

*Help, long-term plan, insurance.* It was not fool-proof, but it was the best the finest diabolist of my generation had been able to help me craft.

“Then Sekoran of the Everdark is granted right to the corpse bargained for, and all Night held therein,” I said. “By this compact we are now bound, and will remain bound.”

The young drow shivered, and it had nothing to do with the coolness of the cavern air. There’d been power in the air, power running through its veins. Through mine as well. I glanced at Centon and nodded. The nisi spoke in Crepuscular, and guided the other drow towards the rylleh’s corpse. Akua lingered, to my complete lack of surprise.

“Diabolist,” I evenly said. “Report.”

She sat at my side without need for an invitation.

“The food situation is out of control,” Akua said. “We can last two more days, three if we ration even the children.”

“We’ll be seizing the Berelun reserve today,” I said.

"And the Berelun themselves with it," she pointed out. "The speed at which we accrue bellies to fill vastly outstrips the quantity of food we're acquiring."

I nodded slowly. She wasn't wrong.

"I expect you're leading to a suggestion," I said.

"You were intent on hitting another two sigils before moving against Great Lotow," Diabolist said. "We cannot afford that. Perhaps one, if what passes for their granaries is large enough."

"We're still weak," I said.

"Our drow contingent will not be the cause of victory or defeat in Lotow, let us not pretend otherwise," she said. "A few more Mighty sworn to you will not make a significant difference either way."

Time and empty bellies. Along with coin, they were the enemies that most often imposed on my plans.

"Agreed," I sighed. "I'll send Archer to see if the Delen are more inclined to fighting than fleeing, we can decide from there."

"Sensible," she conceded with a nod. "As for the situation in the camp, it remains... fluid."

"Rarely a good word, when passing Praesi lips," I said.

She seemed amused by that, and did not deny it.

"The nisi remain cautiously grateful for the rules of behaviour you have imposed, though skeptical it will last," Akua said. "The situation with the dzulu, however, is fast reaching boiling point. The auction has worked, to an extent, but I would expect betrayals in the camp from ambitious elements the moment we run into solid opposition."

"You have names?" I asked.

"I am in the process of gathering them," Diabolist said. "Which remains difficult, as I lack eyes to watch on my behalf. I must rely almost entirely on rumours and observation of social currents – observations, I will remind you, made without appropriate cultural context."

"Still angling for your little death squad, I see," I said.

"There is no nation or large-scale organization on Calernia that does not have individuals charged with internal surveillance," Akua said. "Including Callow under your reign, Catherine. Drow being notably more fractious than humans, to establish such a

measure is mere common sense. We both know the longer we wait the larger this will become and the harder it will be to track would-be traitors. It must be done, and done quickly."

"Not to revisit our last argument, but I still don't trust dzulu to keep an eye on their own kind," I frankly replied. "And for them to have right of life and death inside the camp would carry obvious dangers."

"I have come to understand and somewhat agree with your perspective in this," Diabolist said. "Which is why I would amend my previous request. I would like ten ispe corpses from the next... acquisition to be set aside for raising nisi of my own picking. They can be charged with the duty, after being subjected to a strict set of oaths."

"That'll take the wind out of the next auction," I said.

"It will also make it clear that there is more than one way to rise in your service," Akua said. "A useful tool, if the notion is properly conveyed."

I clenched my fingers, then slowly unclenched them. She was right about the risks of leading a pack of drow without anyone charged with keeping an eye on them. Knives pointed at our back weren't just likely at this rate, they were inevitable.

"Agreed for the corpses," I said. "We'll discuss the hierarchy of that fresh batch of spies and assassins after the Berelun have been brought into the fold."

I was disinclined to let Akua Sahelian head what would effectively be my equivalent of the Jacks down here, but I might not have another choice. Ivah was another possible candidate, but I might need it on the frontlines and my leash on Diabolist was arguably tighter. In the end I could dislike it all I wanted but who else was there?

"One last subject, if you would," Akua said.

Evidently she'd noticed my attention was waning.

"I'm listening," I said.

"I would ask for one more ispe to be set aside," she said. "For Centon to harvest."

"Your assistant," I frowned. "It should have enough status from that position alone, and I can't think of another reason why you'd want to empower it."

"It is being treated as a nisi favoured by one of higher status, not an individual to be respected outside that very narrow boundary," Akua noted. "The casual disrespect it is still offered

grates me and hinders its work besides. Status as one of the lesser Mighty would neatly remedy that."

And also allow her to sink deeper hooks into the rest of the drow through Centon, a notion I was much less pleased about. Keeping Diabolist useful without giving her too much power was ever a delicate balancing act.

"If you were serious about promoting for reasons other than martial talent, you will hardly find a better candidate," Akua said. "It was careful enough to hide it held the Secret of Lower Miezan for more than twenty years."

"No one's born with a full Secret," I grunted. "Not even literacy, and that's the most common there is. It whet its blade a few times to complete that."

"You might as well chide a Praesi for diabolism," she replied amusedly.

My brow rose.

"How's your heart, Akua?" I said.

"Ever in your hand, dearest, in more ways than one," she smoothly replied.

I rolled my eyes.

"I'll see if I can spare an ispe, but that's unlikely until Lotow," I said. "Make do until then."

"By your will, my queen," she said.

"Because *that's* not getting old," I muttered.

I rose to my feet. Time to finish cleaning up the Berelun, then. Archer would be getting restless by now.

—

"You're angry," Indrani said. "It told Ivah you'd be angry."

"First off, I very much doubt that," I replied.

"That's fair," she mused. "I mean, I *was* lying."

"Yours is the laziest, sloppiest form of treachery I have ever countered," I said. "I can't believe that's a mark in your favour, but Gods help me it is. Anyhow, I'm not angry. Surprised? No, surprised is too weak a word. *Befuddled*."

"I mean, you left us alone without supervision so when you really think about it who's really at fault?" Indrani said.

There was a pause.

"You. You are that fault. That was what I was implying," she revealed.

"I left you two alone for two hours and a half tops, Archer," I complained. "How the Hells did you end up 'accidentally' taking over another sigil?"

What the Berelun called their stronghold was, practically speaking, a plateau inside a tall cavern with a passage through drilled under it. To reach the part where the drow had actually lived – the top of the plateau, more specifically a knot of descending stalactites and stalagmites that'd fused into some sort of stone tree around which all the Berelun tents and structures were centered – would normally have required climbing a sheer cliff, but there were benefits to being made of smoke and mirrors. Like growing wings at will. When I'd first realized that Archer and Ivah had proceeded ahead of me I'd expected to find the stronghold cleared of the last Mighty and terrified drow awaiting instructions. The second part of that, at least, had come true. The first had not, since I was currently looking at around thirty Mighty of varying ranks kneeling on the stone with their hands behind their necks.

"There's a very good explanation for that," Indrani assured me.

My brow rose, and I gestured for her to speak. Silence persisted.

"I can't think of a believable lie," she admitted after a moment.

"Have you considered giving me an actual truthful accounting?" I suggested.

"What is this, a bloody House of Light?" she complained, then her eyes brightened. "Although, if you're willing to wear ripped up sister robes I'm more than willing to give you my *confessions*."

"Just give me your godsdamned report, Archer," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

"Fine," she pouted. "So I was, like, making small talk with Ivah while surrounded by corpses."

"As one does," I said.

"Right? We never go anywhere without there being corpses around, we should work on that," she said. "Anyways, it was all like 'Archer, you peerless beauty whose charm has moved me, I'm going to brag so you become interested me'."

"Classic Ivah," I agreed.

"And so it mentioned that Bere-whatever tried to convince it to stab you," Indrani said. "Offered it fourth place in the local pecking order."

Probably the only accurate part of what she'd reported so far, though I would not hold out hope for that trend to continue.

"So then, I was like all 'Ivah, please, don't be so obvious it's just embarrassing'. But then I figured – wait, fourth? That's pretty high up. Burley-whatever brought two rylleh with a bunch of mooks and Ivah hadn't done much to show power at that point. Unless it was real bare back on the home front, Shirley-whatever was full of it when it made that promise."

The worst part, I thought, was that she was perfectly aware that the name of the sigil and sigil-holder had been Berelun. She was yanking my chain. I knew that. She knew I knew that. And I knew that she knew I knew that. Yet if I actually corrected her I would lose, and that was just unacceptable.

"So you went on a walk," I prompted.

"Well, technically you said to keep an eye on the corpses and the corpses were gone by then," Indrani said. "So really you have only yourself to blame."

"Oh I wouldn't worry about that," I grunted. "There's plenty of blame to go around."

"Look, when we found the Troubadours they were already under attack by this other bunch of drow," Indrani protested. "So you know, I defended the innocent. As is my custom."

"I don't suppose you bothered to learn the context for all this," I tried.

"I knew you'd say that," she crowed. "So I wrote it down."

She pulled back her coat and mail sleeve, revealing red scribbles. I blinked.

"Archer, is that *blood*?"

"Which do we run into more often down here: dead bodies or inkwells?" she pointed out. "It's like you don't even think, sometimes. Anyways, here it is. The Dubious-"

Delen, I mentally corrected, which was the nearest sigil to this tone.

"- have been all warlike recently, and slapped the Henries in the face in a skirmish a while back, a defeat bad enough that it cleaned up most of their Mighty."

Had we really gone from 'Bere-whatever' to 'Henries' in the span of thirty heartbeats? I was in dire need of a way to exact pretty revenge on Indrani, it was the only language she truly understood.

"When they heard the Henries were moving out to speak with us, they decided it was a good time to attack," Indrani continued. "But they're blind and their timing is shit-"

The stronghold of the Berelun was difficult to access and finding out precisely when they'd gone to ambush me was difficult, I mentally translated.

"- so they were only just getting started when me and Ivah showed up," she said.

"Ivah and I," I said. "You ignorant wench."

She flipped me off. My gaze returned to the kneeling drow, who'd been watching us talk back and forth very carefully.

"And you what, killed enough of them that the rest gave up?" I asked.

"We protected the innocent until surrender ensued," Indrani proudly replied, then spoiled the way she'd kept her face straight through that by badly winking.

"Fuck it," I sighed. "We'll offer them the usual 'oath or sword' bargain then loot everything before we get back on the road."

"Yes sir, your queenliness ma'am," Archer grinned. "We decided on where we're headed, then?"

"Great Lotow," I told her. "I hope you're in a fighting mood, because we're about to declare war on an entire civilization."

The smile she gave me at that was terrifying in more ways than one, but at least she was on my side.

The drow wouldn't be so lucky.

---

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!!

Please

It would mean a lot to me.

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*Raved Thrad*

Link doesn't work. Does an a href tag work?

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*Raved Thrad*

bleh, that didn't work. 😞

[Miles](#)

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Keep trying eventually one of us will get it right  
(Or click my name)

*Raved Thrad*

That worked! How'd you do it?

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Citizens!

Join The People In The Bellerophon Discord, The First And Mightiest Of All Discords, Peerless Jewel Of Freedom: <https://discord.gg/rpVW3KS>

*Solfadore*

ATTN: ALL READERS

Hey all,

RL friend of ErraticErrata here. A few others and I were debating Guide characters recently, and it dawned on us that there is truly no other way of settling any debate than by the laws of Bellerophon, Peerless Jewel of Freedom.

That's right – we're organizing a PGTE Character Contest!

Mostly because we're curious as to which characters The-People-Who-Can-Do-No-Wrong (that's you) prefer. Getting to hear your opinion of each character is valuable, so don't hesitate to share!

Before you ask, we did manage to talk EE into letting us do this, and with only a minimal number of threats.

- The contest will start with next Monday's chapter (October 22).
- One match per chapter – the link to the poll will be in EE's first comment in response to the chapter. We'll also publish it on PGTE's subreddit if you don't read any of the comments. Like



the one you're reading right now. I'm helpful.

– It will be a series of head-to-head matches between 32 PGTE characters. Just vote for your favourite!

We promise lies, violence, more lies, and even the clenching and unclenching of fists. Or maybe none of that and just a series of polls. We're still figuring it out.

I'll publish the bracket on Wednesday, so stay tuned!

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

As honorary citizen of Bellerophon, Peerless Jewel of Freedom, I shall comply to the Laws.

*Novice*

Hmmm... Your statement feels like you're implying you actually have a choice in whether or not to comply to the Laws As Penned By The People. Have you something to say, Citizen?

[Barthumphries](#)

I feel that citizen is expressing their complete desire to choose to follow all of the laws, even those that they do not have a choice in which to follow, as is right and proper.

*Death Knight*

I predict it's going to be a tie between Black and Anaxares.

[papapok13](#)

As the only rightfully elected member of the cast, our Hierarch is to win. Any other outcome could only be the result of foregin tyrants' treacherous manipulation.

*burguulkodar*

I laughed out loud at this. Genius.

*JankTankJoe*

Sweet. Let the best(worst) character win!

*Fern*

god finally, the only waifu wars that have ever mattered

lets just all agree that brandon talbot is best girl and move on. I've never fought to the death for a bear before but i sure as hell will give it the old college try

*Agent J*

Your waifu is shit and your existence has proven a failed project.

Robber is Best Girl. Always was. Always will be. The quality of the series has declined starkly with his prolonged absence.

*Novice*

Traitorous will always remain as Best Girl. In fact, every contestant turns out to be Traitorous all along!

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Traitorous is fine for thrills and to look at, but we need a waifu who'll stand by us through thick and thin. Bad boys like Traitorous are no good for us. Reliable Brandon Talbot is clearly Best Girl.

[benthelynx](#)

Robber is not best girl. Robber is not even best footrest. Dread Emperor Revenant is best girl.

*Someguy*

"Blood sacrifice is such an ugly term. I prefer to think of it a 'blood redistribution', a thriving new form of Imperial enterprise."

– Dread Empress Sinistra II, the Coy

She should have been in PR and Marketing.

*Antoninjohn*

Well we do have blood banks today so I suppose Empress Sinistra II the coy was just a great visionary

[happyhavak](#)

I love the way this band of villains functions. I really do.

*Gunslinger*

At this rate her next name will be The Drow Butcher. She's basically auctioning premium cuts.

*Someguy*

Akua with a Secret Police is a "NO!". Akua with any form of authority is just Mazrim Taim/Starscream shenanigans waiting to happen.

*Raved Thrad*

Mentioning Starscream had me picturing Akua shouting at someone, "I am Akua Sahelian! Finest product of the Praesi Empire!" 🤪

*SlyMcFly*

I forget the details, but didn't Akua go on a huge "I'm the culmination of centuries of Praesi High Lords breeding their offspring for beauty, brains, and magical brawn" spiel at some point?

*Soma*

Yes.

*Raved Thrad*

If that's the case then they can't just leave things as they are. There *must* be a big showdown between Megaliciatron and Starsakuascream.

*Dainpdf*

Would that Akua were as buffoonish as Starscream...

*RanVor*

Maybe she'll become when she gets her secret police...

*Micke*

As long as the oaths are the same, the risks should be Cat, neither more nor less. We know Akua's interest is making Catherine Dread Empress of Praes, not backstabbing her allies for shits and giggles.

*RanVor*

Exactly. Why people keep believing otherwise is beyond me.

*Allafterme*

Because we know before the end of this book things roll downhill so hard that when you yell "the underdog" to a fountain of knowledge, words "Catherine Foundling" will appear. And Akua is, well, Akua.

*RanVor*

Isn't it the case now?

I mean, Akua is many things, but dumb isn't one of them. She will not betray Cat unless it improves her

situation considerably, and so far none of Cat's enemies can offer her anything that would beat what she already has under Cat, and what she would lose if she turned against the Woe.

*Decius*

Because the reason that Akua wants Cat to be Dread Empress is so that she (Akua) can either run everything under Cat's nose or rule everything over her dead body.

*RanVor*

How does that contradict what Micke said?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Give Akua some credit. She wears her seething treachery rather better than Taim ever could.

*Yitzi*

I'd be more concerned that so many oaths (written by Akua) specify loyalty to the Sovereign of Moonless Nights, and not to Catherine personally.

[benthelynx](#)

I noticed that too. It's possibly a limitation as that's the part of her that allows her to bind those oaths, but even then it's going to come back and bite her.

I'm kinda disappointed that Akua isn't suffering the fate of her folly yet.

*RanVor*

Actually, no. The sad fact is that Cat can't do everything by herself, and can't relegate any sensitive tasks to Archer. That leaves only Akua and the Drow, who are equally untrustworthy and much less predictable. Now, granting any kind of *independent* authority to the Diabolist would be an utterly moronic move. But authority on behalf of Cat that can be easily overridden if Akua feels like being stupid? That's not a bad idea at all, as long as Cat can ensure the secret police are loyal to her before the Diabolist, which shouldn't be hard with all the oaths and Winter shards.

[Javvies](#)

Might need some sort of recall/abort command/option on the second greater oath.

Though, since it appears to be a one-shot, it's unlikely to be lightly used, so maybe not.

But oath-enforced behavior? That's going to work as long as the oaths run for, but I'm dubious about what happens after the term of the oaths expires. Unless she uses the third greater oath on a permanent/indefinite extension of the other oaths, lesser and greater.

Oh, that first greater oath is sneaky – she brings a host of oathbound enforcers to the Liesse Accords ... if she can ever bring the Liesse Accords into play.

Akua gaining more power – especially as head of an internal security service – is trouble waiting to happen.

I bet "Callow" is going to be a lot larger after the Uncivil Wars. Don't want drow marauding on your territory? Become part of Callow, and then they can't or their oaths kill them (until the term of the oaths expire).

—

Hah, Archer is hilarious "we accidentally took these guys over while you weren't watching us".

Leaving Ivah and Archer together and unsupervised is a bad idea Cat, and you should know better.

At least they're about to be causing problems for somebody other than Cat shortly.

—

These oaths demonstrate just how bad an idea it is to make and then break oaths with Cat. As it should be when dealing with powers linked to the Fae.

Pilgrim broke his, though that presumably wasn't anywhere near as one sided. It should still cause him serious problems dealing with Cat in the future.

### *SpeckofStardust*

He did not break an oath with Cat.

### *Novice*

He did, when Pilgrim promptly disappeared after promising to accompany what's-his-face (the Proceran prince heading the Callowan invasion, forgot the name) after the Proceran army agreed to a truce.

### *Drunken Dwarf*

Pretty sure protecting that Prince wasn't actually oath bound. Yes ditching him spit in the face of the Prince, the Northern Procer Coalition, and Callow but it wasn't Story breaking. At least not oath wise, redemption story wise yes

but that story sort of got nipped in the bud when she was labeled the archvillian by the Crusade.

*Novice*

I don't know, man. Agreeing to a truce IS an oath. But I'll concede that it probably won't be a major issue at this point, if at all.

[Javvies](#)

While accompanying the Prince of Iserre was one of his official reasons for wanting to accompany him back to Laure (really to work on the redemption arc for Cat), his presence as a "guest/hostage" was negotiated as part of the deal that got the Proceran army and its attached Heroes. Oaths would have been involved, otherwise Cat would never have accepted a Hero walking into Laure. Sure, they're mostly going to be about good behavior and upholding the terms of the truce. And, sure, there wouldn't have been the sort of Winter-enforced kill clause for violating them that the Drow are getting. But they still would have been required – and there be nothing for him to stand on objecting to swearing said oaths. And since he would've needed to make them, there are likely going to be consequences for breaking them – despite the Conclave declaring Cat Arch-heretic of the East nominally freeing him from oaths sworn to her. He made a deal with a Fae power (Cat) and then broke his end of the deal. Such things have consequences.

*Cicero*

Actually... as I recall, Cat wanted oaths, but it was a deal breaker, that none of the heroes or nobles would risk giving oaths to Cat since if the Crusade ruled she was an nonredeemable villain that would trap them.

So instead they agreed to hostages instead of oaths.

[Javvies](#)

So he didn't swear a binding oath.

He still agreed to a deal with a Fae power and violated his end of it.

Breaking deals made with Fae never ends well.

[benthelynx](#)

Pretty sure that's not a deal he explicitly made- he was an observer to the truce talks not a signatory to them. Also, if I remember correctly the prince was

the hostage not pilgrim – pilgrim was accompanying the prince but not a hostage by the terms of the truce.

*SpeckofStardust*

He didn't do anything that went against his agreement to be allowed to be an observer for the Prince's safety.

He didn't have to stay as part of the truce, Cat had to let him be there. (As long as he didn't cause trouble while staying, which he didn't)

*Dainpdf*

Pretty sure Pilgrim did not, *\*would\** not, enter any kind of blood oath with Catherine. Especially not one bound with a ritual constructed by Diabolist.

[Javvies](#)

The same grade of penalty or enforcement, no, certainly not.

But ... Pilgrim was one of the guarantees of good behavior. He would have needed to agree to swear oaths to abide by his end of the deal as long as Cat and Callow did the same.

In fact, he would have been required to swear more oaths than those staying with the army and leaving Callow.

Sure, mostly he would've been swearing to things in the nature of good behavior, not escaping, no sabotage, etc. But he still made a deal with Cat (a Fae power) and violated his end of the deal. That's going to have consequences.

Making deals with the Fae is something you don't do lightly, and you certainly don't go anywhere near violating your end. Those stories never ever end well for the dealbreaker.

*Dainpdf*

Well, I'm not sure he did swear such oaths. Do we have confirmation? Plus, if just swearing were enough Cat wouldn't have bothered with all of this.

Also, he's a super old hero. Bet he has a way to dodge whatever consequences may or may not come.

Cat might be able to turn this into a story and capitalize, but I doubt it will do anything by itself.

[Javvies](#)

Pilgrim might not have formally and officially sworn binding oaths (and certainly nothing like the ones that the drow are making), but he would have needed to actively and affirmatively agree to abide by the terms of the deal and to terms of behavior and conduct. Ergo, he de facto made a deal with Cat – a Fae Power. And then he broke it.

There are no stories where making, and then breaking, a deal with *any* Fae, much less a powerful one, ends well for the dealbreaker.

Smart people don't make deals with the Fae if it is at all avoidable, but only those who are too stupid to live make and then break a deal with the Fae.

Oh, sure, there are some stories about getting the better end of a deal, if you tricked the Fae in the making of it, or if it's some sort of wager or contest, sometimes you can surprise the Fae with an unexpected display of skill or luck. And the Fae will often leave themselves loopholes through wordplay, but that's for them, not the mortal.

But outright breaking a deal you agreed to? You are all kinds of screwed, until/unless you can somehow make it right, appease, and apologize to the Fae who you broke faith with.

Pilgrim just broke the deal he made with Cat in order to kill (or at least come terrifyingly close in the attempt) Black (aka, Cat's surrogate Father-figure/Mentor).

I'm dubious about Pilgrim being able to grovel his way out of doom for breaking the deal and going after Black.

If Pilgrim had gone north to face off against the Dead King, sure, maybe he could find some way to appease Cat (probably by throwing his full public and private support behind the Liesse Accords).

*Dainpdf*

Would he? It's been a while, so I may have forgotten, but I don't recall any such oaths. Plus, he was there to guarantee the safety of Amadis, and he hasn't attacked Cat's people or Callow. It may be that he has abided by his part in it.

[Javvies](#)

He didn't swear the sort of binding oaths to support the deal that Cat wanted to get out of the Crusaders, no.



On the other hand, he was one of the negotiated guarantors of Crusader behavior, not just an observer.

There would have been terms negotiated on movement, activities, behavior, etc. – that would have been required by both the Crusaders and by Cat before a final agreement. Also, terms for enforcement/penalties for violating the rest of the deal. Cat would have required that both the Crusaders leaving with the army and both the Prince and Pilgrim to actively and affirmatively agree to the deal. Pilgrim especially, because he could do all kinds of damage in Laure if he decided to misbehave – far more than Milenan could. And they'd require that Cat do the same.

That's still making a deal with a Fae, even if there were no oaths covering the conduct, treatment, etc.

Also, in 36 Enchere, when Juniper tells Cat that Pilgrim has booked it, it is said that Pilgrim's disappearance was a violation, though there wouldn't be any point in using Pilgrim's violation to invoke the negotiated penalty terms against either the Crusaders or on Milenan.

*Dainpdf*

I was looking at 21 and 22, and while Cat did say a random promise to her *\*would\** come back to haunt people, the whole hostage thing was done to avoid oaths.

As for 36, I could find no mention of the Pilgrim, though it did mention that as arch heretic of the east all oaths to her are declared void by the Heavens.

[benthelynx](#)

De facto deals definitely don't count with fae in many stories. Usually it's the fae taking advantage of implying something, but in most stories it's the exact spoken words that matter. As indicated in this chapter by the attention placed on the language of the oaths.

*werafdsaew*

Read chapter 22 again; the whole point of leaving Amadis behind as hostage was because the crusaders didn't want to make an oath. Now Cat is a fae and GP did break his words, so it would have consequences, but they are not oaths.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Every tale ever: be careful of your promises and expressed wants or wishes, as even casual words are oaths to the powers of land, fire and water, be they god, djinn, fetish or fae.

Also, never piss off Hera.

### *Excited*

He promised not to be a smug sanctimonious prick and, wow, look at him go!

### *Raved Thrad*

I really like the Archer-Catherine dynamic, too. It's like watching a *yandere* and a *tsundere*, locked together in the same room, and slowly watching the *tsundere* go bugfuck.

### *agumentic*

Pilgrim was freed from his oaths by an official Great Conclave, which is fairly narratively important. I expect it to take most of the backlash.

### [Javvies](#)

Sure, he may think that works. And for regular mortals, even regular Named, it probably would.

Just a slight problem with that, ignoring the fact that the Conclave were declared heretics, and Pilgrim was declared a Villain, not a Hero, by the Callowan House of Light.

You don't get out of deals with the Fae so easily. And violating a deal you made or agreed to with one always has consequences. Severe consequences, at best.

### *Anonymouse*

He'll get some help from Above or from the Bard

### [Javvies](#)

When you break faith with a Fae you made a deal with, there are no stories that end well for you. And all kinds of stories demonstrating just how bad an idea doing so is.

Above is specialized against Below and it's substantially less effective against the Fae – remember when the priests tried to use “holy power” as a countermeasure against the Winter Dead in the Battle of the Camps?

Sure, Pilgrim isn't going to be going solo against Cat. But failing to uphold his end of a deal he made with a Fae power is going to have consequences that he can't just walk off or ignore.

*AVR*

The drow oaths aren't going to expire all at once. Auctions, remember? For the truly dangerous drow Catherine (or her successor) is going to have decades to convince them not to go on a rampage, to make examples of lesser drow with shorter oaths in front of them, or to plan for their inevitable betrayal in the worst case.

If the Grey Pilgrim survives his current encounter with the Black Knight then a stabbing by Catherine looks likely to be a part of his future before the Tenth Crusade is over. Losing a reason for her to negotiate with him is probably the biggest consequence.

*SilentWatcher*

Guys! Did no one consider the possibility of these oaths being the powder keg blowing up in Cat's face? especially the second, what stops Akua, when she is in Cat's body again, from telling the drow Cat's name? massacre in Callow ensues.

*RanVor*

I like this logic. It makes me laugh. If you take it far enough, you'll come to the conclusion that Cat shouldn't do anything ever.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

She really shouldn't, but then again, if she doesn't, who will?

*nimelennar*

I doubt Callow is going to get any larger. It's the country of "You tried to annex us, and we're going to make you pay for it for centuries." Cat would know better than to expect for things to come from trying to occupy hostile territory.

*nimelennar*

\*expect good things

*Allafterme*

I expect Callow & Praes to unite at the very end, not in a conqueror and subjugated relationship, but truly condense in a single nation

*Rup*

Which do we run into more often down here: dead bodies or inkwells?.....

Exactly the type of logic that The Lady Of The Lake would term CommonSense

*Raved Thrad*

Archer's on a roll here. I pictured her bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in the previous chapter, playing knife games with the drow, but here it's like she's building up to one huge deathgasm. She just basically killstole an entire encounter away from Catherine.

*Rook*

Archer is kind of like a goblinfire bomb. You don't actually control it, you sort of throw it in the general direction of your opponents, then look the other way as everything goes to shit for someone else for a change.

*Dainpdf*

Cat did once compare Archer to a building in flames or something to that effect (back when invading Old Dormer).

*fbt*

rotfl! this, exactly.

*habu987*

So, basically Indrani is the Harry Dresden of this world.

*Raved Thrad*

A goblinfire bomb that, if you poke it hard enough, shyly tells you, "I wuv you! Toss me at your enemies so I can make them die!"

*Cicero*

Starting to feel like things are going too smoothly for Cat. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Although I suppose the other shoe could be Black's death. Cat comes back from the Drow all full of a success that worked well and without significant setbacks only to discover her father figure got killed while she was off playing Drow Queen.

[Javvies](#)

Don't forget – she still has to deal with the strongest drow sigils.  
And take care of the Sve of Night.  
That's going to be plenty hard.

She's still dealing, for the most part, with the trash mobs, and only a handful of not as bad ones, of the Drow. This has been the easy part.

*Dainpdf*

First part of the plan always works.

*nimelennar*

Which is why you should always have as many plans going as possible. -Irritant.

*Raved Thrad*

"The man I loved as a father is dead, killed by heroes in Procer, and I will have revenge! Go forth, my treacherous minions! Burn Procer and Ashur to the ground! Build my father a funeral pyre on the ashes of the homes of these crusading bastards!"

*AVR*

Black's a master of making the apparent situation be different to the real one. Don't count him out just yet. Though if he thought that it would make a story where Cat could and would do that he might consider it acceptable losses, he has been a bit suicidal of late.

*Dylan Tullos*

Make Akua your Chancellor and be done with it, Cat.

*Raved Thrad*

Can the dead gain names, as opposed to retaining them (like the undead Named enslaved by the Dead King)? If so, then she might be up for "Demonic Advisor" or something similar.

*Dainpdf*

The revenants don't quite keep Names. They keep slivers of them.

*Yotz*

Akua is a wee bit different now, it seems, the question here being – does her soul interweaving with the Mantle would be enough to alter her /quote/ undead /unquote/ state. She was

able to gain a *weight* once, which implies, I presume, temporary gaining a body of sorts. Would it be enough to gain a semblance of life, or life in full – albeit not a status of “living” in conventional sense, maybe – only EE could answer.

What tickles me in a fancy way, though – her apparent genuineness in the heart matters. Not that it would make it wise to give her even a bit of command over the newly minted Schutzstaffel, but here’s the crux – I doubt she will betray Cat unless Cat undergo radical personality change, essentially eradicating everything she is at this point, but...

Imagine a high-functioning psychopath, megalomaniacal, machiavellian in its worst, utterly unrepentant, and utterly *loyal* to you. Unfortunately, said psycho also considers you to be a bit of a naive numbwit somewhat, and is convinced that in some aspects she knows better. Now, give her an channel to realize her good intents – good for you, that is; from her point of view, that is...

*In two days everyone will be prosperous, happy, and smiling. And if someone would not, I will smother them down, crush them into fine powder, and feed that powder to the devils!*

*Dainpdf*

Cat did swear she doesn’t get to come back, so if she starts to seem like she’ll get to anything like that she’ll be bound to destroy Ubua.

In any case, she’s too traitorous to ever be trusted with anything. It’s religion, to her.

*RanVor*

Not really. That she has no qualms to betray someone when there’s something to gain by it doesn’t mean she feels compelled to betray people at the drop of a hat for some ridiculous reason. She’s much better off at Cat’s side and she knows it. She’s going to stay loyal at least until the situation undergoes a drastic change.

*Dainpdf*

You forget that “betrayal for no good reason” is exactly where “iron sharpens iron” leads. Hell, Praes has a Name dedicated exclusively to knifing the Tyrant in the back.

That, plus look at their version of ‘The Scorpion and the Frog’, which praises the scorpion for exactly betraying the frog for no good reason.

And Akua is Praesi if she’s anything.

*RanVor*

Name one time Ubua did something that didn't further her agency in any way.

Her insistence on sticking to tradition may make her inefficient, but that doesn't mean she's dumb or doesn't know what she's doing.

If she actually did betray Cat for no good reason, it would be the most disappointing plot development in Guide, period. I hate seeing a well developed character being cheapened like that just for the sake of a twist that wouldn't even surprise anyone. It would be much more interesting if she didn't betray Cat at all, simply because too many people expect the betrayal to happen.

*Dainpdf*

People expect her to betray Cat because that's her character. Her not betraying (or at the very least attempting to lead astray) Cat at all would be out of character for her. Calling her betraying Cat a twist is like calling Vivienne stealing things a twist.

As for one time Ubua did something dumb due to her blinders? It's known as Ubua's Folly for a reason.

*RanVor*

People oversimplify Akua's character all the time. She's opportunistic as fuck, but she *needs fucking opportunities* to take advantage of them. I'm not saying she will never betray Cat (why do you keep missing my points?), I'm saying she will only betray Cat when it's actually beneficial for her to do so. She's not going to betray Cat when it's counterproductive and suicidal just because she's Praesi or betrayal is her religion or some other bullshit. She's smarter than that and it honestly baffles me that people think otherwise while simultaneously believing she's a brilliant manipulator who can wrap Cat around her finger whenever she wishes. Right now she has much more to gain by corrupting Cat than by breaking free of her control for five minutes or so (because that's how quickly she would be crushed if she tried).

Akua's Folly wasn't really dumb, and definitely **wasn't counterproductive**. It was actually a solid plan that only failed because she underestimated Black's ingenuity.

*Dainpdf*

There are ways and ways of betraying someone. I'm not saying that Akua is just going to rebel randomly. Just that as soon as she gets what she thinks is a window, she will use it.

Much like, had Cat not had contingencies when she was asleep from lake dropping, she might just have stayed out for a way longer while.

As for manipulating Cat, she'll have a hard time doing it for now, since she still has her blinders on and Cat remembers who she is.

About Akua's Folly: It was a plan that would have gotten her drowning in heroes in a heartbeat. The Bard didn't even take her as a threat.

*RanVor*

"I'm not saying that Akua is just going to rebel randomly"

But you make it sound like she is.

"as soon as she gets what she thinks is a window, she will use it"

If it actually had a solid chance to get her what she wants, then yes, she would do it. But I don't see any situation of this kind coming up in the near future.

"It was a plan that would have gotten her drowning in heroes in a heartbeat"

Sure, but one does not become one of the most influential villains on the continent without attracting unwanted attention from the other side of the fence. Also, the Heavens don't work that quickly. It would be months before the really dangerous ones got to her, and by that time she would have already won. Besides, she would likely be drowning in heroes anyway. The Crusade, remember?

"The Bard didn't even take her as a threat"

That's because the Bard's definition of a threat is quite unorthodox. Ubu was not a threat \*to her\*, because she would benefit from the Diabolist's success. Cat is much greater threat to the Intercessor, despite being less of an actual threat.

*Dainpdf*

"But you make it sound like she is."

Now you're just putting words in my mouth.



"If it actually had a solid chance to get her what she wants, then yes, she would do it. But I don't see any situation of this kind coming up in the near future."

It's more a question of whether she thinks she can get away with it. Plus, there is bound to be an opportunity at some point.

"Sure, but ... The Crusade, remember?"

This is why Neshamah lasted millenia and Triumphant did not."

"That's because ... an actual threat"

The Bard dismissed her saying she would take care of herself. That 'that kind' always ends like that. She dismissed Ubuah not only as a threat to her plans, but as a threat to Good as well.

*RanVor*

"Now you're just putting words in my mouth"

As you in mine. Now we're even.

"Whether she thinks she can get away with it"

Except it's not really possible anymore. This time it's an all-or-nothing situation. And the reason for that is the Winter Mantle.

People keep talking about Akua usurping Cat's power, but I don't think they realize how it actually works. Cat *is* Winter. It can't be taken away from her any more than your brain can be taken away from you, except the consequences would be many times more severe. Her body doesn't exist. It's an illusion made solid by the power of Winter. Her very existence is anchored to the mantle, intertwined so closely that anyone drawing upon Winter is automatically drawing upon Cat as well. To sever that bond, Akua would have to erase Cat from existence, lest she turns into Cat the moment she tried to use her newly acquired power. Of course, she herself would end up erased from existence if her plan failed. That's why Akua has become more cautious than ever before – because the price of failure is utter annihilation, and she's not going to risk it lightly.

"This is why Neshamah lasted millenia and Triumphant did not"

This is also why Triumphant is revered in Praes and Neshamah is not. Praesi perception of victory is rather warped. They don't really care about how long they would last. What matters to them is how they're going to be remembered by future generations. If Akua's hellgate machine succeeded, she'd be able to quickly generate a level of infamy rivaling the Dead King, surpassing almost

every other villain in history of Calernia. That's a perfectly valid win within this mindset.  
"She dismissed Ubua ... as a threat to Good as well" Because she wasn't, really. Save for Black, no villain is a serious threat to Good as a whole. She was a representative of Classic Evil, and those always lose in the end. She was a huge threat to \*people\*, but since when does the Bard care about those?  
It's also worth remembering that not only the Intercessor didn't actually take care of Ubua, but actively hindered others who tried to do so.

*Dainpdf*

I am sorry I put words in your mouth. I did not intend to. Please tell me where?  
As for the mantle being usurped, it has been mentioned before. It would be hella difficult, but if anyone can try it's diabolist. The Dead King did mention Cat hasn't finished her apotheosis yet.  
As for Triumphant, that's precisely my point. Ubua's culture is Praesi, and it stimulates certain behavior even at one's own cost. Grabs for quick power are one, betrayal and shifting alliances are another.

*Yavandir*

Tell this to Dread Emperor Revenant...

*Dainpdf*

I meant the KotD revenants. But I'm sure you knew that.

[Javvies](#)

Never going to happen.  
Malicia was entirely right to seek to exterminate the Chancellor Name and role.  
Chancellors traditionally betray their overlord.  
Betrayal of Cat is not something Cat wants to encourage.

[taliesinskye](#)

Plus, the position of treacherous lieutenant is already taken.

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Although, if Catherine raises enough treacherous lieutenants, she may irritate her way out of it.

*Allafterme*

I'd actually shill out good coin to see that happens from the first row...

*JackbeThimble*

I think book 4 needs to be named 'How Catherine Got her Mojo Back' and it will end with her ascending to the Name of 'Queen Bitch of the Universe.'

Also Cat and Archer should just bang already.

*Novice*

Brood War Kerrigan would contest that title, and rightfully so. That infested girl was a badass.

[benthelynx](#)

Nah archer is just flirting. She's fallen hard for masago.

*Rook*

"at least she was on my side"

That, right there, is everything about Archer as a person in seven words. She's an inconvenience at best when she's trying to help you, but gods, imagine how much worse it would be if she wasn't.

*Ahoy Matey!*

i spy with my little eye a point of failure ; Akua usurping Cat's title "Sovereign of Moonless Nights" along with all the oathbound drow and most of Winter.

[oongawa](#)

Yeah, I was reading those thinking "well that's going to be something you regret when Akua steals the title, which she obviously already has a plan for."

That's ok through, Akua winning in the end would be hilarious.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Yes, indeed. This may be made more likely because Cat is shunting off Winter's effect onto Akua.

*RoflCat*

>The smile she gave me at that was terrifying in more ways than one, but at least she was on my side.

So...this?

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/mirai-nikki-yandere-face>

*Josh*

I'm a little worried that the oaths were made out to the Sovereign of Moonless Night, as opposed to Cat specifically. That seems like a recipe for Akua usurping her title. She's already got the body of a fae, and Cat keeps dumping the power bleed off onto her. Could be trouble.

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To be fair, when Catherine stabbed her supposed "father" she didn't become a Duchess of Violent Squalls, though that might have been King of Winter rigging her title to destroy himself.

*Dainpdf*

Thought the same. Could also be that this creates greater stimulus for other usurpation, eg by Larat. On the other hand, could be it's the only option – their oaths are made on her mantle and upon joining Winter, and so it is possible they can only be made to the Sovereign.

*IDKWhoitis*

If she wants Winter to enforce the oath, she might be obligated to tie the oath to Winter by using her Winter Title. Same way how Cordelia uses her different titles in procer for different purposes. No prince in Procer follows Cordelia Hasenbach, they follow the First Prince.

Likewise, if Catherine want to eventually Retire, she might want to be able to shunt off the responsibilities.

*Berder*

Absolutely. It apparently wasn't even necessary because the first oath refers to "my service" and "my laws" (Catherine's) instead of the Sovereign of Moonless Night. I get the feeling that Akua could usurp Cat's title at any moment, she's just waiting for the right time when she's sufficiently insinuated into everything to take over.

*werafdsaew*

I'm thinking that's exactly why the full oaths is to the Sovereign and not to Cat. Back when Akua was controlling Cat's body, she was subject to all the oaths that Cat swore to. Conversely this means that as long as she controls the construct, she is Cat for purposes of oaths to "I". Given that the Sovereign is the full mantle itself and not the construct,

I'm thinking that it works differently for oaths to the Sovereign.

*Onyavar*

Spotted the same thing (in my first read-through) and became worried until I saw your comments from one year ago when this was still fresh. This is something that readers are supposed to notice, and it will be a topic soon (within this same book is my guess).

This wording is likely not an oversight of Cat. Cat knows that Larat and Akua are the embodiment of the "untrustworthy lieutenant", and there is likely a plan that deals with usurpation.

On the other hand, if Cat names an inheritor for her title, the oath binds the drow not to her person, but to the Heir. And hey, can cat inherit power from her successor? Is Cat the next Heiress?

*Dainpdf*

Can I just say that this is just hilarious as the recipe for the harem that will never be?

Cat and Akua are delightful – until you remember that Ubua is a monster and should probably be dead.

Cat and Indrani is cute – but they've made it quite clear they're happy as friends, and Cat doesn't even feel lust for her anymore. Still, I'm firmly in the "Cat should get laid" camp. Might help her unwind a bit.

*wintersprite*

Too bad Thief would probably be pissed off when she hears about Ubua's drow spy/death squad... Plus, Cat's body is already made out of fae stuff, can she even get laid? Winter's not coming any time soon.

*Dainpdf*

I'm sure Hierophant can come up with something. Cat is already learning how to shunt the worst of Winter on her minions.

*Berder*

Typos:

I'm going to brag so you become interested me (interested in) the nearest sigil to this tone (to this one)

Definitely Akua is getting too much power here by being liaison with the Drow, and this is going to bite Catherine hard.

[Barthumphries](#)

The drow, I'd learned, made the Praesi fondness intrigue and blood sport look positively mild in comparison.

Add "for" after "fondness"

*Redlaw*

Who watched code gueass where at the end lelouch enslaved his brother to "zero" and not him exactly. Here i think it's the same. The oath are to the sovereign of moonless night not cat. So what happen if she lose her title ? What happen if a certain shade who worded the oath and is able to tape in the power of winter managed to steal all the power ? After all this story is about tropes and a protagonist having all his power stolen by an "ally" is a trope used many time in many story.

*crescentsickle*

Comment on recent chapters, since I just got caught up:

Viv paranoia'ing at Hakram is sad. She sees Akua eye up Hakram and conclude it's because Akua recognizes a fellow schemer. The truth is that Akua aims to be Chancellor at the moment, to grab that name in order to aim for Empress once Cat claims it. The Chancellor is an extension of the Empress, and though Akua's existence is a literal physical extension of Cat, Hakram is an extension of Cat in so many ways his Name represents the fact. He exists as a force poured into the mold of whatever tool Cat requires and is thus the ideal candidate for Chancellor to an Empress, especially one that doesn't believe that 'Steel strengthens steel' and so doesn't care for treachery as an open secret in her underlings.

Akua has been trying this entire time to emulate Hakram and serve Cat in all the ways Hakram can't; to be that same force poured into whatever mold is desired, but a force composed of very different things. Arguably more useful things, she whispers to Cat in every action she takes in her service.

The problem is that she has to either make Cat fall far enough to accept her over Hakram, or Hakram has to die in a way she has to be so far removed from suspicion that she can't actually be involved. I wonder if she's been manipulating things with the woe in the hopes that Viv and Hakram will either have a falling out or one of them kills the other. If they do, her position is elevated. If they don't, she gets to continue to woo Cat without supervision.

*Ravenfrost*

Everyone here pass on the most important piece of information delivered in this chapter, the discipline of the nisi. I think cat will make an army of those nisi that follow her. And by

empowering them will effectively change drow society.  
After all, named do not hold ground, a teaching that this guys  
have forget...  
Sorry for bad english

### Screwfloss

*"Black had taught me that there was always a point of failure  
hidden away in even the most stringent of plans"*

It's a good practice to set aside a team (if possible) and give  
them a hypothetical: imagine it's the future, and our plan has  
already failed. Your job is to explain why it failed.

This is a proven way of rooting out those unseen weak points.

### *RanVor*

If Cat ever loses the title of the Sovereign of Moonless Nights,  
I expect all kinds of awful shit happening to everyone *except*  
her, because I'm not sure if she can even exist without her  
mantle anymore.

### *Metalshop*

This chapter makes me really want a chapter from the point of  
view of the Drow.

### leahvad

leahvad a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/BR7CoEpaV6nHqGLkvUzpR>

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## **Chapter 64: Momentum**

*"When in doubt, attack. When doubtless, attack as well."*  
– Bastien de Hauteville, Proceran general

Great Lotow was nothing like I'd expected.

All I'd seen of the drow so far was raised stones and the  
occasional clever exploitation of natural features, and so my  
expectations had been rather low before I took my first look at  
one of their 'cities'. I'd believed it would be a few half-ruined  
structures and perhaps a surviving set of walls, but the Lotow I  
was looking upon served as a reminder that the Everdark had once  
been an empire in its own right. I'd thought of the term city in  
the Callowan sense, a gathering of houses and streets with

marketplaces and maybe a decent set of ramparts. But that was a surface way of looking at things, wasn't it? Up there, cities were built in breadth. Spreading when the population rose. The drow had instead built in depth, in a way that would have been impossible in the land of my birth.

Great Lotow was built in levels, that was the easiest way to describe it. The heart of the city was a massive pit with a spire of stone in the centre, from base to summit large as a small fortress. From that tree radiates branch-like bridges leading to districts carved directly into the rock across the chasm, their sizes variable. Closer to the bottom I could glimpse districts large as Summerholm itself serving as farms and lakes, while closer to the centre the holes in the rock were more like neighbourhoods of carved houses. At its peak, I thought, Lotow must have had several hundred thousand drow living in it. Now, though, most of it was abandoned. Some of the bridges linking the spire to the sides had been broken and though some were replaced by rope bridges made of some kind of pale weed many more had simply been left gaping, the districts they led to now empty ruins.

It was a moving sight, I would admit. The structure of the city alone would have been impressive, but the ancient drow had made of Lotow a work of art. There was hardly a wall or floor that was not filled by a mosaic or bas-relief, stalactites and stalagmites had been carved into painted statues of drow and animals. Entire spans of ceiling had been set with coloured stones and gems to create a sky, and there were tall steles showing spindly sentences in Crepuscular reciting old stories and ballads where my people would have placed street signs instead. Ivah had told me that last detail was an old drow custom: streets had once been known by the never-mentioned titles of the written work on the stele, every drow expected to be well-taught enough to know it at a glance.

Now, though, those old stories were painted over with blood red runes to mark where territories began and ended. Metal and precious stones had been ripped out of statues and mosaics, carvings older than Callow left to erode under the depredations of elements and time. Stone houses that collapsed were not raised anew but covered with skins and leathers as half-tents while ancient temples and mansions lay cracked open, their heavy stones used to make walls of piled rock. And still, after centuries and millennia, Great Lotow endured. Long winding aqueducts rival to any of Miezana descended along the sides of the pit and provided water to cisterns and fountains, sewers unlike I'd ever seen sent filth towards the lower farms without overflowing or clogging after what must have been centuries of disrepair. There was no city like this in Callow, I thought. Not even in Praes, who had been under Miezana occupation and so benefitted from that empire's fondness for great civil works. Great Lotow would have



been the crown jewel of any surface nation, the envy of the continent.

Down here, it was just one more decaying corpse in the pile. It was a sorrowful sort of awe that I felt. *Would we have raised cities like this, if we were not always at war?* I wondered. Callow had little to boast of save for cathedrals and fortresses. The bridges linking Summerholm were a wonder, to be sure, but a Miezan one. Sometimes I could see why the rest of Calernia called us backwards peasants. We were so much less than we could have been. Praes too, I thought. There was so much potential in the Empire, if it would just cease devouring itself every other decade. So much knowledge and skill, always turned to acts of self-immolation that took chunks of the continent along with it.

"You're being quiet," Indrani said.

"It's a lot to take in," I replied.

"Eh," my friend shrugged. "After Keter the bar's been raised. Gonna take more than pretty ruins to impress me."

"We walk through the grave of an empire," I murmured. "That's worth a moment of contemplation."

"Oh, there's still people down there," Indrani mused. "For now. I don't see this lot surviving a firm assault from the dwarves, if we don't get them moving."

There were still drow, it was true. A mere pittance compared to what Lotow must have kept in olden days, but our new acquisitions from the departed Delen Sigil had estimated twenty thousand people here and I believed that was a conservative number. The larger sigils reigned close to the bottom, where the old farms could be kept going and so allow for more nisi to be held, but that didn't necessarily mean the deeper sigils were the most powerful. Mighty Delen and its tribe had been intending to have a go at claiming territory on the outskirts of Lotow within the decade, and so interrogation had wielded more information than I'd expected. The central spire – called an overly-long word meaning 'column' in Crepuscular – wasn't the territory of any single sigil, as whoever held it would have a massive advantage over rivals, but the rest of the inhabited city had been carved up between the ten sigils that inhabited it. The weakest, and the one we'd go after first, was the Urulan Sigil. They'd once ruled a few of the central districts, but after being evicted by a stronger sigil they'd moved upwards and devoured the sigil that had previously ruled the part of Lotow called the Crossroads.

If the city was a cylinder from which districts sprouted, then the Crossroads was the circle atop that cylinder, connected through the central Column by four broad bridges. Nearly every tunnel in the region led to the Crossroads, including the one

where we currently stood, though the Hallian ways that had once been the highways of the drow empire were linked to Lotow's bottom level instead. Which was unfortunate, since I intended to go through those. The Crossroads were arguably the city's second most important strategic point, but highly unpopular territory for a sigil to hold: since near every tunnel led to them, any ambitious sigil trying to get into the Lotow scrap would begin by taking a swing at whoever held them. Word was that a sigil holding them could expect slow and steady decline through constant conflict until either a sigil of the outer ring managed to mount a strong enough assault or a sigil on the losing side of a conflict deeper down moved up and evicted the latest occupants – much as the Urulan themselves had done.

Sadly, the Urulan Sigil had been forced to migrate less than twenty years ago. They might be a wreck compared to any of the deeper sigils, but they would have maintained enough strength they'd make any of the fights I'd picked in the Everdark so far look like child's play.

"The city will be tricky to assault," I finally said.

"Gotta take the Crossroads before we go at it seriously," Indrani noted, squinting down. "That'll be ugly fighting, mark my words."

I did not disagree. Though that section of the city was a single ring going around the edges of the pit holding the Column, it wasn't flat grounds. Large rectangular halls were tightly clustered, with small streets and broader avenues between them. Easy to defend, to force the attacker in a bottleneck.

"We'll have to split our force in two," I said. "Sweep the ring from both sides. I'll need you to lead one of the assaults."

She shot me a curious look.

"Who am I getting as a lieutenant, Diabolist or Ivah?"

"You get Akua," I grunted. "I imagine I'll need a translator more than you."

"Sure," she snorted. "Let's pretend that's true. We certain we want no one keeping an eye on the bridges?"

That was the large risk here, I thought. The odds that a deeper sigil would be willing to send its Mighty against an attacker it hadn't properly looked over were low – sigils prone to taking those kinds of gambles didn't tend to last long. They weren't non-existent, however, and it might change the situation if they learned that it was a human leading the charge. Still, I couldn't afford to let the Urulan run or concentrate their forces. *But can I afford to be flanked halfway through?* Not really, no. After Archer had 'acquired' the Delen Sigil and we'd gathered the

people from both them and the Berelun, our numbers had doubled: a little over four thousand drow were now under my banner. Of those, I counted three hundred and change dzulu and twenty-three Mighty of varying ranks. It wasn't a small force, by the standards of the outer ring, but all the real players down here were either in a city or the inner ring. We wouldn't be fighting dregs, this time. If we ended up going against two real sigils at the same time...

"Fair point," I said. "Change of plans. I want you to sweep a quarter of the ring, then stop in front of the bridge and keep an eye on what's happening."

"To put arrows in the curious and the runners, if there happen to be any," Indrani sighed. "Ugh, I always get the shit jobs."

"You'd get bored scything through dzulu," I countered. "Besides, feel free to take shot from your perch at anything getting in my way."

"Slightly better," she conceded.

The two of us remained standing there for a while, strangers in this broken land looking down at a once-great city. I would have called the moment solemn, if not for the fact that Indrani was pulling at a flask of liquor. She sighed in satisfaction, then rolled her shoulders.

"All right," Archer said. "We doing this or what?"

"Don't get yourself killed," I reminded her, meeting hazelnut eyes with my own.

"Never have before," Indrani drawled. "So, you know, if we go purely by precedent it only makes sense that I'm immortal."

While pushing her over the tunnel's edge would have been deeply satisfying, we did have a battle to win. I settled for freezing her flask solid instead, grinning at the muttered imprecations that followed.

—

Steel-clad boots hit the ground, and I slowed long enough to have a look at my warriors – and they were definitely that, not a soldier among them. One hundred dzulu, moving like large hunting cats with their spears and swords in hand, barely a dozen shields among them. Thirteen Mighty, most of them ispe with only a single jawor and a pair of freshly-harvested rylleh to serve as heavy hitters. My Lord of Silent Steps led the pack from the front, and they slowed along with me without a word.

"Ivah," I said. "Translate. The old terms apply: nisi are not to be touched save in self-defence, surrenders are to be accepted and observed. Anyone they kill, they can take. Corpses of my own making go to auction, and I will personally execute any who reaps their Night."

Not exactly the most inspirational of speeches, but then with drow I'd found it more important to lay down rules than tug at heartstrings. They had precious few of either, and the latter was beyond my ability to fix. The words were repeated in Crepuscular, and within a heartbeat of the sentence ending the first shot of the battle for Great Lotow was fired. A javelin, thrown from a rooftop maybe half a hundred feet ahead. Aimed towards me, which meant either it was a warning to the drow or they'd already caught on to the fact I was running things. I could have simply stepped aside – it was aimed at my centre of mass, well-thrown but barely any better than a mundane human could have – but sometimes it was necessary to make an impression and... set the tone. I let it arc downwards, and at the last moment caught the shaft. Less than an inch stood between the sharp stone tip and my plate. Casually, I spun the javelin around between my fingers and gripped it correctly. One step, lowering my body, then rising up I threw the javelin back.

It, uh, wasn't something I was trained in. I had better aim and certainly more body strength than I'd used to, but that didn't translate to skill. It flew like a damned crossbow bolt, in a straight line, and was easily dodged by the silhouette on the rooftop. Still, at least no other projectile had followed. It was a start. I flicked my wrist, forming a blade of frost, and advanced.

"Forward," I ordered, Ivah translating a heartbeat afterwards.

Archer would begin her own sweep the moment we engaged the enemy properly, so all I had to worry about was the world in front of me. I went down the slope at a pace, and entered the avenue briskly. Already the Urulan had prepared a reception. A dozen dzulu led by a drow roiling with Night – Mighty, and stronger than ispe – were spread out in a loose crescent with with Mighty at the tip. I'd missed this, I realized. The simplicity of it. Enemies ahead, allies behind. No tricky little shades of morality, no debate over right and necessity. It was like I'd been whisked back to the Pit and its much less complicated time. I felt a savage grin split my lips, and for the first time in ages I could savour the air in my lungs. The glorious burn of it, illusion that it was. I'd keep it going as long as I could. I darted forward, dashing around another javelin and closing the distance in mere heartbeats. The Mighty yelled and Night flared, the sound reverberating, but instead of ducking I plunged into it. My eardrums burst and reformed in the same moment, and the

last I saw of that drow was the look of utter surprise on its face when my sword carved through its throat.

The dzulu immediately began retreating, faces gone pale, but I was having none of that. I moved faster than them, and the first I caught before it could even turn to strike me. My hand went through its back and I snapped its spine, withdrawing bloodied fingers. The next struck at me with spear, but I let the stone tip bounce off my plate and slapped its cheek hard enough the neck broke. The third tried to parry my strike, but while the blades were at the right angle the difference in strength made it pointless. Its arm was forced down, and a flick of the wrist had its head rolling on the floor. My own drow joined the fray eagerly, falling on the survivors like wolves on the fold, but I pressed on. I'd not come here to make sport of dzulu. Archer would be going to the right, so my charge was to sweep by the left. Already yells were sounding in the distance, the Urulan gathering for war, but I did not intend to give them the opportunity of mustering a proper resistance. Through halls and houses I strode, ears sharp, and caught my first ambusher. Atop one of those long halls, pressed closely against the roof. Laughing, I struck at the wall and tore through the stone. It rose, alarmed, and I leapt up.

Just a dzulu, I saw, eyes barely touched with silver. Disappointed, I snatched it by the neck before it could bring up its weapon and tossed it further down the avenue. It hit stone with a loud squelch, head pulped. I leapt back down, noting my forces were beginning to catch up. The first enemies had been too heavily outnumbered to put up a real fight. I took the lead, moving down the avenue. We hadn't even taken a fifth of the circle yet, but I found the resistance to have been too lukewarm. Someone had sent expendable to probe out strength while they prepared a response. My instincts proved right maybe sixty heartbeats later, when I found the length of the ring had been walled up. Thin walls of hide held by a framework of glue and stone, but they were decent makeshift fortifications to block off the streets and avenues. Atop the roofs drow with bows and javelins were awaiting, while the streets behind the hide blocks slowly filled with reinforcements. The first chokepoint to break, then. They'd made a kill zone at ground level – the hide panels were likely movable to let through their own warriors – so I'd go at it from a different angle.

I leapt back up on the nearest rooftop and broke into a run. Best to soften up this lot before my drow ran into them. Arrows and javelins streaked the air, which bothered me little – they were loud and slow and my body was mist whenever I wished. They might as well have been shooting at a ghost. I closed the distance and then streaks of Night began lashing out towards me, which was more dangerous. I suspected the mist trick would fail against sorcery, and this was as close as drow could get to magic. There

were, by the looks of it, seven casters. I could take the hits and barrel through, most likely, but the knowledge that my body was exceedingly difficult to permanently damage nowadays had not whisked away Black's earliest lessons. *Never take a blow unless you have to, much less if you do not know what it will do.* A platform served as anchor for the push that sent me to crash into the house beneath which the archers and casters were standing. Momentum alone would not get me through that wall, even in plate, so instead I formed a spike of ice at an angle and caught it with my free hand. A spin had me leaping back upwards, the looks on the faces of the drow when I came of height with them most amusing. Another platform – just in time to avoid a second set of Night streaks – had me landing in a roll among them.

The dzulu, for that was what most of them were, scattered immediately. I didn't have the time to go through them one at a time, so I dipped into Winter and let loose a working. The rings of sharp ice spears formed around my abdomen, lingering for a moment before shooting out. Blood, screams and shredded flesh followed in their wake. I had to throw myself to the side when looked like a snake made of Night ran through where I'd been a heartbeat earlier, jaws snapping. Another two follow suit, keeping me dancing, and to my distaste a streak of Night clipped me on the shoulder as I landed in a roll. It went straight through the plate, though at an angle that meant it hit air instead of flesh after punching through. Seven casters, I found, the only ones not dead or running. The snakes were coming out of their bellies, coiling and releasing at their will, while the other four drow were shooting shorter bursts to keep me from closing distance. Irritating. If they were Mighty, which was likely, they weren't far up the ranks. I didn't have time to waste on these when the real threats were still on the loose.

I sidestepped another streak, ducked under a snake and exerted my will. The drow guiding the snake found its throat filled with ice and began clawing at its skin impotently. I caught another snake-charmer and one of the shooters before being forced to move again. Darting around a snake extended sharply like an arrow shot I ran forward, rolling under another streak of Night and responding with a collar of ice around the second drow's neck that tightened and immediately choked it. They'd needed the numbers to keep me busy, they realized too late as I carved through the throat of the last snake-charmer. The remaining two tried to make a run for it but I pursued, shaping my sword into a spear and tossing it in the first's back. The last survivor leapt down from the roof and I sighed. Its throat filled with ice a moment later and it dropped. The whole of it could not had taken more than seventy heartbeats, and now my own sigil was assaulting the barricades. I casually formed an anvil of ice and dropped it on the nearest hide wall to make an easy point of entry. I supposed I could clear out the dzulu a bit to make it easier on my warriors.

Then the roof under my feet turned into Night, and the Mighty of the Urulan Sigil entered the fray.

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*Solfadore*

Dear readers,

Reminder that starting on Monday, we'll be hosting a PGTE Character Contest. All readers and most varieties of lesser footrests are welcome to vote!

– The bracket is out: <http://www.bracketmaker.com/tmenu.cfm?tid=470805>. Follow the link to find out who will be facing whom.

We had to limit the field to 32 characters, so if your favourites didn't make it in, well... know that it could be worse. You could be a Lesser Lesser Footrest. (We don't let those vote. We have standards.)

– More info on the Guide's subreddit (r/PracticalGuidetoEvil) because I don't want to spam the chapter thread.

Watch out for a comment from EE on Monday for the link to the first match. Votes will remain open until the Wednesday chapter is uploaded, and so on.

*Jane*

You're pitting *Akua* against *Killian D*: ? You *monsters*!

Well, at least *Killian's* been out of focus for long enough that I guess it isn't a hard decision anymore...

*d\_o\_l*

I think it's kind of fitting that *Cat's* old girlfriend is up against her new girlfriend.

*Jane*

The logic makes sense, true, but it's also really the only first-round match that gives me any kind of pause 😊. Well, except *Hanno/Hye*, I guess, but for completely different reasons.

*stevenneiman*

Personally, I'm having trouble deciding for *Malicia/Anaxares* (impressive vs. funny and surreal), *Aisha/Ratface*

(meh), and Juniper/Wekesa (substance vs. style). I'm probably siding with Hakram against Larat, but that one's a tough call. I also notice that the listed title is incorrect, as he resigned his principedom. I think the only title appropriate to him would be Larat of the Wild Hunt.

*RoflCat*

Technically the new potential girlfriend would be Vivi.

Akua is...the yandere stalker, whose plan previously was to brainwash Cath into her servitude to keep her forever. i.e. She's probably quite happy at the current situation, even if the position is reversed from her initial plan.

*RanVor*

You make Akua sound like an S&M enthusiast.

*WuseMajor*

Aren't all Praesi?

*stevenneiman*

Nah, Indrani is the potential new girlfriend. That's my chosen ship at least.

And Akua never really seemed to have romantic plans for Cat, just plans to control her. Though she definitely did win the philosophical battle with Cat even as she lost the practical one, since she was only defeated because Amadeus proved even more heartless, and for all Cat's moralizing Akua escaped justice by being useful.

*Cheerless Mirth*

Indrani would be the best but, apparently, she's got a thing for Masego, for whatever reason.

*the verbiage ecstatic*

But Aisha vs Ratface... harsh, man

*RanVor*

It kinda seems to be set up for the purpose of pitching Black against the Hierarch in the final round.

*Jane*

...Huh. That's odd, I would have sworn people would be predicting Klaus against Rafaela.

*RanVor*



I mean it looks like they're intentionally placed on different branches so they" have no chance to meet before the finals. They're *expected* to win.

*RanVor*

\*they'll

*Nordvegr*

From where I'm standing, it looks like Robber and Hierarch. Just goes to show, we expect other people to think like us when we are all individuals.

Inb4 plot twist: Final winner gets killed. Tournament was real all along.

*Agent J*

I really don't see how that's possible. Anaxares' first opponent is Malicia, who's an absolutely delightful character in her own right. If he beats her he'd likely be up against Masego next. And let's be honest, Zeze is just adorable. Hells, even *Indrani* fell in love with him.

And even if he beats both Masego and Malicia, his next opponent would either be Sabah, Wandering Bard, or Akua Fucking Sahelian.

Our beloved Heirarch is up against some seriously stiff competition. While I do believe he'll make it to round too, it's a toss up if he'll get to the quarterfinals and extremely unlikely he'll make it pass them.

Sabah is still mourned for, Wandering Bard is the second best hero so far and unquestionably the most effective. Zeze needs to be chibified and made a plushie of (get on it Double-E!) And Akua is Bae.

*RanVor*

I would (and will) vote for Anaxares every time.

*Agent J*

Well, personally...

Akua is Bae. Robber is Best Girl. And William Did Nothing Wrong.

Everyone else will be voted for on a case-by-case basis.

Unfortunately, Akua is still reviled and mistrusted by many, Robber is a minor side character at best, and William is mostly forgotten by now. So it's unlikely my favourites will come out on top. No clue how Anaxares will fair as I've mostly just seen him as an interesting curiosity.

*RanVor*

Ah, but Anaxares is the representative of the Mighty Bellerophon, Peerless Jewel of Freedom! Anybody not voting on him is clearly a servant of some Wicked Foreign Despot!

*RanVor*

Also, he's the only character in the Guide who has successfully stood up to the Bard (Neshamah doesn't count, he's on the same level as her).

*Rustndusty*

Robber might have a chance at beating Black too. If this had happened earlier I'd actually give Robber better odds than Black, but he's had lamentably little content this book.

*RanVor*

I've never really understood the popularity of Robber. He's fun, but there's not much more to him. All things considered, he's just a glorified comic relief.

[crysjal](#)

He has his backstory in an interlude. It's a really interesting exposition on the goblins as a race and shows how Robber struggled to get where he is. It was pretty gritty and cements him in the "underdog" role. It also hints that he's named, or the Goblin equivalent.

*RanVor*

Yes, I know. He's a glorified comic relief with a gritty backstory.

*Agent J*

Oh, so you *do* understand the popularity of Robber. That's fantastic. Welcome, brother, to the Lesser Lesser Footrest Tribe. Meetings are on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Snacks are by the corner.

*RanVor*

What? He's a fine character, but he has no role in the story beyond being a funny psycho. How can he be considered a better character than Black is honestly incomprehensible to me.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

So is this a popularity contest or a who-would-win-in-a-fight contest?

*Agent J*

Popularity contest. The inevitable results of the latter are rather self-evident.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

Dunno about that, The Dead King and The Bard seem to be in a similar weight class and if we're talking about pure martial strength than The Ranger cannot be discounted. Admittedly it'd mean only 2-3 individuals would contest for the top but it's hardly a done deal.

*Fern*

At first I thought "oh man, those two are so good! why would they be up against each other in the first round?!" before i realized that all the characters are good. sometimes i forget how fucking phenomenal the characterization is in this story.

*trippdup*

Top 4: Catherine, Black, Masego, Robber. Black on top in the end.

*Death Knightt*

Black wins. A thousand deaths to anyone who disagrees.

*IDKWhoitis*

I wonder how far behind the Dwarves are. Are they just watching this, ale in hand? Or are they slowly clearing empty caves, and building up forts, expecting Cat to fail?

*Misterspokes*

Yes.

*Byzantine*

They likely have a scouting party following her, with their main force continuing at a languid pace, making sure to mop up anything and everything Cat misses.

This way they keep aware of what she is doing, and their main force stays far enough back they won't unintentionally get caught up in a disaster if some kind of extreme working is used, like the lake-drop.

*Byzantine*

Ah, and the heavy hitters are likely waiting for Cat to engage the Mistress of Night, at which point they will ensure they are nearby – to take advantage of any damage Cat manages to deal if she fails. (Aka be there to finish off the wounded and probably exhausted enemy, rather than giving them a chance to recover.)

*Drunken Dwarf*

Depends if you mean the vanguard/scouts, the main army, or the Herald. Cause ya I expect the Herald is just watching the show.

*Jane*

I wonder if any who know the Secret of architecture still remains? Callow could use this kind of deep city construction, especially if they keep picking up strays like the Drow and the Goblins. They've got plenty of empty land, sure, but why not make Callowan cities something *special*?

...'Course, regardless of the techniques, it'd probably involve a lot of slave labor, which isn't something Callow's too keen on. But Cat *would* still have a lot of Nisi under oaths to her, so maybe she could make use of those instead.

...Assuming that it's even possible to build down like this while working with that much dirt instead of stone, and assuming it wouldn't take them so deep that the Dwarves would have words for them.

Look, it would just be *cool*, okay? Sure it might not be practical, but it's not like the name of this work is *A Practical Guide to Evil* or anything!

*Dainpdf*

Even if Cat for some reason used slave labor to save on costs, there would need to be a lot of money spent on materials. Plus time and money spent training the workers...

*Jane*

Based on the description, it sounded like the basics only really required tools (which *would* wear out extremely quickly, admittedly), as they primarily worked with the stone that was already present; the decorations and perhaps the bridges would require outside materials, but for the most

part, it was a matter of taking stone away rather than putting stone in place. Of course, I could only think of a few sites in Callow where that could be remotely practical, so building a city like that in Callow would probably require some modifications.

Regarding skilled labor, they'd certainly require a lot of stonemasons, that's for certain. It would be quite the project.

*Dainpdf*

Well, I assumed you intended for such works to be done above ground, which would require a lot of materials to be obtained, starting by whatever specialized tools would be needed...

*Someguy*

The labour may involve slaves but the Architecture Techniques, Mathematics and other Secrets can simply be written down and studied. Not all education involves mind/soul rips.

*Jane*

While this is true, I was wondering more about the possibility that Drow civilization has degraded to the point where literally nobody knows how the cities were first made anymore; with the Dwarves marching to claim the place for themselves, it's not as though surfacers could send a team of archaeologists down there, and I don't know how much thought Cat has given to collecting what written works might remain.

Any Drow knowledge she walks away with is probably going to be locked in the minds of one of the Mighty she creates/recruits, I imagine.

*Someguy*

I mean Cat herself just mind/soul rip the Secrets from whomever has them and writes them down to pass on the knowledge instead of the nonsense called the Tenants of the Night.

*IDKWhoitis*

Well it has been established that the Goblins do still own tunnels that do not conflict with the Dwavian territory.

However the new worry is how to hollow out the earth that is supposed to be your foundation. Although Callowan cities dont have skyscrapers, undermining your own walls and buildings seems like a recipe for disaster. Unless you go deep enough, but then we return to the Dwarf probelm...

*Jane*

Ah, I had been thinking of the establishment of a new city altogether, such as in the mountains of the Vales, rather than expanding on a currently existing location.

*Shequi*

Or building a city where Liesse used to be?

*Someguy*

The Dwarves claim deep under bedrock I think so the Mountains should be fair game. Plus since the mountains are used by most countries as border markings instead of territory because as far as they know "no one lives there", being the first to plant the flag and claim it would net Cat a bigger chapter in Callowan history books since it would involve "expanding the territories of the Kingdom for settlers" instead of endless battles. Also, high ground to rain rocks on anyone trying to kick them out after doing the groundwork.

*Fern*

IIRC the goblin's were extended a deal where they were allowed to keep their tunnels as long as they didn't expand into dwarven territory; it was mentioned in the negotiations earlier, something bargain? I do recall it had to do with mercy on behalf of the dwarves, which if true frames their morality a bit better. Hardcore jingoism but no genocide unless you're a drow is basically all we've got so far.

*Antoninjohn*

With the way Cat and Callow hold their grudges I wonder if the Great Book of Grudges will pop up

*Shoddi*

Cause I've got a blank space, baby.

\*click\*

And I'll write your name.

[Javvies](#)

Ah, back to one of Cat's strong suites – murdering the crap out of an enemy army.

I wonder how long Cat's going to take in between taking the Sigils of Lotow.

Hmmm. I think the drow are going to be complicated to train up into an organized and disciplined force when Cat gets back to Callow.

## *Rook*

Complicated? That's like calling the ocean slightly damp.

It's going to be an utter logistical nightmare is what it's looking to be. Trying to absorb the drow into any single existing surface nation is enough of a headache that even Hasenbach would likely be in tears; let alone Catherine "fuck it, let's wing it" Foundling.

An estimated twenty thousand drow in great lotow alone. One. City. What was the size of the – entire – army of callow again?

Even if she murders three quarters of the Everdark in the process, the leftovers alone will likely dwarf any single army she's ever lead in her life.

Its not just the numbers either. This is an undisciplined force with no common language or culture with anyone on the surface, and customs so treacherous that it makes Praes look downright civilized. One with shit for leadership structure and every elite soldier or officer-equivalent wielding murder magic on par with a minor fae noble. All of which needs to be immediately fed and housed. Where does the food come from? The management? The equipment? The gold?

If Catherine is even partially successful in her venture here, she needs to pull a magic solution out of her magic Fae ass before even attempting to bring this shitstorm to the surface. Otherwise it sure as hell is going to be Woe to everyone on every side within marching distance, and then some.

## *Javvies*

It's hardly the biggest force she's ever had under her command, even if she got all 20k of them. Though, admittedly, individual for individual, 1 drow (if properly equipped) is likely to be worth a bunch of regular troops.

Equipping them is going to be a noticeable problem as well.

But more to the point about training, pretty much all of Cat's people with applicable skillsets/experience have an entirely different paradigm for training troops up. It's not like regular Legion-style training is going to work the same, or that it would even be an effective use of the drow. And the closest thing she has to people with something like the right experience are the relatively few people responsible for training members of the Watch. Unless one or more of the Fae who joined the Wild Hunt in her service have experience at training troops, which seems unlikely.

*Rook*

There's an estimated 20k in just great lotow. One city in the Everdark, not the entire Everdark. Not even counting the thousands outside of the cities. The largest army she ever fielded was the army of callow which was under thirty thousand even before bleeding itself against the Crusade.

If the entire kingdom of the drow has even one more city, which we know it does, that already puts the estimated total at nearly double anything she's ever handled before. That's assuming the remnants of an entire ancient empire are limited to two cities, which is unlikely at best.

Training them even if you could handle the numbers is entirely different from training Callowan farmers who share the exact same culture and language as you to swing a sword. It's another thing entirely to try training a different race so alien to yours that they find your common sense utterly incomprehensible to begin with.

Especially if not a single person that would be training them can actually speak their language, unless the monarch is going to personally train several thousands of drow.

She doesn't call the drow 'it' because she can't tell the difference between male or female. She calls them 'it' because they're not just dark skinned mean people, they're fundamentally different from anything above ground in every practical sense. It took her several days with Akua's help to even begin to comprehend the basics of their social structure.

Even ignoring all those problems, she's currently the ruler of a country trying to rebuild after getting burned down twice in a few decades, with not enough hands to work the fields, one major city completely gutted, major leadership completely gutted, and a treasury so empty that its a viable option for Praes to attack them by devaluing their currency, because there's that much Praesi gold that can't be taken off the streets.

So, with a country so in shambles that a Named sidekick specializing in administration that doesn't sleep is already on the verge of breaking down, where do you get the manpower or resources to train an alien race that'll likely significantly outnumber your existing standard army (which you can barely handle right now as is)?

*werafdsaew*

I think the problem is smaller than you think. The nisi would not be doing any fighting, and they're the bulk of



the people. The people doing the fighting have some Nights in them, which gives them combat knowledge.

*Micke*

It gives them *individual* combat power. In a battle discipline, coordination, and being able to manoeuvre in formation are each an order of magnitude more important – and neither is worth anything without a structure for crafting, distributing, and executing orders. The Mightiest of the Drow could be useful against Named champions; the mid-levels would be useful skirmishers and raiders if they could be taught to distinguish between enemies, allies, and civilians; the lessers would, at best, be equal to peasant levies – far better to use them for building a support structure.

Logistics and camp hygiene, in turn, are each an order of magnitude more important than being able to win individual battles; campaigns are won on the march. I've no idea if Drow can become ill, but far more campaigning soldiers have succumbed to disease, malnutrition, and harsh weather than to the enemy.

Of course, this is in the real world, not in a storybook where one might gain an advantage by sending one's elites to certain death to obtain some underdog power in the rematch.

*RanVor*

You somehow missed the fact that Cat calls the Drow "it" because they call *themselves* "it". Otherwise I agree.

*Anonymouse*

If she manages to secretly get the Sve of Night on her side it would be hell of a lot easier.

*ALazyMonster*

You say complicated but I feel like it could be fixed with "Ok you murderous twits, listen to everything Marshal Juniper tells you" and one month later the Hellhound has made the Drow legion. Yes, I'm over simplifying but I feel like sending them through her boot camp would sort them out quick considering that Archer and Masego both buckle under her glare as shown in that conference before they went to Keter.

*Fern*

As long as the majority are nisi and the oaths hold, i don't see much of a problem in force organization and logistics. The

real problem is going to come from the stronger might trying to rules-lawyer their way thru the oaths, which could cause Cat a fair few headaches in the future.

*Dainpdf*

Felt a bit like filler... I guess it's nice to see the Drow really were all that, before devolving into their current state, and good on Cat for finding that brawl she'd been waiting for.

[sengachi](#)

Just a comment about the throwaway line about the Meizan occupation. I really love how this story doesn't have an empire based on the Romans, but an old, old historical empire based on the Romans. It's a nice little subversion on the trope of "ever epic war fantasy has a Roman Empire" and you do some cool stuff with it.

*Rook*

I thought Praes was the Roman Empire though? I mean, looking at the birth of the Roman Empire you get:

A nation embroiled in civil war with repeat assassinations of the leader until an indisputable dictator finally comes out on top, birthing a new empire and ushering in an age of unprecedented stability.

Which then proceeds to immediately invade and conquer Callo-er, Britannia. A nearby land that was already prone to being targeted by its neighbors in the past.

Using a professional standing army called the \*Legions\*. Which derived most of its superiority from being well-equipped, highly disciplined, and extremely organized. Even the title of legate was something the first emperor of Rome formalized as a designation for an officer in charge of a Legion.

*Allafterme*

Praes is what would happen if Rome took Eastern Mediterranean instead of Africa first, somewhat assimilate it... only to be bitch slapped back to Italia by Carthage in the middle of the process

*nick012000*

What I find interesting is that the Drow seem to have the highest density of Named-equivlanents among any of the mortal races of Calernia among them. Even by this early point in her conquest of them, Cat's already accumulated nearly two dozen of them.

*GabrielTosh*

I think you overestimate the Mighty Cat has. They are probably closer to the weakest fey at this point or skilled Knights with some magic since they are of the lowest tier. The only one I consider on par with a Named is Silent Steps since he has both a title and probably the most night out of Cat's force. I will agree that the Drow appear to have a lot of extremely powerful individuals but Named are just about always a cut above any mortal, simply because of narrative weight. The drow probably only have 1 named and that is their high priestess that has given them the Night.

*jonnney*

Well all of the Elves are named equivalent simply due to their age, but I guess they might not count as one of the mortal races.

*RanVor*

Then what are Named Elves equivalent of?

*Drunken Dwarf*

They might all be "Named" or at least given a similar power at birth. Problem is it takes them ages to gain power and solidify it, like the Spellblade.

*Sylwoos*

Not sure all mighty could be considered named. No story weight and a few night tricks would just put them on par with Praesi mage.

*MetruX*

In a sense, any of them are individually stronger than any mage, praesi or otherwise, with rare exceptions of people who could go for a Name. But they can't unite their powers into truly great workings, and most of them have different powers. Powers, not tricks, that's where the difference derives from. Most of them are incredible combatants, and the powers of the Night allow them to fight better, or in a way different from how they could before, so if you look at it carefully most of them CAN'T be considered special units like mages, they are more alike elite soldiers.

But I agree they can't be considered Named, even though they are nothing alike mages.

[Not a robot](#)

...I have to build this city in Dwarf Fortress. I just cannot not do that. Brb gimme two weeks

[sengachi](#)

Would you mind using one of those 3d dwarf fortress modeling programs and showing it to us when you're done, if you can? I'd love to see how it comes out.

*Shequi*

At least the Drow don't use Magma.

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## Chapter 65: Impact

*"'lo and behold, I have brought peace to the Empire."*

– Dread Empress Massacre, after ordering the Burning of Okoro

Three things happened in swift succession.

The first was that I formed a handhold of ice to hoist myself up. I wasn't sure what would happen if I stayed standing in the middle of a blanket of Night, but it was unlikely to be pleasant. The second was that, even as my fingers closed around the handhold, it began vibrating and exploded with a scream. The third thing, unfortunately, was that I fell back into that same blanket of Night spread over the roof. Feet first, which turned out to be a stroke of luck. The moment they made contact with the Night they... dissolved, like they'd been dropped in acid. I dimmed my mind, turning into mist, and slithered away towards the edge of the roof. It was difficult to think, in that state, and my situational awareness was shit – as was made clear by the fact that I neither saw nor heard coming the spear of Night that caught me in the side. Or as close to a side as I could have, while made of mist. The second unpleasant surprise of the day – night? – unfolded as the spear forced me back into solid form where it struck and sent my human-like silhouette to go tumbling over the side. Into a pack of dzulu, though that didn't prove to be much of a problem.

Night spread over the street with a soft whisper and they dissolved screaming even as I fell.

I formed a spike of ice jutting out of a house's sidewall and landed on it for exactly a heartbeat before it broke with a scream, but it'd been enough to allow me to situate myself. A pair of translucent blue wings ripped out of my back and I flew upwards, finally getting a look at the drow that'd ambushed me. There were three, all holding so much Night within their thin

frames they darkened their surroundings just by being there: the air around them looked like near-invisible wisps of smoke was spreading through it. The two on the sides looked like they could have been twins, their deep grey skin and whip-like faces identical save for the crescent scars they had on opposite cheeks. Their eyes were pure silver, save for the black pupils. Long curved blades in hand, they watched me rise with identical bored expressions. If those two were strong, holding enough Night to fill a pond, then the drow between them was a lake. Taller than either of them, its faces was covered with thick burned flesh in a horrid mask that denied even the appearance of lips. There was no trace of anything but silver in its eyes, the pupils merely a darker shade of it.

"Urulan?" I called out.

"Cattle," it mildly replied in Crepuscular.

Well, that took care of the introductions. I'd go out on a limb and say the flankers were rylleh, because with that much power they could hardly be anything else. Mighty Urulan wielded a long staff of glass, and without bothered with any more banter pointed it at me. Droplets of Night formed around me in a ring-like pattern, rippling with power, and I definitely wasn't sticking around to find out what that did. I'd already noticed that the flesh dissolved by the earlier blanket had taken longer than usual to reform after I'd returned to physical form, and that'd been the *opening* volley. It could be it'd opened with its strongest trick, true. But when had I ever been that lucky? The wings folded against my back and I dropped like a stone, which didn't help nearly as much as I'd wished. The Night droplets rippled, and every single one of them lanced out with a beam of the same stuff downwards. The firing angle had been well-judged: I'd be falling right into the thickest knot of beams if I didn't act. My wings spread again, but I held back a curse when they both began vibrating and broke a heartbeat later. Neither the rylleh had moved, but their silver eyes shone brighter. Time to improvise, then. Mist-form wasn't getting me out of this, so the time for delicate works was over.

I formed a large cube of ice under me, feeling Winter's influence begin to creep and promptly shunting it off, and even as the beams of Night tore into the frost I parted it around my falling form to go straight through. A whisper came to my ears, the sound of another Night blanket forming below me, and the cube began to vibrate. Distraction first, I thought. I ripped out a chunk of ice from the bottom of the cube with an exertion will, transmuted it into mist and sent it slithering to the left. The ice ceased vibrating a pair of Night spears shot out, and there was my opening. I fell under the itself-falling cube as the beams of Night shot through it, muscles tightening as I caught it with a grunt and tossed the entire thing at the drow. I couldn't spare

the time to look if I'd made impact, instead forming wings again and plunging into a somewhat-controlled descent that had me landing in front of the three drow. And, most importantly, away from the Night blanket. They'd already shown me it did not discriminate in its effect, they shouldn't be able to use it when I closed distance.

By the time my bare feet hit the ground – my boots were sadly gone for the foreseeable future, *again* – all that was left of the ice I'd thrown was a rain of mist and shards. I'd not even seen how they'd gotten rid of it. With me in the open, the earlier distraction had come to an end: all three drow had their eyes on me. *The rylleh first*, I thought. Urulan would be less dangerous without the backup. I darted towards the left one, body centre low, and made it three feet forward before they unleashed their arsenal. Darkness fell like a curtain, robbing me of my sight, but my ears still worked just fine. It was the only reason I heard the low whistling sound of Night on the move, dropping to the floor and feeling something scythe just above my body. I rolled forward just in time to avoid the spike of Night that came down in the other working's wake, letting out a sharp breath. If they'd timed that just a little better, I would have taken it right in the spine. Another step saw me coming out of the curtain of darkness, which was no comfort as I saw my foes for only a heartbeat before a whisper sounded and a globe of Night began forming around me.

If that was the acid trick again...

I realized, dimly, that if this went through entirely I might actually die. I'd treated the Everdark like a training exercise, sometimes almost a game, but I'd been swimming in the shallows of this sea. There were monsters in the deeps that would make these look like imps. I close my eyes and let Winter loose. Frost formed all over my body, rapidly thickening and then shooting out. They had a globe of Night, I had a globe of ice. In a pissing contest of raw power, I'd bet on me every time. The Night ate into the ice but I kept pouring out Winter, its delighted laughter sounding softly in my ears. At first it devoured quicker than I made, but I dug in my heels and truly let loose. It became even, and I felt my blood turn cold as I dug even deeper. Like skin bursting for being filled too much, the globe of Night came apart under the pressure of the ice and I launched out through the opening I'd made. For a moment I hung in the air, seeing two curved swords rising to point at me and Urulan itself leisurely leaning on its staff. I shaped an ice javelin and threw it at the sigil-holder, just quick enough to loose it before shackles of Night formed around my wrists and ankles. I turned to mist, or at least tried to. The Night shackles thickened and nothing happened. Urulan gently tapped its staff against the ground and the javelin shattered into mist, the rylleh moving as it did.

Their stances were perfect, muscles coiling as they simultaneously thrust their blades into my sides. They went through the plate, bit into flesh, and then I felt my organs began to vibrate. I grit my teeth and hardened my insides, but that actually made it worse: it was like a sharper full of metal scraps went off in there. Everything was shredded, and chunks of my ribs and flesh splattered the floor as they withdrew their swords. Urulan pointed its staff at me, and tissue already knitting itself back together stopped. *Stupid*, I thought. *Stupid, stupid*. I'd already known there were drow who could heal themselves like I did, but I'd never entered my mind that the Mighty could have tricks that would inhibit my own ability. They just needed to keep taking me apart, and sooner or later they'd get me into a state I wouldn't walk away from.

Then an arrow went through my left wrist, breaking the shackle holding it on the way, and I promised myself I was going to kiss Indrani next time I saw her.

"My turn," I growled.

My mangled wrist flicked, forming a blade of ice, and I carved through my other shackled wrist before offering my ankles the same courtesy. The rylleh wreathed their blades with Night and stabbed into my open torso, pinning me down with what felt like a similar trick, but they really should have gone for the arms. I caught the flat of one sword and ice crept up it, shattering three fingers before the rylleh dropped it and retreated. There was a whisper and another globe of Night began forming around me, which given my current lack of feet was something of an issue. So I took care of it, forming feet out of ice and throwing myself out of the jaws of death. The second rylleh was not so lucky, and died screaming as it dissolved inside. I picked its blade out of my ribs, dropping it down, and finally my torso began putting itself back together. I stomped down and mist billowed out, covering all three of us, though not before I noticed the rylleh who'd lost fingers had already regrown them. Still, I'd learned another weakness to the Night-acid trick. When it began forming, it could not be stopped. Urulan would not have lost one of its lieutenants otherwise.

I shed off the last of my ice-forged feet and padded softly on the stone, feeling the drow through their warmth where my eyes found no purchase. The sigil-holder had only barely moved – it'd retreated a bit, nothing more – but the rylleh was circling around me. Could they sense Winter, as I could sense the Night? The powers were not so different. No, I decided. They would already have struck otherwise. Their senses might be sharper than those of other drow, though, so I'd have to be careful. I'd begin with Urulan's last helper. I crept forward quietly, circling it as it believed it was circling me, and only struck when facing its back. I could use mist, I had learned, if it was of my own

making. It was just another facet of my mantle. And so I condensed it into ice over the rylleh's body, spooking it enough it dropped down into a puddle of shadow – and that was when I struck. A spear of ice forced it back into drow-form, and by then I was upon it. That transient moment where it stopped being shadow and started being a drow again? They were nearly blind during that, having to reorient all their senses. I didn't give it the time: my blade went through its throat, severed the spine, and I ripped off the head afterwards just to make sure it wouldn't heal. Amusingly enough, it did. Both separate parts closed up with fresh skin, though it remained quite dead.

Urulan spoke a single word in Crepuscular, and just like that I was back in the deep end.

I'd wondered why it was being so prudent, after being so aggressive since the start. Because it was preparing a major working, as it turned out. The mist had robbed my enemies of their sight, but it had also given the drow materials to work with – something I only realized was a very bad idea when my own mist began burning at my flesh. It'd turned the whole fucking thing into acid, hadn't it? My eyes were the first thing to go, but I could feel the mist eating at me all over. Worst, I couldn't just reform my way through it: the Night slowed that down, and the acid was eating at me quicker than I healed. This was worse than fighting Praesi mages, I thought. Those might be able to make wards, but they weren't nearly this quick or vicious. Considering Urulan had likely been at this for centuries it only made sense, but that absent-minded consideration did nothing to help me out of my current predicament. Hardening my flesh, which was difficult when not contained to smaller body parts, did little to stop the problem. Slowed it some, but not enough to turn the tide. Gritting my teeth, I turned into mist myself but was forced back into human-form not even a heartbeat later. With fresh acid burns all over to show for it.

Fuck. Right, if I couldn't flee it then I had to move it. I'd lost all of my plate by now, which was infuriating but not as much as the fact that most my face muscles were bare and falling apart. I was melting like snow in summer sun. I formed of ice a large windmill and set it to spinning, which drew back the mist closest to me and bought me a moment until Urulan clapped down its staff and broke it without a word. Still, thinned was good enough for what I'd intended. Wings ripped out of my back for the third time today and I rose out of the mist. The problem, now, was that I was literally flying blind with someone waiting to take a shot at me. I couldn't just keep rising, that'd be painting a target on my back, so I zig-zagged erratically as my face slowly grew back. Even if I got hit, I thought, by the time I got back on my feet I'd be ready to fight again. Unfortunately, Urulan agreed. The sound of mist billowing forward came to my ears, and I realized it was pursuing me with the cloud. All



right, desperate measures then. I flipped directions and went crashing straight towards the ground, hoping to... ah, there it was, a rooftop. My blood and flesh made a mess on the tiles, but I punched my way through and landed in a sprawl below.

Screams, people running away. Nisi? They hadn't tried to fight anyway. I wildly sprayed ice where I'd crashed through and crouched close to the floor. I just needed to wait this out, I thought, though every passing moment where the mist hadn't caught up was ratcheting up the tension in my frame. My eyes finally formed again, and I let out a relieved sigh. I'd made it. Through the ice-patched hole in the roof I could see the acid mist was surrounding the building, which was my first warning sign. Urulan wouldn't have bothered unless it intended to flush me out. Night flared above me, a beacon to my eldritch senses, and I cursed under my breath. It wasn't just going to flush me out, it was going to shattered the damned thing and drown me in acid again. I wouldn't be able to dodge that. I had to convince it to strike elsewhere instead. I wove glamour, two separate workings. I sent an image of myself through the ice, wreathed in a blue halo that would serve as cheap explanation why she wasn't melting. Too cheap, too obvious. A look to the side revealed there was an open door to my left, with five corpses where the nisi had tried to flee and been caught by the mist instead. Through there I sent another illusion of me, this one discreet and melding with the shadows. Almost invisible. She ran for the other on the other side of the street.

It evaporated a moment after she entered in a burst of Night that shook the entire Crossroads and collapsed the wall of the house I was really in.

The glamour had been dispersed by the hit, and I dispersed the one above as well. Crouching low behind loose stones, I wove one last glamour: my own skeleton, slowly growing back its flesh. Spikes of Night fell down around it in a circle and there was a swell of power. Biting my lip, I slowed the regeneration to a crawl in the glamour. I wasn't sure if that had been what the trick was intended for, but I'd have to guess. Urulan approached slowly, its glass staff pointed at my fake body and quietly I formed a sword. I waited until it was standing over my illusion, staff raised, before I attacked. Had it been its senses or a discrepancy in effect that tipped it off? I might never know, but when I was a mere ten feet away the sigil-holder turned and cast a silvery gaze towards me. We were done with the posturing, and so I struck. Step forward, feint low to the left and then a spin – its staff my sword and I smiled. It went away quickly, when the staff did not break and its arm did not lower. I was, I could feel, slightly stronger. But not enough to hammer it back, and then the staff *rippled*. My sword blew up, shredding a few fingers with it, and the tip of the staff hit me in the stomach.

I rocked back and it struck upwards smoothly, breaking my chin before whipping back down and going for a thrust into my throat. I spun on myself, feeling the staff pass a hair's breadth from my neck, and formed another blade to swing at its extended shoulder. It spun with me, as if the two of us were dancing, and fluidly stepped away when my strike at reached the apex of its arc. The tip of the staff lightly touched the sword, and just like that it fucking blew up again. The fingers I'd just bloody grew back were shredded again, to my mounting irritation. I made a third blade along with what was clearly more than my third set of fingers of the fight. Irritating as this was, it was likely better than what would happen if Urulan pulled the same trick on my actual body. The drow spoke something in a language other than Crepuscular, sounding amused, but I didn't recognize the language. It sounded close to Reitz, but the vowels were even more of a debacle. Some older form, maybe? Some Secrets floating around the Night were much older than the current Calernia. Most of them, actually.

"Didn't catch that," I said, and attacked.

I didn't start with a feint, this time. It was clearly a better fighter than I was, the only way I'd win was by cheating. I angled my sword for its throat and swung with brute force and speed. It withdrew just out of reach, bending backwards, and then bent forward. One hand came off the staff to tap my side and I had to bite back the scream. It'd found a vein, and was pouring the Night-acid in it. I did the only reasonable thing, and froze my own blood so stop it from spreading. It caught the wrist of my sword hand and forced it to continue the arc as it drew back the staff to better bring it down.

"Mistake," I calmly said.

I turned the wrist it held to mist, and wrenched it out. The wisp of wrist moved under my will, slithering up its nostril and sinking into the brains behind them. All it took after that was a twist of will, and I shredded what lay inside its skull. Mighty Urulan dropped the ground, and I stood panting. I'd didn't bother recover the flesh I'd turned into mist, making another hand instead. Didn't want the old one back, after where it'd been. My flank still felt like it'd been lit on fire, but I carved out the infection and breathed a sigh of relief. It was only then, covered in blood both my own and that of my enemies, that I realized I'd been naked ever since the acid mist trick. I'd just been too angry to notice, and it wasn't like I felt the cold anyways. I looked down at the drow's corpse and shrugged. Might as well steal its clothes before I cut its head off, then.

Throwing Mighty Urulan's severed head in the middle of its own warriors ought to have a slight effect on enemy morale.

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*Lucas*

Great chapter.  
Haven't read it yet but I trust it's awesome.  
Have a good night everyone 😊

*Ahoy Matey!*

TL;DR Cute teen goes naked in public and takes a pounding from three black man.

[taborask](#)

I wish I could like that twice

*Kirook*

Catherine is twenty now, actually.

*kelioez*

Im feeling proud that this is the most liked comment as of this this chapter, I'm so proud of this community and of humanity.

[DroughtBringer](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>  
Go vote!

[Javvies](#)

Throwing the head of your defeated enemies before you to unsettle the ones still fighting. Good job.

Overconfidence will screw you every time. Just as well you got reminded of that before anything too terrible or permanent happened. Again.

Stealing the clothes of the Mighty?

Did you forget that you are short and they weren't, Cat? It isn't going to fit properly.

But, good job on the murderhoboing.

You aren't murderhoboing right if you aren't wearing stuff looted from dead enemies.

*Dainpdf*

She could theoretically just make clothes out of winter. Heck, couldn't she make herself taller? It worked with Ubua, ought to work with her. And then she'll be even closer to apotheosis.  
Mwahahahaha

*Anonymouse*

Name shenanigans will prevent that

*Yotz*

Or allow. Self-image of the Named one postulates the physical form. If Cat would be able to shift her self-perception to see herself as a slightly taller person, she will grow. Doubly for the Fae stuff, for it is a concept first and a matter – second.

Problem lies in the peculiarities of flesh – you kinda grow in in the body you were born with, and your psyche usually molds in accordance with it, not other way around.

*Dainpdf*

Not necessarily. Both the Dead King and the Intercessor are, as he once said, “more essence than form” (or something to that effect). Name shenanigans only keep your appearance fixed if how you perceive yourself includes your appearance.

*John*

Clothes formed out of winter would probably mean drawing more power, meaning more principle alienation. Battle’s not over yet, makes sense to avoid wasting resources on vanity when possible.

*Yotz*

If they would be akin to active camo or streith, yes – but if Winter would be used only to create a sheet of flexible ice that can exist without further power infusing, then alienation would be of not issue. Presumably.

Hoarfrost body-paint, as a less reality-breaking clothes – something akin to skin-suit, maybe even with a touch of artistry in form of microprisms to form a rainbows in key areas instead of a palatine or a cloak.

Imagination is the only limit in this case.

*Yotz*

\*”stole”. Not “palatine”.

*Dainpdf*

They would probably draw way less than a whole body – by that token, Cat should also make her body smaller to save power.

*Snowfire1224*

I don't know. I think occasionally joking about how short she is so part of the story that it's not going to happen

*Dainpdf*

I guess. She could still outgrow it, though.

[Sethur](#)

What was the official motto of the Fifteenth again? "Kill them! Take their stuff!" Or was that just the goblins?

*Rup*

....stab the kidney..loot the corpse....some goblinspeak

*tithin*

This was an incredibly brutal chapter in a lot of respects.

... please tell us what happened to Black.

[ahd](#)

Bet you five quatloos that's gotten skipped over and we'll never see the scene.

*tithin*

No deal!

We may not see the scene, I just want to know if he survived



[ahd](#)

His protege would know if her mentor were dead. <sup>TM</sup>

*JJR*

I'll take that bet. And then as is customary reveal the details of my evil plan. For you see the term used was that we "never" see the scene, in order to determine that this has come to pass we would have to wait forever! Even the author telling us that they were definitely not going to write the scene is not enough to resolve the bet as they may change their mind about such a decision in the future and write it anyway. So the only two outcomes are that we do see the scene in which case I win, or we don't see the scene in which case you don't win as we have to wait some more time to determine whether or not the scene is just coming later.

I literally can't lose!

And writing that makes me feel like I'm channeling Dread Emperor Irritant, The oddly Successful.

*FactualInsanity*

Irritant always seemed to me like accidentally successful more than anything. This is clearly premeditated. In fact, it strikes me as only a single reveal away from a Traitorous plan. Are you perchance also ahd?

*Sylwoos*

Like we never saw Captain last moment. Wouldn't be surprise if all calamity have the same treatment...

*Dainpdf*

I just want to see the plot moving again. Last real plot event was swearing in the drow, and before that meeting the dwarves.

*JJR*

So the Mighty did not realize how Cat's Winter tricks would let her slip from his grasp, and he got a brain full of hand to show for it.

Truly, it was a terrible mist ache on his part.

[taliesinskye](#)

\*sigh\*

Take the damned like and go home to think about what you've done.

*FactualInsanity*

Booooooooooooo! Booooooooooooo!  
You should be ashamed of yourself!  
I'd upvote if I had an account, but booooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!

*Wry Warudo*

Oh no, it's the Pundering Bard

*SilentWatcher*

As for Winter tricks, will Cat also turn into Liquid? We already got the Solid and Mist trick. Would be great against that vibration attack of the drow and/ or for impossibly flexibel moves.

*Novice*

Gotta admit, Cat with that Black impression right before the finishing blow was badass.

*Dainpdf*

Black was cooler. He only said "mistake" in his mind. Also, I wonder why Cat took so long to do the "breathe the mist in" trick? She had them in the mist in the middle of the fight. Not like this specific moment opened her enemy to it somehow. Unless I'm missing something.

*Hellspirit*

Yeah, the time it takes to say "mistake" would undoubtedly be the opening for a heroic asspull.

*Novice*

Of course Black was cooler. It's the mfing Carrion Lord. I just like this because of the whole 'like father, like daughter' thing ya know?

*Rook*

This is Catherine Foundling. Taking hideous injuries before beating a boss is basically her trademark.

I mean what kind of self-respecting warlord ends a fight without at least getting naked and covered head to toe in blood? Let's be reasonable here.

*Metrux*

Don't forget the scars to show to all your concubines.

*Metalshop*

Holy shit that was amazing. And Urulun is supposed to be on the weak end of the spectrum. Cat's back in the underdog slot of the title card again.

*Gunslinger*

She's fighting without using her domain though. That's a secret she'd be saving for later, but there might very well be some Night secret that dissolved domains for all we know

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

I really, really hope that with one part of a body, you can't collect Night from all of it.

*IDKWhoitis*

Night seems to reside within an extra organ (it looks like a grey heart).

*Dainpdf*

Cool. A pity she couldn't take the time to learn some of these Night tricks. I bet the acid mist would be great against all sorts of enemies, and would regeneration inhibitors. Priestbane, anyone?

*Someguy*

The acid trick would work better with her Fall/Moonless Night Domain than Winter I think. The vibration damage-disruption and droplet shooty trick would work very well with Winter.

*Dainpdf*

She can still do Fall, to some extent. She's just not done it offensively in a while. Last time was against the Thief of Stars back in Keter.

*Anonymouse*

That would make it so the Sve of Night could use it against her

*Dainpdf*

I assume the Sve can already use all these tricks against her. It's her domain, after all. She can probably use every Trick and Secret.

[Swishy Sword](#)

For whatever reason, I'm starting to feel like the Guide would make a good setting for a DMC-style game.

*Jane*

I hummed a few tunes from *Bayonetta* in my head as she dodged through the spears of Night to fly at her foe.

Though if they keep it up with these full-screen attacks, something out of *Touhou* might become more appropriate soon...

*nick012000*

Rules of Nature goes with everything. 😊

*Faiir*

Every time, EVERY TIME  
I read that as  
Detroit Metal City



*Gunslinger*

That's pretty fitting too considering Cat's speciality in killing everyone.

*limwanya*

So this guy is one of the weaker mightys in the city?

*JJR*

If I'm understanding the situation correctly, he's not even one of the Mightys of the city any more. I think these Drow were the ones that lost their foothold in the city and got pushed outside. If I'm reading the last chapter correctly this one was literally too weak to stay. So, yeah, weaker than the ones down in the city.

*MetruX*

Uhh... No. The guy at this spot is the weakest IN the city, he has a territory that allows passage for most of the other mightys territories. The problem with this spot, and why people don't want it, is two: it has few resources, and it is the entry point for any other Mighty coming from outside, so he was attacked frequently. Though he is still a Mighty from the city, and was even from an inner part until some time ago, when he got pushed back to this spot.

*Jane*

Hm. You know, with tricks like the "Turn the ground into a pool of acid", maybe the proper Drow could have handled the Dwarven invaders more effectively than the dregs they crushed made it seem. While the logic of the story did make it seem like they were doomed, they only had to deal with a small expeditionary force (relative to what the Dwarves would be able to muster without the Gloom), and it wouldn't take *that* many ugly surprises to deplete their numbers to the point where they couldn't hope to succeed.

Of course, the fact that the Dwarves were prepared to spend a very long time here does suggest that they weren't going to rush in the way Cat did, making it much less likely that they'd be caught by a power like this...

Oh, c'mon Cat, you don't know where those have been! Just make your own clothing out of Winter. Ice Armour is *tres chic*.

[\*taliesinskye\*](#)

Ice armor may be convenient and fashionable, but it's also transparent, and I think the only thing Cat really gets out of clothing is modesty anyway.

*Jane*

It can be frosted. And frosted ice armor is all the rage with Evil Winter Queens at the moment! She might as well look the part, since that literally is one of the things she is now.

*Someguy*

Just let it go.

*Jane*

...Cat, Disney Princess. No wonder everyone says she's aligned with the Gods Below.

*Raved Thrad*

You know you've reached the pinnacle of Evil when Disney's bought your franchise.

*JN*

More importantly, she just found out that her opponents can shatter her ice at will.

*FactualInsanity*

The Dwarves are also not squeamish about essentially carpet bombing any fortified position ahead of marching their infantry into Night range. An organized and united Everdark could probably fight them on a more or less equal footing. A few Mighty? Not a chance.

*Jane*

While this is true, it strikes me as similar in ways to when Cat dropped a lake on her foes – just using that for a few seconds nearly broke the Crusaders on its own, despite dozens of Named and a far larger force. The Dwarves can overwhelm the Drow in anything remotely approaching a fair fight, but a few figures like *these* would still be able to inflict devastating losses if they were able to find an opportunity to act.

The Drow are crippled by their inability to ally with each other despite the dire need, true, but the Dwarves aren't getting any reinforcements – any losses they take clearing out a Sigil won't be replaced. It shouldn't take more than a few nasty losses to a Mighty whose trick they couldn't protect themselves against for their numbers to fall to a less dangerous level.

'course, it doesn't look like they could capitalize on that win. Even if they have army-killing tricks, unlike at the

Battle of the Camps, they don't really have the lower-level soldiers necessary to follow through afterwards. They can't drop a pool of acid on *everyone*, probably.

### *FactualInsanity*

There are some key differences though.

First, there's the issue of morale. The Crusaders were close to breaking, because breaking simply means, running back home. The Dwarves are stuck. There's no getting past the Gloom without Drow obsidian shards, or the magic lamps and it's unlikely either of those are present in enough numbers/easily obtainable for the common soldiery.

Second, unlike the lake trick which was done from accross the battlefield, every use of night so far seen has been within relatively close quarters. If Urulan could sling the acid-Night from halfway accross the city, he wouldn't even need to be where Cat could see him and strike back. (Unless it's a cultural hangup about being seen dominating foes and/or things like line of sight requirements, but those work out to "unable to strike from range" anyway.) If the Drow could approach the dwarven army safely, that wouldn't matter, but so far their shadow form has not been seen making them invincible. Any damage (like say, from an exploding projectile) just shunts them into their corporeal form, where they're vulnerable to further damage (like say, from further exploding projectiles).

Third, while saying "These are all the tricks the Drow have." is clearly wrong, it is equally wrong to assume thesame thing about the Dwarves. They clearly have strong magic. They've been preparing for decades if not centuries. And even before that Drow have considered them something you survive, not something you fight.

I think a Winter/Summer comparison is apt here. Drow are dangerous predators and hunters, sure. But so are Winter and they still always lose to Summer in matters of war.

### *Jane*

While the Dwarves do have a considerable range advantage, we also have to consider the terrain – with everything taking place underground, there are many places where that would be less decisive than it was in their first encounter. The trick used in this fight, at least, seemed able to operate at least at a moderate range, which would be enough to neutralize their siege weapons. Of course, if things close to actual melee range, only the stronger Drow have any hope against them, so the terrain doesn't favor them too much.

The Dwarves *do* have a terrifying reputation, true, but we also have to consider that it was the dregs of their society speaking – no Mighty would be interested in going to the outer edges of Drow society to pick a fight with Dwarves who will leave on their own, especially not when that means coming back to find someone else stole your territory from you.

We also have to consider that the Dwarves seem to be a proper army, rather than a rabble of warriors – this is usually an advantage, but it does mean that they are likely more specialized. If they lose too many of their heavy soldiers, or their engineers, it could represent a much more significant loss of capability than the loss of any given non-Mighty Drow.

As it stands, I'm pretty sure the Dwarves could do a lot of destruction, but I'm not as certain that they could actually reach the Priestess with enough soldiers left alive to kill her. Setting aside the question of what unmentioned tricks they have of their own, of course. ... Speaking of which, now I wonder if they have some kind of Goddess Trap they were saving for her, but will instead end up using on Cat when their friendly-ish relationship breaks down.

*FactualInsanity*

Time, patience and the willingness to collapse entire sections of the underground, if the cost in lives is prohibitive?

But that would make me so sad, if it happens. I like the Dwarves (I like dwarves in general, though appeal varies with portrayal) and unlike virtually everyone else, they have zero interest in being anything but straight with Cat. Plus, I'm really eager for her to start making headway in the political diplomacy department.

[taliesinskye](#)

The dwarves have enough magic lamps for everyone, that's how they got in and the lamps haven't gone anywhere.

*FactualInsanity*

They got in in organized groups. Not the same as a broken force routing.

*MetruX*

The lamps are temporary, you should read it again.

### *Quite Possibly A Cat*

I think that if a Mighty starts slicing through the Dwarves it won't need lower level soldiers to follow up. If the dwarves break they stop being a real threat and start being food for the more powerful mighty. Plus if the dwarves can't defend the Drow corpses they kill any Drow essentially undo their victories. Or even worse, you can end up with a situation where one of the Mighty starts snowballing and eating through the entire dwarven force.

It is entirely possible that the dwarves have simply badly miscalculated. As far as we know the dwarves have only penetrated the edges of the Gloom before this raid. They have almost certainly never had to deal with one of the more powerful Drow. Hell, what if Sve Noc can shift the Gloom? Once the lights are exhausted she might be able to just reap the dwarves wholesale.

### *MetruX*

People, this discussion seems to forget a really, really important thing about this dwarf army. They are not here to push eternally and win the battles. They are here to push the Drow out of the underdark, which means it's not something you win like a war. They will bide their time, kill any who gets too close, advance slowly and GROW. Yes, the dwarfs will grow in here, they will take decades or even centuries to finish this conquest, and be assured, if they can take out the Sve, with it the Gloom, the drows are ended, for all the rest of the dwarfs will be able to come as reinforcements. So, to summarize: this is the last people still underground near dwarf territory, and the dwarfs have no need to push too much or stay in battle if they find something they can't immediately destroy.

### [sengachi](#)

Okay but imagine the dwarves take the city, but some of the Mighty escape. Or they just catch wind of what's coming and bail. And having escaped, some of the Mighty decide that their best course of action is to sneak around to the dwarven flank and go on a power-up spree by slaughtering a few thousand dwarven civilians. Or just doing hit and run in general.

The dwarves can out-muscle the drow in any scenario and crack any drow fortification, sure. But that doesn't actually mean that much. Just look at the real world example of the US' wars in the Middle East. There's absolutely no power the US has been fighting whose military might holds a candle to the US military, but the end result has most definitely not been a US victory. This isn't because the people fighting the US

can take them in a fight. It's because they don't have to take the US in a fight to deal unsustainable losses. And that's with the war fought half a world away from any soft US assets. Can you imagine what the situation would look like if the US military was trying to defend a small nation's worth of its citizens at the same time?

Oh the drow are going to suffer during the war, there's no doubt. The dwarves will crush every stronghold of resistance and scatter every army. But the dwarves are going to take losses with a capital L. Guerrilla warfare in the Underdark will make guerrilla warfare in the mountainous deserts of the Middle East look positively quaint. There will be booby traps and assassins and ambushes and hit and run strikes and dwarves will die.

The dwarves might win in the end. They seem like they've really thought this out and are truly willing to commit on a massive scale here. But just because they can stomp all over drow cities doesn't mean it's going to be easy.

### *FactualInsanity*

If some Mighty decide to bail and flank, they just run into the dwarven fortifications and defenses. This isn't open terrain. It's a network of caves and narrow passages. Chokepoints where the dwarven capacity to drown the opposition in high literal firepower is just further capitalized on. It's not like the dwarves have any incentive to leave their flanks exposed.

### *lorelord*

Ah, but you have to remember that the US was never trying to kill every man, woman, and child. The dwarves are not here to "liberate" the drow, they are here to exterminate the drow. Meaning that most of the advantages of guerilla warfare are gone. The drow cannot attack and then vanish into the populace. They can't even sneak into dwarven towns and the like, because the dwarf garrisons will just kill them.

### *agumentic*

It bears remembering that Dwarves didn't send an expeditionary force, they sent a colony. Faced with casualties, they would dig in in already conquered territory and just rebuild their army old-fashioned way.

### *TheCount*

Thanks for the chapter!

Well, even if the head isn't working as well, I'm sure the leader's

stuff on someone else will do.... unless they are made of night, ofc.

*Berder*

Too close, for a lesser Sigil-holder in a decaying city! He was almost her match. Cat has got to get way tougher somehow, and quick, if she hopes to challenge greater Sigil-holders and the Priestess of Night herself.

*Berder*

Or, perhaps it will turn out that Urulan was actually a lot stronger than a lesser sigil-holder. Maybe he had the direct attention and backing of the Priestess during that fight.

*Jane*

I don't think it's a matter of toughness – I mean, how many times did Cat remake herself during that fight? And I don't think it's a matter of power, either – he went down pretty quick, once she was actually able to get close to him.

What she needs is essentially what she's been doing (and how she eventually won this battle) – expanding her bag of tricks, and looking for new solutions to her problems. Her opponent this time worked with little more than a single trick and some backup to hem her into it, and came closer to killing her than anyone has in quite some time – not by overwhelming her, but just by finding new ways to try to burn her with it.

There's a lot of lessons for her here, if she can find a moment to review it.

*Berder*

Agree, she needs a strategy session to figure out some more tricks and counters that would have made the Urulan fight easy.

*Anonymouse*

The moment she comes out of the Everdark with an even more huge bag of tricks and an army of drow she'll be OP

*Argentorum*

The funny thing, is that the Everdark is training her to beat Hanno. Every time she wins she gets better at turning her foes gimmick against them, and the White Knight is 100% gimmicks (in order to match and defeat Black).

It's looking like the Gods Below played the long game on this one.

*Antoninjohn*

With all the xp Cat's getting she is probably going to level up a lot before she gets to the boss fight with Siv

[sengachi](#)

Cat is learning to fight like Akua, but I think she needs to get back to the basics and fight more like Black. This isn't the kind of fight you can throw yourself into and walk away from a hundred times. Once, sure. Twice, probably. A dozen times? Ehhhh. But a hundred, no. Eventually one of them will kill you. Pitting power against power like this is only a surefire win so long as providence is on your side, and that's a fickle force to play with.

What Cat needs is to be more practical. She needs to fight with a squad of ice dummies like Black uses undead, with glamoured traps and careful terrain control, with an exit strategy *\*always\** an exit strategy for every move she makes. She still does need to learn how to use her power to better effect, yes, but not at the expense of the brutal practicality which has gotten her this far.

Which, I'm guessing, is the lesson she's going to take away from this fight. Immortality is all fun and games and unstoppable violence until your enemy whips out a perma-kill and you haven't bothered to think out your next move.

*FactualInsanity*

Preach.

I know Worm comparisons are tired, but I kind of want to see her do it like Taylor and utterly destroy and terrorize her enemies with ice constructs, while sitting in the warm comfort of her own tent with a tankard of (forgive the misspelling, if there is any; it's been a while since a chapter included the name) aragh in hand.

*Greg*

This kinda feels like filler.

It's well-done filler in terms of magical fight scenes, but it's still largely irrelevant to the main story. Yes, Cat has to fight her way through to Sve. No, Cat will not be defeated by some random Mighty. The stakes here are fairly nonexistent (for me, I should add). She is not in any danger, Hunter is not in any danger, Akua is not in any danger (much as I wish she was), and there's no other characters here we truly care about at all yet. There's barely even a Story going on.

She is level grinding. And level grinding is not even that fun to play yourself, let alone watch someone else play. This entire



chapter could be handled by a paragraph explaining what Cat learned, as it doesn't even particularly matter who she's beaten.

More power to you if you're enjoying yourself, but for me, this has ground the story to somewhat of a halt.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I can see where you're coming from and agree to an extent. Personally, I enjoy interesting fights with new tricks and lessons to be learned. But I don't more than a couple in a row. I expect EE will skip a lot of the action required between here and Sve.

[\*crysjal\*](#)

I think this chapter is more to illustrate that things are going to actually be difficult from this point. Cat has left the player friendly teaching zone and entered the actual boss dungeons. This was just to illustrate that aswell as her growth in using her power.

*JJR*

I have to wonder, given the jump in night power that Cat just ran across, is night distribution follows a sort of Pareto Principle Power Law distribution. Basically 80% of the night expected to be owned by 20% of the Drow. It's a thing that happens all the time apparently, there's a video by Vsauce about it too

If this is the case then the enemies Cat is about to face are about to get a heck of a lot stronger. The priestess of night, Sve Noc is probably like an ocean of night all by herself.

[\*NZPIEFACE\*](#)

I'm pretty sure the Sve *\*is\** the Night.

*IDKWhoitis*

I foresee a time skip, or a very long arc of Cat murdering her way down the City. I normally hate timeskips, but this might take a while as Cat goes through the tutorial of "How to be a Proper Eldritch Monstrosity."

Because we just got to the part in the tutorial where the first serious enemy has been thrown at you, but there's probably going to be a lot of grinding until we get near the bottom of this pit.

*Anony*

So if her mist can be used to kill, and the mist she spread earlier in the fight is just an extension of her, she could have just killed all three of them back then without much struggle at

all.

Might not have thought of it or not wanted to reveal that ability I guess.

*nimelennar*

"I formed of ice a large windmill and set it to spinning, which drew back the mist closest to me and bought me a moment until Urulan clapped down its staff and broke it without a word."

I just want to say: huge fan.

*Forrest*

So here we are again with Cat being the underdog despite being \*all\* of winter, and she is yet again fighting without strategy. Hell, I feel like Cat was more strategic in book 1 than she has been recently. And no, her expanding her bag of tricks for personal combat is not a strategy, it is something you form your strategy around. Oh well, hopefully we get some story manipulation shenanigans when it comes to the sve of night at least.

*Drunken Dwarf*

To be fair, she's no longer fighting human rebels, young Named, and Name qualifiers. Not to mention these enemies are not only strong, but have centuries of experience in fighting random Night powers. But ya I do hope to see some story manipulation as well for Sve, which should happen considering Cat has now realized she needs every advantage as she can get.

*Mike E.*

Personally, I'm waiting for Cat to deliver that kiss to Archer 😊

*SMHF*

You know if Cat keep going like this... Her first new aspect is gonna be Pants!

*Barrendur*

In addition to this chapter feeling like "filler", it reinforced the emerging theme of "Catherine wins just 'cause... even though she she's got all the tactical prowess of a bull with both horns stuck in a tree."

*Barrendur*

It doesn't feel to me as if Catherine \*deserves\* to win; she kills for convenience now and is largely indifferent to it... but more tellingly, she hasn't done anything clever/ingenious in a long time. Catherine's not \*earning\* her wins anymore.

## NZPIEFACE

Not much point in thinking about it when you have literally unlimited power at your disposal.

## Hydrargentium

Interesting. So, Urulan lost because it never realized it could lose. It must've been stronger than everyone else around it for a long time. Or perhaps one of its Secrets was a zen-like ability to stay cool. It was clearly confident and feeling calm and in control the entire time, right up until the moment Catherine blenderized its brain.

Hg

## Miles

Throw the head into the middle of a bunch of enemy drow, fight with whomever survives to harvest it, and repeat. Great thing to do if it's just a training exercise.

## benthelynx

Not the strongest chapter. But I want to add to that that I love this story and please don't let criticism get to you.

JJR

Right, time for some silly speculation.

This chapter is called 'Impact'. Perhaps it will soon be followed by one called 'Second Impact' involving an even more powerful mighty that kills about half the Drow.

These two chapters would really be to set up the chapter where the Sve is confronted directly, called 'Third Impact'.

Viconr

Mighty Urulan wielded a long staff of glass, and without bothered with any more banter pointed it at me.

Without BOTHERING maybe?

burguulkodar

I do wonder who will get Urulan's night on auction. I mean, if I was a drow I would auction a thousand years or more for THOSE TRICKS. If Cat was flesh, she would have died a dozen times in that fight.

Archer, I believe, would die too against those three. They were way too strong for a non-hero mortal to face, named or otherwise.

Max Scherer

I hope she hold back in this fight, because it was actually pretty underwhelming. I dont know why people liked this fight... If this is all what Cat has up her sleeve(without her Domain) Then her Power is way too low. I mean this guy is on the low end of Drow and she had Problems. How the Hell is she going to fight the other Powerhouses? I am really disappointed right now and hoped that she for once wouldnt be the 'weak' one.

---

## Chapter 66: Tremors

*"It is a small-minded man who needs a reason to create a ritual that would crash the moon into Creation."*

– Dread Emperor Malignant III, before his death and second reign as Dread Emperor Revenant

The Urulan Sigil broke within an hour of its chief dying at my hands.

It was a valuable lessons as to how I should handle drow in the future. Decapitating a Proceran or Praesi army, for example, wouldn't necessarily take them out of the fight. The Legions, after the Reforms anyway, had been built with the notion in mind that the highest-ranking officers were natural targets for heroes or resistance fighters. Redundancies and a clear order of succession for the chain of command had been set into their framework. Princes of Procer, on the other hand, might be the undisputed rulers of their hosts but they also tended to delegate the practicalities of campaigning to trained career officers. In both cases, putting the head of the army's leader on a pike would be damaging in many ways but not outright scatter that same army. Sigils weren't armies, though, they were tribes kept together only by the strength of the sigil-holder. When I'd tossed Urulan's severed head into the middle of the battle, the glue keeping the sigil together had crumbled. Their kind, when it came down to it, let their actions be dictated by the invisible balance of martial strength. If the attacker was capable of killing the sigil-holder, odds were that the individual who'd done it was capable of wiping out the rest of the sigil on their own. Best to bargain, if possible, or flee if it was not.

Unsurprisingly it was the Mighty that kept fighting the longest. Dzulu could afford surrender more easily, knowing that they weren't worth harvesting to the enemy's upper ranks and that whoever was in charge there would always be a need for warriors

to send into the meat grinder. What did they care under which sigil it happened? Drow did not fight for plunder in the way that most tribes and clans would, not exactly. To amount to anything they needed Night, and war was certainly the easiest way to accumulate that – but when there was a clear winner, doubling down on a losing fight was not to their advantage. Mighty, on the other hand, knew they'd be hunted and harvested after a defeat. Used as spoils instead of coin or food. Surrender might be feasible if assurances were made, but that was not custom. Drow, for obvious reasons, preferred to raise the strength of their own Mighty rather than bring into the fold those defeated. I was part of a broader trend in their ways, one I was only now beginning to really grasp: as far as the drow were concerned, maybe nine tenths of their own kind were essentially irrelevant. Matters of life and death were settled by a handful of Mighty on both sides, with dzulu and nisi serving as tools and ornaments to whoever came out on top.

What that meant, practically speaking, was that the moment Mighty Urulan died this stopped being a battle and started being clean-up. It could still have turned south on us, if we hadn't been careful. The Urulan had outnumbered us three to one in Mighty and if they managed to cull my own numbers the idea of continued resistance might have taken hold. Corpses would have been harvested, fresh demigods raised and sent after our 'champions'. Our saving grace, in this case, was Ivah. My Lord of Silent Steps had no real interest in fighting minions, and had gone after the enemy's Mighty relentlessly. It would have been one thing if those had been allowed to gather together, but instead they'd found themselves ambushed and taken out one by one by a titled drow who was no stranger to these kinds of fights. Archer's sweep on the other side had met with only cursory resistance before she stopped as ordered. When it became clear neither she nor her escorts were inclined to advance any further, the forces sent out to meet her had doubled back to meet my own assault. Too late, however, to turn the tides. Their sigil-holder was already dead.

A few had tried her flank anyway, but after the second time she shot a jawor in the throat the moment it left cover their enthusiasm had mysteriously waned.

I spent the rest of the battle watching over my forces like a hen watching her chicks, not exactly holding their hand but ensuring that if they got in over their heads I could swiftly step on the opposition. To my surprise, even when we began taking sections of the Crossroads holding mostly nisi I never found the need to call my warband to order. My Mighty were oath-bound to decency, but the dzulu were not. Still, it had been made clear to them that wanton slaughter would not be allowed, or rape – though apparently that latter crime was near unheard of among drow, who treated sex as more a chore than a pleasure and rarely bothered unless they were nisi – and in the end they did not test my laws.

I wondered if they would have pulled at the leash, had I not personally slain Urulan and its strongest rylleh. My general distaste for what passed as drow nature whispered yes, but I might be doing them injustice. I held no illusions about the moral fibre of a people whose main occupation was murder, but there was something about them that brought old words from Black to mind. *If you have the ability to accomplish something, it is your right to do so.* I hadn't understood back then how deep a look into him that little sentence offered, or how close to the same Praesi philosophy he disdained it was in practice.

But there was a ring to it, an underlying sense that I saw mirrored in the way drow thought. The pragmatic monsters who'd shaped the woman I was today – and the plural was not a mistake for Malicia had been a teacher too, if not a willing or gentle one – kept to a faith worshipping only ability, the capacity to carry out one's will. That was a face given to their beliefs by the complicated games of the surface, though, where every little act was part of a broader war of growing sophistication. Down here the varnish of civilization had been stripped off, and the face given to that god was rawer: power. Just power. If you were strong enough, your rules were the only rules there were and they would not be questioned or disobeyed unless someone stronger than you contradicted them. I might be ordering them to act in ways that broke their customs, but as long as I remained the larger monster those orders would be observed for that, too, was custom. And perhaps deeper one than the rest.

"So is it me or do you always get all silent and philosophical after a big fight?" Indrani mused.

She swaggered in, her coat flecked with blood and a satisfied smile on her face. For someone who disdained the trappings of civilization, Archer had taken well to battles. Grown to enjoy them more than I'd thought, her sense of what victory being so personal it should not lend itself well to a clash of armies. A reminder, I mused, that people could continue to surprise even when you believed you had the measure of them.

"I never liked this part," I admitted as she came to stand beside me. "The clean-up. When the blades are out and shields collide I can almost feel what the songs sing of, but the aftermath spoils it. The return to the bare realities of what took place."

It'd barely qualified as a skirmish, by the numbers. More soldiers had been involved in the war game that'd won me command of the Fifteenth, and arguably much more complex tactics. How many people had actually fought today? Five hundred, maybe. And of those less than a hundred had actually had an impact on the outcome. There were not even two hundred dead in the aking of the Crossroads, though the way their corpses had been dragged and laid down in rows along the largest avenue made it seem more than

it should. Most those bodies were already bereft of Night, their killers have wasted no time claiming their due, but enough remained that the auction to come would be the largest yet. Indrani sighed.

"It does get on my nerves, that the best parts of you are also the most irritating," she said.

I snorted and left it at that, the two of us sharing a rare moment of comfortable silence. She tended to fill those religiously, almost as if she were afraid of the absence of noise, and so I savoured the rare respite.

"Should I ask why you're wearing clothes too large for you?" she finally asked.

"No," I grunted.

"Well, the pants are tight enough they make your arse look *amazing*," Indrani said. "But the whole long sleeves thing makes you look like a Mercantis trader."

"You know what, I'll take it," I said. "Still going to need to change before speaking with whoever comes up, though."

"Talk with Diabolist first, maybe," she said. "It's not like *she's* wearing real clothes, but she is disappointingly not naked all the time."

Thank the Gods for that. Indrani would never get anything done if Akua's admittedly impressive assets were permanently on display.

"I will," I replied. "Not right now, though. She's still taking count of our acquisitions."

"Of course she is," Indrani drawled. "It's almost like she's maneuvering herself into being the obvious pick for who ends up stuck watching over the drow when we get back upstairs."

It was easy to forget, sometimes, that Archer's lack of manners was more choice than inability. In some ways she was as sharp as Hakram when it came to reading social currents.

"She can manoeuvre all she wants, she's not getting the job," I said. "I'm still debating who'll oversee when I'm not around, but she's not in the running."

"Vivienne?" Indrani suggested.

"She doesn't have the right edges," I reluctantly admitted. "They'll challenge her. I'm considering Larat."

"Now there's a real philosophical question," Indrani drawled. "How many treacherous lieutenants it too many treacherous lieutenants?"

"One, but we make do with what we have," I sighed.

"We make do with what we have," Indrani repeated grimly, squinting forward in a poor imitation of a frown.

"I don't sound like that," I protested.

She hunched her shoulders and raised her chin, trying for noble sorrow but mostly looking like she had stomach cramps.

"I beat up empires but I'm real conflicted about it," Indrani declared. "A fairy queen named my crew the Woe because I'm so tragic and misunderstood."

"Screw you," I grinned. "You're part of it too."

"I once finished the last of the stew even if I don't really need to eat, because I'm just the *worst*," Indrani solemnly added.

It surprised a splash of laughter out of me, and once it started it didn't stop. The two of us ended up standing there like fools, sniggering at nothing much at all. It was a release I hadn't known I needed, and I could not help but be grateful for it. I'd thought before that Indrani was most beautiful in fleeting moments, when the part of her that was more glorious alive than anyone I'd ever known came to the surface and it was all you could see. I'd not been wrong, I decided. Strange as it was, she more attractive to me now – laughter glinting in hazelnut eyes, slightly breathless and making sport of all the world – than she would have been half-naked on my bed wearing little but lace.

"I did make a promise, while fighting Urulan," I teased.

"Oh?" she said. "What-"

My hand slipped around her waist, beneath the coat, and she allowed herself to be dipped down. Her eyes wide, I watched her lips part and leaned down to kiss her. She tasted, I thought, like spices – but soon enough all I could think of was the hungry heat of her lips against mine, the way our teeth clicked together awkwardly before she teased me with her tongue. She threaded her fingers into my hair, forcing me closer, and when we finally parted she was flushed and out of breath.

"Gods," she said, "you are so *short*."

Naturally, I dropped her. She fell into a sprawl with a loud yelp, perfectly capable of landing on her feet but never one to allow practicalities to get in the way of theatrics. I wiped my lips, then shrugged.



"There, promise fulfilled," I mused. "Back to work."

"Really?" she whined. "You're going to get me all worked up and then just leave?"

"I'm sure you'll get over it," I grinned, and turned my back to her.

She cursed me loudly as I sauntered away, feeling more human than I had in a very long time.

—

I found Diabolist seated like the queen of an industrious grey-skinned hive, drow gravitating to her and Centon for translated instructions before darting away to carry out her bidding. They were getting in the habit of obeying her, I saw. Not the Mighty — they saw her, I suspected, more as an obstacle to climb than a superior — but the nascent pack of dzulu officers and supervisors had grown used to taking her orders. They saw little of me, on a daily basis. Primly perched on a flat stone, Akua was a vision in her long dress of silver and blue. While high-necked and seemingly conservative, her clothes were cut to be rather flattering to her frame: they suggested rather than revealed, but the suggestion was not mild. Scarlet eyes remained on me as I strolled at her side, plopping myself down next to her. I glanced at Centon.

"Dismissed," I said in Lower Miezán. "All of you."

The nisi, though that status might just be remedied to today, bowed low and repeated the order in Crepuscular. Within five heartbeats we were entirely alone in the avenue.

"Catherine," Diabolist greeted me. "Another victory for your tally."

"It was the opening measure," I replied. "The real pivot comes when the deeper sigils decide on their response."

"There have been scouts," she noted. "No Mighty yet."

"It's coming," I said. "They can't afford an unknown her for long, not when we control the top floor of the Column."

"As you say," Akua murmured, inclining her head. "I had the privilege of witnessing your duel with Mighty Urulan, from a distance."

I hummed.

"And you have thoughts," I said.

So did I, and I was curious to see if they aligned.

"If I may speak frankly?" Diabolist said.

"Never too late to start," I drawled.

"Yes, yes, very clever," she sighed. "I have begun to worry, Catherine. Urulan was perhaps in the twenty strongest drow of Great Lotow, and likely close to the bottom of that division. It fought... better than I expected. You came close to death more than once."

"It was a wakeup call," I softly agreed. "We haven't been taking them seriously enough, have we? Lotow's not one of the big cities when it comes down to it. There's leviathans lurking ahead."

"You have grown used to being able to walk away from wounds that would kill even Named," Akua said. "And so developed what I can only call sloppy habits. I've heard descriptions of your encounters with heroes at the Battle of the Camps, the Saint in particular, and cannot help but think this is a trend and not an instance."

"In that, we are in agreement," I said.

Some of the fights I'd been in, lately... Black would weep to see them. I'd always been more inclined towards brawling than finesse, but I was starting to realize there was a reason my teacher had never seen his relative lack of power compared to his predecessors as a weakness. When you had a good enough hammer, everything started looking like a nail. That was a lot more likely to get you killed than lack of juice. I'd begun to rely on abilities that I should only ever use as a last result, and at some point I was going to run into someone who'd kill me for it.

"You use only the thinnest slice of what Winter is capable of," Diabolist said. "Perhaps exploration in depth is in order."

"You want me to fight like you," I smiled. "Distance, control, never committing."

"Not your usual fare, I know," she said. "But you are no longer the Squire in any significant sense. Your repertoire has expanded."

"Tricks are useful," I admitted. "And I do need to learn how to use the kind of great workings you threw around when riding my mantle. But you're wrong about the rest."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You intend to take the opposite path," Akua said.

"The basics," I mused. "I've been neglecting those, since I took my mantle. Thinking it was all right to get into fights because

I'm hard enough to win them. But many of those should never have been fights at all."

"Fight no battle save that which you must, for war is best won away from the field," Diabolist quoted thoughtfully.

"Theodosius?" I asked.

"Terribilis the First," she replied. "You intend... contingencies for the coming meeting with the drow, then."

"They're useful things, contingencies," I muttered, looking up at the bare stone of the cavern ceiling.

It was about time, I decided. The opening was there.

"Marker," I said. "It's time for us to have one of our regular little chats, Akua."

"Is it?" Diabolist said. "I cannot recall-"

She paused. Her face went blank and I smiled ruefully.

**"I compel you to answer my questions and do so truthfully and completely,"** I Spoke.

The shade shivered, the order sinking into her.

"We have done this before," Diabolist said.

"We have," I murmured. "Have you walled off any memories or knowledge, or considered doing so?"

"I have not," Akua replied.

"Do you have any hole or holes in your memories?"

"I do not," she said, then cocked her head to the side. "I do not. Oh my, you *have* been thorough."

I had. I'd known from the start that I wouldn't outplay her with words, she'd always been better at that. But I had other ways to even the scales.

"Have you plotted or acted against my interests?" I asked.

"I have not," she replied, sounding amused.

"What are your current short-term and long-term objectives?"

"I seek to prove myself as necessary to the running of your sigil," she said. "And in doing so, remain undeniably useful so long as you have use for the drow. My only long-term objective is survival."

"How do you intend to secure your survival?"

Her lips thinned. She never enjoyed that one.

"I must first learn the exact wording of the oath I believe you gave Thief, to see if it can be escaped through a technicality," Akua said. "I must then prove myself invaluable to your own objectives so that you will allow me to do so. I must be reconciled to Vivienne Dartwick, or she must be removed from the situation. If the wording is without flaw, I will seek to obtain a manner of resurrection that preserves most of what I am."

Nothing new, then. Good.

"Have you manipulated the greater or lesser oaths, or both, so that you can exploit them in any way?" I asked.

"I have not," she said.

The same answer as every time I'd asked the question, but it was worth checking to be sure.

"Do you know why I insisted the oaths be sworn to the Sovereign of Moonless Nights?"

"I do not," she said.

Ah, too broad.

"Do you have theories as to why I did?" I asked.

"I do," Diabolist drawled. "Shall I save us the time and elaborate?"

I ignored her. If not prompted, she could lie.

"What are these theories?"

"I believe you intend to divert yourself or your mantle in the future, and so dissociated oath-keeping from your personal identity," she said. "I am not certain if the beneficiary would be an object or an individual, but suspect it will be the former Prince of Nightfall."

Wrong, but she didn't have to know that.

"Is there any other part of my soul you would like me to bare?" Akua asked. "You must have other questions."

I had to keep it short – too long and the risks increased she might notice – and I usually used my last question to make sure she hadn't picked up on anything. I could do that tomorrow, though, at no great loss. And there were some things I'd grown curious about.

"Why do you flirt with me?"

She laughed, full-throated.

"I know you have difficulty remaining emotionally uninvolved when in a sexual relationship, and you have a known weakness for powerful women," she said. "I also believe that contact between us would temporarily allow me to regain full physical senses, which is promising as I find you attractive enough sex would not be unpleasant."

I waited for a moment.

"It also infuriates Thief when she overhears," Akua added reluctantly, forced by the order. "Which I deeply enjoy."

"That might be the most human I've ever seen you act," I said.

She languidly shrugged.

"And now?"

**"From and including the word 'marker' I spoke earlier today, you will remember this conversation as idle chatter from the moment this sentence ends," I Spoke.**

Her form rippled and a heartbeat passed.

"Amusing as this was, I believe there might be more pressing matters at hand," Diabolist said.

"You're right," I said. "Let's talk contingencies, then."

Still under control for now.

I'd ask again tomorrow.

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[DroughtBringer](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>  
Go vote. You know you want to.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

<https://discord.gg/CQRZBFM>

All paths lead to the Guide Discord. I await you beyond the reach of dawn, in the realm of ceaseless shipping and revolutionary baby cuisine.

*NerfContessa*

Looking back at this during a reread.

Oh my, how much this chapter foreshadowed is insane...

[erraticerrata](#)

For those of you who've been following the comment section here or checked out the reddit, you'll know there's a character popularity tournament going on for the Guide, organized by a good friend of mine! It'll keep coming out update by update, with the link below leading to the first matchup. Check it out and vote!  
[https://www.strawpoll.me/16692414?fbclid=IwAR1MTfBI8pLDLkMAU429g0LWgS6RtUUqRIp\\_kFKcD8ZG8a3QaYZEhs7a2QI](https://www.strawpoll.me/16692414?fbclid=IwAR1MTfBI8pLDLkMAU429g0LWgS6RtUUqRIp_kFKcD8ZG8a3QaYZEhs7a2QI)

*stevenneiman*

Starting with an easy choice, I see.

*naturalnuke*

Poor Klaus xD

*stevenneiman*

Obviously everyone's going to vote for the noble and wise leader of the armies of Good rather than some sort of fae abomination.

*RanVor*

I am genuinely surprised that Papenheim has *any* votes.

*letouriste*

same. that's quite a feat. the guy is more popular i thought

*Jane*

Someone confused this for a "who should we eliminate" style contest, a couple of weirdos *really* hate the main character, and a few dozen people's mouse slipped while voting, I guess?

[TeK](#)

I personally, knowing that Cat will win, gave my voice to Klaus to support him, despite overwhelming odds against him. It is exactly the reason that I see no way for him to win, which compelled me to be graceful in victory, even though he would not be my first pick. However, it is my understanding that those rankings are used for purposes such as judging overall character respectance by the audience, and I do solemnly

apologise for throwing the data into a turmoil, however insignificant my voice may be.

Also, I believe there is small, but vocal, groupe of readers who stand vehemently opposed to Catherine Foundling and her accomplices, who vote for Klaus out of principle, since he does represent the "Good" side of the conflict.

*eaglejarl*

Who is Klaus?

*kelioez*

U...u monster

*stevenneiman*

I'm not surprised that there exist people who like Klaus better than Cat, but I am surprised they would have stuck with the story long enough to see this. I guess they might be in it for the side characters, given that Hakram and Juniper between them have a lot of Klaus' personality.

*Ethan Smith*

Side characters are pretty great to be fair

[DroughtBringer](#)

Huh. I'm wondering how long she has been doing that. Also, if that is Speaking as we have seen it before, that ability there could be terrifying. Find people, Speak something to them, and then make them forget what you Spoke to them. Has interesting potential, but would probably run into flaws quickly. It is nice that Cat has taken this precaution though, although I feel like Akua is a bit too smart for that to keep working for too long.

*Byzantine*

That is the exact reason anyone in their circle who was ever in direct contact with malicia was killed by Praesi highborns: she can give an order they will be unaware of and that cannot be detected until it is already far too late.

*Novice*

It's probably the combination of the strength of Cat's Speak and the fact that Cat has full ownership of Akua's soul that makes this type of contingency possible.

*NerfContessa*

Still, very very well done this... Contingency.

I approve.

*IDKWhoitis*

Black uses a variation of this trick regularly, as noted in the Free Cities Arc.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Remember Lelouch?

[Miles](#)

I wouldn't be surprised if that's how Black started this story in ch 1.

**\*\*Kill him, but remember it as your own decision\*\***

*agumentic*

That would be just asking the whole thing to backfire horribly somewhere down the line, so I doubt it.

*Concerned*

That would have come back to bite him by now, we all know how fucked tricking your apprentice makes you

*Someguy*

She forgot to ask what Akua's interpretation of Cat's interests is.

By deliberately interpreting that it is in Cat's interests to walk down the Stupid Wasteful Evil path, it may open an opportunity for Akua to reverse the "Caged Monster" Storyline on Cat or Starscream her way free.

*stevenneiman*

My understanding is that Speaking only works when narratively you are the one who is expected to be in control of the situation. Otherwise the only combat ability worth having would be to Speak and command the opponents to kill themselves. Except for Malicia, but she was dealing with minions she had plenty of time to mess with and in a situation where the narrative was set up for her to swat aside an assassination attempt or two

Most of the cases of Speaking we've seen have been between two characters with an explicit command relationship, and in most of them the one Speaking only short-cut a process that they could have done the hard way. The only exception I can think of



was shutting up the Bard, and the Bard's whole design is built around a lack of explicit power. For example, Black could have simply ordered Akua to stab her own hand that one time and she would have had to do it. Cat has incredible power when she Speaks to Akua, because right now Akua is as much one of Cat's special abilities as an actual person, and there is certainly no question of who has the explicit power in their relationship for all that Akua might be trying to change that state of affairs.

I think Speaking is basically a mechanism by which reality forces to plot along, so the more out of line your command is with Fate's current trajectory, the less likely you are to be able to control someone by Speaking.

*Cicero*

Well... glad Cat is taking precautions.

*letouriste*

saying it that way is a bit...xD

[Javvies](#)

Ah, good. Enforced Interrogations of Akua that she can't remember to keep an eye on her.

Clever. Nicely done, Cat.

Brute force only gets you so far. Skill and finesse backed by force is better.

And a liberal application of shooting/stabbing first from surprise doesn't hurt either.

*Allafterme*

Perhaps too clever for her own good. One does not simply con the conman...

*SilentWatcher*

Would it not be best if Cat goes back to the basics, but also takes a trick or two from Akua? If not she has a obvious weakness in distance fights

*SilentWatcher*

And I hope cat doesnt lose her mantle. It always pains me when the MCs lose Power in the stories, just so they can be back in the "Underdog" position. an Extrem example is: " The sword of Truth". Growth is always more satisfying.

*SpeckofStardust*

""  
I already see the flaw in this but no one in story has spotted it yet.

"From and including the word 'marker' I spoke earlier today, you will remember this conversation as idle chatter from the moment this sentence ends,"

idle chatter is not always unimportant to remember when it comes to understanding something.

### *Dainsleif*

While i agree with you, she has done this before for who knows how long, and her questions to Akua shows that she doesnt remember any of these interrogations. Which means that Akua would not, as a character trait, focus on idle chatter. Also one may say that since she is FORCED to remember it as a idle chatter her brain would not save it unless she had photographic memory, which we know she dont.

### *Mental Mouse*

The problem comes when she tries to review the "idle chatter" to extract further insights about Cat, as she certainly would. But that just tells her that \*something\* has been covered over, and this is something Akua would take in stride as Cat actually being kinda smart for once. Of course, the substitution also allows her to truthfully report that there are no holes in her memory.

### *Sulomund*

Typos!(?)

"I'd begun to rely on abilities that I should only ever use as a last result [resort], and at some point I was going to run into someone who'd kill me for it."

Well that's actually all I saw. Any more? Great chapter, as ever.

### *Morgenstern*

to divest yourself of your mantle. not "or". I guess.

### *Berder*

There were not even two hundred dead in the aking of the Crossroads (taking)

How many treacherous lieutenants it too many treacherous lieutenants (it/is)

They saw little of me, on a daily basisl (basis)

The nisi, though that status might just be remedied to today (remove "to")

They can't afford an unknown her for long, (her/here)  
If the wording is without flaw (second if should be is)

### *Gunslinger*

A lot of answers this chapter to regularly asked questions. The daily interrogation of Akua bit was probably the best. I still fear Akua is going to be a threat again (an extremely annoying one) but her addition to the Woe has been quite fruitful.

Also poor Archer. The guy she loves is ace and the girl she hits on leaves her with only a kiss

### *IDKWhoitis*

Archer, playing the part of the audience.

Never Change.

### [tyizor](#)

Seriously. Gods above and bellow, bless Archer

### *edrey*

i really can see the bard using this to fuck cat in several ways

### *Agent J*

Well, tell her to get in line. Indrani and Akua clearly have dibs.

### *Dainsleif*

I think Vivienne would like a word with you about that dibs stuff.

### [tyizor](#)

Well, this chapter was interesting, but Idk what Cat is really expecting from this. If this actually kind of works, imma call horseshit b/c this isn't "Cat". Cat's never been particularly stealthy or smart on the pedantic side of the spectrum before picking up the mantle. Things never go well for her when she tried to fulfill a role that's \*not her\*. Like, how well did her last few stealth missions go? The hell is she thinking right now?

Maybe erratic is pushing towards Cat being affected by some kind of meta-story of a warlord invading the country of a big-bad, but I still have no clue how we got here. Everything leading to the drow arc has seemed kind of... loosely thrown together. Things have just kind of... worked. She didn't even have a plan for how to bind the drow until Akua mentioned it in the \*after\* they dived into what seemed like unnecessary danger. Things are working out so

easily it almost makes Cat seem heroic (which has been kind of annoying to read).

*IDKWhoitis*

I wonder if Cat is getting Meta-Storied by the Winter influence she thinks is getting shunted off.

*werafdsaew*

Cat can learn, and she does have friends that is good at this, like Masego and Hakram.

---

Hey, she's the girl that almost got Path to Victory as an Aspect, only botching it because she rushed the aftermath of its acquisition (something that happened to the original, too). Hiding a deeper plan under reliable conflict and advisors who would pick up her slack is almost as much her thing as it's the Tyrant's.

*Rook*

She's actually seriously talented when it comes to mundane tactics and playing the story. It's easy to forget in the wake of all the recent Winter shenanigans that her very first major victory came about as a result of some clever wordplay and a bit of theatrics. It let a fledgling squire rip resurrection out of the hands of an entire Choir, then stomp her foremost heroic rival's head into paste without so much as a squeak of resistance. The same one that completely overpowered her and cut off her head, earlier the same day.

The same kind of tactics Black uses are her foundations to begin with.

Her strength is improvisation, but the key has always been to use it within the framework that her teacher taught her. Set up the scenario first, and when her Villainous plan inevitably unravels, that's when her affinity for improvisation comes into play to give her that little edge needed to win. It'll just get her killed if relied on from the start.

Her instinct to go back to basics instead of playing for more raw power is the difference between wearing your enemies as a fashion accessory vs becoming a fashion accessory. The victory there was more Black's than anything, and he did it without even being in the same room. Using some clever wordplay and a barrage of crossbow bolts to a certain mage's face.

*Dainpdf*

Well, I guess that's why she says she knows she can't outword Akua. I assume she has a great number of contingencies, as Black once taught her (since one big plan is a terrible idea).

[Dresden 67](#)

What are you even saying? That Cat isn't a planner? She's no genius, true, but she's beaten Akua before, at First Llesse. Her plans have worked more often than not, though often at a cost.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

Wait... she's never considered walling off part of her memory or knowledge? Not even during the little chats? Like I would think that would instantly trigger consideration of walling off bits of herself. Never as a method to beat interrogations while she was still alive?

*IDKWhoitis*

I'm absolutely sure Akua is aware of these conversations. With so many Wasteland horrors and seeing Cat pull that memory block gambit with the Dead King, I would be legitimately surprised if Akua does not have a countermeasure.

*Byzantine*

I'd suspect she knows she is being interrogated, but nothing more.

Right now it is better to minimize her knowledge of things in case Cat gets smart and asks. And following Cat really is in her best interests, at least until she has the information she requires to slip free.

*Byzantine*

As to countermeasures: The Praesi Highborn considered anyone who ever had a direct contact with Malicia lost. ...She can Speak so powerfully that she can give orders to an entire room and have no one in room aware of it. And there were no countermeasures to it. I believe we saw them kill an asset, annoyed by the loss but considering them irreparably compromised just from casual contact.

And Cat has even greater control over Akua, due to her nature as Fey.

[Dresden 67](#)

I wish people would stop assuming that Cat is terrible and wrong about everything.

*werafdsaew*

Maybe she did, and that's why she doesn't remember it.

*Dainpdf*

The issue is she'd have to do it so well she wouldn't notice it when Cat asks. And she'd have to do it immediately or have to admit to considering it on their little session.

*IDKWhoitis*

The thing that has me on edge is that Akua PAUSES right before Cat asks her,

"She paused. Her face went blank and I smiled ruefully."

There is so much bullshit that Akua could pull at that moment, and it seems like this has become a daily occurrence. Cat is so much more vulnerable if she thinks she's holding all the cards, and we can't trust her to have every contingency planned out if she is possibly under the influence of Winter or some meta-story.

*Dainpdf*

This Cat doesn't sound like Winter Cat; plus, Catherine has been able to tell when Winter was creeping up before. In any case, I believe Akua's face went blank because the Speaking made her fetch all those memories of "idle chatter" and recontextualize them. It's a given that she will eventually be able to use these times when she can remember to plan something, but hopefully Cat has enough small plans that she can stymie the treachery until she's ready to pass the mantle around. And/or snuff Akua.

*Dainsleif*

However that specific line of narration happens BEFORE Cat Speaks. My take on this, is that Cat knows that these jabs on memories that should be inside Akua's brain triggers them back. After she was surprised by the first time it happens she probably started taking pleasure in seeing Akua react. Which makes sense since Diabolist's reaction doesn't change after Catherine Speaks.

*Dainpdf*

You're right, except for one point: Cat says she smiled "ruefully". That's not an indicator of pleasure.

### NZPIEFACE

wtf cat thats terrible and i absolutely \*love it\*

holy shit she's plotting things that even the readers dont know about

*RanVor*

On the other hand, she's not plotting things the readers thought they knew about...

*JillyBean*

Well, not particular things. Possibly other things.

### Walter

Haha, I was thinking Akua's endearments were part of some deep scheme or cunning plan, and the answer is just that she finds Catherine attractive and wants to have sex with her.

*d\_o\_l*

Well, also that she thinks it'll improve Cat's feelings towards her. Great multitasker, Akua.

*Dainsleif*

Nor surprising. One of the first things she teaches Cat is to never do something for a single reason. A action must return several rewards. Its the same idea of the multi plan.

*Dainpdf*

She did mention that Cat has difficulty not getting emotionally involved. She's bound to speak the truth and she only said the sex would "not be unpleasant".

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I always got the impression that Akua is heterosexual, but her attraction to power is held above all else. So her being a girl isn't a plus, but the fact she murdered her and tortures her soul is. It's certainly enough for her to work with.

*Dainpdf*

IIRC we don't really know much about Akua's love life, except that she slept with that Fasili guy before Second Liesse.

*naturalnuke*

I think I enjoy the little peak into Akua the most, this confirms she does truly believe her rhetoric of 'to the victor goes the spoils' and as a 'spoil' is being as helpful as possible to not die.

*Dainpdf*

That's one way to see it. I see it as her biding her time to get out of this situation as soon as possible.

*Yotz*

One doesn't contradict the other. *"I'll serve you in sooth and good faith for one year and one day"*, and all that jazz. If her survival first, and new body second would be assured, she would have no objections with her current subservient status, it seems. For the time being, yes – but the time in question will be measured by the Catherine's nature. The moment she stops being the person who crushed Akua Sahelian would be the moment the 'victor' is no longer is, and so the 'spoil' would be set free again. ...If only to reshape Cat in the form that can be considered 'victor' once more.

*Dainpdf*

They sort of do. One is honest subservience while the other is laying low, waiting for the time when one can flip the relationship and gain independence (hopefully killing and/or dominating Cat while at it). One implies she's serving Cat out of respect for her winning, the other that she just thinks this is her best way forward for now.

*JackbeThimble*

Catherine finally got her prescription in for a fresh pair of Dresden Goggles I see. Her old ones seem to have been wearing out a bit. Presumably the Liesse accords will have an appendix that properly accounts for releasing pent-up sexual tension like civilized foes.

*Dainpdf*

And so we see why Cat trusts nothing that comes out of Akua Sahelian.

Damn... I hope Cat has ALL the contingencies for this one djinn in



a bottle.

As for Cat going back to a more controlled fighting style, that's great to hear. She's been depending way too much on just throwing power around these days, and that is something Praesi have tried over and over.

*WuseMajor*

I think she might be headed back to a more diplomatic form actually.

*Dainpdf*

That, yes, but Cat also used to fight smarter than this. Never as well as Black, but she still used to have all sorts of tricks and plans when fighting.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Cat seems strangely possessive of Ivah. Calling him "My Lord of Silent Steps" every time she refers to him by his title... kind of worried about it tbh.

I'm eagerly awaiting the point where her forces reach critical mass. If she's smart and the sigils underestimate her, she'll be able to take them over one by one and at certain point the drow under her command will be powerful enough to steamroll through any of the lesser sigils. I suspect the Sigils in Holy Tvarigu will be a different beast altogether.

*Yotz*

*-Dodo. Urulan. Papenheim. Apricot. Enter supervision, stealth mode. Execute Sitrep One, Akua.*

*-Subjective integrity maintained. Subjective continuity maintained. Subject observes no tampering.*

*-Good. Now execute Sitrep Two.*

*-Very well. Exit supervision.*

*tithin*

Damn you, Angleton.

*Yotz*

Unfortunately, TEAPOT was decommissioned [REDACTED] ago. Although, [EXPUNGED BY DEEP CONTINGENCY]

*IDKWhoitis*

This comment reminds me of an SCP report or something.

### Mental Mouse

It's a reference to Charles Stross' Laundry series, which is well worth reading.

Mike E.

Thank you for a follow up to the promise of a kiss...Archer's reaction to being left with blue balls (or whatever women call their equivalent condition) was awesome.

Djinn O'Cide

Pretty sure its "pink balls"

burdi

cat want to make a story, about "sovereign of moonless night" who change the drow civilization forever, it is just like akua when she tried to get Diabolist Name  
so i think cat want to make sovereign of moonless night a Name, by making drow swear to it

Morgenstern

" I will seek to obtain a manner of resurrection that preserves most of what I am "

Why, just why, did this make me think again about Heroes, Akua trying out (faking) being a hero, and the redemption story the Pilgrim angled for or did not angle for that everyone was wondering about...

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I remain of the opinion that the weird OOC dialog between Akua playing Catherine and the Grey Pilgrim was her negotiating for a resurrection and him establishing the conditions on which she could obtain it.

### Dresden 67

The Pilgrim can be ruthless but I find it hard to believe that he would help an utter monster like Akua walk free.

Steve

Possible dangerous loophole:

Cat tells Akua to forget back to the utterance of Marker earlier that day.

They are deep underground, how is Akua supposed to know when the days roll over?

Walter

I've been modeling Cat's mind control stuff as body control, for the most part. This update muddies the water a lot though. Like, why not Speak "Take the slave oaths" to her new followers, why bother with the auction? Why not tell Akua to forget her ambition to be free?

Javvies

Because that's just asking for something to go wrong. If she mindcontrols the drow into taking the Oaths, that's just asking for some hero to break the mind control at some point, and then for the drow to maliciously comply with the Oaths – rather than willingly volunteer and comply. This way, the most loyal and subservient drow get the most power. That means they are less likely to cause trouble for Cat.

Also, there's a fair chance that taking the kind of Oaths that are being taken requires the oathtaker to not be mindcontrolled into taking them.

Besides, Cat is relatively pro Free Will.

Akua's ambition is not freedom. It is survival. Wanting to survive is fine, within reason – it is a motivation to prove useful, competent, and loyal.

Free, Akua is without allies or protection from basically everyone.

*Dainpdf*

Since the mantle seems to be able to tell names given from those taken, that latter hypothesis is quite likely.

As for survival, Ubua knows Cat will kill her once her usefulness has stopped.

*caoimhinh*

I wonder if Ivah will be Cat's version of Assassin, you know, with that whole Lord of Silent Steps title.

*Stevedace*

I like this novel.

*jjffjhjf*

So, I notice that no one else seems to have given a theory as to who she plans to abdicate her fae title to. I'm putting forward its her Ex, the half-fae lady who she got in a fight with over her desire to use a blood ritual to gain power via her fae blood. She gives it to her, likely under the stipulation of loyalty to

Callow. She's got a fae monarch on her side, her ex is happy with her, no longer needs to do a blood ritual. Its really a win all around for her.

*Steven Casort II*

"If the wording is without flaw" I believe you meant "is without flaw"

*Isa Lumitus*

Black's words, "If you have the ability to accomplish something, it is your right to do so." Probably deserve to be a chapter opening quote.

Maybe I'm a bit biased, though. Mostly because that exact sentiment was one of my epiphanies when it came to understanding how the world actually works. In my head it was phrased as "I have the right to do anything that I am capable of doing." With, of course, the unspoken implication that everything else also has this right.

[Dresden 67](#)

So your philosophy is 'appeal to force'? You do realise that in real life that results in chaos, death and not much else right?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, in the real world, it also leads to a lot of negotiation, basically because fights are risky.

*Rup*

How many treacherous lieutenants it ...takes to change a light bulb.??

*burguulkodar*

Two. One to change the light bulb and the other to make the first to be seen like lighting the bulb was an act of treason, punishable by death.

*maxwell wearing*

FUCK. YES.

This WHOLE time I've been wondering why Cat didn't do this (Speaking to interrogate Akua) and now I finally have an extremely satisfying explanation to fill that seeming plot hole.

Good job.

*burguulkodar*

I find Akua's answers interesting, but I also do find the Speak power to be much more OP than previously assumed. We should be aware of limits within it, for it seems as OP as the Pilgrim's unstoppable plague.

Cat could just ORDER everyone to either obey her, make oaths to winter or to kill themselves.

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## Chapter 67: Breakthrough

*"With great madness comes great possibility."*

– Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

It took three hours before the first envoy showed up, requesting the name of the sigil that had displaced the Urulan and politely inquiring as to its intentions. Some poor dzulu bastard who'd obviously been sent because it was expendable. It wasn't allowed entrance into the Crossroads, not that it was eager, and I sent Ivah to meet it halfway through one of the bridges instead. Our diplomatic approach, if it could be called that, was rather simple: I wanted a meeting with the nine remaining sigil-holders in Great Lotow. In exchange I would provide information about a great common threat approaching, which Ivah had been instructed to make sound properly dire while remaining light on the details. Given the scope of the dwarven invasion, that was hardly difficult. Decapitating Mighty Urulan had earned me the attention of the city's power-brokers, but I hadn't made enough of an impression I could simply browbeat them into following me. To get an audience, I needed a gift.

A warning about the dwarves invading ought to do the trick.

The sigil that first approached us was the Slaus, who held the territory directly below the Crossroads. They'd been on decent terms with the Urulan, who usually had higher priorities than raiding their downstairs neighbours, but their envoy made it clear they weren't all that broken up about a replacement having taken up residence. A stronger cork atop the bottle that was Great Lotow was a good thing, in their eyes, since weak Crossroads meant an open door for raids into their own territory. The dzulu provided names along a bare – and probably highly biased – lay of the land to my Lord of Silent Steps even as Akua and I settled the auction. The report I was given afterwards was illuminating, though I'd already known some parts of it from earlier interrogations. Aside from my own sigil, there were nine others in Lotow. The Slaus Sigil, my new 'friends', were fighting

to rule the upper levels against the Kanya and Losle. Along with the Urulan, those three sigils had made up the 'weaker' tribes forced closer to the top of the city and denied the room and resources of better districts.

There were two sigils at the very bottom, the Orelik and the Vasyl, who were the largest of the city and had tacitly been allowed to monopolize the larger farms and lakes so long as they kept trading with the others: the balance there was a delicate one, where other sigils kept them weak enough they couldn't refuse but didn't want to damage them so badly the food would stop coming. That left four sigils to squabble over what had once been the core districts of Great Lotow: Sagas, Nodoi, Soln and Zarkan. From what I understood they'd been at war for the better part of a millennium and played out enough heroic alliances and wicked betrayals to fill a dozen epics, taking and losing territory to each other with every passing year. All four raided other sigils, but usually only to strengthen themselves against their adversaries in the centre. The rest of the city enabled the centuries-old feuds cheerfully, well aware that if one ever became strong enough to devour the others the remainder of Lotow would follow in short order.

Mighty Soln was a name I'd heard before, actually. It was the same drow who'd famously beaten the now-dead Kodrog so bad it had fled into the outer ring, where it'd had the misfortune of running into the dwarves and then myself. Soln was the most promising of the city's Mighty, in my eyes, as it had a reputation for fair dealings. Which mostly meant it formally broke alliances before turning on its former allies, but that was already a cut above the rest. Willingness to make bargains in the first place was what I needed the most.

"I believe a cabal is the way to unite these Mighty under your banner, my queen," Ivah said. "Outright subjugation would be long and costly enterprise, given our current strength."

It had changed again, I thought. There was no trace of the original green or the grown silver in its deep blue eyes, but that was the least of the changes. My Lord of Silent Steps was still tall and blade-thin, but there was a sense of strength to its frame that'd previously been absent. Fae could be skinny as a goblin and still be strong enough to wrestle down an ox, and the bestowal of the title had brought that power to Ivah. That unspoken impression that its body was a disguise, that physical abilities were estranged from its flesh. It walked upon Creation like something not born of it, a transient guest. Its presence had bloomed to my senses, though I'd expected nothing less when I'd offered it the harvesting of Mighty Urulan. I had need of a strong right hand among the drow, and it had proved useful enough to deserve the reward. There were risks to that, but benefits as well.

If it came to a fight again, it'd be my side that fielded Urulan's tricks.

"A cabal," I repeated. "Those are a kind of warrior honour societies, no?"

"It is a nuanced matter," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "In olden days cabals were formed along the twelve purposes and three duties, but this practice has been abandoned by all save the most traditional of my kind. There are cabals that, as you say, are honour and recognition. Only Mighty of renown are invited to them, and their name swells from the joining. Yet this is no longer the accepted custom."

"Which is?" I prompted.

Ivah hesitated. I'd give it a pass on that, I thought, since I was pretty much asking it to summarize what was beginning to sound like a fairly complex matter simply enough an outsider like me could understand it

"One might say a cabal is a compact of Mighty who share a single desire," the drow finally said. "This desire can be near anything, my queen. The legendary Red Hunt formed when Mighty undertook the annihilation of the Fagran Sigil. The Hour of Twilight was raised when the strongest of Great Albenrak desired the conquest of Great Telarun – and a hundred cabals were born to sow the seeds of the Hour's own destruction. The Old Vigil guards the temples and libraries that once belonged to the Sages, while the Wayfarers still keep the northern Hylan ways open for all who would travel them."

"Mighty but not sigils," I slowly said. "It's on an individual basis. If a sigil-holder's part of a cabal, it doesn't mean the entire sigil is."

Ivah nodded.

"A cabal may hold individuals of many different sigils, some at war with each other, and so long as they act in the fulfilling of the compact they will not turn on each other," the drow said. "It is a separate matter, not to be spoken of."

Which did explain, at least in part, why the Everdark didn't currently consist of half a dozen lesser gods sitting in their own city with the rest of the race long gone. If a sigil started pissing off all its neighbours, half the region's Mighty would form a cabal and put it down together. Gains had to be weighed against the risk of backlash.

"It would not surprise me, for example, if many of Lotow's Mighty were part of a cabal ensuring the farms of the bottom levels remain unspoiled," Ivah elaborated.

"So we make our own cabal," I said. "One that desires evacuation in the face of the dwarves."

"Mighty are proud creatures," Ivah said without a hint of irony. "Stating it differently would be more palatable."

I snorted.

"I suppose calling ourselves the Get Out Ahead Of The Dwarves Cabal wouldn't be all that impressive," I said. "We are, let's say... seeking out Sve Noc for instructions on how to answer the nerezim threat."

"That would be acceptable," Ivah noted. "The Sve speaks only when it wishes, but this is a great crisis. Custom can be bent."

"And you think that'll be good enough an offer they'll take it?" I asked.

"The upper sigils, perhaps," the drow said. "They will know that if a cabal is formed for the defence of Lotow against nerezim encroachment, its first act will be to devour them to strengthen ahead of the battle. I do not believe the others will enter your service."

"And if I make the taking of oaths a requirement to entering the cabal?"

"None will bend," the Lord bluntly said. "Exile would be more acceptable an alternative. Cabals to answer the threat can be formed without us, regardless. We will be seen as useful addition yet no requirement."

Yeah, about what I'd expected. Even with a bearded apocalypse at their doorstep the drow would have issues with my rules. My sigil was just a droplet in the sea of the Everdark, and even in a border city like Great Lotow we weren't the biggest stallion in the pen.

"We'll try anyway," I said.

Ivah's blue eyes watched me closely.

"And if we fail?" the Lord of Silent Steps asked.

"Then I beat them with a stick," I said. "And ask again, much less politely."

—

It was not an auspicious beginning that I couldn't even get every sigil-holder in the city to attend. The Losle refused to show if the Nodoi did, and the Zarkan boldly required both a tithe of dzulu from my ranks and an alliance against the Soln if they were



to deign attending. Both the bottom sigils suggested in strong terms that the meeting should be held near their territory, at the lowest level of the Column, which essentially everyone else made clear was unacceptable. I chose the Nodoi over the Losle – the latter were angry they kept being raided by the former, which was reasonable, but the Nodoi were stronger and I needed them more – while Archer returned the Zarkan envoy to its sigil by throwing off the bridge in their territory's direction after it got unruly. Seven out of nine would have to do, and I'd never seriously considered following the suggestion of the bottom sigils. Aside from how unpalatable that'd be to everyone else, it would screw with my contingency. Not make it impossible, no, but it would mean a significant increase in collateral damage if things went south.

Envoys went back and forth for most of a day until the cats were finally herded. It might not have taken as long if the spurned sigils hadn't started ambushing them, but Mighty Soln seized the central levels of the Column for a few hours and guaranteed safe passage. I sent a polite message of thanks, it replied with a hint that the courtesy could be returned more materially and so I sent it back a single word: *nerezim*. I was not above playing favourites in the slightest if it any of them were willing to behave halfway-decently. It was about an hour before the meeting that Ivah came to me with a problem that hadn't thought was one. *If you are to stand among them as sigil-holder, my queen, you must have a sigil*, it informed me. Though some of my drow had taken to calling our band a sigil, it was true I'd never really considered it that. I wasn't a drow myself, and had no intention of remaining their equivalent of a noble when we left the Everdark. But Ivah insisted, saying it would be disrespectful to arrive without the proper apparel and would lower my prestige in the eyes of the others. I gave in, not willing to dig in my heels over something this minor.

There was a slight issue, in the sense that a sigil's, well, sigil was usually the name of the sigil-holder in stylized Crepuscular with the colour of the cloth it was on denoting a creed. Black for the seeking of Night, red for ambition, different shades of blue for those espousing specific virtues and Ivah might have gone on describing for an hour if I hadn't interrupted. The closest equivalent to 'Catherine' in Crepuscular was apparently Katarin, the symbols making it up possible to accentuate to mean either 'elegant snake' or 'delicate dark pearl'. I was rather glad Archer wasn't around to hear the second one, though Akua got rather smirky regardless. 'Foundling' had no real equivalent, though after conversing for a while like two deaf people shouting across the language divide I got the sounds and meaning of it in Lower Miezan understood. *Losara*, Ivah finally said. The characters of it meaning 'lost and found', and when drawn on the dirt resembling a tree with twin incomplete

circles under the branches. Painted in silver over purple cloth, which symbolized seeking a higher purpose.

The irony amused me. Upwards was where I meant for them to go, after all.

A nisi with some aptitude for painting that hadn't been slain for the talent was rustled up and a sigil produced, barely dry by the time I set out alone. I had need of Diabolist and Archer elsewhere, and given the nature of my plans bringing a retinue would be a waste. Besides, the agreement was for a meeting between only myself and the sigil-holders. A solid third of the debate through envoys had been settling on a language for the conversation, which had ended up being Chantant. It got stuck in my throat that odds were good people had been killed so all the sigil-holders would be fluent in the Proceran tongue when they arrived, but Indrani's words had stayed with me. I'd not come here to save the drow from themselves. I wasn't sure if I could. *Or even if I should.* I came to the Mighty of Great Lotow without my cloak, draped instead in the cloth of my sigil over my clothes. The glamour I wore had been anchored in a stone I'd made myself swallow, carefully crafted over hours to be flawless. There was no room for mistakes today.

The meeting was to be held in the Column, my first venture into the dead heart of this ruined city. The structure itself was a broad pentagon, every side measuring exactly sixty-five feet and seven inches. Given the Column's ridiculous height – it had to make up most of a mile – simply stacking stones wouldn't have been enough for it to hold up. The ancient drow hadn't done that, anyway: masonry was a different business when you lived underground. The Column itself was the remains of what had once been solid ground before a pit was excavated around it, further reinforced by five spines of some red metal going all the way up and a plethora of bridges linking it to the surrounding districts. I'd actually thought the metal was just rust steel, when I first took a look at it, but it was oily to the touch and perfectly preserved. If not for my suspicions it was the main thing holding up the structure, I would have ripped out a few chunks to bring back home to Callow: I'd never seen an alloy like it, and if it could survive a few centuries without regular touch-ups it was heads and shoulders above anything my people had ever used.

The inside was surprisingly elaborate. Most everything that could be pried or hammered off had been, including entire spans of mosaics and anything even remotely shiny but every single floor was a book in Crepuscular, beautiful curved characters spreading out in rows and swirls. Historical chronicles and stories, songs and poems and every written thing that made up the lifeblood of a culture. It was a stark contrast to the stumps left behind by stolen statues, the dusty holes of ripped out mosaics and the

spider webs woven into the complicated arrays of dead magelights and absent mirrors that must have once cast light all over the Column floors. The structure had not been the administrative centre of Great Lotow, or its religious one – temples and palaces were in the middle districts – but it had been the heart of the old city. I walked through empty marketplaces and riots of now-dry fountains, gardens of dust and the wrecked stands of what must have once been a public playhouse. It was the grave of an ancient people, still haunted by the last remnants of it. I allowed myself awe, but not too much. Past glories were a little thing in the face of breathing dangers.

Having Masego along for the calculations would have been preferable, but admittedly Diabolist was no slouch when it came to numbers. She'd counted the bridges, figured out the weight and given me the correct floor. I hoped, anyway. There would be no second chance if she was wrong. Ten floors deep, that was the sweet spot, but I'd had to compromise and go to the eleventh. Most levels of the Column had multiple access points aside from the two sets of spiraling stairs every single one boasted, but the eleventh floor had once served as a court where lesser offences were settled. There were no bridges leading to it, and the heart of the floor was a large courtroom whose only point of entrance and exit was a set of massive stone doors. Given the temptation of ambushing this large a concentration of Mighty in one place, this floor had been judged the most fitting place for a meeting. Time was fluid in the Everdark, not in the way that it was in Arcadia but because there were so few devices that measured it. No bells, down here, and so I was not overly surprised I'd been the last to arrive. I'd taken my time to ensure as much, after all.

The doors were slightly ajar, just enough a single person could pass through, and seven Mighty seated on high thrones beyond them. For all that power swam around them like currents, I could not help but think they looked like children. There were nineteen seats set against the walls, and the sight of the sigil-holder failing to claim even half of them made it seem like they were just kids wearing the regalia of adults. Playacting at empire in a pile of ruins. None rose when I entered, remaining seated on the thrones of stones where they had draped their sigil's banner. Without a word I leaned forward and clasped the red metal rings set into the stone doors, closing them shut behind me with a clap as my bones creaked under the weight. Seven pairs of eyes studied me in silence as I wiped my now dust-coated hands on my pants and strolled forward. I didn't overthinking my sitting position, simply claiming the throne to the left of the doors and putting my banner over it.

"Losara," one of the Mighty said. "And so we finally have a name."

The Chantant it had spoken in was a strange mixture of Crepuscular pronunciation and an ancient Alamans way of speaking, but still perfectly understandable for all that. I eyed the banner behind the speaker, having memorized the names going with the symbols. Orelík, I thought, recognizing the swirly fish-like pattern. One of the two bottom sigils, those that held the farms. It was the first fat drow I'd ever seen and the sight was jarring. The loose hide tunic failed to hide the folds of grey skin, though its pure silver eyes served as reminder that fat or not it was accomplished in the art of killing.

"*Mighty* Losara, you bloated old slug," another drow replied. "Urulan would speak to that truth, if it still spoke."

Its symbol looked like eyes over three fangs: Slaus, my downstairs neighbours. That sigil had the most skin in this game, as they were both sharing a border with me and the next in line if an outside threat came muscling in. I settled into my throne, comfortable allowing the byplay to go on without me. Which it did, hissed sentences in Crepuscular starting to go back and forth as the *Mighty* began what sounded like an old and bitter argument. They were interrupted by the sound of stone shattering. The *Mighty* who'd struck its throne and powdered a chunk of it rose to its feet, face twisted in irritation. The sigil behind it was one I easily identified, as I'd paid particular attention to it: a ring of swords, with an open mouth in the centre.

"You spend the time of your betters frivolously," *Mighty* Soln said. "*Be silent.*"

Both the other drow looked furious, but they did not argue. I cleared my throat.

"If we're quite done," I said, eyebrow rising, and none gainsaid me. "You came here because I promised information. As it pertains to the conversation I wish to have afterwards, I'll begin by laying it out in full."

Silver eyes all turned to me, and I shifted in my throne. The fucking thing had been carved for someone Hakram's height, not mine, and so my legs were dangling off of it like I was a kid in her father's seat. It was adding insult to injury that I knew for a fact I fit in dwarven seats just fine.

"As of two months ago," I said, "the nerezim have begun an invasion of the Everdark."

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed.

"Allow me to be perfectly clear," I said. "I did not misspeak. This is not an expedition, it is an *invasion*. At least a hundred thousand soldiers came through the Gloom, their vanguard led by a Named. They bring with them civilians because they intend to

stay. Even as we speak most of the outer ring has fallen into their hands. They aim for nothing less than the extermination of your kind."

One of the Mighty scoffed. Its sigil looked like a wall broken through. Sagas, I thought, one of the strong sigils in the centre.

"Burning words," Mighty Sagas said. "Yet what proof do you bring?"

"I have witnesses, if my word is not sufficient," I said. "They saw the vanguard with their own eyes. Saw it slaughter an entire sigil of the outer ring."

"I doubt not the word," Mighty Orelik said. "It has been delivered. You have done service, human, and may now leave."

"That won't be happening," I mildly said.

"Do you think aping our ways gives you seat here?" the drow hissed. "You are interloper, not guest. Know your-"

"Be silent, Orelik," Mighty Soln said softly. "If I must ask you a third time, there will not be a fourth."

The first Mighty opened its mouth, but Soln rose from its seat and the lips closed. I nodded in appreciation, though got only indifference in response.

"I came here today to propose the founding of a cabal," I said. "Not to defend Great Lotow, for it is already lost. It was the moment the nerezim crossed the Gloom in force. But to seek out Sve Noc and ask instruction."

One of the Mighty snorted. Nodoi, I saw, the last of the central sigils in attendance. I needed those the most, if I was to make any progress at all.

"The Sve speaks when it wishes," Mighty Nodoi said. "That is custom. To *request* words is to beg for a curse."

Mighty Slaus sneered.

"Are we inner ring darkskins, to prattle of tradition?" it replied. "Mighty Losara speaks sense. Extraordinary times demand extraordinary measures."

I would have been more moved by the support if I hadn't known it sprang from the fact that the Slaus would be on the chopping block the moment the central sigils decided to band together to defend the city. It was less belief in my solution that bade it to speak than the urge of self-preservation.

"Do we know when the nerezim will strike?" one of the Mighty said, staring at me.

Vasyl, the symbol said. The other bottom sigil, and noticeably less hostile than the Orelik so far.

"At least two weeks," I said. "Perhaps more, if they spread their forces to completely clear out the outer rings."

"Then this is no time for quibbling," Mighty Vasyl grimly said. "Defences must be seen to, or the city abandoned. There is no middle path."

"I'll be frank," I said. "You can't hold Lotow. They'll bring down the city on your heads and drown the districts in molten stone without ever engaging. They have the engines for it. This is not a war like those you know. They will not harvest or take prisoners: their intent is to claim the Everdark without any of you in it."

"You know nothing, child," Mighty Orelik sneered. "We have fought wars, turned back the Hylvian Dogs when they tested our borders. You—"

"— have commanded armies larger in number than this entire city," I flatly replied. "I've slain heroes and tricked fae, walked the streets of Keter as a guest and pried life out of the hands of the Hashmallim. You're just a rat in a hole, Orelik, and if you try my patience once more I swear on all the Gods I will feed you your own fucking limbs."

It flinched, and murmurs spread across the room. They might not know much about fae or heroes, down here, but the mention of the Dead King's capital had made an impact. *Him* they remembered.

"It is said you make even Mighty take oaths," Mighty Soln said, voice cutting through the whispers.

"I have rules," I said. "They bring power as well as bindings. Many have thought this a worthy trade."

"And these rules," Soln said. "Will you seek to impose them on any that join this nameless cabal of yours?"

I rose to my feet, hand going through through my clothes and taking out a parchment scroll. I tossed it at the Mighty Soln, who easily snatched it out of the air.

"I will," I said. "These are the oaths, written in Crepuscular, though they will have to be sworn in my own native tongue."

The drow unfolded it, silver eyes studying the contents, and didn't even get halfway through before it snorted and tossed the scroll at Mighty Vasyl.

"This is subjugation, not alliance," Mighty Soln said

"They are standards of behaviour," I replied calmly, "enforced by my mantle."

That did nothing to move it, so I moved on to the larger audience when I kept speaking.

"Are none of you tempted by the thought of an alliance that you *know* will hold?" I said. "That will lead to no betrayal, for going back on the oaths means death. How much could you actually accomplish, if you were not always watching your back for knives?"

"A cabal is a worthy idea," Mighty Soln said. "Yet this is not a cabal, Losara. It is... *queenship*, your kind call it."

"It would make me warlord," I said. "Until the war is over. An extraordinary measure for an extraordinary crisis."

Mighty Vasyl had passed the scroll to Mighty Nodoi, who outright laughed.

"You give terms like a victor," it said. "You are not. This is overreach. To obey your orders without fail? Madness. *Arrogant* madness."

"You've overplayed your strength, child," Mighty Orelik said.

This time no one chided it.

"I'm sad to hear you believe that," I said. "Should I consider this to be a refusal for all of you?"

"Obedience is not our way," Mighty Slaus said. "The terms must be changed."

Mighty Soln laughed.

"Look into its eyes, Slaus," it said. "Do you see compromise there? No, this was not request. It was an order."

Slowly, I sat back down on my throne.

"Is there nothing," I asked, "that I can do to change your minds?"

"If you seek the terms of a victor," Mighty Soln said, "*prove yourself one.*"

The challenge rang loud and clear in the room. There was only agreement on the faces of the others, and so I tugged at the chains that bound Akua to me. Our signal.

"I considered that," I admitted. "But what would be the point? I've no need of corpses and chaos. It's you I want. The whole lot of you."

The Column shivered under our feet and every single Mighty had left their throne within a heartbeat.

"Ambush," Mighty Orelik said. "Your last mistake, human."

"I'm not going to fight you," I calmly said. "That would be wasteful, and I was taught better than that. This is a... counterargument."

The sound of stone shattering sounded in the distance, and half the Mighty began boiling with Night. It was pointless. The moment the shiver had been felt the gate had opened. Akua and I were not without cleverness, and so we'd planned to have it unfold right under the ceiling of the floor below. Unfelt until it cut through the walls, and by then it'd be too late. The bridges had snapped under the weight, and the Mighty that would have fought me found their footing failing as we began to impossibly fall. The conclusion was appropriately impressive: our chunk of the Column hit the ground with a massive impact, and the gate sliced right under the ceiling above us as it closed. I fell from my throne, ankle bone snapping from the bad angle, but forced myself to rise.

Midday sun shone down on us, bring a cold breeze with it.

"What have you done?" Mighty Nodoi howled.

"Welcome," I calmly said, "to Arcadia."

"This is not the Everdark," Mighty Soln said, tone confounded.

"No," I smiled. "And if you ever want to return there, well, you have the scroll. All it'll take is a few oaths."

"You will not survive this," Mighty Orelik screamed.

"I will return tomorrow," I said, ignoring it, "to see if any of you have reconsidered. Try not to die."

Without bothering with goodbyes, I abandoned the glamoured drow corpse I'd been controlling and left them to stand alone in the outskirts of Winter.



Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evilerraticerrata>

Second match up for the popularity contest, Dead King vs First Prince! Vote for your favourite through the link below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16703965?fbclid=IwAR2B4-UUFUtQKiiJ4eml\\_vymSVtQJReTK0YSU4-pWf\\_MzqTQeDk06DmV2o](https://www.strawpoll.me/16703965?fbclid=IwAR2B4-UUFUtQKiiJ4eml_vymSVtQJReTK0YSU4-pWf_MzqTQeDk06DmV2o)

*Solfadore*

Results of the previous match: Catherine utterly crushes Klaus by 945 votes to 76 (92.56% of the vote). No surprises there, but today's match will likely be closer – though how much is anyone's guess.

Link to the (updated) bracket: <http://www.bracketmaker.com/tmenu.cfm?tid=470805>

*stevenneiman*

I'm thinking it'll go for the Dead King. They're both major but somewhat distant antagonists, but the Dead King is more honest about his nature, and has this sense of grandeur about him where Cordelia just seems like William except with tact. That's just my thinking, but it looked like the votes agreed, with Neshamah leading by about a 2-to-1 margin. Still a lot better than Klaus vs. Cat, but Cat's a good part of why a lot of people keep reading.

*Jane*

I'm hoping Hasenbach can rally, but... Realistically speaking, they're just competing for the right to lose to Cat anyway. Neither is going to make it past the second round.

*Aston W*

The welcome to Arcadia paragraph just made this the best chapter in ages. Brill writing!

*Rup*

...oh, how the Mighty have fallen...er...gate-ed 😊

*NerfContessa*

That was really excellent.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Yeah, but there's absolutely no chance Cat will kiss the Dead king. There's a very small but still more than 0%

chance of Cat engaging in something with Hasenbach, though I suspect it would be in this sort of manner.

*JackbeThimble*

I'm not sure what you're basing this assessment on. The Dead King's a gentleman with some serious prospects, not to mention a more than passing resemblance to the Father figure that Cat doesn't know she's lost yet. Plus they both like to spend time inhabiting reanimated corpses so they've got that much in common.

*letouriste*

not really close. Apparently, the shares are around 2/3 1/3

*Shequi*

I'd suggest next time linking to the poll page, not the /r (results) page. It takes some of the fun out of it if you see how the vote is going before casting your own vote, IMO

*Morgenstern*

Second that. It actually made me reconsider my first choice, if just for a moment until voting for it anyway.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

God, I love both, they're two of my favorite characters, but I have to give this one to the Dead King. He and Bard are the two greater scope characters in the entire story and every one of his lines is just so perfect

[Javvies](#)

Oh snap.  
Try not to die indeed.

And Cat can pilot at least individual Winter Dead like an avatar.  
Nice.

*stevenneiman*

Every part of that trick has been shown before, it's just the combination and the coordination that are remarkable. She's woven glammers, puppeted whole armies of corpses, and sensed through her constructs before, she just put those all together in a clever way.

[Javvies](#)

She's puppeteered individuals and directed large numbers previously.

She's never before shown the level of fine control over one of her undead that she displayed here.  
And as far as I know, this is the first time she spoke through one at all, far less used one as an avatar.

*naturalnuke*

No when she was traversing Abua's doom castle she had dead mages talk to her. Don't you remember 'Surprisingly A Bleeder' and 'Should Have Ducked'?

*naturalnuke*

And there's nothing that said she directly spoke through one, none of them had ever heard her voice before after all. And even if they had she can glamour sounds.

*Morgenstern*

Those undead mages were speaking \*on their own\*, not directed by her. She enquired, they answered to the best of their previous knowledge that they'd retained. That's not the same as controlling and speaking through another corpse on her own. She only controlled her Zombie horses and gave some controlling commands to an army of corpses, but never outright took one over, as far as I can remember.

[Javvies](#)

That was her making the consciousness of the Winter Dead speak about memories of the body from life.  
Different thing.  
She told them to answer questions, she wasn't speaking through them as though they were her.  
It is the difference between Speak With Dead and possessing the corpse.

*Morgenstern*

What Javvies said. Saw that comment too late.

*naturalnuke*

I get that, but we know she can control her undead with mental commands, and we know that her undead are capable of speech when prompted. It's a logical step that she'd be able to at least feed them lines to say.

*Snowfire1224*

Perhaps she's using winter to speak and cover up the jerkiness of the corpse that comes from puppeteering it?

*naturalnuke*

That's probably one of the things the glamour stone covered.

*Antoninjohn*

I wonder if they can take Night from Fea, still it probably would do them no good the Fea will beat them up badly with ease

*Darkening*

Depends on the Fae, Urulan was supposed to be one of the weakest of this lot and he nearly killed Cat. Granted, she's not using her power to the fullest extent, but she is still a lot harder to kill than your average fae noble proved to be.

*Andrei*

True but as far as we know only Winter has similarities to Night. Since the winter court is no more the mixed court may not have enough common ground with Night for the mighty to be able to harvest the fae. In addition to that this seems like such an amusing ploy I don't see the gods throwing a hand on the scales and allowing the mighty to harvest fae just to see what other funny things this Catherine-monkey does.

*Rook*

Gotta keep in mind that Catherine's threat level varies wildly based on narrative context, rather than anything concrete. She has a history of nearly (or actually) dying at the hands of minor characters, then later kicking the shit out of antagonists several orders of magnitude more dangerous, all with very little concrete powerups in between.

She almost got bopped by bog-standard winter fae at the start of the Arcadian war too, and ended up going toe to toe with the highest levels of Summer nobility by the end. William waltzed through everything she could throw at him and beheaded her back when he was the main antagonist. A few hours later she literally squished him underneath her boot, solely because that was her moment of triumph.

*RandomFan*

I think that's a named thing, not a Catherine thing. The prince of silver swords nearly upended the status quo- and got killed by a single arrow to the throat from an orc.

Also William was bullshit not just because he was a hero- for all that novice heroes wind up being plausible threats no matter how unfair a mundane-oriented villian like Black might feel that to be- but also because he had a pattern of

three going. That's two hands on the scale pushing in William's favor. Even if Catherine is literally being given capital G godly support from something on the other side of the scales, that's going to push hard enough that she'll still lose that fight itself.

But with the sword, she basically stole his plot, and conservation of ninjutsu made it that Catherine was probably stronger- after all, Akua and William teamed up against her, and as you mentioned, it was a moment of triumph. Both give the edge to Catherine.

Is my thoughts on the matter. That every named has an approximate power level, but swings all over the spectrum as needed.

*Novice*

The only fae that has Night is the Lord the Silent Steps. Night came from Sve Noc.

*Novice*

I really hate that we can't edit our posts.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Ooooh...  
Nicely done.  
So very nicely done.

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

I remember a plucky band of people getting trapped in Arcadia. How did that end exactly?

Seriously, the Drow should just go a looting. Faerie a rich environment for them to get power ups. Then they can beat a Fae into making a gate for them.

[Javvies](#)

This is Arcadia. The Drow, even Mighty, are not the big dogs they are at home in the Everdark.

The very land is their enemy, especially since they got dropped on the edges of what was Winter. They aren't dressed for the cold, and probably don't have an environmental adaptation power.

Plus, the locals aren't exactly friendly and welcoming.

*Novice*

Plus the fact that there's only seven drow there. Mighty but still completely outnumbered and outclassed.

*Dainpdf*

That plus fighting groups of millennia old Fae in Arcadia is quite different from fighting a single Catherine in Creation, especially one who's still figuring out her powers.

*Geoff*

I don't think there's a single fae in winter for miles on miles.

They're all in other lands.

She dumped them in a barren wasteland.

*Rook*

The locals are only half the problem with Arcadia anyway. The other half is Arcadia itself.

Time doesn't even make sense there. If she weaves the story well enough, she could in theory re-open the gate five minutes later in Creation proper, and fifty years of wandering a wasteland could've occurred on the Arcadian side. Reality will bend over backwards to enforce the stories.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Necro posting... Wheeee!

Reality bending over? Arcadia is a tale. A story being told. It knows no boundaries but the imagination of the storyteller. The fey are a part of the tale, that's why they were locked in a ever repeating pattern until Cat broke it. Currently the story remains fluid enough to give the fey a semblance of free will, but in time it will settle down into a pattern again.

The murder hobos she dropped in Arcadia are at a severe disadvantage. Even if they have some knowledge of Arcadia it will be out of date. Also not being part of the tale they're effectively mortals in a world of immortals. They could burn winter off the map kill every being in Arcadia and the only thing they would have to show is a lonely place to die. And the moment that happens Arcadia would reset ready for another telling of its tale. Only this time it would be different as there most probably wouldn't be another group of outsiders matching these mighty thrown into Arcadia to repeat the story.

Not that a few murder hobos would be able to actually do all that. What I expect them to do is freeze a lot and possibly

create a cabal to neutralize Cat when they are safe from the dwarves. It's not like they know she has plot armor...

### *Byzantine*

If the Drow were heros there would be a problem. They aren't. Catherine is trying to enforce some degree of heroism on them. That story gives Catherine quite the edge in Arcadia.

### *onedollargum*

I imagine that the main difference is that the plucky band was a young cohesive group who invaded by choice, were invited by the monarch and were plastic enough to mould themselves around a story that favoured them.

In this case we have a handful of ornery individualists who are taken unwillingly, being held prisoner by the monarch, and who were rigid enough that they couldn't take the bargain that would have spared them in the first place.

The odds are good that some of these mighty will be fractured by the experience, and that at least one will die and be consumed.

### *Metalshop*

The first thing that popped into my head reading this was 'The enemy's gate is down.'

### *Jane*

Planeshift, an age-old solution to troublesome encounters you'd rather just bypass.

...Incidentally, if even this isn't enough to get them to swear, it'd probably still make it a lot easier to take the rest of the city without the Mighty there to fight or give orders. I don't know that it would be take-the-city-in-two-weeks-and-get-out easy, though...

### *Darkening*

Yeah, she could probably take the city at this point with them gone. Losing out on their Night for her army would be a shame though.

### *Dainpdf*

She could also probably lake the city and get whoever swims up from it. Pity Masego is not there to enable it, but maybe Akua could help? If Cat ever trusts her enough to weave magic with her, of course.

*werafdsaew*

There are still 2 Sigil holders left in the city.

*Jane*

But if she swoops in and takes the territories lacking their sigil-holders, the two remaining Sigils can hardly hope to challenge her – and even if they tried, it'd be two relatively straightforward, if stiff, fights, as opposed to having to slowly chew through nine difficult fights while hoping that none of the other Sigils attempt to flank her while she's busy fighting. Even if it wouldn't be ideal, it would still dramatically simplify her problem.

*Rook*

They'll be doing a LOT of swearing. Maybe not oaths, necessarily, but swearing nonetheless.

*JackbeThimble*

That was probably Cat's most Dread Empress moment yet.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Humans and non-humans love swearing oaths to me. Especially after I gate them to a parallel dimension containing vicious, sadistic human-like caricatures who toy with bodies and lives like we do with clay.

– Extract from A Guide to Being Loved by All by Dread Empress Victorious Catherine Foundling

*JackbeThimble*

'Before you decide whether or not to make me the happiest Dread Empress in the world you should know that I've always booked our honeymoon.'

– Dread Empress Precipitous, formulating what is now a traditional Praesi wedding proposal.

*JackbeThimble*

\*already booked  
lol

*Insanenoodlyguy*

"I don't always portal my foes and potential foes to another plane, but when I do, I portal them to Arcadia." -Dread Empress Most Interesting.

*ALazyMonster*



I love this, we're back to Cat playing the players rather than the game and it is glorious!

Also, I'm wondering if the area of Arcadia she dropped them in is specifically under her control as she stated that Arcadia on the way to Keter wasn't really winter anymore (I'm talking before the whole broken flashback world stuff) and this area was described as being winter. Which as the queen of winter means her sticking them in her personal prison also goes great narratively since Drow aren't heroes, they're the attack dogs for bigger nightmares. This is them learning their place.

*Dainpdf*

No area of Arcadia is exactly Winter anymore. First, it's not the season (the Hunt exists right now), and second, Winter and Summer don't exist in Arcadia anymore. It's a single Court now.

[Javvies](#)

The Wild Hunt that answers to Cat is always in existence. They do not care about the Season.

At any rate, Cat specified she dropped the Mighty on the outskirts of Winter.

Plus ... the lands that the Duchess of Moonless Nights inherited from the Duke of Violent Squalls would have remained hers, and thus remained of Winter after the King of Winter married the Queen of Summer and the Courts merged. Besides ... we don't know the extent of the changes.

*Dainpdf*

Did she? I know she inherited the title of Duke, but I don't know about any lands. Cat is not a member of Arcadian Court anymore, so she most likely has no holdings there even if she inherited some.

As for the Hunt, where did you get that they're always extant? It might be that the end of Summer and Winter means eternal Autumn/Spring in Arcadia, or that by swearing to Cat these fae have broken out of the cycle, but I've seen no indication of that.

*ALazyMonster*

It was implied by the conversations with Larat and referencing his story about foxes escaping traps that the hunt had slipped out of the normal fae cycle.

As far as the courts not actually existing that was kind of my point since winter doesn't exist anywhere other than Cat, then theoretically as Javvies mentioned if she inherited land/ territory from the Duke of Squalls, it

would technically be a domain of winter. It would in theory simply be like an independent nation due to her separating from the courts. However, this is more or less just speculation and I have no idea if this rabbit hole is really going anywhere. It is just fun to consider though.



*Dainpdf*

I believe the words of Larat referred only to the cycle of Summer and Winter fighting ending. It's most likely that there is a new state to which things transition during the Summer/Winter season, instead of just stopping at the Spring/Autumn stage.

As for lands, nothing was ever said of her inheriting lands – in fact, she'd have probably gotten rid of any she did inherit, since it's a connection of Arcadia to Creation (specifically Callow) she couldn't afford.

*Antoninjohn*

The Winter King at the time gave the Fea rights to her land in creation not Arcadia, it was the entire plan to change the story "we are now part of the dream you call Callow"

*werafdsaew*

The Winter King also recognized Cat as heiress to the Duke of Violent Squalls, which means she gets all the Duke's holdings without any additional bestowal

*Anonymouse*

Don't forget that the unification of the Courts only applies to Arcadia that is accessed from Calernia. The Everdark may not be included.

*Dainpdf*

That is true. Then again, Drow are still somewhat active in the surface, and were even more in the past. Courts in other places would also not need to be season based.

*Agent J*

The Everdark is part of Calernia. It's right there on the maps.

*Someguy*

Ah, the Foundling/Losara Gambit: Kidnap the interlocutor, isolate and beat them up until they submit.

*Rook*

Even if they don't submit, she doesn't theoretically have to fight them herself. She could just assimilate what she can, leave, and rig a gate to dump them in front of the dwarves when they come knocking. Hell, it could just pop them back into the pillar as the city is getting glassed with molten lava.

*Dainpdf*

Once again, Cat was playing a completely different game from everyone else.

She should be glad no one had the "Arcadia Portal" secret, though. I mean, powerful spellcasters can cut through Arcadia (see Warlock), so Drow with enough Night might have been able to... Also, she should take some of that metal back for Masego. I mean, you know the dwarves are just going to take everything they can and destroy everything else, so why not bring her favorite Hierophant a souvenir?

It also ought to be good bait to bring him back from his parents' company.

*Andrew Mitchell*

A treat for Masego is a very sensible idea.

*Rook*

A treat for masego would be vivisecting Ivah in four dimensions to study it. A distraction is the word you're looking for. That or coercion, in the form of several poorly-carved wooden ducks thrown at his head.

[sengachi](#)

Now \*that\* was how Black fights! Approach your enemies with a corpse puppet, and engage them by removing their ability to engage you. Use the awesome power of Winter not to fight, but to control the battlefield in a way that makes fighting unnecessary. And layer it all with a studied understanding of your opponents and a full exploration of the options your power gives you.

A+, Catherine is piecing together Black's lessons very well indeed.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Oh cool, the drow have magical weathering steel.

Not gonna lie, I'm disappointed Cat hasn't killed the rest of the sigil-holders and absorbed their forces underneath her banner. It would be more difficult in the short term but in the long term having direct control over a large force would be better.

She's placing a lot of trust that the oaths will hold and can't be undermined and I think it will bite her in the ass.

*RanVor*

Even if the oaths can be undermined, she can still kill any Drow who swore to her with a thought thanks to Winter she has put in their souls. She's in no danger.

*Owyn Beleforte*

"It is said you make even Mighty (missing) oaths," Mighty Soln said, voice cutting through the whispers.

*nimelennar*

Mighty Soln, after being gated to Arcadia: "I need to learn that trick."

Mighty Soln, after Cat abandons the drow corpse: "That trick, too."

*Morgenstern*

I'm banking on Soln being the first to swear to her, as he basically asked her to show the benefits that come with it and that she can really hold up her end of the bargain, that she has enough power and that she can go up against other, bigger foes they'd be going against by showing them she can at least trump the ones she tries to "bargain with" here. Displaying such powers, dumping them in Arcadia, and taking over the city (or at least the sigils that they "left" rather involuntarily) while they're gone should count as enough of a victory.

*Morgenstern*

Enough of a victory to be counted as "victor" who can impose such terms, I mean. He *\*seemed\** rather reasonable, in a Praesi way of thinking, I mean. To the victor go the spoils and all that...

*Tohron*

Given that most but not all of the sigil-holders just suddenly disappeared for a day, I get the feeling that the ones who didn't attend will move to take advantage of their absence. Wonder if Catherine will do anything about that.

*Snowfire1224*

"You want me to play by your rules? Screw you and your rules! Speaking of places that regularly screws the rules, have you ever heard of a little place called Arcadia? Lovely weather this time of year. As someone who has been there, I can only describe it as an experience like no other. Oh look we're already there, I wonder how that happened, hmm? Too bad you wanted to play by your rules instead of my own, perhaps this time out will help relieve

your stress, I'm sure being a Sigil Holder is a very demanding occupation after all and stress, I'm told, causes one to make stupid decisions. By the way, I was never here, have fun surviving"

—basically Cathrine to the Drow Sigil Holders.

On an unrelated note could enforcing the rules on the drow perhaps be a warm up to enforcing the Lisse Accords?

### Javvies

Maybe, or maybe it's a warmup/practice for bringing the other Named and nations into the Accords, but one of the Oaths she's having the drow make is to enforce the Lisse Accords.

### Fuodiachloris

I'm sure Oaths can be kept in reserve. For the chronically intransigent. Or the really, really dense. Because you can never underestimate the number of people who will refuse to see the benefit to new ways, even if the potential rewards are pretty obvious.

### crysjal

So Black dies and shortly after Cat starts really applying Practical Evil once more as opposed to the "throw my power at them and watch them die" approach.

Good use of the inheriting the teacher's spirit trope, which isn't an actual trope apparently. Surprising, considering Naruto is a thing.

### *Berder*

This chapter made me happy.

### NZPIEFACE

Man, Cat is a creative bitch.

### *StabBacker*

This is foreshadowing/(sideshadowing?) of what Capn Black did on his armada of rafts – possess a body to expose the flank of the opponent.

Possession is nine tenths is the lore – Masego the Distracted

*plantsbeans*

Wow.

*Deviant Loader*

Cat: I have commanded large armies

Mighties: We can do it too

Cat: I've slain heroes

Mighties: Meh, we don't care...

Cat: I have tricked faes and angels

Mighties: What's that?

Cat: I walked the streets of Keter....

Mighties: Oh Shit! She's the real deal!

*asnpn*

Slavery at it's finest

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## Interlude: Heretics

*"It is common practice among the lower classes of Praes, who lack surnames, to name their children after themselves in the hopes of confounding any devils coming to collect on debts."*

– Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

Masego had not missed court.

At least this was not Ater, where a formal session would be held in the Tower with corresponding pageantry, but Thalassina was wealthy enough its ruler was near as indulgent. The floating fountains and illusory interior garden were proof enough of that. High Lord Idriss Kebdana was, he'd been told, an old ally of the Empress. Two years ago that would have made him Masego's ally as well, but things had since changed. Catherine and Malicia were enemies now, and he'd already had to give thought as to how he would attack the Tower's vicious set of protections when that enmity finally led to blows. He'd considered killing High Lord Idriss, since he was already here anyway, but he was a guest. It was apparently very different to kill someone on the battlefield compared to killing them in their bed – which was irksome since practically speaking the end result was the same – so he'd eventually decided against it. Still, he'd made a note of the weaknesses in the city's wards. If the Army of Callow ever had to assault Thalassina, he was confident he could collapse the central array with the right ritual.

"A glass, Lord Hierophant?"

His eyes moved under the cloth to study the pair who'd approached him. Twins. Soninke, or close enough: native Thalassinians tended to be mixed blood, taking in appearance after the last infusion from either side. The man had the Gift, and heavily enchanted robes. An utter waste, he thought with disdain as he took them in. Silk might be costly and take well to sorcery, but it also dispersed it at an unusually high rate. The Yan Tei supposedly had their ways around that, but secrets from across the Tyrian Sea were not easily obtained. Those robes would require regular maintenance just to keep up... warmth, shifting patterns of gold and a lesser illusion anchored in the man's face? What a waste of the art. Three different workings in this difficult a material: they were throwing away a skilled mage's time just by owning it. The woman of the pair was offering him a delicate transparent glass filled with wine. His eyes narrowed in on it, finding no poison within. Unusual. They put poison in everything at events like this.

"That won't be necessary," Masego replied.

He belatedly remembered to add a slight inclination of the head as thanks, as was polite.

"I would have thought you eager to taste a proper Wasteland vintage, after your years abroad," the man said with a friendly smile.

"I usually can't tell where wine is from," he admitted. "Not without alchemical tools."

They both laughed, which surprised him. Had someone told a joke? He should pay closer attention to the conversation then. The woman laid a hand on her brother's arm and leaned forward as she laughed, the elaborate straps of her dress shifting. It was a strange apparel, he thought. Thalassina was known for its seaside breeze, would she not get cold walking outside attired in this way? Maybe it was a dress meant purely for receptions like these.

"Still, it must be pleasing to have returned home," the woman said. "The provinces are not known for their... comforts."

She was leaning forward again. Must have a bad back.

"I usually sleep in the Observatory," Masego noted. "So I wouldn't know."

"Ah, the famous Observatory. I have heard much of it, lately," the man smiled. "Your own work, it is not? Would it be indiscreet to ask how it functions?"

The blind man cocked his head to the side.

"Have you read Serebano's ten volumes on scrying?" he asked.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"I have not," the man said.

"Then there would be no point in telling you," Masego replied. "You lack the necessary grounding to understand the basic underlying tenets."

The man's smile grew stiff, though his twin seemed amused.

"Then I will obtain copies, my lord, and perhaps we can pursue that discussion at a later date," the other mage said.

"If you'd like," Masego said. "Although I've been told I should kill anyone who tries to figure it out without permission, so that seems counter-productive of you."

"Is that so?" the male twin blandly said.

His face had gone blank. *Ah, I offended him*, the mage realized. It must have been that he'd made it clear the man was ignorant. His friends kept telling him it was impolite to do that, though they might as well ask him to stop remarking that the sea was wet. Ignorance was everywhere.

"I am told you've never visited Thalassina properly," the female twin said.

Masego wondered if it was too late to ask for their names. It probably was. Father had provided him a list with names and descriptions, but he'd needed something to wipe an acid stain and he hadn't felt like getting up to fetch a cloth. That might have been a tactical mistake of sorts, he reluctantly conceded. In his experience, if you asked people their name after conversing with them for more than four sentences they tended to get angry.

"I am uncertain what you mean by properly," he said. "But I have only ever seen a few streets and parts of this palace."

"There is much I could show you, then," she replied smilingly. "It would be a grave sin if I never offered to escort you to the seastone walls or the corals."

He was uncertain what religion had to do with sightseeing, but Thalassinians were known for their strange practices.

"If my work allows," he said.

By reputation, the corals were rather beautiful. Also filled with old wards and traps for any seeking invasion through the sea, which to be frank interested him rather more.



"My sisters knows the city well as any native," the other twin said encouragingly. "And I've no doubt the company of your own kind will be a balm after your time amongst the savages."

"Most legionaries are actually well-behaved," Masego noted. "And I spent little time with them regardless."

They laughed again, to his growing confusion. He went over the spoken words carefully. His own kind? He'd thought they meant humans, which was rather odd since as far as he knew the Army of Callow was human in majority. Assuming they were not idiots, which he almost never did in situations such as these, they might have meant 'his kind' as Praesi instead. Oh. Was he supposed to be feeling patriotic since the Empire was at war? But then he was technically at war with it, since his friends were, so the logic was not sound. Baffling.

"You meant Callowans," he tried.

"I suppose some are barely civilized," the male twin mused. "They did spend a few decades under our rule, after all. And they are now led by the Carrion's Lord castoff, no doubt thanking all their Gods for her Praesi education."

"I was not aware my uncle had cast off anything," Masego noted. "Except scruples, but he's always insisted he was born without those."

Which had led to a thoroughly wasted evening when he'd been nine and trying to find those in his anatomy charts, worried Uncle Amadeus was missing an organ. The woman smiled over the rim of her cup.

"There is no need to be coy, my lord," she said. "We have kin in the capital. The breach between the two is common knowledge in the right circles."

Who had Uncle Amadeus been arguing with recently? The Empress, he remembered, but that hardly fit the rest of the conversation. Did they mean Catherine?

"It must have been tedious to humour the fools," the man drawled. "Yet you did benefit: an unprecedented Name. Your foresight is to be praised."

Oh, they'd been insulting his friends the whole time. Maybe. He should check to be certain, Hakram had noted it was important.

"By the fools, you mean the Woe," he asked.

"What greater fools are there?" the woman laughed.

So now the list. They were nobles, since no one else would be allowed here. They weren't visibly being forced to speak to him.

There'd be no collateral damage to innocents. Was it legal? Probably. Callow had some kind of treason law about insulting the queen, didn't it? It counted.

"Right," Hierophant smiled, and raised his hand. "*Boil.*"

Casting without proper incantation had become much easier since his transition, save when he was molding miracles. As a rule Trismegistan sorcery put greater emphasis on precise manipulation of magical energies than the use of mediums like incantations and runes – they were a crutch to visualize and measure, not a requirement – but that same precision made it difficult to actually dispense with those mediums. The acceptable margin of error before collapse in a Trismegistan spell formula was barely a tenth of what it would be in a Petronian equivalent or, Gods forbid, a *Jaquinite* one. As a result Trismegistan sorcery usually produced superior results for inferior costs while serving the same purpose, but also required greater skill and longer practice from of the mage using it. The portion of practitioners that could transcend those limitations was small, and even among those such transcendence was usually reserved for a few especially well-studied formulas. It was possible to lower the bar so badly any blunderer could tinker with the spell, of course, as the Legions had done with their own arcane roster. But only at the expense of every single boon save flexibility.

Fortunately, Masego's sensitivity to the forces he manipulated through his will had greatly increased since transition. He'd initially been disinclined to rely on anything as fallible as senses when using magic, but he'd overcome that reluctance after proving he could reproduce that sensitivity through adjusted measuring tools. Indeed, he'd since come to theorize that aside from magical capacity – one's inborn talent to use sorcery – there might be a second, more discreet aspect to the Gift. Sensitivity to those same energies, which he'd ventured on parchment might be what distinguished mages capable of using High Arcana from those who could not even after a lifetime of dedicated study. It might even finally solve the mystery of why the Taghreb produced fewer mages than Soninke stock but a proportionally higher amount of mages capable of using the higher mysteries. Many Taghreb lines had twined with creatures, after all, wick were said to have a natural grasp of magic humans did not. The paired screams of the twins as their blood boiled in their veins and began to waft out through their eyes and nostrils shook him out of his thoughts. Ah, yes, that was still happening.

The spell had been crude, its formula still fresh and untested, but being able to affect blood without a sympathetic link or a ritual whose sheer power would make the matter irrelevant was excitingly new grounds for him. He paid close attention to the rate at which their blood evaporated, committing the numbers to memory, and was rather irked when they both only died after ten

heartbeats. Much too long, it meant part of the heat was being dispersed into the broader body. He'd have to scrap the entire containment vector, and since that was tied into almost every part of the formula that effectively meant scrapping the entire spell and starting from scratch.

"Masego."

Papa's tone was chiding, and there had been a time where that would have given Hierophant pause. Before Keter. Before he'd seen Tikoloshe walk the grounds of what had become the single most significant magical phenomenon in Calernian history without speaking a single word of it to his son. Much had been cast into doubt by that revelation. If Papa had been human there might have been uncertainty about his motivations, but unlike humans devils were... direct. Unequivocal in what drove them. There were only two reasons that Tikoloshe would have failed to fulfill Masego's desire when he so easily could, and both were ugly things. *So which are you, father – a stranger or a slave?* Either was betrayal, if owned by different pair of hands.

"Father," he simply replied.

"That was unwise," Tikoloshe said, eyeing the corpses.

Masego frowned.

"It would have been better to test the spell on animals beforehand," he conceded. "But pigs are expensive and the physiological differences really are rather minor."

Whispers spread across the hall in the wake of his words. No doubt they were agreeing with him. Apes were even better for experimentation, admittedly, but those could only be obtained from across the Tyrian Sea and they were *ridiculously* costly to import. Even the small ones that didn't know any tricks. He'd asked around. Well, asked Vivienne to, which was basically the same thing. Papa sighed. More than a few nobles flushed at the sight.

"That is not what I meant," he said. "You should apologize to High Lord Idriss for disrupting his reception."

Masego's brow rose. Wasn't it already enough that he hadn't killed the man? He'd been very courteous so far.

"Will he apologize for them insulting my friends?" he asked peevishly.

"He is not responsible for their words," Tikoloshe said.

"Then it has nothing to do with him" Masego said.

"Mas -"

"Enough," Hierophant hissed. "Father asked for my help and so I came, but my patience is running thin. I agreed to lend my time, not waste it. There is work to do, and none of it takes place here."

He could be at the Observatory right now, plumbing the depths of a hundred Hells. He could be with Catherine, taking apart drow sorcery and learning from ancient secrets. He could be picking at the minds of the Wild Hunt to understand what set them apart from the other fae but no, instead he was at court, talking with blind children who – Masego took a deep breath. He would not get angry. Not over this, when the true source of his anger was other. He would be fair, and hold only the responsible to account. They'd shown him. It was *better* when the world worked that way. And when it didn't? You just had to make it.

"Enjoy court, Father," he said through gritted teeth. "I am done with it."

—

Wekesa watch his son stride away in a swirl of dark robes, leaving silence behind him. A few heartbeats and then whispers bloomed, even as servants took away the corpses of the Serali twins. Their father was stuck halfway between terrified and furious, his little gamble to curry favour having proved rather costly. But this was court, in the end, and so the conversations moved on. Lord Hajal Serali's blunder would be the talk of the city for a few weeks and that would be the end of it. The man was not so influential as to risk taking revenge on a Named, not unless Alaya tacitly allowed it. Which she would not. Warlock had set this as a condition with his old friend before sending for Masego. So long as certain boundaries were observed, the Eyes would disappear anyone even considering raising a hand at his son. Tikoloshe returned to his side, and decades of marriage told him his husband was feeling rather irritated even if his face betrayed none of it. The two of them were given a wide berth after they reunited, the implicit courtesy nothing less than his due. He and his son were the only thing that stood between Thalassina and a sack, after all. Idriss might get snippy about the dead bodies, but he would not forget that.

Wekesa was not above simply leaving if he felt like it, and had made that much abundantly clear.

He was here on Alaya's behalf, not the High Lord's, and she knew better than to ask to tedious a favour of him. Wekesa had not thrown away his hours teaching imbeciles when Amadeus had requested it, and he would not do the same fighting this chore of war if he had to watch for knives aimed at his family's back. Not even for a single battle, however interesting in nature. If Procer and its crusading fellow insisted on testing the Wasteland he'd discipline them appropriately, but what did he care if Nok

and Thalassina burned? He had no laboratories or correspondents in either: there was nothing to defend. If Kahtan or Okoro were on the line it would be a different story, but they were too far inland to be threatened by Ashuran raids. Tikoloshe came to stand by his side, almost close enough to touch, and Wekesa idly brushed his fingers against the rune-carved jewels on his belt. The contamination ward bubbled out a heartbeat later.

"He used to be such an obedient child," his husband mourned.

"He's an adult now," Wekesa said. "With the opinions of one. He won't always agree with us. He's no longer the little boy that used to chase the hem of our robes."

The incubus made a moue. It was a wonder, Warlock thought, that even after all these years the sight of that could cause a low stir of desire in his belly. He'd never taken another lover after wedding his husband – how could any mortal man be half as good in bed as a creature born of desire itself? – and still it amazed him he'd never felt the need to seek a partner outside their marriage. It wasn't like Tikoloshe would have minded, though he'd certainly gotten more possessive over the years. Love, Wekesa thought, was a strange thing. For what else could it be he felt, when other desires failed to move him?

"In public, 'Kesa?" Tikoloshe said, sounding flattered.

"It's nothing they've not speculated about," he replied, sliding a hand around his husband's firm waist and bringing him close for a kiss.

There was little chaste about it, but they did not linger.

"You're attempting to distract me," Tikoloshe sighed. "It won't work. This is more than growing up, Wekesa. He is angry with us. Which one I cannot tell, but-"

"I know," Warlock admitted. "And while I dislike Foundling, she has done wonders to keep him even-keeled. He would not act so sullen without a reason."

Amadeus' apprentice might be a little twerp as arrogant as she was ignorant, but she'd done right by his son. He'd seriously considered asking Alaya to keep her alive just for how she benefited Masego, but the situation was too far gone. It'd become a mess between her and Amadeus, and while those were rare they also tended to get exceedingly nasty. *He should have adopted some orphan years ago and settled the paternal urge*, Wekesa thought. More than once he'd hinted fatherhood might do his friend some good. He and Alaya acted like they were married half the time, a shared child would only have served to channel that tension more productively.

"Then he's learned something that angered him," Tikoloshe said.  
"While he was abroad."

And there was the trouble, for while Wekesa knew neither of them had been perfect fathers he was genuinely surprised anything he'd done would wound his son this way. He should have spent more time with Masego when he was younger, instead of studying. That was one of his great regrets, for he'd not truly understood back then that those days would never come again. All those he cared about, save for his husband, were Named. He'd gotten in the habit of treating long partings as being of little import. Yet where would his son have learned to resent this? None of the Woe were close to their parents according to the reports, save for the Thief, and her father hadn't even known she was moonlighting as an apprentice to a member of the Guild of Thieves. Trust and closeness could be different matters, true, but it was still baffling.

"I cannot think of what would have led to this," Warlock admitted.

"He's been to Keter," Tikoloshe murmured.

"That matter is long buried," Wekesa frowned.

"The Dead King-"

"Would not deign to indulge in games with a mortal mage, however talented," Warlock flatly stated.

"Then it might have been the journey," his husband replied.

Wekesa did not contradict him. The reflection of Keter in Arcadia must be highly perilous, but he knew little of it. Hye had passed through there once, but getting anything useful out of her was near impossible. It wasn't that she lied. That would have been of some use, as even boasts and exaggerations would hold a kernel of truth. No, it was the opposite: she was concise to the point of uselessness. *I walked through Arcadia and then cut my way out and then I beat up dead people all the way to Hell.* That was the whole sum of how she'd described her experience assaulting Keter through the realm of the fae, to Warlock's despair. Trying to tease more information out of her inevitably ran into the wall of Ranger genuinely believing she'd given him all she needed to and getting irritated if he implied otherwise.

"Perhaps a conversation is in order," Wekesa finally said.

"Perhaps," his husband gently mocked.

He grimaced. It would be a delicate matter to approach, even more so if it proved to be a correct guess. Warlock was not unaware that decades of being able to dictate on what terms he interacted

with almost everyone else had atrophied some his former social finesse. On the other side of the room, Lady Gharim dropped to the floor screaming and clawing at her face. Her veins had turned dark, thick with rot. Sloppy spellwork.

"People," the Warlock said loudly enough his voice could be heard by all attendees, "should be aware of their own limitations."

His gaze lingered on the dead woman, who might still be alive if she hadn't tried her hand at an eavesdropping spell. Contamination wards were not forgiving.

"I believe we will take our leave, High Lord Idriss," Tikoloshe smiled. "And let that particular reminder linger in our absence."

The hall was silent, at least for now. Whispers would resume as soon as they left.

It was not the first death of the night, and it would not be the last.

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[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Or else I'll...

Through you into Arcadia until you do!

[DroughtBringer](#)

Throw\*

Storming phone autocorrect.

*soonnandnaanssoon*

Hmm you could also be thorough with someone until Arcadia comes



*stevenneiman*

They'd be stuck there a while. Place has terrible cell reception and I haven't been able to find any ISPs that offer service out there. Apparently their accountants haven't figured out how to bill for the relative time or something.

Yotz

On the general account of "what to do in the case 'or else'", oathkeeping, and the season of Pooptober – let me axe you a question:

NZPIEFACE

Been waiting for this one.

And does EE always upload at this time of the day?

*Byzantine*

Yes, Midnight EST Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

Sometimes a few minutes late if something sticks up.

TeK

Yeap.

taliesinskye

The upload time is midnight on the East coast of the US, so that's probably why.

NZPIEFACE

5PM for me, so nice.

*Snowfire1224*

I get it around 9:30 the day before

erraticerrata

Round three of the character popularity contest, Tyrant vs Nauk!  
Link to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16716277?  
fbclid=IwAR03RBPam5PwLy1DwBaIywoqies7I6Zz6c72jNnHcpBu7FVmw5N\\_DLYMEY4](https://www.strawpoll.me/16716277?fbclid=IwAR03RBPam5PwLy1DwBaIywoqies7I6Zz6c72jNnHcpBu7FVmw5N_DLYMEY4)

*HandyCapped*

Yup, this was the most difficult vote yet. Possibly the only really difficult one along with the second and third last ones in the first round.

NZPIEFACE

btw, what's nauk doing right now in the story? I think he just fell off the radar after the Fae campaign.

*darkening*



He's an officer in the army still now that he's healed, but most of his personality got burned away and left him cold and savage and just not really the same person.

[daegone823](#)

Please give Hakram Berserker Name he has earned it, born from fire, betrayed by his friends, all that is left is rage and serving the Queen. He could almost inherit the Captain name, since it is a Paresi name. Serving a master, relinquishing control over one self to a much more sinister force

*goliath1303*

I know it's late to comment, but I'm gonna do it anyways lol. I'm trait not expecting you to answer, but I am hoping somebody else who comes along will be able to answer my question. First off though, I'm assuming you meant Nauk since Hakram already has a Name, he almost died from fire before being naked by Warlock, and he's a berserker. Either way though, what friends betrayed him? I don't remember Nauk(Or Hakram.) ever being betrayed, especially by friends. Please, somebody point out what, if anything, I missed.

*Yavandir*

The most difficult one will be Robber vs Assassin

[TeK](#)

Not really much of a choice. Tyrant is best girl, hands down.

*letouriste*

i'm surprised Nauk don't get more votes. Guys, you already forgot him? i mean, this is one of the most interesting character in this story 🙄 my favourite greenskin after robber actually (even now).

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Speaking as a Tyrant voter: You're not wrong. But while I have not forgotten Nauk, I giggle uncontrollably every time Tyrant does something. So my vote is spoken for.

*Dainpdf*

He's not nearly as entertaining. And his arsenic is not nearly as good. Also, he has yet to pull a fast one over the Bard.

*caoimhinh*

When I saw Interlude, I hoped to see more of Black, but well, this is also an interesting development worth reading about.

*JackbeThimble*

I fear we may never see more of Black again.

*caoimhinh*

It's possible, but he is far too important to be simply discarded like that.

I am of the opinion he was using some trick when the Gray Pilgrim found him, it's strange how Pilgrim couldn't feel Black's Name on him.

He was also surrounded by an army of dead legionaries from which he could use the corpses, that battle could go in many ways.

Also, if Black died Catherine would be the first one to notice due to her connection with the Name, she might be very disconnected from the Squire Name, but she still holds it, so the Name of Black Knight would come to her if Amadeus died.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Cat commented when she was speaking with The Dwarven Herald that Black doesn't let any of his Name out.

*JackbeThimble*

In reverse order:

1) Catherine definitely does not hold the Squire Name as has been explicitly stated multiple times, it's been years since she's had anything resembling name dreams or anything else and she actively renounced the Black Knight name already.

2) Black was never particularly good at Necromancy, rarely using it in combat and even if he was as good as Akua, Tariq would almost certainly be the perfect counter to undead.

There are avenues that Black could have used to do some serious damage going down- he might have rigged the ship with Goblinfire or possibly used Ranker to spread the Pilgrim's plague into a Proceran population center- but it's difficult to think of any that would allow him to actually defeat Pilgrim, Saint and half a dozen other heroes in combat, and if he had the means to escape he presumably could have done so before they'd arrived at the fleet. Black's own last words indicate that he does not expect to survive.

3) Black had been abusing his name pretty badly, including temporarily discarding it during the battle in the Red Flower Vales and running himself ragged on the march. It's true that there are many possible interesting reasons why Pilgrim couldn't feel Black's Name but at this point it

seems unlikely that the Pilgrim would fall for it if this was simply a ruse.

### Javvies

1) Cat definitely does hold the Name of Squire, or rather, what's left of it. Between Winter and two rejected/failed/broken Transitions from Squire, the Name is pretty much down to the gnawed on bones.

2) Black is the one who taught Cat Name-based necromancy. Akua was not a necromancer specialist, though she was doubtlessly proficient at it. She had minions for that. Though, true, undead are of limited value against a Band of Heroes in a direct engagement, and Black will have had something else up his sleeve.

3) Pilgrim might not have been looking at Black himself that hard – I think he'd expect something other than Black just waiting for them to have a straight fight with no tricks. Besides, one of Black's strengths is working with time to plan – whatever you think you see, something else is going on too. Akua never does anything for one reason; Black never has just one plan or one reason.

### *Dainpdf*

She has a loose grip on it, yeah. I assume once she transitions or gets a new Name it will be free to be whole again with a new holder.

### *JackbeThimble*

Black taught Cat how to raise and control a single zombie at a time. As far as I know we've never seen him animate more than one or two corpses at a single time and I don't recall ever seeing him actually use undead personally combat except as a mount. Even if he did have the skill and wherewithal to animate and control several hundred or thousand undead most of what we've seen indicates a) he probably doesn't have the raw power to do so and b) considering the opposition he's facing that would probably be an extremely inefficient use of his resources.

### *nick012000*

Black used undead in his fight with Hanno. It was basically Cat's zombie bomb trick, but with human corpses instead of dead goats.

### *caoimhinh*

1) It has always been said that Cat still holds the Name Squire, but she "holds it by a thread" or that "the Name is gnawed on bones", she has mutilated it due to her transformation into an incomplete Fae, right now she is a contradictory existence, a Villain doing Hero works, a human wielding Fae powers and holding a Fairy Title, and also being Named without having a full connection to her Name.

2) Black has been shown using Necromancy in all his fights, manipulating undead to disguise as himself, to attack at range, to pretend to be a hostage and actually having bombs inside, etc. so while he might not have the power to use hundreds and thousands at the same time, he definitely can use them and can even see through their eyes. Also, he doesn't need to defeat the heroes there, he just needs to escape/survive, and for that purpose there are many things he could do.

3) It might be a meat puppet like last time, or it could be that Black is exhausted from using the corpses to spread the plague on Procer, we don't know yet what plan he has prepared. Black didn't lose his name temporarily, he ran out of power like a mage running out of mana for spells.

### Bhale

From Pilgrims perspective, I think Black is worth more alive than dead. Well, alive but captured rather. He's seen Catherine's modus operandi and could be expecting that she'd try to negotiate once more. What better way to swing the pendulum your way during the negotiations than having something your opponent desperately wants.

From Black's perspective, after reading your comment, I think he got inspired by Catherine losing her Name. It doesn't make much sense to me that Black would feel that much weaker by using his name. If anything, he should feel more powerful. After all, he's made it clear as far as the first book he's not exactly a typical Black Knight and seeing what happened to Catherine when she contradicted her name, it stands to reason Black has weak powers only because he isn't using them correctly. He was during his march, so why would he feel weaker?

I believe he was intentionally leading them into a trap. I mean, what else could you expect but death when you march all over Procer without any plan or reinforcements. Maybe he wasn't aware what kind of a trap it was, but it didn't really matter. A Black Knight leading his army into what he knew would be death? Why, that's reason enough to strip him off his Name. And when his army died, his Name died

therefore with it, making him nameless. It could be what he referred to when he said he “wanted to trick the heaven’s dice”.

*naturalnuke*

Oh shit I didn’t think about that. Huh.

*caoimhinh*

Now, that’s an interesting theory, I’m not sure how it could work but if he loses and gains his Name again he’s going to become OP.

*FactualInsanity*

Not only did Pilgrim not feel a Name on Black, the text itself referred to him as Amadeus of the Green Stretch, instead of Black Knight for the first time in ever. I think that’s pretty telling.

Don’t get me wrong, I want him to be alive, but I highly doubt it. Realistically the best we could hope for, in my opinion anyway, is that he managed to leave a mark after all.

And I’m curious where you got that about Catherine becoming Black Knight if he dies. Or her still holding the Squire Name, even.

[Javvies](#)

Carry still holds the Name of Squire, or rather, what’s left of it.

Between Winter and two rejected/failed/broken Transitions from Squire, the Name is basically down to the gnawed on bones.

[Javvies](#)

\*Cat, not Carry, damned autocomplete/correct.

*FactualInsanity*

I know that Cat’s fae powers are heavily influenced by her preceeding Name powers, but I can’t recall any bit of text that actually explicitly states she still has a Name. Given that she’s more or less an actual fae now and it was heavily implied that fae can’t be Named, because fae are more or less anthropomorphic Names themselves, I just don’t see it.

I’m open to being wrong, but I don’t think there’s enough actual evidence to suggest that I am. 🙄

## Javvies

It hasn't been mentioned in text recently, but the last time it was talked about, it was after Cat was the Sovereign of Moonless Nights, and she described her Name of Squire as being gnawed on bones. Slightly different wording of course.

And at one point in the comments – no idea where offhand – EE dropped some Word Of Author, and mentioned the two failed/rejected/broken Transitions from Squire having damaged/ weakened the Name of Squire in Cat.

Cat having the Name of Squire is really more of a technicality at this point, since she's using her Winter and Fae powers for basically everything the Name could have given her and more.

Basically, the only thing that the Name still gives her is that she has the Name and so nobody else can become the Squire until/unless she dies, gets a new Name, or otherwise releases her possession of the Name of Squire. Probably makes opening the door to a new Name a little easier than it would be for a non-Named.

## *FactualInsanity*

Fair enough on the WoE. I have only really paid attention to comments after catching up with the story and that was pretty recently chapter-wise.

## *Rook*

I think it's also up for debate whether she's still considered the successor of the Black Knight. Which is imo an entirely different issue than whether she's still the successor of Amadeus of the green stretch.

In many senses she's still Amadeus's successor, regardless how miffed she is at him right now. Stabbing someone once does little to change that when you do it while declaring you still love them as a kind of surrogate parent, and continue to derive nearly all your fundamental tactics and strategies from their teachings. Said stabbee didn't really mind it too much in the first place, which further takes wind out of the dramatic sails.

Her role in the the story though, has shifted far enough away from being the Squire of the Black Knight that it's highly debatable whether that's still the transition. Or if there even will be a transition in the traditional sense. The effect of a major Fae mantle

on the process is also pretty poorly understood as well, considering there's zero known precedent for it.

### Javvies

When Cat stabbed Black without killing him, she short-circuited the automatic Transition from Squire to Black Knight.

That damaged/weakened the Squire Name in Cat, but it also released Black from the Narrative Doom of having a Chosen Successor/Heir/Student.

### *Rook*

Again, still highly debatable considering her transition was left a hanging thread and how she still holds onto the bones of the Name.

We know for a fact that in extreme circumstances, the Name will readily abandon her if the connection to it is thin and a better candidate exists. It already happened once.

The fact that no one else has claimed or even attempted to claim the Name – despite her relation to it being a bare thread – speaks volumes when discussing whether she's still considered Amadeus' successor in any practical sense.

### *RanVor*

That's untrue. He's been referred to as Amadeus of the Green Stretch before, like right after his "duel" with Hanno for example.

### *FactualInsanity*

I don't remember that. Can you point me to the relevant chapter?

### *RanVor*

It was at the end of the Interlude: Sing We Of Rage. Posting the link on my phone is too much of a bother, but I'm sure you can find it easily enough.

### *FactualInsanity*

Right, I was clearly factually incorrect in my statement, however upon rereading the end of that chapter, I feel like it kind of reinforces my point.

The Interlude refers to him as Amadeus of the Green Stretch at that point, because, as he himself points

out a sentence or two after that, the Black Knight fell at the hands of the White Knight. He chose to put most of his Name somewhere else in order to cheat the story. At the end of Queen's Gambit, Declined the implication is the opposite (before going into details about what sort of benefit could be derived from willingly discarding his Name in the face of a whole band of Heroes).

Also, a notable difference is that Sing We Of Rage, shortly refers to him as Black Knight again, whereas Queen's Gambit, Declined closes on him as Amadeus, not Black. The only way I could see him alive, is if for some reason one of the Heroes gets it in their head, that having him as a hostage would be of some use against Cat. Which is a horrible idea on many levels, but would gel nicely with the theory that the Interlude Arc was about the Heroes' fall from grace.

*RanVor*

There's so much bullshit in this reasoning I can't even. Hakram is referred to as Hakram all the time and nobody screams he's not the Adjutant anymore. The only difference is that Hakram doesn't have a fancy nickname. No, wait, he has. He's obviously losing his Name, so where's the outrage?

*FactualInsanity*

That is exactly the thing though. Hakram *is* referred to as Hakram by the text constantly. It is not significant. Black is very rarely referred to as Amadeus, even in dialogue. When the narrative text refers to him with his full name (not Name), literary sense implies that has significance.

*RanVor*

I dunno, last time it was rather insignificant. Sure, people were freaking out over it like no tomorrow, but it ultimately amounted to nothing. I'm pretty confident it's still the case this time around.

Honestly though, if Black died now, I wouldn't even be sad. I'd be just disappointed. It would be such a waste, still he has so much to do in the plot. This is not even the climax of the storyline of any real importance. It's the middle of an insignificant subplot with little meaning in context of the overall plot. The most dangerous



villain of the generation should go out with a bang, not disperse quietly like a fart in the air.

EE has never disappointed me before, and I'm sure as hell he won't do it now.

### *FactualInsanity*

(I didn't even know there was a reply limit.)  
I disagree with the first bit. I think it was significant, just not in the way the people that freaked out assumed. It showed *how* and *why* his story-screwing worked. (And really given that like I said he's back to being Black Knight within a few sentences at that point, jumping to "ohmigodheslosingName" seems a tad premature.)

I tend to agree that if Black is to remain in the story he has the potential to achieve a lot more, but I take the opposite view on whether he *should* stay in the story after his meeting with the Pilgrim and his merry bunch under these circumstances. If he had never fallen in the Heroes trap, sure. But he was legitimately outplayed. If he survives this, while implicitly being stripped of everything he usually relies on, it would destroy what was great about his character for me. That he wasn't infallible.

In my opinion, and I can't stress enough that it is simply my opinion, the best "bang" for him would be if the next time Pilgrim is on stage, his pack of Heroes is permanently missing several of them.

### *RanVor*

It's as if you didn't know Black at all. He always knows more than he lets on. The last part of that interlude was from Pilgrim's POV specifically not to show whatever Amadeus might keep in reserve for the occasion. Black comes off as outplayed because Pilgrim assumes him to be. But Pilgrim doesn't really know him, does he?

Anyway, I could be inclined to agree with you if not for the fact that Black's death would leave at least two plotlines much more important than this silly little raid unresolved. It would be bad for the story, and I wholeheartedly believe EE to be beyond this kind of mistakes.

### [Javvies](#)

Black had the better part of a week to expect inbound Heroes, and to make plans and preparations.

Sure, it looks like they trapped him. But never back a Villain (or any Named, really) into a corner – bad things happen when you do that. Also, Black is really good away making plans and contingencies within contingencies. He had plenty of time to set all kinds of things up.

For that matter, he could have left an avatar to face the Heroes and set off the stocks of goblin munitions, while he took off in a boat and a couple undead oarsmen.

Besides, unless the Heroes somehow beat Black before he even sees it coming, there's goblin munitions to blow up the boat and make sure that there's no body to see, find, and recover – no body and a "certain death/no way somebody could survive being in the middle of that" type event means they aren't dead, just escaped somehow.

The plague was not in Black's plans when he left shore. But he had several days to rework existing plans and to make new ones.

He has plans for the situation he wound up in. And there's no way he's going too go out quietly. Plus, I'm pretty sure he's too important to just get offscreened like Captain, who while likeable, was not personally all that important in her own right.

*caoimhinh*

FactualInsanity, Black has been called 'Amadeus' and 'Amadeus of the Green Stretch' by the narrative many times before, not as many as 'Black' but still many times, during his conversations with Malicia, during his fight with Hanno, during Catherine's Name Dreams, etc. And it has also been said many times that Catherine still holds the Name of Squire, but not in a significant proportion, she has described it as the Name being "at the bones" and "connected by a thread to her". Remember that Catherine is a singularity in many aspects, a paradox of sorts, as she holds the power of Fae but it's not a Fae, and she holds the Name of Squire without being tied by it, both her soul and the Name are mutilated by her actions, so she is doing what should be impossible.

As for the fight between Black and the Heroes (Pilgrim, Sword Saint, and co) he doesn't need to win, he just needs to survive, and there are many ways that battle could go for it to happen, keep in mind they are in the middle of a river, one of the favorites escape routes in stories along with precipices, and given how Amadeus left in good terms with the villagers while Pilgrim massacred them, Black has a decent chance at twisting things to his favor to at least survive.

*Loud Buzzing*

@caoimhinh

I mean that's more or less the thing though. Alaya talks to Amadeus, but the Dread Empress talks to the Black Knight. Amadeus is separate from the Black Knight, because Amadeus of Green Stretch basically refers to the kid watching the stars that the Black Knight once was. It's the person behind the role.

*RanVor*

And there were similar theories back then, too.

*maresther23*

The other Named that died an understated death was the Ashen Priestess, when Bard used her death to get narrative weight to break Black. Black learned. He may or may not be dead, but his weight is still impacting the story.

*Letouriste*

I don't believe it one second.  
There is too many reasons black can't die right now, storywise.  
EE doing so would probably be a mistake

*Dainpdf*

That's precisely why EE will do it, then consume our tears for sustenance.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I'm more convinced then ever he's alive. Remember what he said about Warlock himself? If he was dead, he'd know? I think that flows both ways. Warlock and Black appeared to know immediately when Captain was taken out. The fact that Warlock is this chill and acting like his friend is alive means his friend is alive. I'm not saying he's happy, or in

anything like a good condition right now, but he's not dead. Which is plausible, Pilgrim asked for his surrender for a reason. You don't take a narrative hijacker like Cat and give her something like a dead father to work with on top of everything else.

*RanVor*

I thought the same thing. If Black was dead, Wekesa would be flipping his shit right now.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Pros of having two dads besides the overprotective, impossibly intelligent evil mentors ?

Masego is immune to Yo Mama jokes.

*Agent J*

And is so joyously oblivious that he'll be genuinely confused as to why people would still make them after being informed he doesn't have one.

*Antoninjohn*

I like how well Mango insulted them without meaning to, the difference between them and pig is too small to really matter

*Quite Possibly A Cat*

No, he clearly should have tried the spell on a pig first. Gosh, he must have come across as such a villain there. The best part is he was relatively justified. They were enemies, evil and insulting his friends! That's like triple the justification a hero would need.

Vote Masego for hero... umm... what year is it again?

*Argentorum*

Neither stranger nor slave, Masego. "Parent" is the word you were looking for.

*muffin*

Papa lied to him. He either couldn't or didn't want to answer.

[sengachi](#)

I'm guessing it's the kind of knowledge which the Heavens do not brook being spread, which would have endangered Masego to even know of its existence when he was younger.

*Someguy*

Maybe Tikoloshe can't remember Keter because he was Bound to forget?

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Yeah, Masego doesn't take the peculiarities of the situation into account. There could be anything, from the backlash altering the bindings to Tikoloshe making the mistake of crossing into Dead King's domain.

*Jane*

Three dead, just from bad manners. No wonder Praesi courts are so *polite*, normally.

*Letouriste*

Oooooh masego! Thank you so much EE, I needed his pov more I thought.  
That was a real treat xD

*SpeckofStardust*

Those 2 decided to insult a mage's friends to said mage's face...  
A mage that had been raised by the a top tier villain.  
Lets be honest the pigs are actually intelligent enough to moon a goddam dragon equivalent.

*SpeckofStardust*

\*not moon

[TeK](#)

To be fair, his "friends" are just some Callowan untermensch, a Greenskin, and a slave, albeit former.

[Javvies](#)

Being fair, they probably assumed that Masego was more like them, ie, traditionally Praesi, than he has ever been in his entire life.  
Unfortunately for them, they ran into the ultra literal, socially uninformed and indifferent, probably mildly autistic, and incredibly loyal to his friends and comrades, Masego.

This indicates that they didn't know a damned thing about his longstanding personality traits that would have been apparent at all the Praesi social events he had been dragged to as a child. Somebody failed to do their research before sending the twins in.

Though, he probably wouldn't have killed anyone for talking to him as a child.

*Andrew Mitchell*

He probably would have killed someone as a child if he could have (and had the desire to).

*Decius*

It's Praes. The twins had either instructions or encouragement to annoy Masego, from somebody who wanted them dead but couldn't do it themselves for some reason. Or possibly they were just expendable assets being used to find out which buttons work.

[Javvies](#)

According to Warlock, they were sent to "curry favour", aka, make friends, with Masego. And that their father blundered in doing so.

*RandomFan*

Warlock may humor the motions of the court, but I doubt he is the best informed on the matter. He could be right, he could be wrong.

It would not surprise me if this is an example of the folly of youth and nothing more, abet particularly dangerous folly. It would not surprise me if Warlock is correct- I suspect not all praesi have had the chance to observe enough to reach the right conclusions, and it isn't likely to be public knowledge- or shared with potential enemies without cost. It would not surprise me if it was an assassination attempt that succeeded. It could be multiple of the above, even.

[Euodiachloris](#)

The Ankh-Morporkian definition of suicide stirs and rears its head, blinking helpfully...

*Rup*

Thank you for a cheering morning read...as i had no idea..looked it up in the wiki (Ankh ; Discworld)

[Euodiachloris](#)

I recommend starting with *Small Gods* or *Pyramids* to get a taste of what's what. Then finding a recommended order of reading online for the rough map of the timeline. 😊

*Abrakadabra*

Eh... Dickworld does nothing for me. Wathever happens is undone by the end of the book, so nothing changes ever on the discworld. After some eleven books I grow bored with it since it went nowhere...

### Mental Mouse

Not to mention that Masego himself is considered one of the Woe. So they were insulting him directly, *and* his friends. Not a survival tactic in Praesi. Especially when his parents are also untouchable, and his friends are out of reach.

### Javvies

Ah, Masego, never change.  
Only you could get distracted from the fact that you just killed someone before they finished dying.  
And consider smiting the city when you leave for Callow.

It seems Warlock doesn't know about Tikoloshe's connections to the origins of the Dead King and the Doom of Keter.  
Wonder how he'll react when he finds out.

Hmmm.  
Going by Warlock's thoughts, he might not avenge Malicia if Cat managed to take her out before Warlock got involved in that fight, if he bothers to become involved, which he might not, if only for Masego's sake.

### *Drunken Dwarf*

From the text it seems like Warlock does know, but only from what Tikoloshe's told him. And I do agree, seems like Warlock isn't really interested in involving himself with the fight between Malicia and Catherine. For some reason I feel like she is gonna betray him anyways.

### *Letouriste*

The best part is probably they were BOILING from the inside JUST BEFORE him and he still completely forgot about it in two seconds...until the too loud screams comes out and rudely distract him from his superior musing xD

### wirelessgrapes

That was a given for the most part, so long as Masego grew under Cat. That was pretty much the stipulation for bringing him. Make sure he doesn't die, and make sure he makes something of himself.

### *Dainpdf*

The Red Skies interlude indicates that he does know. He was told about Tikoloshe's summoning by the Queen of the People of the Wolf. If Masego could get from there to his presence at the Fall, then so could Wekesa.

*Soronel Haetir*

Warlock was never a supporter of Malicia for her own sake, it was always Black who brought him (and Ranger and maybe even Assassin for that matter) along.

*Byzantine*

Warlock knows, but I suspect he only knows a bit. I don't think anyone really knows more than a bit. The Gods stamped that knowledge down \*hard\*.

*muffin*

Masego's diplomatic skills have increased a lot.

[Euodiachloris](#)

His dads are not wrong; the Woe have helped their lad no end. He now quips properly before murder, and everything. Sure, he doesn't quite realise how the wit is witty, but it's a vast improvement of not doing either the quipping or the murder in court at all.

*IDKWhoitis*

Im really curious about what Warlock would feel about Archer liking Masego. Like would he be chill? Would he find the concept of having Ranger as a co parent in law horrifying?

Like I don't think he would do anything to push for or against the relationship, but I wonder what his opinion of her would be.

*JackbeThimble*

From what I've seen of Warlock I'm not certain that he would recognize an asexual/platonic relationship as an actual thing. Like not that he would be angry or disapproving or whatever just that he wouldn't understand the concept. This is a guy who can literally only define love as 'I don't want to fuck anyone else'.

*WuseMajor*

Eh, I think he could get it as "Archer wants to fuck Masego, but Masego isn't interested, which causes her to have some weird behavior."

*Andrew Mitchell*



Loved this chapter. Brilliant characterisation of Masego when he made sure to check his list before casually biking the couple's blood and using it as a learning opportunity. I laughed out loud.

*nick012000*

Well, at least now we know that Alaya didn't just send Masego there so that she could have assassins murder him.

*Javvies*

That was never seriously considered, I think. Any assassination attempt (successful or otherwise) against Masego would have Warlock seriously pissed off and ripping apart souls to find the responsible party and turning the section of Calernia within several miles of them into a brand new lava and hellfire filled crater. And then he'd get brutal. There is no sufficient term to adequately describe the kind of overkill Warlock would unleash on someone for assassinating his son.

Far more likely is some sort of attempt to keep Masego from returning to Callow, the Woe, and Cat. Whether that's by Malicia's hand or Warlock's is still an open option, though nothing here suggests that Warlock is planning anything that could be construed as involving himself in the Cat vs Malicia fight, indeed everything here suggests he wants no part of that particular fight if he can avoid it.

*letouriste*

Actually, he think the conclusion is obvious (malicia win). He is WAY more concerned about Black vs Malicia

*GabrielTosh*

Without a stupid amount of story behind you, like already being fated to kill Warlock, whoever kills Masego will be obliterated, possibly including any nearby settlements. The amount of story behind that spell would make even people like Grey Pilgrim stay dead.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I'm thinking it's an observation of her friendship with Warlock. Whatever Malicia is planning (and it's obvious it involves Cat being dead, since Warlock considered asking her to do otherwise), it's happening reasonably soon, as i doubt a few assassinations of Cats people coordinated to happen at once would be anything more then the opening of her larger plan. Whatever it is, there's enough risk of collateral damage that Masego could end up getting some of it, and/or being an obstacle to it. So, she lets Warlock know it's a good time to have his son be a bit closer to home, and here we are. No fuss, no muss, no insanely powerful forces of

magic being aimed at your tower because your childless magic friend doesn't think your friends anymore.

[ahd](#)

Alternative hypothesis:

Warlock is too much a friend of Black, therefore Dread Empress Malicia wants him gone, does not want to hit the Warlock and miss the Hierophant lest she get laked, so she has arranged to have both of them in the one ground zero.

Story logic implies both the Warlock and Hierophant will survive, and shortly afterwards Praes will need to build a replacement Tower again.

[sugarrollblog](#)

Props to the female twin's attempts at seduction even if it failed. Masego is not a simple man—breasts doesn't have the same effect to him than it would have on other men.

*letouriste*

no effects you mean. Actually, many men would also not be affected at all. This is a cliché treating men as virgin young boys and don't reflect the reality. Of course there is many people out there liking breasts to an unhealthy degree but they represent just a low percentage of the grown up men. Most would just look out of reflex because the woman put them in evidence and we have an animal part of our brain picking up details when they are moving or put in front. That doesn't mean interest tho.

*Dainpdf*

Well, honeypots are a thing for a reason... For both sexes, one might add.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

She wasn't just showing some cleavage. She was very strongly suggesting they go do something alone. She was sending out signals an "average" man would have picked up on. And yes, while most of us keep from becoming drooling morons every time we see a hot girl, a hot girl who's making it very clear she wants to have sex with you? That can leave you a bit more discombobulated.

[Mental Mouse](#)

But Masego isn't even close to average. While the word isn't used in-world, he's written with the social deficits and attention issues of a severe autistic. He doesn't seem to

have a real-world autistic's usual vulnerability to sensory overload, but I assume that would be easy to deal with via magic, as would many of the other usual "tells".

### *Metalshop*

I love this look at Praesi party life. Really brings home what a society run by villains would truly be like.

"Ah, yes, that was still happening."=My new favorite line.

### *Redlaw*

What make me laugh in this chapter wasn't masebo but how warlock still see cat as the little girl he can easily kill whenever he want

### *Dainpdf*

Gotta remember his specialty is in wards. If any of the current Calamities can put her down it's Warlock.  
...that feels like I'm underestimating Assassin and Black.

### *Redlaw*

Neither black nor assassin can kill cat. At least not directly. After all black was never the strongest but those he put down...  
as for warlock. I don't doubt he could kill the current cat with enough preparation, ward and trap but if he go and underestimated her (like many many dead villain hero drow and fae ).. well he will only live because he is the father of zeke

### *Dainpdf*

Eh. Careful about Black and Assassin. Assassin's whole Name is about killing people, and Black has a history of killing way more powerful people he has no business killing.  
As for Warlock, yeah, mages do better with preparation and his kind of magic is especially inclined to it. But if you recall, out of Cat's three most recent losses (controlled at Second Liesse, Pilgrim cutting the portal, getting boxed at Keter), two were at the hands of mages.

### *Mental Mouse*

The portal cut was at best half a loss, but Keter also included Cat getting completely owned by Malicia without even realizing it. That said, she's leveling up in her own story, including picking up an army (unless she loses it in the finale there).

### *Trebar*

"Taylor/Cat? Eh, I can take her"

*Dainpdf*

I wonder how Catherine would react to Masego's parents (well, parent – we don't get to see inside the devil) thinking she's been a stabilizing influence on him. Enough that Warlock, of all people, would want her to stick around him.

This somewhat flies in the face of that whole "corruption by association" bit... Not by much, of course, since Masego was already deeply associated with the Calamities, but still.

By the way, I 100% expect the finished version of the "Boil" spell being "Twig".

*usernamesbco*

Warlock is making him attend court, i.e. forcing him to socialize with stupid people playing stupid games for stupid prizes.

Catherine makes him attend family dinners with the Woe, built him an expensive magic playhouse with cool toys so he can better dissect Creation, and gave him minions to help him Do Magic.

I think she'd agree her handbook is more up to date than his.

*Snowfire1224*

Masego is the best at parties and small talk.

I find it funny that Warlock thinks it would have been good for Black to adopt a child with Malicia to raise platonically. I don't know why but the notion amuses me.

*Redlaw*

Lol.From a certain view point. Cat is the child of black and malicia is the step mother who try to control the child(cat) her husband(black) had in another marriage

*Snowfire1224*

So then if Black is the Dad and Malicia the step mom, then practical guide to evil is just a revamped version of Cinderella in which Cat is forced to clean up Malicia's messes with ample amounts of Goblin Fire. Additionally Akua would be the step sister and the Winter King is her Fairy GodMother.

*Agent J*

What the hell have you done? What dark sorcery did you use that that actually makes some modicum of sense? Monster.

*ethericsentinel*

It's "fairy godfather." He even tries to make Cat an offer she can't refuse.

*Snowfire1224*

Took me longer than I should have to get that pun.

*Mike E.*

And another example of how OP/badass Ranger is:

"I walked through Arcadia and then cut my way out and then I beat up dead people all the way to Hell" That was the whole sum of how she'd described her experience assaulting Keter through the realm of the fae...

*burguulkodar*

Short summary of Ranger's chapter book 1 or 2...

Actually a previous attempt, since now Arcadia doesn't lead to the inside of Keter (as Cat found out, it leads only up to before the abyssal gates)

[crysjal](#)

Masego has a bloody checklist to tick of in order to decide when it's appropriate to kill someone. That's fantastic.

*plantsbeans*

> The incubus made a moue  
What's a "moue"?

*HandyCapped*

A pout, if i'm not entirely wrong.

*Agent J*

A petulant pout. So sayeth Professor Google.

*Zaver SaintCloud*

I'm actually on chapter 25, but wanted to post here in the latest one. Somebody linked this in the Dwarf Fortress reddit, and I just wanted to say how thoroughly I'm enjoying this story. The quotes at the beginning are especially amusing. Any chance there is a handy PDF available?


[Thorsten Rapp](#)

"He was here on Alaya's behalf, not the High Lord's, and she knew better than to ask ~~to~~ too tedious a favour of him"


[\*ahd\*](#)

Where. Is. Black?

*Rup*

..with us..hanging on a Cliff..

*Raved Thrad*

Power Word: Boil. Not quite Power Word: Kill, but apparently it can be used selectively on multiple targets. 

*burguulkodar*

Awesome chapter of my favorite character, as always.

*Letouriste*

Masego pov is always such a delight, must be a hell of a work to write it.

*Satan*

Masego could easily commit just as big of an atrocity as Akua if he thought he could learn something from it. I guess it's hard to hold him to the same standards when he isn't very cunning.

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## Interlude: Dreadful

*"And so Sinistra said: 'What we cannot grow we will take by dread, and damnation on all who deny this.'"*

– Extract from the Scroll of Misfortunes, thirteenth of the Secret Histories of Praes

The Windless Salon was an indulgence.

Not hers, originally, but that of Dread Emperor Sorcerous. The infamous warlock-emperor had been fond of ambitious experiments demonstrating the superiority of Praesi sorcery over all others. His in particular, and he'd never been shy about denting the treasury for his latest fancy. The Salon was one of his earlier projects: an entire floor of the Tower, well above the clouds, made into a single room. The stones of the walls and ceiling were

enchanted to make it seem as if it were entirely outdoors, revealing a staggeringly beautiful view in every direction. Nefarious had despised it, for he'd spent the better part of a decade trying to puzzle out its secrets with only failures to show for it. In truth, few save for Sorcerous himself had ever used the Windless Salon. Alaya and her predecessors disliked allowing the lords and ladies of Praes access this far up the Tower, and there was no lack of other wonders within the walls to strike a particular tone when receiving guests. The Empress had, instead, turned Sorcerous' costly vanity into an office of sorts.

The seats and sofas had been removed, saved for her own luxurious cushioned armchair, and the ornate banquet tables had been replaced by two bureaus and a writing desk. Access here was restricted to those she'd given token to, and with good reason. The transparent walls of the Windless Salon had been adorned with a maze of secrets and faces. Painted mosaics representing every Praesi noble of import hung over apparent air, tiles written over in chalk noting their latest schemes and objectives and alliances. Lines had been drawn to connect conspirators and foes, weaving a tapestry of treacheries and interests that spanned the whole of her empire. It was not all exact, of course. Believing this to be untouchable sanctum merely because she had the minds of everyone with access searched at random intervals would have been arrogance. The tiles were incomplete, sometimes incorrect information added to fool a would-be spy. The only complete and truthful version was in Alaya's own mind.

Years of practice meant she had only to close her eyes to see the whole of it, but there was something oddly soothing about seeing the Wasteland's plotting laid bare against the backdrop of Ater's sky. In the last few years, a fresh section had been birthed. A small cluster of names under a chalk-drawn crown. Such a small representation for a handful of people who'd shaken the foundations of Calernia. A half-full cup of wine in hand, Dread Empress Malicia allowed her gaze to linger on the foremost individuals of the Kingdom of Callow. Some names were followed by only sparse writing. Hakram of the Howling Wolves, the Adjutant, remained opaque in intent and motivation despite her best efforts. It was tempting to study the Woe through the lens of what she knew the Calamities to be, but it would be an overly simplistic view. Oh, most of them had ties to the old guard: Masego was Wekesa's own son, the Archer had been the favourite pupil of that rabid dog in Refuge and Catherine had been the only apprentice Amadeus ever took. The Adjutant himself was often dismissed as Captain's legacy in green, which had always amused Malicia greatly.

The boy had more in common with Scribe than he'd ever had with still-mourned Sabah, and even that was overly simplified. His Name, as far as she could tell, had been shaped since inception to serve as shield and empowerment to Catherine Foundling's own

role. The Woe were not their predecessors, and that was a shame: Alaya had spent decades learning how best to work with and around the Calamities. Dealing with a younger and cruder version of them would have been mercifully easy. No, instead she'd been forced to learn to navigate an entirely different river of desires and drives. Changeable things, these, especially in individuals so young. The girl who was now called the Black Queen had little in common with the child who'd chased Black's shadow as his Squire. Still, she'd begun to understand the lay of them. Where pressure could be applied for the correct effect. Vivienne Dartwick was the weakest link. Archer had been the obvious guess, but much like Hye the girl was simply too apathetic to be influenced. It was hard to leverage someone who cared about nothing save a few earthly pleasures that essentially any major city on the surface of Calernia could provide.

Thief, however? She was a Callowan nationalist, the kind that kingdom bred by the thousands. That was an old foe to Praesi, one made almost predictable – though no less dangerous for it. People like Vivienne Dartwick had broken Wasteland invasions for a millennium and a half with only two major failures to show for their toil. Patriotism was a set of blinders, Malicia would not speak otherwise, but however narrow the perspective it had proven exceedingly skilled at frustrating Praesi efforts. Fortunately, central tenets of it ran contrary to the kind of nation Catherine was trying to build. The Black Queen had failed to realize, she often thought, how deeply she'd taken after Praesi culture. Callowans tended to think of their own ethnic group and their nation at the same thing, unlike Praesi. The Dread Empire had, since the Declaration, been made up of disparate and often opposed forces. Guiding the refugees from the sack of Nok into Callowan territory had been killing two birds with one stone, in that light.

It eased the pressure of Malicia's own granaries by displacing individuals who would have turned to banditry or rioting if left unfed while simultaneously forcing onto Callow a problem that could not be solved with a sword. Well, she conceded, that was untrue. If Thief and Adjutant had sent in soldiers to slaughter every refugee crossing into the kingdom's territory the flow would have abruptly stopped and there was precious little the Empress could have done about it without loosening her leash on the High Lords – which would be ill-advised, at this juncture. On the other hand, if the Woe were truly that ruthless this would be an entirely different situation. As things stood, Vivienne Dartwick must be chewing on the fundamental conflict between doing something good, namely not slaughtering desperate peasants, and seeing the immediate costs that good action imposed on her countrymen. It would fester, Alaya thought. In her and in the farmers displaced at Catherine's orders. The Black Queen might think of her land as more than the territory of tribes-made-kingdom, but few in even her closest circle shared that view.



The seed had been sown and conflict would grow from it. Enough, Alaya had judged, that it would weaken the fabric of the kingdom without collapsing it. At some point a compromise would be forged that pleased no one, slowly dragging back Catherine Foundling to the position Malicia preferred her in: that of an unpopular but unopposed necessary evil. If that strife could be carried to the heart of the Woe, so much the better. That band of children had already proved they could unmake the designs of empires, if allowed to run rampant. It was a private delight of the Empress that the results of her offensive must have Cordelia Hasenbach a throbbing ulcer.

"And yet," Dread Empress Malicia said, eyeing the walls that were not there.

She sipped at her wine. Beneath Catherine Foundling's own face, a blank space had been made. It was not that the girl's designs were unknown: Malicia was thoroughly well-informed of what was unfolding in the kingdom, despite Amadeus' best efforts. But there was a question, she thought, that must weigh heavy on the mind of every ruler on this continent.

Where the Hells was the Black Queen?

Callow might be somewhat stable, but it was one bad winter away from effective collapse. If Alaya ordered most royal granaries torched, starvation would afflict half the realm after the snows came. And yet, fresh off her failure in Keter, Catherine had disappeared into thin air. The Adjutant and the Thief had been sent back to Laure to settle affairs, but neither had the legitimacy to truly keep things under control. Was it mere negligence? Alaya was self-aware enough to acknowledge she disliked the girl on a personal level, and so was inclined to match perceived mistakes with personality flaws. Yet the Black Queen had proved surprisingly adept at the diplomatic game. Blackmailing the northern crusaders into leaving under treaty instead of risking extermination had been inspired, as had been the request to join the Grand Alliance. Had the First Prince's grasp on Procer been stronger when the offer was made, Hasenbach might actually have gone for it. Not without losing a few feathers in the process, but the First Prince had already proved capable of cold pragmatism when the situation demanded it.

It wouldn't have mattered, in the end. The Dead King would have upended the board regardless. Yet the skill was there, however raw, and it meant the girl had *learned*. If she was capable of shaping a military campaign so it would lead to the kind of peace she desired, she should be able to recognize Callow without her was a house of cards. Something had forced her to seek another path, and the only true contender for that was what had taken place in Keter. The Black Queen was, at heart, still a soldier. In times of trouble, she would reach out for military force. It

was the solution she was best versed in. Her options, however, would be few. The League would refuse out of hand, as the Hierarch was the mad puppet of the Tyrant of Helike – who'd sent her a lovely letter professing eternal friendship but was a man made from a mould rather familiar to Praesi. The Everdark was a mess of primitive warring tribes, effectively impossible to mobilize quickly and highly unpalatable allies regardless, which left only two real options: the Kingdom Under and the fae. Malicia had been made aware that the dwarves were in yet another expansion phase, meaning they would refuse to get involved with surface affairs.

That left the sole remaining Court of Arcadia, to which the Black Queen already had ties.

There was a very real chance, Alaya admitted to herself, that within the next six months a horde of fae would come pouring out of gates after Catherine struck bargain with them. It was madness, of course. Giving their kind stronger foothold on Creation was a blunder all living souls would pay for. But fighting fire with fire was Catherine's signature, and the Dead King's entrance in the melee might very well have been enough to quiet her doubts. Of all the nations currently involved in the Tenth Crusade it was the Empire that would find it easiest to defend against such an incursion, given its heavily warded cities and high number of skilled mages, but Praes was already under assault by the Ashurans. Deep raids into the Wasteland that left the forces of the High Lords untouched could become a catastrophe, and there was no doubt the Black Queen's advisors were learned enough of Praesi affairs to know this even if she herself might not be fully aware. Thalassina, then, had become the crucible on which her reign would be decided. If Ashur could be removed from the equation, an attack on the Empire became a very different affair. Wekesa and his son's preparations were of the highest import.

It might be necessary to arrange a failure to protect Hierophant from vengeful nobles after it took place, even if the consequences would be dire. She'd mull on it. She was fond of the young man, personally, and had found him a breath of fresh air on the few occasions they'd met. He was also, unfortunately, one of the most dangerous war assets of the Kingdom of Callow. A compromise might be possible through Warlock, she thought, who'd certainly prefer his only son be imprisoned for a few years rather than involved in a brutal knife-fight between the Woe and the Empire where death was a real possibility. Wekesa had made it clear he was willing to break a few pots if it meant return to normality would follow. Like her, he knew that disposing of contentious elements would lead to recriminations in the short-term and reconciliation after the storm had passed. It would be the ugliest disagreement they'd had, and one that would taint

their relationship for decades, but Alaya was nothing if not patient.

There was no knock on the door. Anyone requiring such announcement would have died to the wards in the hallway. The sound of the steps, though, could allow Malicia to discern the identity of her visitor. The four servants allowed access here had different strides, as did the sole other person with a token.

"Ime," the Empress said, greeting her guest without turning. "An unexpected pleasure."

He spymistress observed the niceties, coming before her to kneel before rising. Not quite as fluidly as she used to, Alaya noticed with grief that half-surprised her. Ime had grown old, though her body's appearance did not betray it. Yet rituals could only accomplish so much, and eventually a cloth stretched too far would snap. It might be twenty years yet before that happened, but it was as inevitable as the sun rising.

"My Empress," Ime said.

She remained standing. There was no other seat here, entirely by design. None save her should be encouraged to linger.

"I take it there has been a fresh report from the Eyes," Malicia said, brow quirked.

Her little retreats into the Windless Salon were, while not exactly forbidden from interruption, not to be lightly trespassed on.

"Our agents in the Principate managed to get urgent news through the scrying relays," the spymistress said, then hesitated. "Lord Black's legions are in full retreat through lands they've already pillaged. The Dominion's armies are in pursuit."

Alaya hid her surprise. She'd believed she'd grasped Maddie's intent when she'd seen what principalities he was targeting – namely, the loudest opposition to Hasenbach in the Highest Assembly. But he should have been heading south or across the lakes, not doubling back. It was the hesitation that gave it away.

"Ime," Alaya said quietly. "Tell me."

"We're not sure what happened," the spymistress admitted. "But there's a town full of corpses where he allegedly stole the Proceran fleet and there's been orders out of Salia to reclaim the barges."

Her mouth, she found, had gone dry.

"He won't have stolen a fleet alone," Alaya said. "The legionaries with him?"

"The orders from Salia did not mention opposition," Ime grimaced. Her stomach clenched.

"I don't believe he's dead, Malicia," her spymistress softly said. "I know it's not much, but Hasenbach has sent people to speak with the shopkeepers on the central avenue of Salia."

Alaya's lips tightened. Her teeth clenched so tightly it felt like they would shatter.

"A parade for the heroes," she forced out. "Celebrating his death."

"A triumph," Ime countered. "As the Miezans once held. Displaying a foe taken prisoner. He would make for a very useful hostage. He has influence with every single force on their eastern front."

"Do not," Malicia quietly said, "coddle me."

"This is my professional opinion," her spymistress assured her. "They have to know that outright killing him would get the Ranger to come out swinging."

She grit her teeth. Unpleasant as it was to her, it was not untrue. The question was if they'd *care*, given the number of heroes on the field. Hye was dangerous but she was not invincible and her draw with the Queen of Summer had caused her heavy wounds she'd yet to recuperate from.

"Mobilize the Eyes in strength," Alaya said. "I want answers."

Ime's lips thinned.

"My Empress, moving so openly would-"

"I don't care if we have to out every agent in that misbegotten fucking hole they call a country," Alaya hissed. "*Find out if he's alive.*"

Ime nodded slowly and the Empress forced her hands into her lap, where her fingers could not be seen to tremble.

"And pass this along to Wekesa," she added tiredly.

Ime hesitated once more. Alaya's fury spiked, though she mastered it.

"He might leave Thalassina," she said.

"If Maddie's..." she began, then faltered. "Warlock would know. They have arrangements. And he'd know I kept it from him. Besides, whether it is revenge or rescue he will not act until Scribe contacts him. Keep an eye on that, she may know something we don't."

"I will," Ime said.

A heartbeat passed.

"And yet here you stand," Malicia said.

"We must prepare," Ime said, "for all eventualities. If he is truly dead, the balance with Callow has shifted. If he has been captured, perhaps some matters should be considered with a fresh eye."

*Calm, she thought. A pond without a single ripple, so they only ever see their own reflection.*

"The Callowan situation has changed already, simply with what you've told me," Malicia said. "Get in touch with our envoy in Laure. The full terms of my pact with Keter are to be revealed."

"The initial plan," her spymistress carefully said, "was to wait until the Black Queen's return."

"It also relied on him being a restraining influence against the notion of war on the Empire," Malicia said. "That can no longer be counted on. We need a new guarantee that she won't gate in and burn a few miles of farmland to the ground every time she's provoked."

Ime nodded.

"I know you might be reluctant to explore the full spread of options, if he has been captured," she said. "But it is my duty to speak."

"Then do so," Malicia flatly said.

"If he's jailed in Salia, it might be best to simply leave him there," Ime said. "Temporarily, at least. It would be an opportunity to bring his legions back into the fold, and he can be freed after the situation in the Wasteland is made less volatile."

Malicia forced herself to consider it with cold eyes. While the legions who'd followed Amadeus to the borders and turned back the invasion at the Vales were not exactly in rebellion, it was undeniable they'd acted against her intent. She'd long known that if there ever came a day when call was made on the loyalties of the old guard, it would not be her most of them chose. The urge had always been there to dismiss the issue as a mere theoretical,

but a Dread Empress of Praes could not afford that kind of hopeful thinking. She'd had measures in place for decades, telling herself it would no matter if she never used them. She still had not, and would not unless she had no other choice. Yet much could be accomplished by the more mundane leverage was speaking of – presented with a *fait accompli* after his release, Black would likely be forced to abandoned his most recent designs. Dangerous as he could be, without an army he was just a man.

"No," Alaya said.

"My Empress-"

"I will not repeat myself," she said. "The risks are too high he'll be executed if he's allowed to remain in their grasp for long. He is to be freed at first opportunity."

"You are not thinking about this clearly, Malicia," Ime softly said. "I know you feel like you owe him. I do as well. But there comes a time when debts have to be weighed. A life spared – or saved – is not a life owed."

The laughter that ripped out of her throat was not kind.

"Is that what you think this is?" Alaya mockingly said. "He spared your life after you helped butcher his kin with the Heir's, and because he withheld the blade you *understand* us."

The spymistress grew stiff in her stance, but did not disagree.

"I wish this were about something as petty as debt," Alaya murmured, knowing it a lie. "How easy that would be."

How could she tell this familiar stranger that they had been one for so long some days she could hardly tell where she began and he ended? Maybe debt could have been the sum of them, if after the civil war he had treated her a figurehead – as was well within his power. If he'd proved himself yet another cage, this one gentler than the last but no less a prison for it. But he'd understood, that it was not comfort or a furious avenger she craved. Kindness, consolation, all the sweets words their tongue could offer. Those things she could have measured and paid back in full. But instead she'd been offered something priceless: a world of endless paths, and someone to walk them with her. *Debt*? She might as well try to weigh the worth the breath in her lungs, the blood in her veins. She was not Catherine Foundling, to carve out pieces of her own soul at a whim.

"I have your orders, Lady Ime," Malicia spoke into the silence that followed. "See to them."

Her spymistress was not so gauche as to show even the slightest hint of disapproval after being dismissed, though there was no doubt it was there. It did not matter. She had been taught better than to overreach.

"Your Most Dreadful Majesty," Ime said, bowing low.

Her steps whispered out of the room, leaving the Dread Empress of Praes alone with her thoughts. Her carefully woven surroundings seemed mockery now, a reminder that no matter how orderly she made her world chaos would always crawl in through the cracks.

"I warned you," Alaya spoke into the empty salon. "Gods, I *warned* you. That it was not sustainable, that one day you would make a mistake and that'd be all it took."

And yet she had not acted on it. Because he'd been so sure, because it would have killed the heart of him to be made to sit at her feet. Caged. And he'd won, hadn't he? Again and again and again. As so she'd not spoken the words. She should have. Better to wound him than to sit on the other side of the continent, wondering if his corpse was floating face down in some foreign lake. *Mistake*, she thought. It was too bitter a word to be called rueful.

"We will survive," said Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name. "You and me and the others. This empire we raised. We will survive this, as we have all other dooms."

But if Cordelia Hasenbach and her pack of pale-clad killers had done it? Oh, she was not seventeen anymore. She was not bleeding from the mouth, incapable of rising as the Sentinels nailed her father to the floor.

If they'd killed him, Alaya would give him an empire for a pyre.

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[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

I don't need to say it! Do it!

[\*TeK\*](#)

Do what? Please, elaborate.

[\*greatwyrmgold\*](#)

Information Technicians, of course.

## [erraticerrata](#)

Popularity contest continues: Archer vs Saint. Link to vote below.

<https://www.strawpoll.me/16735751?fbclid=IwAR1YhNZ7GdbFNVi77bF79Z0zs4MxDVIFhkpSUvZ2ti0x7nhivmiWWK3h4Y4>

*Dainpdf*

The worldly warrior versus the knight templar. Let the games begin!

*Dainpdf*

And you just know Archer won't let anyone she beats ever live it down.

*Someguy*

Archer vs Saint still results in Unlimited Blade Works.

---

Saint is more Saber, power-wise.

*Jane*

Hm. You know, when I first saw the brackets, this was an easy choice, but now that I think about it a bit more, the Saint's vicious drive to purge Evil from the world is kind of endearing in its own way...

*luminiousblu*

It's endearing only insofar as a first-time D&D player who chose the "stick in the arse" interpretation for his LG Paladin. Yeah, she's more or less on-the-nose Lawful Good, and she's undeniably a pure and good person if you subscribe to objective morality (which remember, this world does). She's just also kind of an ass, especially if you're trying not to go full murderhobo or play a character with some nuance.

*Jane*

Oh, she'd be unbearable to actually *know*, but as a "Good" antagonist, she's great; how many other characters can half-gloat as she tells a leader that she's deliberately engineering the sacrifice of their country so that a country more faithful to the ideals of Good can one day take its place?

That kind of zealotry is hard to write well, especially with that sort of jaded edge to it that she has.



[boballab](#)

Not really. Saint is a puppet whose strings are easily pulled by the Bard and that mono mania is all there is to her and is the reason Saint got so mad at Cat when she basically called her a cheap Ranger knockoff, because she knows she is a cheap Ranger knockoff. Ranger also has a mono mania but as seen in that interlude where she went to Keter she has a personality to it and you can't use it to puppet master her. In a way I hope they do kill Black just so Ranger, even an injured Ranger, would show up and beat the crap out of Saint.

*stevenneiman*

Personally, I find her to be kind of a hypocrite. She wouldn't have thrown a fit when Cat compared her to Hye if it wasn't true, and she doesn't have too much more going for her.

Both in and out of meta-narrative I feel like Cat did a wonderful job of stripping her of audience sympathy. All it took was a few words and her own thoughtless response and she went from the mighty and noble champion of Good to a self-righteous bully who isn't even impressive compared the other people Cat's met.

*luminiousblu*

She's not really a hypocrite when she lives in a world where Good and Evil are very clearly delineated. She's a Good version of Hye (but less fun and probably old and busted unlike the half-elf, who's still fresh and looks like she's still a senior girl in university) – alright, but that doesn't actually bear comparison because the fact that she's a Good version of her is the salient difference.

*naturalnuke*

The saint of swords is a horrible person. And archer just got shipping, this round isn't even a contest.

*stevenneiman*

Yeah, this one was the most one-sided so far when I was voting.

*caoimhinh*

2 Typos found:

– He spymistress observed the niceties  
should be: The spymistress or Her spymistress.

– Her teeth clenched so tightly it felt like they would shatter should be: clenched so tightly that it felt like they would shatter.

Also, Archer FTW!!

*cookiehunter*

please change rankers name in chapter 48 in this volume to sacker  
ranker doesnt make sense

*Big Brother*

Sacker and Ranker are two different people, I thought.

*cookiehunter*

yes they are which is why it should be changed because ranker is off with black in Procer and dead as off a few chapters ago

*superkeaton*

I know I'll lose my vote in this. But I can't help it, I always love a villain.

*Agent J*

How? The villain's leading by a mile.

*smh*

Stop teasing us so hard. Fantastic Chapter!!

*SMHF*

First part of the plan... get captured alive.  
The first part never fails.  
Yeah this is gonna be fun!

*Dainpdf*

Black is going to pull a Cat and join the Pilgrim's hero band. ...yeah, it's not in his nature to do that. I just wanted to read about the face the Saint would make at that.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Actually, I can kinda see it. I was theorizing before when the whole "redemption" angle was raised that Cat was going to end up the Token evil member in the band of 5 that would form in response to the dead king. But what if it's Black? He's right there after all.

Anon

Well, we know villains don't get capture alive unless they are turning cloak... or if it was part of the plan all along.

Dainpdf

Bit hard for Black to join up when the whole core of the man is to spit in the eyes of the Heavens. Who knows, maybe he sees some way to further defy them from the inside, but I wouldn't bet on it.

[Euodiachloris](#)

This is the guy who uses eldritch, Name-wrought shadows to saw at the legs of a chair for a prank.

I can see him pulling something like a more or less genuine attempt at redemption that he'd know full well would be thrown back in his face... all just to make the other side jut steam from their ears and start throwing chairs around. 😊

Dainpdf

Inb4 all those bodies in the barges were rigged with munitions.

Insanenoodlyguy

To be clear, I was envisioning less of the "okay, guess I'll reform" and more of the "So hey, your desperate and clearly about to die, and if you let me out of this cage we both know I'm bound to see this thing through with you. So I'm going to sit here with an evil grin while you reject me till the last moment and oh look, the dead king's army is here and now you are surrounded and everything is on fire and sure I'll make this hasty oath that has no loopholes at all and yep here we go."

Lark

"The Everdark was a mess of primitive warring tribes, effectively impossible to mobilize quickly and highly unpalatable allies regardless, which left only two real options: the Kingdom Under and the fae."

While I am of course heavily biased due to the information I have as a reader, it still seems weird to me that Malicia would dismiss the Drow so quickly, especially as she's aware that the Kingdom Under are expanding \*somewhere\*. Is this her "one mistake", to match Black's?

Dainpdf

Well, it has been pointed out that expanding into the Everdark makes little sense for the dwarves outside the Keter situation. Very costly, with benefits unlikely to see the light of day in timely manner, and they can just expand in depth (as they probably did in most previous expansion phases). The only reason Ubu and Cat even arrived at why the dwarves were invading the Drow was because they already knew the dwarves were invading, and how.

*luminiousblu*

The funniest thing, I think, is that Malicia basically is the one who made it possible for Catherine to try negotiating with the Drow in the face of a "bearded apocalypse". The Dead King extended an invitation to Catherine in response to Malicia trying to hammer out a deal with him, and the end result of that is that no matter who got the upper hand, the Dwarves would be on the move.

*Someguy*

Also, no matter what the moves the Dead King benefits.

*Jane*

The Drow fundamentally don't understand the concept of binding agreements – they *should* be impossible to use as allies, at best a sort of living weapon that you point in the direction of your enemy. It's only Cat's Fae nature that makes this possible at all; she's turning conventional wisdom on its head, something that's hard to think around unless you make a deliberate effort to do so.

This setting aside all of the other problems (you need dozens of different agreements normally, most of them haven't been out of the Underdark for centuries, they're badly equipped, their tactics aren't suited for modern armies, etc...) that they present as being *effective* allies, even if they were to agree.

Really, the Fae would make a much more logical ally, so long as you assume that Cat is willing to invite that much collateral damage, which... Well, she was willing to strike a bargain with the Dead King.

*Anonymouse*

The Dead King could be more or less controlled, the fae couldn't.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I just want to point out, it's Everdark not Underdark.

*mavant*

I'm sure Jane is just mixing the two up for the lolth.

\*rimshot\*

### *Drunken Dwarf*

That is what the Drow are though, at least the very outskirts of the Gloom and those that leave it. No one except the Dead King, the Dwarves, and the Bard know about the sheer amount and quality of power that the Drow are hoarding. As for the Dwarves, well they could be expanding anywhere (even further down) so she can't just assume it's the Everdark.

### *Quite Possibly A Cat*

It makes perfect sense to dismiss the Drow. We as the reader know the Drow have stupid levels of power. But all anyone else has seen is total rubbish. Up until we saw what a real city-tier Sigil holder could do, we thought the Drow were a joke.

I'm not sure what knowing about the dwarven expansion has to do with it. So what if the dwarves are expanding into the drow? Why would that make the drow any more worthwhile to get? They still all suck as far as anyone on the surface knows.

If anything she's underestimating what Winter can do. (Hopefully.) Winter is what allows Catherine to recruit Drow. Without that oath trick Catherine wouldn't be able to get squat from the Drow. The other possibility is Catherine is doing something that's a bad idea. (TM) Which would be really bad.

### *King Salmon*

It's a case of having justified historical bias. Catherine, for all of her experience, is still "fresh" – she considers things other people dismiss out of hand, such as the entry into the Grand Alliance that even Malicia praised. In this case, the Drow being ridiculously hard to control is a self-evident fact. You don't actually consider the Drow a potential ally any more you consider the Chain of Hunger a potential ally in the same way that (to use a historical, real-life example) many civilizations didn't consider the idea of autarky to be anything but a good idea. It's just common sense – the Drow cannot be treated with, so you don't even try.

The Drow are well-known to be both so prone to backstabbing that it's literally what they're known for as well as being so fractured that trying to treat with them would be a lot like trying to treat with "The Celts" as a classical Mediterranean power when you only have access to Iberia. They're also not all that powerful in a fight, so it's a hell of a lot of work for allies both weak and unreliable compared to the Dead King or the Kingdom Under.

The Kingdom Under being in an “expansion phase” could mean many things but the Dwarves themselves did not expect it to be easy or immediate. They intended to drag this war out for decades if not centuries, so Malicia is by conventional wisdom safe in assuming there would be negligible surface results – after all the only actual time we know of where the Kingdom Under’s expansions led to anything at all happening on the surface was when the Goblins got kicked out ages ago, and that time the Goblins only got out because the Kingdom Under decided to ask them nicely first.

I think something else to note is that Malicia and Black have not (to my knowledge) demonstrated their knowledge of Akua’s existence. Malicia saw Akua in disguise but hasn’t shown that she realized who it was, especially since it’s a believable lie – a Duchess of Winter brought along a fae negotiator from Winter, the land of backstabbing and plots, and later summoned the Wild Hunt lead by a former Prince of Winter when she was in a jam. It’s perfectly believable that she managed to get her hands on a fae, and it’s doubtful that Malicia even realizes it’s possible for Akua to have basically become part of Catherine’s Winter mantle if she considered it at all or even realizes Akua hasn’t been crushed into pieces.

The fact that the Diabolist, whose mind games are in my opinion close to or even on Malicia’s level (she effectively opposed Malicia outright, and would’ve won if not for the combination of Catherine and Black, with a terrifically shit hand compared to Malicia), is not only on Catherine’s side but is actively doing her best to help her achieve her goals is a mountain-sized wrench in judging how much negotiating power Catherine has. In Malicia’s eyes, Catherine has Archer and herself, plus maybe a fae or a captured drow. That’s not the most promising picture for a negotiating team or even knowledge of Drow customs and magic. Akua, though? Akua’s been at the game since Catherine was born and she’s good at it. It fixes many of the ‘team’s’ blind spots.

*luminousblu*

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*Darkening*

To be fair, Malicia could have stopped her early, she just wanted the super weapon, so she let her get away with a lot of stuff and even cleared some obstacles iirc, because she was sure Black could defeat her in the end and acquire it for her. Still, Akua is very talented.

*luminiousblu*

But isn't that just the thing when it comes to mind games? Malicia miscalculated horribly when it came to Akua. The only reason Black managed to win was because of the Fae incursion that had Catherine made into a pseudodeific being, which was completely out of left field for just about everyone. Hell, even before that, Akua came very, very close to outright claiming Liesse and a Hashmallim's corpse, only defeated because Catherine turned herself into basically a wight to keep going. And unlike Malicia, Akua didn't have the Eyes or Black on her side. Malicia almost got her bacon toasted twice because Akua managed to keep her in the dark of what she was really after and what she was really capable of, and the second time it would've been game over if not for a literal chance occurrence.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Worse, she can REFORM (not in a moral sense so much as a practical/tactical one) them. Backstabbing is why you can't get that many drow in the same place doing the same thing... but thanks to Winter Deals, the most powerful Drow are the ones who keep to their words and loyalties. If she starts handing down more Fae titles, that's only going to become more and more the case. They'll think of it much differently than a "moral" culture might, but the end result is the same. If the strongest keep their words and the strongest are what matters (the strongest, Cat, being so absolute that she must always keep her word, and YOU must always keep yours to her or she kills you wherever you are on the spot) then integrity is going to become a sign of strength. If they live long enough, then in a few generations, Lying? Oh hell no you would never lie, you aren't weak! Sure, fae doublespeak and exact wording trickery will become a thing, but that's just being clever. Not on you if you were made to give your word and the other schmuck chose the words poorly.

And once you have cohesion and integrity, you have the bedrock to make them start coordinating and actual tactics can be drilled into them. And as much as the power encourages discord, I'm going to bet an army with night power working together is going to be scary.

*luminiousblu*



Exactly, in time what will happen is that the culture will reshape itself around the fact that those who keep their words are strong and influential for it, and so honesty is associated with power and prestige. Lying ends up being something you're ashamed to do because it's a sign of the poor and weak, while honesty ends up becoming something children aspire to because all of their folk heroes are honest.

*Oshi*

The quieter (read deadlier) possibility is once they stop murdering each other at the drop of a hat stories will actually be able to form. The Drow will come closer to what it means to be fae on the material plane without much of the handicaps.

*nimelennar*

They'll actually be dark elves.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Come to think of it, whole thing works into the "integrity = strength" angle as well. Named? People who get great powers from roles. The greatest of winter? The first Sovereign was an ascended name who became something that told even less lies as she gained more power. Drow will want names bad, and narrative will let them get some. More bound to oaths least consequences, more power. It will work exactly how it should work based on this new framework of what it means to be Mighty. We'll probably see them have a flavor of bryonic stories about people tragically having to keep or foolishly breaking their word, if the emphasis holds up.

Probably will make them even more elf like in that Heroes (though also Villians, considering) will be the people that get the most respect. Outsiders on the whole? They have a tendency to lie and break oaths. Won't even have to shift their "all others are near worthless" cultural perception all that much, it'll just go from "no night: weak, less than the lowest elf" to "they lie: weak, they could never hold winter." Named are the exception because their word can be trusted, after all they are strong.

*Jago*

The Drow had an Empire and an advanced culture, capable to fight the Dwarves and win at least some of the time. Then something or better someone, the Sve, broke it from within.

If the Sve night and knowledge can be recovered probably it will become possible to start reforging it, as that knowledge should include something of how the transfer of night was done without the need of harvesting it from the weak.

I suspect that the real power of the immortals like the Nameless Bard, the Death King, and (probably) the Sve is that they can change the paradigms of a whole culture.

The Bard is probably the one that changed the Blessing to the more constricted Names in Celernia;

the DK completely changed his people to undead and people living in the Serentity;

the Sve broke the Drows;

Cat will create a new paradigm, a nation made of different people. Not a hodgepodge of different nations, but an alloy of them, made stronger by the mixing of the different components.

*Byzantine*

Yep. Selective pressure is an amazing thing, both genetically and culturally. There is a reason these days we can domesticate foxes in a few decades, while wolves appear to have taken centuries – the right pressure applied the right way and things change amazingly fast.

*jonnnney*

Well she is not wrong about how long it would take to mobilize them, but Malicia does not yet realize that Catherine can bestow Fae mantles nor does she realize the strength of oaths made to Catherine. The 100+ oath to the kingdom of callow makes that unpalatable allies part a non issue. Honestly, unless the author is being coy, there is a good deal that Malicia doesn't understand about Catherine's control over Winter. She doesn't mention Akua when considering the Woe which means she either doesn't get that her soul is bound to Catherine or thinks that Akua is merely being used as a tool of war rather than a magic expert and political adviser. Heck the fact that she thinks Catherine would need to make a deal with with the combined winter and summer courts in order to get backup shows how ignorant she is of Catherine's abilities as the Last Queen of Winter.

*Dainpdf*

Interesting. I guess Malicia could get the Start of Darkness if Black is dead. Somehow, although she's already evil and has a tragic backstory.

Even more interesting? In a way, turns out she's actually Amadeus's most loyal follower. Scribe and Captain are also contenders, of course, but this? All of this makes Alaya quite

the fan.

It also makes her human. And humans bleed. Seems to me like we'll be seeing the calamities drop in the not too distant future.

Also interesting: Malicia has different opinions from the Hellhound regarding the feasibility of ambushing the Summerholm garrison. Plus, she got outplayed *\*hard\** by Adjutant – who even she can't read, point for Vivi's paranoia – and all it cost him was a hand.

[TeK](#)

I don't think she thinks about feasibility of ambushing Summerholm garrison, rather about feasibility of escalating her conflict with Callow.

*Dainpdf*

She seems very focused on the feasibility of letting High Lords act independently. It's a dangerous thing to rely on, especially in the eyes of someone who craves control as much as she does (plus it would actively wear at all the work she's done to rob the High Lords of agency).

*luminiousblu*

Hakram is unreadable because, for all of his characterization, his actual goals amount to "Catherine". He's a rare breed of right-hand man where his goals amount to supporting the person he serves. He doesn't have any real ambitions beyond it.

*muffin*

>>>>

"The Callowan situation has changed already, simply with what you've told me," Malicia said. "Get in touch with our envoy in Laure. The full terms of my pact with Keter are to be revealed."

"The initial plan," her spymistress carefully said, "was to wait until the Black Queen's return."

"It also relied on him being a restraining influence against the notion of war on the Empire," Malicia said. "That can no longer be counted on. We need a new guarantee that she won't gate in and burn a few miles of farmland to the ground every time she's provoked."

<<<<

So, Malicia isn't outright for killing Cat. What was the original plan then?

I don't get it, why is she constantly antagonizing her?

Why was she bleeding Callow an Black forces.

Why the killing of Callow administration?

*luminiousblu*

Because the best way to keep a place under your control is to make sure it literally cannot oppose you in any meaningful way.

Killing Callow's administration means that it can't be its own power bloc, since it lacks functional talent, while bleeding out "allies" you expect to turn on later is a ploy old as dirt.

*Jago*

Maybe I read too much into it, but I think she is jealous of Cat, even she doesn't realize it. Cat is taking away some of the affection of Asmodeus and Ayala doesn't know how to react to that, so Malice the Tyrant is acting for her, without realizing that it is a bad way to resolve the problem.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Killing Callow's ruler's class either immobilizes the kingdom, leads to centralization of power which can be toppled with a death of the ruler or to replacement with new people, many of whom will likely be Malicia's agents.

*FactualInsanity*

I think that's selling him short.  
It's not that he has no ambitions beyond supporting Catherine. It's that his ambitions match hers, more or less.  
In my opinion anyway.

*luminiousblu*

Well yeah, but Hakram sees his place at her side, not unlike how Black saw his place, for the longest time, at Alaya's side, or how Scribe sees her place at Black's side. He's not a slavish hanger-on, and he supports Catherine because he agrees with her, but the difference is almost moot – he supports Catherine because of her goals, and her goals are what they are because of who she is. Hakram supports Catherine because of who she is and what that implies.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

This. And if she ever turns from those goals, he's likely to go Klingon about it, and put them in a situation where they are fighting to the death. Not to kill her, but to have her kill him in such a way that she remembers what she's doing this for. (Coin flip on if he actually dies or

if the fight ends with one of them over the other but both of them thinking the same way again).

### *Stormblessed*

I agree with you... Mostly. My disagreement falls that I don't think he supports Catherine's goals unequivocally without any goals of his own, I think he believes in Catherine and believes in his goals and dreams for abetted future. While the might squabble a bit on what that would mean, he takes Catherine's side and position in the end and is most certainly the 'right hand man'.

In a sense, the dread empress can't understand Hakram because she underestimates and dislikes Catherine. Basically, their relationship is similar to the one between her and Black in that they work as a unit. Hakram and Cat's relationship might be best described as a mix between that of Black and Squire and Black and Malacia. In my opinion obviously.

### *Dainpdf*

He does. Remember the night, ages ago, when he swore to follow her. He dreams of a better world, where his people aren't limited by their baser instincts, treated by the other peoples of Calernia as brutes and grunts. Or at least that's what he's said he wants.

### *Byzantine*

And worse the way he does it always leaves you thinking there *\*has\** to be something you are missing. He never does anything for just a single purpose. So obviously his devotion to Catherine can't really be that single minded... right?

grzecho2222

Start of Darkerness

### *Jane*

And this chapter is why I love Malicia's character so dearly; the cold logic hiding behind a dozen different masks, all tied to a character who still fundamentally *feels*, and cares deeply about the things she wishes to protect.

Incidentally, it's amusing to see her apply that logic to come to a perfectly reasonable conclusion (Cat will go for the Fae – it's her only option, and it would be devastating), and be completely and thoroughly wrong about it (Wait, what do you *mean*, she was actually able to unify a decent portion of the Drow?). At least she's in the right ballpark? I mean, Cat's less-informed enemies probably think she's off preparing some dire ritual or something...

*Dainpdf*

I found it interesting that she associated keeping those feelings and loyalties to *\*not\** being Cat – by her own admission, Malicia is biased, but still this says something about what the Black Queen is.

Compare this to the Nauk situation, for example.

*Jane*

Cat's capacity for self-sacrifice certainly is becoming a legend, isn't it? From the Saint of Swords disgust at what she's done to her own soul, to Malicia's quiet disdain for how she cuts out portions of herself, to Akua's presumption that self-mutilation will be Cat's *first* resort... She really has quite the reputation, though for different reasons across her various foes.

In many ways, she has more in common with Akua than one would assume – her dream comes before all else. In Akua's case, before the cost to the world, in Cat's case, before the cost to herself.

*naturalnuke*

I've said it before and I'll say it again. As horrible a person Ubua is, she is a reflection of Cat and the perfect foil. She's Cat if Cat reacted inversely to the way she did.

*Dantalian*

No one foresaw Cat's deal with the Kingdom Under too. That's probably going to result in a HUGE shift in the balance of power in Calernia.

*Oshi*

No. The Kingdom Under makes plenty of deal with the surface. This is just one more in a long line of diplomatic maneuvers on the Dwarves part. There is a reason that Malicia knows about the Dwarves expansion after all.

[frolamiz](#)

Yes, they made deals with others, but most of them should be limited to "we sell you weapons for x" or "we can't send you mercenaries because we are in a period of expansion".

Cat's deal will be perceived VERY differently when all the member of Hasenbach's alliances are are refused because they are at war with her. There will be a lot of speculations about what is going on between her and the

dwarves and how much they are willing to help her. At the very least, refusing to deal with people at war with her will be seen as approving her.

### Javvies

Yeah, depending on how long it's been ... Cat seemingly disappearing off the face of the planet should have everybody who knows about it in the Grand Alliance worried. Heck – Malicia's sort of worried, and she thinks she knows what Cat is doing and why. I mean, Malicia's wrong about the who, where, and why, but sort of right on the what.

As far as the Grand Alliance is concerned, Cat's the Archeretic of the East, who dropped a glacial lake on an army, seemingly because she could, can mass produce undead that Holy power is useless against, and disappeared shortly before the Dead King invaded. At best, she's in Keter, at worst, she's up to something else horrific and Evil.

Okay, Cat kind of is up to something horrific and debatably evil, but still, Cat's up to something she thinks is more important than the problems in Callow – nobody on the side of Above is going to think that could possibly be a good thing.

### Javvies

Hmmm. That Malicia seems to think that her deal with the Dead King is apparently some sort of counterweight to Cat acting against Praes is not good.

Black captured ... I can see that as being more likely as an offscreen event than him getting killed offscreen.

Going to backfire all kinds of horribly on them when Cat finds out.

For that matter, breaking Black out is something she, the Woe, Scribe, and what's left of the Calamities would be wrong to work together on.

Would not want to be on the wrong side of that group when they're all working together.

Hell, for getting Black back, Malicia might even stop screwing with Cat, at least for a while.

Hah. Cat going to the Drow is something Malicia has discounted, thinking she went to Arcadia and the Fae. That's probably a good thing for Cat.

Malicia, fucking around with Masego/Hierophant is a terrible idea. Imprisoning him is simply a very bad one. Letting him die will end Praesi cities. At best. And that's only if Warlock and Cat don't find out you let Masego get killed, then they'll both turn on you, and that just plain isn't particularly survivable, at least, not in any sort of condition where survival is desirable.

*Dainpdf*

Malicia stated it herself, she can work around regular debt. Even the "saving Black's hide" kind.

*IDKWhoitis*

I think in the case of Masego, Warlock would blame her without any proof she did anything. If she failed to protect him, with or without intention, he will be at best neutral in the ensuing shitshow, and at worst will work with Cat to topple the tower. Malica promised she would protect Masego.

*caoimhinh*

My bet is that "Amadeus Prison Break Arc" will have at least 4 chapters named X person's plan, each showing us the different teams carrying out their plans to rescue Black. It will be interesting to see it play out. I just don't want it to end like the Ace Rescue Arc in One Piece.

*Oshi*

How did it end (not a One Piece reader) ?

*Yeah*

Dead ace

*Novice*

SPOILERS:

Ace, the one they're rescuing, died.

*caoimhinh*

SPOILERS:

The whole Arc was about Luffy (the MC) and others rushing to rescue his brother Ace who was sentenced to be executed publicly in the Marine Headquarters.

This ended even setting off a war among some of the strongest powerhouses of the world in the Marine HQ, issuing a huge battle involving the top forces of the marines and all divisions of White Beard Pirates.

Luffy even managed to release Ace from the shackles that bound him to the scaffold, but Ace died at the hands of one of the Admirals while protecting Luffy during their escape.

A very sad ending for that arc that made their efforts be in vain and leaving thousands of dead as the aftermath.

*grzecho2222*



My guess is that Hierarch and Tyrant will save him since he is:

- a) of Common Orgins and tries to change Praes into place where People (institutions) not Lords have power
- b) mad with Kairos and kidnapping him will make everybody go after them (thus creating too many opponents for Fate to choose)
- c) other reason

*jonnnney*

Reason C with Kairos is always "for the lols"

### Mental Mouse

Might end up with Black saying "what do you think you're doing? Aside from messing up my scheme?"

### TeK

So, Black is alive, but captured, alledgedly. All theories are once again in the air.

Nice to see Cat's drow gambit is too insane even for Malicia to consider. I guess this is one of the boons that come with it: nobody will expect for you to get drow army, it's like getting elf army as a Hero.

*Dylan Tullos*

TeK:

Try as I might, I cannot come up with a single reason for the Heroes to capture Black instead of killing him. Leaving him alive means that he can escape or be freed, while dead is dead.

I think there are obvious problems with "so crazy they'll never see it coming", like the fact that the plan is actually so bad that Malicia immediately dismisses it.

### Javvies

Because Cat's too good at manipulating stories to hand her the "we killed her mentor" card.

Also, taking Black alive is a huge triumph – and proving it is a huge morale booster.

Plus, they can try to get information out of him if he is alive. Lot harder to do that when he's dead and you don't do necromancy.

Also, Black alive is potential leverage against Cat, the Calamities, and Praes.

Then there's the fact that the Heroes probably don't want to

do anything they don't have to do that could pull Ranger into wanting to kill them.

Or ... Black was tricky and surrendered at some point. And Heroes don't/can't kill somebody who had clearly surrendered.

*Drunken Dwarf*

Not to mention it would officially open the Name spot for the Black Knight. While I doubt they'd expect Cat to take the Name, there is the possibility of another being risen before the Dead King is pushed back.

*Jane*

...Isn't the "Holding The Beloved Mentor Figure As A Hostage" card even worse, from a Narrative position? Though a bit easier to direct, I guess... I can think of many stories where that's gone horribly wrong, and not very many where it works out well for the hostage-taker. At best, it's setting up a heroic (villainous?) sacrifice on the part of Black that does significant harm to their plans, and puts Cat on a path to greater growth.

[Javvies](#)

The "Hostage Mentor" card, while not a good one to give somebody, is less targeted than the "Killed Mentor" card. The "Hostage Mentor" card, will give Cat the most advantage against whomever is actually holding him prisoner.

The "Killed Mentor" card would give Cat an even bigger boost against the very Heroes most likely to be able to stand up to her in a fight, even kill her – namely Saint and Pilgrim, plus the other Heroes involved.

Giving Cat a specific advantage against those who pose the greatest threat to her is not a good plan.

Plus, the "Hostage Mentor" gives them a known point where they can prepare the area against Cat, whereas "Killed Mentor" means she can strike anywhere at any time. Now they can set up against Cat's rescue attempt. Still don't know when, but they'll know where.

*Jane*

Ah... So you're saying that Pilgrim is setting up Hasenbach to take the fall, while hoping that Black ends up killed during the rescue and they inflict a bit of lasting damage during the attempt. Yes, that would make sense, though I'd still be a bit concerned by the promise of greater growth such plotlines usually enable. Then again, with how strange Cat's arc has grown, who's

to say that the plotline would still offer that kind of payoff for her? She's not the Squire anymore, after all.

### Javvies

No, Cat still holds the Name of Squire, or, rather, what's left of it. It is in bad shape, down to the gnawed on bones between Winter and two failed/rejected/broken Transitions from Squire, but she still has it.

Might not be Pilgrim intentionally setting up Hasenbach – from what we've seen of him, he appears to want to protect the status quo, rather than burn everything and start over like Laurence.

Pilgrim might be using the captured Black as bait and/or leverage against Cat, the Woe, and the rest of the Calamities – if they want Black back, they have to play into his hands, either going after where he's being held, or trying to cut a deal. If they try to break him out, they're walking into a trap, if they try to cut a deal, it's going to be expensive.

Alternatively, if that don't try to get Black back, that's going to cause divisions and gut morale amongst their forces. The Legions would not be happy about Black being left in Proceran/Hero hands, and decidedly disappointed with those responsible for making that decision. Could cause a serious problem.

Lot of it depends on what actually happened to result in Black being captured. And on whether Black captured is part of a Hero's plan, part of Black's plan, or some fluke that just happened.

We don't know enough, frankly, to do much speculating about what's going on with Black presumably being captured.

### *caoimhinh*

It works if you don't look at it as "the hostage mentor" but rather "the villain sentenced to prison".

Keep in mind there are narratives that overlap with each other, and the 2 sides from a story might be very different while telling the same tale.

### *Jane*

But this conversation line was concerned with what Stories this would enable Cat to take advantage of, on the premise that Cat would deliberately manipulate the Narrative to her advantage; how Pilgrim (or other Heroes) would represent the situation and manipulate it

to their advantage is a side concern to what Cat would attempt.

Though I'd note that "The Villain Sentenced to Prison" can all too often be reframed as "Sealed Evil in a Can", and we all know how that ends – with the Dead King on their doorstep, it's unlikely that such a seed would sprout, but how many stories begin with a Villain breaking out of prison, exactly?

*Yotz*

One thing they should be especially careful with in the case of Black's imprisoning, is the place. I mean, if you throwing someone in the local analogue of Elba or, Gods forbid, Château d'If – you simply asking for it at this point.

*caoimhinh*

Yes, but also many stories for a villain end in him being captured, deprived of power and ending life in prison, it's also stronger than the "rescue the imprisoned mentor" narrative because it's an end of narrative not the plot of one AND because Cat is a villain, not a Heroine fighting to rescue her teacher who is held as hostage.

Of course, we the readers know that it can horribly backfire for Pilgrim and co. since Cat has a knack for bending narrative in her favor, but Pilgrim might not know that or rather, he might think he can outsmart her in this, as have been his attitude when facing her during the Northern Campaign and the peace treaty; the bit of insight we got from him when he planned the plague trap against Black also shows us he believes himself to be above the others in the knowledge of narrative, such arrogance will kill him when facing off against Catherine.

*SilentWatcher*

i dont think pilgrim would do such a foolish mistake. it could be "it was a trap all along" they must expect the calamities to rescue him. Even malicia is now emotional in her decision making.

Even crazier, maybe Black planned to get captured, because he is a weakness of Malicia

*Dylan Tullos*

Javvies:

You know what would be good for morale? Killing Black and displaying his body. That would be great for morale. The Carrion Lord would be dead and gone, the most feared Villain alive would be vanquished, and all Good people could sleep soundly in the knowledge that he was never coming back.

It would be less great for morale to capture Black and have the Calamities break him out a week later. However nice it might be in theory to have him as a hostage, there is no jail anywhere that could keep him safely.

Grey Pilgrim is allowed to use a plague to kill innocent villagers. He's allowed to smother his own nephew with a pillow. His Choir obviously isn't going to care if he kills a Villain after they surrender.

The Saint of Swords did not strike me as the kind of woman who refuses to kill Villains because she's scared. Heroes die as part of their job, and there's no better way to go out than as a result of killing the worst Villain since Triumphant.

### Javvies

If he's not alive, what proves it was actually Black's body? Remember, he's relatively unassuming, and not at all like what anybody thinks of when they think about him. Plus, he's Duni, and so is light skinned like a Callowan (and Proceran?), not the stereotypical darker skinned Praesi. The average person would just assume they don't actually have the dreaded Praesi Black Knight.

Plus, as noted, while he is alive, no one else, such as Cat, can pick up the Name of Black Knight. As a prisoner, one of the few standard Names available to Praes is off the board and staying off.

### *Dylan Tullos*

Javvies:

The benefit of killing Black is that Black will be dead. This is an advantage that does not go away or lessen over time.

The benefits to taking Black prisoner are that he can't fight you and that your morale improves. These advantages can go away in five seconds when the Calamities arrive to break him out. Taking the Black Knight off the board only helps you if the enemy can't bring him back.

It's better to take a permanent win over a temporary boost. As for the danger of another Black Knight, that Black Knight would be a rookie, without Black's decades of experience as a Hero killer, his skill as a general, or his relationship with the Calamities. Heroes aren't scared of a random Black Knight, like the dozens or hundreds who have fallen and failed; they're scared of Amadeus of the Green Stretch, who actually succeeded in conquering Callow. Killing him is worth any cost, and failing to do so is an act of pure idiocy that leaves Evil's most dangerous general to live and fight another day.

### Javvies

The Calamities showing up to break Black out of prison is them showing up on ground that should be a place chosen and prepared to trap and kill them. I don't know about you, but fighting the Calamities at a place of my choosing that I've prepared to have them, even if I don't have much control over the timing, sounds like a better idea than letting them choose the time and place, far less digging them out of Praes. And you can control the timing some – announce a date for an execution or trial, public or otherwise, or transfer to a place of execution or trial.

Also, it is within the realm of possibility that killing Black would free his soul to get installed into someone else. Nermcromantic practices are the realm of Evil, after all.

Sure, a new Black Knight won't be Amadeus, but it could easily be Cat, as far as the Heroes know, and that would just be a disaster. Or maybe it's somebody else – someone whose identity and capabilities are unknown. It could easily be someone more dangerous in a fight than Amadeus – probably would be, in fact.

### *caoimhinh*

Yeah, they probably mean to use him as a temporal prisoner and execute him in a later date.

That would give them the benefits of:

- boosting their own morale while damaging the enemy's morale
- sowing hesitation, unrest, and tension between their enemies (Praes, Malicia, Cat, the Calamities, the legions, etc) because every faction will react differently
- gaining some time before the next offensive, because while it can be expected that the many factions in

Praes and Callow's side would join hands to break him out, they won't do it immediately.

Of course, it is a risk, but Black can be contained temporarily, and executed later on when preparations are in place, while killing Black would effectively make Cat, Malicia and the Calamities join in a vendetta against Procer; Saint might not care, but Pilgrim would, and will plan more carefully to take advantage of the other's agitation, hesitation and haste on rescuing Amadeus, setting traps and countermeasures to deal with them.

We know it will probably backfire to Procer, because Catherine is the MC, but that's us the readers, the characters don't know that and thus can make those mistakes.

*jonnnney*

The good guys are currently planning to set out a few million innocent people as lambs to the slaughter because they lost an election. I doubt they care about morale. The benefit of keeping Black alive is Warlock and his Son don't get a chance nuke the Ashuran fleet which is the only military around that is currently attacking the Dread Empire itself.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You know what would be really *bad* for morale? "Killing Black and displaying his body" – and then he shows up to kick the snot out of the nobles and lesser Named. 😊

*Rook*

The problem with Black isn't that he isn't a clever enough mastermind. The problem is that he treats himself as just another piece on the board. An important one, yes, but still expendable given the right conditions.

I think the question of his survival isn't whether things are going according to plan, so much as whether his plan actually involves his own survival. The fact that killing Black may be far too costly for the Heroes or Procer to weather is worrying, not comforting, because Black himself has so much to gain from sacrificing his own piece here. It may, in fact, turn into a farce in which the Heroes have to save the archvillain while said archvillain attempts to off himself on their swords.

The thing is that if he actually forces them to kill him, he wins. All the old Heroic monsters have crawled out of the

woodwork, placing themselves in Procer's camp and openly taking the field to put him down. The sharpest swords that the Heavens have to bare, the ones that would normally come screaming out of a clear blue sky to save the day, are in the open field and targetable along with the Crusade and Procer itself. All at once.

If he dies here, he gives the deadliest monsters that Praes has spawned in tens of generations a clean swing at them under the guise of a classic, typically Heroic, motivation – retribution for a loved one lost.

The end result? He breaks the last remaining madmen of Praes against the last remaining Heroic nation close enough to be a threat, and simultaneously wounds or outright shatters most of the Legendary Heroes that might ruin all his plans. The snake eating it's own tail is ended, procer is ended, Callow is under the iron fist of his own apprentice, and a massive power vacuum is created that can now be filled by mundane institutions.

### [TeK](#)

Oh yeah, why would Peregrin leave Maddie alive? What about a bait? Praesi had consistently proven that being on defensive is a preferable position. Now instead of trying to invade Callow (which is impossible giving an upcoming undead incursion), you can dictate where Calamities'll struck. And you'll get a "Good country besieged by various forces of evil" bonus, which gives +2 defensive roll. I think, the most important thing for Good is to get every monster into action there. They don't really care about backlash or casualties, as long as they will be the ones left standing. It's a nice trade, me thinks, making Praes go on offensive.

About "so crazy they never see it coming", Malicia does not judge which plan is better, cause both are different yet similar shades of godawful, she judges what she thinks Cat will do. And I think whatever advantage giving fae permanent foothold in Creation has over herding a bunch of backstabbing demigods into an army, it's worth it, as long as your enemies won't expect it.

Also, while we consistently overlook nisi and dzulu in favor of Mighty, what Cat told us, time and again, is that she doesn't need monsters, but rather numbers. And think of it this way: if Kingdom Under can't sell weapons to any side in Calernia that is at war with Callow, whom they can sell those weapons? Give "cattle" drow cheap dwarven armaments, and you got yourself analog to Proceran levies, for your professional core Army of Callow.

Yotz



Cat may still get herself an army of slightly less backstabbing lesser demigods courtesy of her auctions – on which nisi are the main buyers, afair, since most of the dzulu are waiting for a shot on the Titles. Yes, some of the dzulu may be lured in by the promise of draining a Mighty – but with Cat's last gambit that would be one with no guarantee on getting more in foreseeable future. So the bulk of dzulu and – presumably – all the Mighty in Cat's thrall will wait on a chance to prove themselves enough to gain a Title, making (slightly) empowered nisi Cat's main footsoldiers. Which, depending on the amount of Night drained and Secrets obtained, may place some of them on the level of elite troops of other nations, or even higher. I mean, if your meatshield is capable of nearly instantaneous regeneration and is highly poisonous for anyone who dares to chomp on it...

*werafdsaew*

How about the reason given in this chapter? They want to parade him around in a triumph, and they don't want to piss off Ranger. Or maybe one sworn to Mercy, GP actually cannot take a life unless it saves another life elsewhere, and he judges Black to have been sufficiently neutralized. I'm sure I can come up with other possible reasons.

*Death Knight*

No, the reason Mercy is one of the most feared choirs is because of their core ability "The FINAL mercy."

Life is horrible and difficult, full of suffering and anguish. You are doing your choir's will when you alleviate another person's suffering by killing them.

There's a reason Saint (rancid sack of vinegar and piss discount Ranger) shuts up when Pilgrim tells her to.

Mercy's creed permits killing of ANYONE for the paltry price of merely feeling their suffering.

*werafdsaew*

I don't agree with your interpretation of GP; I see him as a utility maximizer.

*Morgenstern*

Well, one thing you do achieve, when taking someone captive is making other people come for them. That just MIGHT actually be something worth angling for (making a trap for them). And, if the person(s) in question do/es have enough tricks (known to the maybe-captors!) up their sleeve that

they would see you simply CLAIMING to have taken the other person, but actually killed them... there would be no way, but to actually do take them prisoner, if that were indeed your angle.

It would be a funfest for Black, of course, being taken prisoner to the main city, where he can spread the plague that he has probably caught, his Name simply not letting it kill him...

But. There is at least a third avenue: Those shopkeeper-talks? What if it is NOT (quite) a parade of victory at all? It might actually be about mourning some lost hero(es), less about victory...

*Morgenstern*

...that would let them see through you just \*claiming\*...

hmpf. once again i overly miss the edit function here. --

*Morgenstern*

(Far away sidenote: Black might, of course, simply not have contracted the plague at all, due to Name shenanigans, which changes a lot of the perspective of what Black's plan might be.)

*caoimhinh*

I still think the theory of infected undead going down the river to spread the plague in Procer is a high possibility, and I particularly like it, since it would come to hit the Pilgrim in a few days time and hit him hard (he must feel the pain of those infected until they die) due to the sheer amount of people infected. It would also be a huge "fuck you" and spit in the eye of the heavens if Black managed to do that.

---

The Pilgrim might be actually going for the "install Amadeus as the new Dread Emperor" plan Catherine suggested, believing that the divide it creates in the Legions will make the Wasteland tad bit less impossible to campaign in. Remember, they are already waging war on three fronts, with the fourth about to be opened in the Free Cities and the fifth whenever the critical mass of hungry ratlings is achieved. A currently nameless claimant to the throne might be too good to pass up.

[vuthuha912](#)

My gosh. You are right. They should have killed Black. The man wants it himself, his defeat was meant to be a price for a ticking bomb around Cordelia's head. Now that the south of Procer is on fire surely they should just kill him. It will not be a worthwhile price but killing him will weaken Malicia.

### *IDKWhoitis*

I do have to wonder how much of a weight Ranger could place on the scales in favor of Praes if she just tore a hole in Procer. Like could she mobilize Refuge? Would the Saint and Ranger just duke it out and wreck a city? I kinda wish Ranger gets involved anyways, an old monster reawakened because someone decided to poke its tail.

Regarding the Drow gambit, I think they might be much worse than Fae, as wards and spells may not be as effective. Even accounting for Winter influence, they are fundamentally of this plane of existence, so a Ward cannot banish them as easily.

Regarding Magic, Would Warlock use Combat magic to suppress Masego (and better question, would he win?). Like that path leads to either a city being lost in the aftermath or an emotional showdown between Masego and his father.

[ahd](#)

Ten quatloos on the Hierophant.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

A lot of people think Ranger would just tear through the crusade but I disagree. Part of why she's so powerful is that she doesn't step into any narratives. We've seen her fight against the Dead King's Revenants, we know she's been scrapping with the rattlings and the drow but it's never as a part of a bigger story – it's just her hunting the foes she finds worthy.

In fact, the moment she steps into a story bigger than her, like when she fought against the Summer Queen, she gets seriously injured. So yeah, I'm sure she would do some damage but I doubt it would be very significant.

### *Death Knight*

We've only seen Ranger fighting foes head on and we've been led to believe that she does not have any other tactics.

That is a mistake.

Recall in the interlude Apprentice in book 3, Archer uses arrows that are made of naturally enchanted wood. These arrows fly straight through most mage shields.

They're mage killers.

Now I'm not saying Ranger invented them but she has centuries of experience fighting Named from all walks of life. From Sorcerors to Knights to Puglists and everything in between.

If she actually hunted those heroes, as in be as pragmatically cold as possible. Making use of traps, magical trinkets, specialized arrows etc. that an actual hunter uses in real life, well, as the Calamaties have proven repeatedly you can kill anything bullshit heroic Named included with enough preparation.

Also, Ranger's role is hunting strong opponents. That's her Role in the Story. Now, wouldn't you say a team of Old Heroic Monsters qualifies? Especially ones that managed to kill the most feared Villain in recent history? Her lover too?

No as long Hye does not face all 5 of the bastards head on she can kill the lot of them.

### Javvies

More to the point, we've only seen Ranger looking for a fight for the sake of a fight to push/improve herself. There's a distinct difference between wanting to fight with someone for the sake of a good fight and wanting to kill someone so that they're dead.

The former is ultra-hardcore sparring with live blades, the way Ranger does it. The latter is an ambush opened with lethal strikes, if it's not just a headshot from behind cover.

In other words, the former is the Exiled Prince challenging Cat, the latter is Cat telling Nauk to just shoot him instead of answering the challenge.

---

Masego mentioned that miracles and wards don't have much overlap (which is why he couldn't contain the Heavenly Fences). I think Warlock may find out that his defences aren't enough to hold Masego, or to protect himself.

### *IDKWhoitis*

It will make for a very funny story of Masego gets "Grounded" and can't go to the murder party in Callow (or Tower) and sneaks out anyways.

### *octopusfluff*

The degree to which Alaya fails to comprehend Catherine verges on comical.

Her reaction to Cat's current gambit is going to be precious.

*Sylwoos*

As will be everyone reaction if killing the Sve doesn't destroy the night. She'll show up with a army of named able to put to shame the Hero's gathering of the tenth crusade.

*Jason Ipswitch*

I will be very surprised if the Night does not survive, given that the woman gunning for her is The Queen of Moonless Nights, who at least in theory still has an Aspect called Take. (And a history of taking things like resurrections and leveraging them in her own favor.)

*jonnnney*

Well Sve didn't create the night she stole it when she killed the twilight priestesses or whatever they were called.

[Euodiachloris](#)

One thing she still can't get her head around: Cat isn't inclined to kill Amodeus, nor is she particularly willing to attempt climbing/levelling the Tower. But, if Malicia keeps pushing Cat because she fears she might become a real threat... self-fulfilling prophecy may occur.

Everything Malicia dislikes about Cat stems from the rock-hard belief that Squires will always try to kill Black Knights to get power coupled to "Callowans hate Praesi unconditionally".

*IDKWhoitis*

Villains create their own demise, and Malica is slipping into some bad villainous habits lately.

She's gotten used to holding most of the cards, and now that someone stole one, the house of cards is toppling.

*caoimhinh*

Nice chapter from Malicia's POV.

Good to see her assumptions and plans directly from her, she is going to be VERY surprised when Catherine emerge with an army of Drow and a pact with the Dwarves.

Come on, Amadeus, be alive.

It will be interesting to see Wekesa's reaction to the news too, he will probably get them right after or in the middle of talking with Masego.

I wonder who will handle the rescue operations, it might even be 4 different teams with plans to free Black.

### Mental Mouse

It's worth noting that the pact with the Dwarves may become visible on the surface even before Cat herself does.

*caoimhinh*

Indeed. And to the annoyance of everyone else, the Dwarves don't give explanations. Hahahaha.

### *Gunslinger*

Evil chapter this, dangling us all the hope of a still alive Black. Though I have to say I laughed when Malicia didn't even consider the Drow as a possibility given how monumentally stupid it originally seemed

### *Xinci*

Truly another interesting and informative chapter. Malicia is still non-the wiser on the Tyrants plan as like many others strangely ignores the Heiarch. Well I suppose few know what he has seen, he only needs the right pivot to have some fundamental impacts..truly he would work quite well with Cat.

In this case props to Hakrams musings in previous chapters for he foresaw the way the game would go and is working to support the fabric of the kingdom more now. We shall of course have to see how it plays out but the pivot is there and change comes. Cat getting a highly adaptable force that can help her fill in the various roles of her kingdom is rather important, but as mentioned she is \*raw\*. She will need several more lessons or inspirations to learn how to mold them into the proper role and actually keep that adaptability intact. A big question right now is how Cat will mold her people as a whole once she unifies them or if she will act as a unifier at all, given I am still unsure if Cat is still in a foundational stage like Archer is.

### *soonnanandnaanssoon*

"a world of endless paths, and someone to walk them with her"

This. Damn I can't believe a Dread Empress & her Black Knight could best describe my relationship goals.

*caoimhinh*

I know, right? It's a pretty awesome phrase, the best of this chapter in my opinion, with second best being the ending sentence "If they'd killed him, Alaya would give him an empire for a pyre."

And both of those phrases come from the same source: their relationship and the love and dreams they have shared for over four decades.

*Jessica Day*

I find it interesting how she correctly identifies Vivienne as the weak link but misunderstands her as simply nationalistic. But then, I don't suppose there is anyway for her to have heard about Cat's plans with the Liesse Accords?

*IDKWhoitis*

WAIT, MALICA DOESNT SEEM TO KNOW AKUA IS STILL ACTIVE.

OH &!@#.

*caoimhinh*

No one outside the Woe knows that.

*IDKWhoitis*

Malica seemed very well informed about many things. Akua was in Keter, Malica was in Keter, DK is Malica's ally. I thought Malica knew this whole time, and allowed it because Akua is worth more alive than dead.

When dealing with Black or Malica, I feel like its a better assumption that they have more information than they are letting on.

*caoimhinh*

Hmm, well, she might know and simply not mention it during this chapter, but a higher possibility is that she doesn't know. Malicia had a meat puppet disguised as a servant of the Dead King who spent the most time with Cat's group, but Akua was disguised as a Fae, one thing I find strange is that it was never really mentioned how they presented Akua, since giving her a new appearance would only works if they gave her a different name, but we don't know about that, so far it's only in conversations between them that they say her name.

Akua was called 'The Shade of Splendor' by the announcer when they were in the Dead King's audience, but that's ambiguous since it means that Neshamah knows she is a shade, but doesn't specifically states that he knows her real identity and isn't just calling her Splendid because her appearance is that of a Fae.

But, the Dead King is not Malicia's ally, and he doesn't need to share any information with her, he does what he pleases. If anything, he is more likely to see Catherine as

an ally rather than Malicia, though he is not beyond making things very hard for her and even hurting her and her closed ones badly, he even admitted head on that he might betray her and wouldn't be offended if she betrayed him.

*IDKWhoitis*

I think part of the reason Malica thinks Cat is going the Fae route is that she had a "Fae" with the Woe, and confirmation bias is making her draw conclusions that sound pretty decent.

The Dead King is a mercenary, who is friendly with Cat because she is new to the whole "Immortal" thing, and he might be able to glean the whole Breaker of cycles thing that other powerful entities have just mentioned offhandedly about Cat. He is just trying to game another variable, and treats her as more than disposable or passing, because she truly has the possibility of staying "On the Board" for the foreseeable future.

*jonnney*

If she does know about Akua she likely thinks that Catherine is only using her as a weapon rather than a weapon, a magical expert, and a political adviser. She certainly doesn't understand how much power and control Catherine has as the Last Queen of Winter. Honestly the fact that Malicia always has more information is a big problem with Catherine because she makes far too many assumptions about Cat even when she has little concrete information.

*Fern*

Jesus crimminy what a fucking look into Malicia's character. This whole time we thought she was going to betray him if it meant keeping Praes together, but that was never in the cards, was it? Sure, she planned for it just in case, but that betrayal would only come from him, not her. Calernia's mistake has been seeing these two as the Big Bad and her Dragon, when it's really a dueteragonist situation in the hypothetical "Maddie Alaya and the boys take over the world" story. Just as well, we have a pretty good idea of what makes Black tick: like a much less deplorable version of Griffith, his dream – of stopping the cycle of war and plunder between Callow and Praes so that they can buckle down and finally fix the damn place – comes before everything else. At the same time, he's wise enough and has a good enough group of people with him to know that if he took control of Praes from Malicia it'd cause more problems than it solves.

The crusade won't know what hit em.

*SMHF*



Reading this chapter again, I think I figured out Malicia's terms with The Dead King...  
He can attack any land on the continent that is not at peace with The Tower. Giving an east out to anyone in league with Cordelia when though gets going... and keeping Cat at bay, because she wouldn't risk her people as long as he's out and about.  
It just sounds like something she's go for.

*letouriste*

pretty sure cat would go to war either way and strike a deal with the dead king on her own

[sugarrollblog](#)

Or possibly an alliance. Either way, Cat already foresaw the confrontation with the Dead King and is preparing for it now. She'll be ready when she comes back with an army of Drows and with enough coin from the Dwarves.

Malicia is shooting herself on the foot by jumping the gun on exposing her deal with the Dead King. Unsurprising since she's not aware of what Cat is doing.

*RanVor*

Is she? I mean, she can't get much more hated than she already is, and besides, Hasenbach knows anyway and has surely passed the information along to her allies.

*Agent J*

She knows that she made a deal with the Hidden Horror, but not what the deal entails. Malicia is of the opinion that exposing the details of her Dead Alliance, it would make the rulers of Callow less likely to be openly hostile.

*RanVor*

Yes, I know. That's not what I was talking about. Sugarrollblog stated that Malicia is risking a lot by revealing her deal with the Dead King, and I was wondering what she might possibly lose that is not already compromised.

*caoimhinh*

Because Malicia is rushing to conclusions and acting up before the correct, planned time.

She is exposing to Cat's friends the true and full extent of her deal with the Dead King, which means showing exactly how long and tight is her leash on him, to what extent he can act, invade and attack, and

allowing to look for loopholes to exploit.  
So long as the terms of the deal were a mystery there would be uncertainty and hesitation when taking decisions for Cat and the rest, now they will know the game rules and can make countermeasures, which is why Malicia's initial plan was to wait until Cat returned to reveal it, because Malicia wanted to first see what were Cat's cards at hand before making a decision and playing her own.

*RanVor*

Oh. Right. I haven't thought of that.

[crysjal](#)

So Black is confirmed as captured. There's a lot of speculation about the "hostage mentor" storyline and how Cat will work to rescue Black. A few mentions about caged Evil aswell.

There's another potential way this goes though. Where are they going to keep Black? Their primary stronghold? The capital of Procer, where one queen who is rapidly losing faith in the heroes has just realised the threat her empowered allies pose to her people.

Now a mentor character is going to be key prisoner in close proximity to a leader who is in desperate need of help and advice from a friendly(?) teacher who will be quite happy to provide some insight.

*Morgenstern*

I would definitely like to see that. Although it doesn't quite feel like that is what actually happened or is going to happen atm, to me.

[crysjal](#)

Considering the scene with Hasenbach there is definitely potential. Aside from the obvious tropes of a captured mentor which is no doubt what GP is thinknig regarding this (thinking like a Villain). I'm just looking at "good" narratives that Black is going to be more than happy to insert himself into. After all he himself is a manipulator of the narrative and it's something the Good guys won't expect. Cordelia is supposed to just sit and watch her country be destroyed, it's for the Greater Good after all and it's notl ike she'll be able to do anything on her own.

*Byzantine*

Yep. Black is Evil because it is what he needs for the job. If being Good does the job? He wouldn't hesitate to use it too. He does not care at all about the sides. He wants to break the board.

### Confused Tortoise

This smells an awful lot like a trap, and with that final line, I suspect Malicia may be stepping into it. For all we talk about vengeance stories, we've already seen how trying to play into those works out for villains against heroes when the Champion was paraded in front of the Black Knight at the Vales [Lest Dawn Fail]. If he had taken that bait he would have been stuck in the field, already committed, when the White Knight miraculously returned. Even the Black Knight believes this would have killed him. Unfortunately, Malicia and Warlock don't seem to be as adept at Story-Fu. If the Black Knight dies, Malicia seems to be planning to throw every superweapon and horror at her disposal at those she sees as responsible. The problem is that Dread Emperors/Empresses have been throwing superweapons and horrors at the Good nations for centuries and it has always ended the same. Not even Triumphant managed to las (Note the current similarities of Malicia to Triumphant what with the alliance with the Dead King). I suspect the capture may be intended to make sure Blacks allies and friends are paying attention when he is executed, so whoever is running this scheme may better control exactly where the vengeance will be directed. Pilgrim would rather he die than any of the young heroes predicted in the chosen band of five [Kaleidoscope II] and the Saint of Swords also seems quite willing to make sacrifices [Fatalism III]. Note the conspicuous absence of any mention of the other heroes predicted to make up the chosen five in the goon squad cornering the Black Knight [Queens Gambit Declined]. Perhaps this is intended to keep them clear of the vengeance, allowing them to swoop in and slay the villain? Or I could just be being paranoid.

Yotz

*...on the small table near the fluffy atrocity that Sve Noc called her bed was an opened letter from a Tyrant of Helike, evidently professing eternal friendship to the Night...*

### Euodiachloris

Well, yeah. And, it'll have sufficiently sophisticated (yet sarcastically cute) spiders printed on the envelope, and everything. 😊

Nash Equilibrium

Is anyone else noticing the parallels between what Cat is doing now and what William did after his defeat in book 1? She has run away from the storied war and is taking time to have a training

montage before returning bigger and stronger (or in Cat's case just stronger, she'll always be short).

And since Malicia and the hero's are still pressing Callow, mostly Malicia, now when she returns it'll be the timely return of the hero.

### [crysja1](#)

This book so far has heavily demonstrated how the narrative roles of good and evil are swapping between the sides of Good and Evil. The Good named are following plot lines that are traditionally villainous. Hell, Grey Pilgrim basically acknowledged that he was pulling out the "bad" stuff when he captured Black and is quickly taking on the role of a major antagonist. Plagues and mass slaughter are not the stuff of the good guys.

I wonder how they'll react when the shoe finally drops and they realise exactly what they have become.

### *Agent J*

He asked when was ruthlessness strictly the purview of Evil. I absolutely loved that quote. Employ their methods, earn their results. It's not a coincidence Cat's been leaning harder towards anti-villain than actual villain.

### *mavant*

At the centre of the Light there is a cold white flame...

### *Byzantine*

Or more accurately when they realize that Bard's millenia-long plan has finally come to fruition. because let's face it: she's been setting this up for a very long time. And I suspect she hates \*all\* of the Gods for what they have done to her.

She wasn't mocking Black because he was out of his league. She was mocking Black because his plan was so small.

### *Wry Warudo*

So Amadeus is still alive...and Cat has implied she's passing down the mantle to someone.

Are we going to get the King of Black Night?

### *mavant*

I think after this adventure, Amadeus is just going to go back to the Green Stretch and take up cricket.

He's always wanted to be batsman.

*Antoninjohn*

What did the Bard say about using plagues in a scheme to bring about one's goals, something about it backfiring really badly every time it's used

[Tohron](#)

So, seems Sorcerous came after Triumphant. I'd thought he was one of the earlier Dread Emperors, but if his vanity project in the Tower is still around he clearly came after Triumphant brought the whole thing down.

*Snowfire1224*

Is it just me or has Malicia miss read the situation. She talked about Theif grappling with killing the refugees or solving the problem in other ways, but in the chapter before Theif didn't even consider killing them. Unless I'm remembering it wrong.

There's also the fact that she completely dismisses the Drow, which I honestly don't blame her for, but she also treats Cat as if she's incapable of not learning how to be less reckless after pointing out the girl can learn.

Also I think she misunderstands Black, she can tell him all she wants that he's going to lose and get himself killed. For Black it doesn't matter if he dies as long as it achieves his goal. She can warn him all she wants, he'd still go out there with his sword raised high and fight to his death knowing that it's one more step towards his larger plan to fight the heavens.

*werafdsaew*

She has blinders on like everybody else, and Villains raise their own gallows.

*mavant*

I must say, even though I don't much care for Malicia most of the time, I love her BFF situation with Amadeus. It's nice to see this deep, decades long friendship without romantic undertones. I mean, all the Calamities care for each other, and I love that in an "even bad men love their mothers" sort of way, but something about these two just warms my little Grinch heart.

*Joshua Sills*

"I wish this were about something as petty as debt," Alaya murmured, knowing it a lie.'

The first step is hardest, they said to her.  
You will have to walk through fire.  
It will burn away what you once were,  
And always devour whole a liar

These may be really simplistic of an analysis, but looks like Malicia is out, and it's just a matter of when Cat is ready to climb.

*Ernest Tsui*

It took over 2 weeks but I have finally caught up!

*Rup*

1. ..fighting fire with fire was Catherine's signature...  
Uh...that should be.. fighting fire with Goblin fire & Winter ice...
2. ...her fingers could not be seen to tremble....some days she could hardly tell where she began and he ended...  
....Wow...i am speechless
3. ...and Maddy...perfect nickname for the ultimate rationalist  
(ya..short from Amadeus...but still nice pun)

*Rup*

Oh...this comment is about a previous chapter....the way the sigils in that everdark city contended with each other...seemed so close to the "raiding the tower" game of Hakram

*Rup*

..ugg...raising

[Walter](#)

It weirds me out that Malicia thinks Cat won't ally with the drow. Like, it seems mad obvious that she's going to enslave them. Cat has used the Gallowsborn. She binds souls to her banner. She compels Akua, whatever other people may think she is. Heck, back when she had a real name it was all about stealing other people's power. She takes the souls of Heroes and makes items out of them. She has broken the Wild Hunt to heel. The people she defeated in her freaking classroom battles ended up in her army.

Like, Cat's soul or story, or whatever you want to call her modus operandi is fundamentally that of a slaver. The idea that she's not going to be able to keep bodies in line is ridiculous. She can \*speak\* and make people obey short term. Tell them to take Fae oaths, and now they die if they disobey, without her expending any power.

Malicia... \*sigh\* He wants that defeat. He planned for it. Even with the 2 of them fighting, he still tried to protect her/buy more time for her. He does love her as much as she loves him. Malicia is always at the center of his plan for Praes. She was meant to outlive him in all of his plans. Now that he is captured and Malicia starts falling into Dread Empress's Madness. It will be an extra cruel outcome if he ended up surviving while his dearest friend died.

Malicia darling. You two could have been an unstoppable force and be the couple that finally drag the Empire out of the pit it dug itself in. If you just ... work together ...

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## Interlude: Apostates

*"There is greater power in severing than binding, in releasing than capturing. The most fundamental act of will is to cut."*

-Translation from the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

Thalassina was old.

Some scholars believed it to be the first Praesi city, though Wekesa's own studies had hinted at Kahtan holding the title instead – the three oases of its site had been a natural draw on the nearby Taghreb tribes of the Devouring Sands. Still, it had undeniably existed longer than Ater or Wolof which in these modern days tended to be considered the two greatest cities of the Empire even though Thalassina's population was near the double of Wolof's: three hundred thousand inhabitants, give or take a few thousand. The city's fortunes tended to rise and fall with the state of the sea trade that was its lifeblood. It was almost absurdly wealthy when there was peace with Ashur and the League, growing fat off tariffs on grain and luxuries imported from foreign shores. When the ships ceased coming, however, its revenues dwindled and the large population became a stone around its ruler's neck. As it was the Empire's primary sea port, Emperors and Empresses had meddled with its ruling line's affairs more than they had any other's. Most of that meddling had proved to be costly blunders. Thrice there'd been attempts to raise an Imperial Fleet, two swatted down by the Ashurans sailing in to torch everything and the last made a failure by one of the foremost captains rebelling and going pirate. On occasion, however, reasonable notions had emerged.

Shatha's Maze was one of that rare breed.

Named after the ancient Warlock who'd built it, it'd been raised at the order of Dread Empress Maleficent the Second. She had prudently assessed that the victory she'd won against the Thalassocracy at sea had forged a very fragile peace, and that improving the defences of Thalassina before hostilities resumed was necessary. She'd set her Warlock to the task, opening up the treasury without qualms at one of the high historical points of Praesi wealth. The Maze was therefore unsurprisingly rather extravagant, but also one of the finest ward-based defensive arrays Wekesa ever had the privilege to witness. It had only failed twice over the last six hundred years, both times to treachery instead of superior sorcery. Naturally, knowing this, the first thing he'd requested of High Lord Idriss was a thorough purge of any uncertain elements in the city followed by heavy restriction of who would have access to the Maze from now on. The ruler of Thalassina had taken the opportunity to thin the ranks of his vassals with imperial permission eagerly, and though Wekesa suspected most of the dead had been rivals and not liabilities as long as the liabilities were dead he hardly cared. With that preventative measure taken care of, he'd sat down with his husband and his son to plan how they would turn a defensive ward array into a death trap.

It was a fascinating problem. Shatha's Maze warded the waters to miles out of the city, except of course it didn't: it was, after all, one of fundamentals limits of sorcery that wards could not be made over water. Shatha's solution had been to anchor the workings in corals, artificially raised to crest over even the tallest waves. The Maze was not a single array, though it might seem like it at first glance. It was over three hundred small, self-contained wards extending only over their coral tower. The ancient Warlock had been brilliant, Wekesa would admit. Aware that she could not cover the waves with sorcery, she'd made it instead so that the effect would come from people looking upon her works. Some wards confused perception, leading ships to crash into spikes of rock beneath the surface. Others attacked minds directly by sowing madness and uncontrollable fury into all who saw them. Yet more contained direct sorcerous effects like flame and lightning, triggered by will or proximity. The full lay of the Maze was known only to a few, though he'd obtained a version when agreeing to Alaya's favour. It had been illuminating, teaching him that sufficient time and manpower could create what was effectively an array with no single element linked to another. There was, naturally, a catch. Thalassina was a trade port: it needed foreign ships to be capable of passing through in peace time.

Shatha's Maze needed to be activated, from twin underground facilities dug beneath the banks the adjoining coasts. The rituals involved were both long and expensive, as they



essentially required three hundred separate ward empowerments done in quick succession. The Kebdana had been rulers of the Thalassina for the better part of five centuries and so ensured that they had a contingent of powerful and well-educated mages ready at all times to carry out that onerous duty, but those practitioners were unfortunately highly specialized because of it. Useless when it came to the kind of theoretical legwork needed to design a ritual meant repurpose the Maze, and Wekesa had neither the time nor the inclination to educate them. So be it. They'd chosen to waste their Gift on being beasts of burden, he would treat them as such. With Masego and Tikoloshe at his side, he hardly needed the help anyway. His son was arguably the finest magical theorist of his generation, now that Akua Sahelian was dead, and his husband had at least three millennia of first-hand observation of sorcery to call on. Even a devil as ancient as 'Loshe had difficulty proving truly creative, but his treasure trove of knowledge was priceless.

With such aides he should have no trouble, or so theory went. The practicalities proved to be slightly different.

"Sueton was a hack," Masego insisted. "Barely half his experiments are reproducible."

"This particular phenomenon is one of them," Wekesa replied flatly.

"Under controlled circumstances," his son objected. "If his results are this shoddy, the theoretical framework behind them can only be called flawed. There's no guarantee the explosions will cascade if we can't accurately predict the nature of the release."

"Petronian sorcery *has* a degree of unpredictability," Tikoloshe noted. "Not a subtle folk, the Miezans. Never prone to using a dagger when a spot of genocide would work."

"We cannot use Trismegistan formulae for this large a spell," Warlock said. "The precision required is beyond our workforce, and to be blunt we lack the power."

"Then make a master array and feed it with secondary rituals," Masego said. "If we begin accumulating power now and centre it on our own manipulation, Trismegistan sorcery remains feasible."

"That'd require at least six straight hours of direction on both our parts," Wekesa said, frowning as he calculated. "With absolutely no margin of error either individually or in concert. That's even riskier than going Petronian."

"It puts the possibility of failure in our hands instead of leaving Creation to roll the dice," his son grunted. "That can

only be called an improvement on that abomination you call a plan."

"Perhaps a more diplomatic word could have been chosen, Masego," Tikoloshe chided.

His son's beautiful glass eyes swivelled under the eye cloth, brow raising.

"A thing that causes distrust or hatred," Masego quoted. "That is the definition. I assure you, it earned both from me."

"Redundancies," Wekesa said, ignoring the salvo. "If your issue is with the unpredictability, we set several triggers. It will make it difficult to predict the exact sequence, but-

"- it won't matter if their fleet is deep enough in the Maze," his son finished thoughtfully. "Perfection is the enemy of functionality."

Wekesa blinked in surprise. Where had he learned *that*?

"This all rests on the Ashurans being unable to interrupt your little game," Tikoloshe reminded them. "They will have hundreds of mages trained from the cradle."

"Trained in Sabrathan sorcery," Wekesa said, the sneer implied.

Oh, there was no denying that the Thalassocracy's practitioners were the foremost in their fields. It was simply that those fields were so very narrow. The Gift was only cultivated two ways in Ashur: healers and ship mages. Ashuran mage-doctors could take the slightest ember of life and turn it into haleness, making Praesi attempts at healing look like the fumbling of children. Their sailing-mages could quiet storms or craft them, steal sunken ships from the depths and ride the tides. Yet outside that particular set of specialties, they were rank amateurs. Unlike Praesi they'd never outgrown the sorceries taught them by their forebears across the Tyrian Sea. They refined but did not innovate, in large part because the Sabrathan theory of magic was so badly antiquated. Victory was the mother of stagnation, and after wiping out the Miezens in the Licerian Wars the Baalite Hegemony had gone from triumph to triumph. Embracing stagnation just as deeply as the empire they'd overthrown. They'd not been forced to revisit the foundations of their sorcery for centuries, after the rest of the world had moved on. No, Wekesa thought little of Sabrathan magic. Or of any other that emphasized something as mundane as natural talent over skill and intellect.

"Narrow in scope, yet no less effective for it," Masego said. "A hundred oxen cannot raise a pen but they *can* trample it."

"At best they'll be able to save a third of the fleet by submerging it," Warlock flatly said. "Most of their practitioners lack the ability to use the spells, and their methods are ill-suited to rituals."

"They could interrupt the sequence by detonating parts of it in advance with their own sorcery," Tikoloshe said. "It has been done before."

"Then we harden the wards from the outside, thin them on the inside," Wekesa said. "It will be tedious, but as an additional safeguard it will serve well enough."

"Someone will need to be among the corals," Masego disagreed. "To start the sequence again if it stalls. Your schematic works in principle, but only if the possibility of Ashuran intervention is removed."

Warlock's lips tightened. He was not wrong. Much as he held Ashuran sorcery in contempt, dismissing it outright would be a blunder. There were no heroes here to muddle the mixture, but mortal ingenuity could be just as dangerous. The trap could not be sprung twice, it would wreck the Maze. Which meant if too few Ashuran ships were sunk, Thalassina was stripped of its finest defence while the enemy remained on the prowl. Alaya had made it clear that if the city fell there would be major unrest in the Empire. Nok being put to the torch was one thing, its ruler was by far the least influential of the High Lords and a former Trueblood besides. If the Dread Empress of Praes failed to shield even her oldest allies, however, there would be waves. Much as Wekesa despised the notion of having to stay in this city to protect idiots, he despised even more the prospect of having to put down a rebellion against the Tower.

"Agreed," he finally said.

"Good," Masego said. "I'll require some accommodations on my perch, which I assume will need the permission of High Lord Idriss before being made."

"No," Tikoloshe immediately said, before Wekesa could speak the word himself. "Absolutely not."

His son cocked his head to the side.

"Father is the best fit to oversee the ritual from the city," he pointed out. "It is primarily his design. What follows is obvious."

"The risks are much higher out there," Warlock said. "If the sequence fails-"

"- I will handle the matter," Masego interrupted. "If you believe your plan to be sound, any risks posed to me are irrelevant. If you do not believe your plan to be sound, this conversation is an exercise in pointlessness."

"You are perfectly capable of overseeing the ritual yourself," Wekesa said. "There is no need to discuss this further."

"I am capable," his son agreed. "But I am not the *most* capable. Logically speaking-"

"*Enough*," Warlock bellowed. "I will not allow you to stand in the middle of a fucking Ashuran fleet while we turn centuries-old wards into munitions. You are staying in the city, and that's the last we'll speak of this."

Heat spread across the room, carrying the faint scent of brimstone. His temper had loosened his hold. Slowly, Masego straightened in his chair. *He's almost as tall as I am*, Wekesa realized with muted surprise. Grown slender from his stay abroad, though his long braids and the trinkets woven into them made him seem larger. Robes stark black, eyes veiled, he looked like a stranger. A man grown instead of a boy.

"There has been quite enough of not speaking, I would think," Hierophant coldly said. "And my patience has officially *run out*."

—

They did not react to his words, not visibly at least.

But Masego felt the weight of what he'd spoken fall over the room and was glad of it. He'd hoped they would tell him themselves. That he wouldn't need to drag it out of them, that maybe they had a good *reason*. He'd grown, since leaving to fight in the Liesse Rebellion. Learned so much about himself and Creation around him, so much the revelations had carried him beyond the Name of Apprentice. If they'd recognized that, acted on it... It wouldn't have bound the wounds, no. Not entirely. But it would have mattered. Been measured on the scales of the betrayal. Instead here he was, expected to sit and pretend like they'd not *lied* to him his whole life. No, worse than a lie. They had hidden the truth after raising him to seek it above all else. What possible justification could there be for that?

"Masego," Papa said cautiously, "I do not know what-"

"You know," Masego said. "Or suspect, at least. I have been to Keter, fathers. And oh, the things I witnessed on that journey. The secrets I glimpsed."

"The Dead King lies," Father calmly said.

His eyes were dark mirrors, revealing nothing.

"So do you," Hierophant hissed. "He, at least, does not pretend otherwise."

"You don't understand," Papa sighed.

"A common consequence of being kept in the dark," Masego harshly replied.

"The dark," Father murmured. "The right term, used incorrectly. You were kept *from* the dark, my son."

"There is nothing in this world to fear save ignorance," the blind mage said. "You taught me this, once. The lesson should have been tailored to your deeds, if you did not want to be called to account for them."

Father leaned back into his seat, then drummed his fingers against the tables.

"What do you think death is, Masego?" he asked.

"Religion, now," the younger man snorted. "The resort of those without answers of their own."

"Let us speak of two Dread Emperors," the Warlock said. "One called Malignant, third of the name. The other called Revenant."

"The same man," Masego said. "Famously so."

Malignant the Third had killed himself through ritual and risen from the grave a year later, dethroning his successor and reigning again under the name of Dread Emperor Revenant. There'd been some rebellion when it'd become clear he intended on reigning forever, the first of the Wars of the Dead. He vaguely remembered Revenant being used as the basis for the legal argument that later excluded undead from claiming the Tower, though there'd been some other barely more interesting wars in between.

"I knew both," Papa said. "And believe this to be untrue."

He watched the incubus, looking for a lie and finding none. But they were both much better liars than he'd thought, weren't they?

"What came back shared much with Malignant," Papa continued.

"Memories, thoughts, opinions. It was also fundamentally *other*. It was... a tracing of the man. A prefect imitation, yet still only that. An imitation."

"An interesting matter," Masego said. "Yet utterly irrelevant to this conversation."

"No. No it isn't," Father quietly said. "Because in one of the deepest vaults beneath the Tower, there is the most complete version of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness in existence. A third of the full text, and not contiguous. And it was there Malignant learned the foundations of the ritual that turned him into Revenant."

His fingers clenched. All these years, the knowledge had been there. In his father's memories, yes, but also *written on parchment*. And they'd kept it from him. The oldest, most important instance of apotheosis in the history of the continent and they'd hidden it away. His teeth clicked together so strongly his mouth almost bled.

"If you were under the impression this helped your case," Masego replied in a furious whisper, "allow me to disabuse you of that notion."

"You would have embraced the teachings," Papa said. "No matter what we said."

His Name flared, like a morning sun, sheer power wafting from his frame like smoke.

"And so Father bound you not to speak of it," he hissed. "So much for free will."

"I did not," Warlock said.

"Liar," Masego spat out. "You should not have taught me diabolism if you wanted to maintain that pretence. Papa is driven by *desire*. He had answers I wanted, what could possibly silence him except a binding?"

Gods, how many other hidden bindings were there? Had Father forced love as well? How could he tell if a single thing he'd seen or heard or felt was genuine? Had Papa baked because he enjoyed it, or because there was a rule that made him? The most sophisticated set of oaths in existence bound the incubus, decades in the making. Free will made by mortal cleverness, they'd called it. Could you really call it that, if there were *exceptions*?

"A greater desire," Tikoloshe said. "Of my own."

Hierophant bitterly laughed.

"Did you want me ignorant so badly?"

"I wanted to keep my son alive," Papa softly said. "Even if it hurt him. Even he hated me for it."

Masego flinched.

"You can't just-"

"You should have noticed by now," Father said, tone calm and even. "I'm told you've studied her physiology in depth, both physical and metaphysical. The signs must be there."

"No," Masego said.

"Catherine Foundling died at Second Liesse," the Warlock gently said. "What walked out of that fortress is an impression of the young woman made on the fabric of Winter, no more and no less. I'm sorry, Masego. I really am. I know you liked her. But even if the Black Queen believes she's the same person, she is not. Amadeus didn't realize it either, he doesn't have the learning. But he described what happened in the city to me. There can be no doubt."

"We hurt you," Papa said. "And for that, I will apologize. But not regret. Not if you are still alive to be hurt."

He didn't want to think about it, but he couldn't not. He'd been told a theory and so it must be considered. He had observed a certain stiffness in thought in Catherine, an inability to deviate from goals even if it meant employing means she would have once dismissed out of hand. Believed it, back then, to be a consequence of the mantle becoming one with her soul – it would retain certain properties, which would be made inherent to her. It had been a reasonable theory. Or it could be that the imprint on Winter was limited in nature, and that the creature playing at being Catherine was incapable of deviating from it. He'd already known that her body was a construct, proved it.

Was her mind as well?

"Oh, child," Father sadly said. "It will pass. The first one is always the worst. But you do yourself no service by denying the truth."

Masego could no longer close his eyes. The closest he could come was to cease paying attention to what he saw. It was not a release. An effort of will was still required, and he abandoned the attempt after a moment.

"No," he said.

"Masego, I understand you don't want to-"

"This is not sentiment," Hierophant said. "I disagree with you on rational grounds. Even if what you say is true, it is irrelevant. She remains the same individual."

"You know that to be untrue," Father said.

"I am not the same person I was this morning," Hierophant said. "I have learned and changed. I am still Masego."

"The degree of change is different," the Warlock flatly said.

"And how does one decide on the appropriate degree?" he replied. "If I removed all my memories from age five to fifteen, I would behave differently. A part of what makes me would be absent, and yet I would still consider myself to be the same person. Assuming your theory is correct, the changes she went through are lesser than this. It is, therefore, irrelevant."

"You're being willfully-"

"Furthermore," Hierophant said, raising his voice. "If your theory is incorrect, you both kept me ignorant out of petty fear."

"Petty?" Papa repeated softly, and there was a rare thread of anger in his voice.

"I am no great scholar of niceties," he replied. "But even I know an apology that is not *apologetic* rings empty."

"Consider it withdrawn, then," Papa tonelessly said.

His heart clenched, but he would not bend in this.

"You could have told me," Masego said. "What you believe, why I shouldn't do it. But you didn't. You made the choice for me."

"That's what parents do, Masego," Father said.

He swallowed.

"I love you," he said. "Both of you. But I disagree. You didn't learn anything, you just... flinched. And apotheosis is not for the faint of heart."

"There are journeys," Father said, "that you can never finish. Because the person that left is not the same that arrives."

"There is nothing in this world to fear save ignorance," Masego replied, eyes burning bright. "And whatever may come, *I will not flinch.*"



Ahahahaha, so that's why the Dead King took so much interest in Cat.

She's already died and came back.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Also, did everyone forget how she took a resurrection straight out of an angel's hand?

[Switch](#)

I mean it's not the first time she's done it.

*TheLiesseAccordsSuddenlyLookThreatening*

Damn, yeah, that makes Liesse 2, Cat 0

If Akua ever suggests that Cat should name another city Liesse, then we know for sure she's playing the long con

[sport102blog2017](#)

ahhhh

*Sulomund*

Our glassy-eyed boy has grown so much... \*sniffle\*

Hey would we consider these his teenage years, since he's finally getting into rebellion? Poor papas.

*Aston W*

I actually think Black killed her the first time with a sword. So that's loads of times she died.

*WuseMajor*

Honestly, every meaningful journey is like that. If you haven't learned and grown along the way, then you haven't really traveled. If you have, then the person who arrives at the end is different.

*Snowfire1224*

Apostates. Funny. I just got into playing Dragon Age games

*Styn*

Masego is defiantly my favorite supporting character. I've really enjoyed watching his character arcs.

[sengachi](#)

Very few journeys worth taking return you to the place where you began. The question should never be "will I stay the same?" but "do I want to be the person I'm becoming?". And while it seems that Warlock doesn't see that, maybe Masego does.

Good on him. Our mad science boy is growing up.

*Zaver SaintCloud*

This strikes me as very similar to the discussions of what truly happens when you use a Star Trek teleporter. If life is the continuation of consciousness, then we die every time we go to sleep.

*Snowfire1224*

Not really because sleep isn't actually a lack of consciousness it's actually an altered state of consciousness. Other altered states include meditation, hypnosis, and any time you take drugs.

*Dennis Muleri*

Holy crap this is my first commenting but holy crap didn't see that ish coming

*NerfContessa*

Very nice turnabout. And really, a Warlock that doesn't believe IN apotheosis, that's.... unlikely.

*therealgridlock*

Not gonna lie I was kinda hoping they'd actually explain their fears, not just dance around them tentatively

They say everyone who dies comes back a different person... But are they implying demons? Are they implying automata? They never say why that's a good or bad thing.

Good wants to rule over their subjects and evil wants to guide their children to greater things, it makes sense that everyone who dies and is resurrected by good remains the same, and everyone who dies and comes back under evil changes as a person.

One cannot become greater if one remains the same as one was before.

I think masego might be right, if the soul is still there, and she's still making free choices, of course she's a bit different, she's turning into a god slowly piece by piece, and since two things that are different can't be the same, she can't remain what she was and still be something else.

*burguulkodar*

Interesting!

*aran*

*The sanctioned action is to Cut. To Cut means division by the blade of Want, that parer of potentials that excises infinities.*

*ishouldsleepc104*

Pretty much agree with the warlocks assessment. It isn't a ship of theses problem it is straight up replacement. Chatarina was copied, the original died and the copy remained unaware of the temporal and physical interruption

*DC*

Y'know, Tikoloshe's theory makes me a little less sanguine about the fragments of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness that keep appearing at the top of chapters...

*DC*

...this should have been posted on the next chapter >\_>

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## **Interlude: Apogee**

*"It is a bitter truth that in trying to escape the flaws of our parents we inevitably inherit the worst of them."*

– King Pater of Callow, the Unheeding

After they entered the second month of hard labour and sleepless nights, Wekesa jested that if he were a god he's snap his fingers and put them all out of their misery. Neither his husband nor his son graced him with even a perfunctory chuckle, which he found rather cold-blooded of them. Warlock had hoped that even disagreements, after being aired, would lance the wound festering in his family but it had been... overly optimistic of him. Tikoloshe was still furious that Masego had spurned his good intentions so fully, and their son had made it exceedingly clear that he'd be leaving Praes the moment the city was safeguarded and did not intend to return for many years. There'd been no talking him out of that, or even a way to broach the subject of the Black Queen again. His boy had learned to keep his own

council, and while the way he'd grown stirred some embers of paternal pride in Wekesa it was also highly inconvenient. Message came from Ater within the first month, word of the war in the west.

It was not good news.

"He's not dead," Warlock told Alaya's envoy. "I am certain. Beyond that I cannot tell. Wherever he is cannot be scried even through his blood."

Which meant he was either underground or, more likely, in the presence of priests or heroes. It had slowed the work in Thalassina by a whole week to craft a ritual that would scry even through such distance and natural barriers, setting up relays and contingencies, but there'd been no question of doing otherwise. The silver of Amadeus' soul in his possession was still called to the remainder of it somewhere in Creation, but aside from determining death that measure was essentially worthless. His old friend's soul might not even still be inside his body, he knew, though that breed of meddling was rare among heroes. The Saint of Swords might be capable, though. Hye had told him, years ago, that Laurence de Montfort had grown skilled enough to rip a soul from its body with a swing of her sword. Was that what they'd wrought on Amadeus? Was he now a shivering shade in a bottle sealed by some priest's power? Tikoloshe chided him for the thought.

"You are casting fear as fact," his husband said.

"We're not dealing with shepherd boys and rebels anymore," Wekesa murmured. "I've heard *things* about the Pilgrim, 'Loshe. The Saint might be the executioner for Above, but he's something rather more dangerous than that. He... smooths away wrinkles. His is a thinking man's Role."

"Scribe will find out the truth of it, and the Empress will put her weight behind the retrieval," Tikoloshe said. "Worrying any further is without purpose."

"I could leave," Wekesa said. "Head out right now."

"And do what?" his husband gently asked. "Traipse around the Proceran countryside with target painted on your back?"

Warlock sighed. Tikoloshe was right, of course. Moving prematurely was just asking to get into a fight with whatever heroes had not gone north to prepare against the Dead King.

"Gods, why would he wander around the Principate like that?" Wekesa bit out. "We're not twenty anymore, the wind's no longer at our back. And there's at least half a dozen Choirs embroiled

in this mess, he was bound to run into someone he couldn't cope with."

"Making virtues of one's flaws does not mean those flaws are gone," his husband delicately replied.

Warlock sighed and left it at that. The two of them had never gotten along. Amadeus remained, even after over forty years, of the opinion that Tikoloshe was an unnecessary risk that should have long been dispensed with permanently. He was polite enough not to mention it anymore, but the years had not changed his position by an inch. 'Loshe had frankly admitted that the sheer bleak intensity of Amadeus' desires, coupled with utter disregard for the incubus' existence, made him uncomfortable just to be in the presence of. Like putting fingers over a candle: tolerable for a pass, but painful if continued. Masego spent several hours conferring with his comrades in Laure when he was told the news, weaving some particularly vicious protections on his scrying spell. Woe unto whoever tested those, Wekesa had mused. There'd be a few more dead Eyes in the city by the time that conversation was over. Not his issue, regardless. While he recognized that Alaya had right to try eavesdropping on the conversation, his son also had right to privacy. The victor of that skirmish would be theirs to determine, and he saw no need to intervene so long as no harsh feelings were incurred on either side.

They returned to the work with renewed vigor afterwards, but as the weeks passed tensions never fully put to rest reared their ugly heads again. It was not unexpected, truthfully. Long hours of mentally exhausting work with little rest or company save each other – Masego had bluntly refused to attend court again – made small irritations seem large, and when the bottle was uncorked there was no preventing the spill. It was darkly amusing, Wekesa thought, that it was an attempted olive branch from Tikoloshe that'd been the spark to light the fire. His husband made an offer to discuss his time in the Kingdom of Sephirah, should Masego promise not to delve in that branch of research afterwards. Warlock had given it even odds that it would lead to either the beginning of reconciliation or a blowout, but his predictions proved inaccurate. In both cases, he'd believed the impetus would come from their son.

"That won't be necessary," Masego simply said.

The three of them had gone to the Maze with dawn, and it was now midmorning. Both mages hung from their spits of coral by leather harnesses, their engraving tools made to hover by their side by a quaint little Taghrebi spell. Tikoloshe was perched atop Wekesa's own coral, comfortably seated and keeping an eye on their work for mistakes. All of them were under illusion, naturally. High Lord Idriss might have purged the city, but Warlock would not rely on the man's work when his family's safety was at stake.

Their modifications to Shatha's Maze would remain hidden until the very last moment.

"It is not the Book of Darkness," Tikoloshe conceded. "Yet my remembrance is likely more than you'll ever learn otherwise."

"I would not be moved even if you offered the Tower's own text," Masego replied, placing back his carving knife into the floating set and picking up a chisel.

"Surely you don't mean to bargain with the Dead King," Tikoloshe frowned.

"Unnecessary," their son said. "I've already harvested sufficient knowledge from his echoes."

"Pardon me," Wekesa said. "Did you say his *echoes*?"

"His apotheosis left a reflection in Arcadia, yes," Masego replied absent-mindedly. "I took from him twice, at a pivot and later from his final moments as mortal. Vivienne was displeased about the delay on our trip back, admittedly, but the Hunt would not move without all of us."

There was a soft sound as he angled the chisel against an accumulation rune, bringing down his hammer to connect it with the fresh additions. The only sound for a long moment was the waves around them.

"You stole memories from the Dead King's reflection," Tikoloshe quietly summarized. "Child, have you gone mad?"

"Debatable," Masego mused. "I am not certain if operating on a different set of logic should truly be called that."

"Don't you give me lip like this is some trifle," 'Loshe snarled. "Get rid of them this instant. It's an *infection*."

It went downhill from there. Wekesa could not stay out of it, for he shared some of his husband's worries in this, but he could not serve as a mediator if he was also arguing. That proved to be a mistake. Tikoloshe had become emotional. That never worked well with their son. It was bad enough they ceased working for the day, walking back to the shore in fuming silence. Warlock ran into a wall when he tried to tease out details during the afternoon, Masego stubbornly refusing to speak more of the matter. Against his better judgement, he offered his son a concession: he'd get to participate in the ritual from inside the Maze instead of the city, if the subject was opened again. It worked, or close enough. Masego remained vague on details, but it was clear his son could probably transcribe half the Kabbalis Book of Darkness from memory if he were so inclined – and that was the least of it. It was not the diluted knowledge put to ink

he'd gotten his hands on but the thoughts of the Dead King himself. Secrets known only to one, until now.

"Take it out," his husband said later that night, when they were alone in their room. "By force if need be."

"I'm not going to fight him, 'Loshe," Wekesa replied with genuine surprise. "Obviously we need to reconsider our approach, but-"

"You don't get it," Tikoloshe said quietly. "It's a trap. I don't know for sure, but I've seen the lay of it over the years and..."

"You've never spoken of this before," Warlock softly said.

"I don't know for sure," his husband repeated. "And it was never an issue, with the mere fragments of his work Praesi possess. But I think he's been killed before, 'Kesa. The Dead King. With that many heroes having fought him over the years? At least once, one will have slain him."

Wekesa was not without cleverness, and he'd been married to the man for a very long time. The implication was not difficult to divine.

"You think the Book is a lure," he said. "And anyone that follows its teachings deep enough..."

"He can inhabit different bodies, he could even as a mortal," Tikoloshe said. "But how useful would it really be to wear some farmer's skin? No, he'd need mages. Talented, ambitious, well-trained in the use of their powers. And to ensure they made their way to him, seeds were sown."

"Never the complete book, because then they might realize the purpose of it," Warlock murmured. "There'd be risks, 'Loshe. If Amadeus is right about the Wandering Bard-"

"Black isn't even a *hundred years old*," his husband hissed. "And he thinks he can grasp the nature something like the Bard? Last time he followed that conceit Sabah was killed. Do we need to lose our son to his pride as well?"

"Peace," Wekesa said. "You've said it yourself, this is only a theory."

"I will not gamble with his safety, Wekesa, hear me well," Tikoloshe said. "Not when the stakes are this high."

"If I raise my hand against him, we lose him for good," he replied. "Think about this clearly."

"We lose him deeper still, if we do nothing," his husband said.

Gods, what a mess this had become. Maybe if memories were modified... No, he'd find out eventually. Masego had been taught to assess the state of his own mind before he'd even reached puberty, he'd notice sooner or later. It was only pushing the issue back by a few months or years. Part of him insisted this was only a theory, but he could not refrain from considering it. 'Loshe would not be this incensed if he did not genuinely believe in what he'd said, and he knew better than to dismiss the thoughts of his husband out of hand. It would be easier if he was wrong, but he could not put weight on something simply because it would be more convenient were it false.

"Tell me everything you know about this," Wekesa said. "Every single detail, no matter how insignificant."

Tikoloshe's eyes met his.

"And if you agree I'm right?"

Warlock grimaced, but went on.

"Alaya has made inquiries about putting him under house arrest until this Callowan mess is over with," Wekesa admitted. "I might have to take her up on them, until we've found a permanent solution."

"After the Ashurans are dispersed, then," Tikoloshe said.

Warlock reluctantly nodded. He'd need at least that long to prepare, if it was to be painless.

—

It'd been easier when Catherine had been there to provide ice. Winter-forged substance had a keen affinity to scrying spells, especially those involving the Observatory. Less than surprising, given that she'd provided quite a bit of the power involved in the raising of it. Without her around, Masego had been forced to rely on the more traditional methods of a water-filled bowl. The link was rather solid, given the distances and likely interferences involved, which warmed his heart. His work in Laure had proved fruitful. The waters shivered and a pair of silhouettes greeted him, both familiar. They must have been standing in front of one of the pools, he thought. Hakram looked exhausted, his face tight and the ridges around his eyes standing out — the orc equivalent of dark circles in a human. Vivienne, on the other hand, was flushed with good health. She'd grown out her hair, Masego noted. It suited her, made her seem almost regal.

"Hierophant," Hakram said, showing just enough teeth to be respectful.

There was a pause as Masego's eyes took in all of him.



"You seem to be missing a hand," the mage observed.

Vivienne snorted.

"Literally the first thing," she said. "I told you he'd skip right over greetings."

"Already was when we last spoke, the bowl simply did not show it. And I still have the one," Hakram told him, ignoring the Callowan. "It serves well enough."

"Two would objectively serve better," he pointed out.

"If we're to have this conversation, it will be in person," the orc said. "And over drinks."

Ah, one of those complicated matters then. It should prove a learning experience.

"You've made contact days before I next expected you," Masego said. "I take it something happened?"

"You could say that," Vivienne grimaced. "The Empress' envoy sung us a pretty song, and we need to pick your brains over it."

"I do not know much of singing," he admitted.

"I mean-" she sighed. "Never mind. Look, we were made privy to the full content of Malicia's pact with the Dead King."

"Does it matter?" Masego asked, mildly surprised. "I was under the impression we would oppose both regardless of the technicalities involved."

"I believed that as well," Hakram gravelled. "Before he finished speaking. She effectively sold out most of Calernia."

"Which seems ill-mannered, considering she does not own it," Masego offered.

"The definition of 'most' is what matters, as it happens," Vivienne said. "There's a clause that exempts Praes and Callow from his attentions."

"Which is good," he tried.

"Somewhat," she said. "Unfortunately, it only applies so long as she's alive."

Huh. Which was not good, because Catherine had admitted some months ago she would most likely have to kill the Empress before the war was over.

"We've asked some of our mages, but it's not their specialty," Hakram said. "We need to confirm – is it theoretically possible for a magical contract to have a clause like that?"

"It is exceedingly dangerous, but yes," Masego replied.

"*Shit*," Vivienne said, with feeling.

"I do not see the issue," he admitted. "Considering we were planning war against the Dead King regardless we have lost nothing."

"She's kept it secret for now, but it's likely she'll make the terms openly known when she judges the situation ripe for it," Hakram said. "That's going to make a mess."

Masego's brows rose. Would it? He failed to see how.

"Public opinion, Zeze," Vivienne said. "It'd be bad enough if we came out on Procer's side after they took a swing at us, but if on top of that we have a guarantee Calow will stay safe? War will be *highly* unpopular. Even war against Praes, if the Empress stays quiet from now on, and she's too clever not to."

Ah, politics. Hardly his specialty.

"If you could provide me the exact terms, I'll study them for weaknesses," he offered.

"We will," Hakram said. "But there might not be a point. There's no guarantee she gave us the real phrasing. And if she has, she'll have had every good diabolist in her employ look it over first."

"I have time during the evenings," Masego shrugged. "And without my library and my laboratory, only so much to spend it on."

"There's nothing to lose in trying, at least," Hakram said.

He nodded.

"If I may ask, do you have news of Uncle Amadeus?"

Vivienne wiggled her hand in a manner that presumably had meaning, though he was not certain what it was.

"Getting word from the Jacks quickly has been harder since the Vales were shut," she said. "The best I can give you is that Hasenbach's agents from her internal spy network are out in force in Salia. Turning over every vaguely suspicious stone. I've had to recall quite a few of my people."

She frowned.

"Still, if she's cleaning up the capital that thoroughly it adds weight to the Empress' take in my eyes," she continued. "They might be bringing in the Carrion Lord for a good spot of jeering and rock-throwing. Gods know he's been hated like poison there ever since he started setting fire to everything."

It was a relief to hear it, and Masego felt a knot in his shoulders loosen. He'd lost enough family to wars already. If Uncle Amadeus had followed Aunt Sabah into the grave so quickly... No, it couldn't be allowed to happen.

"Which is worrying," Hakram said. "They have to know if he's kept prisoner there will be rescue attempts. If he's not dead it is for a reason."

"It does not matter what they want," Hierophant calmly said. "They will not keep him. Catherine will agree with me on this. So will Father and the Empress. We will lack no resources for the rescue."

"My precise worry," Hakram replied. "Procer cannot afford war on two fronts if one of those fronts is Keter. To execute Lord Black and break his legions makes sense, but to *capture* him? I can think of only one reason for that."

It took a moment, but he came to the conclusion.

"Bait," Masego slowly said.

"It neatly takes care of what they fear most about Cat, namely her ability to gate anywhere with an army," Vivienne said.

"More than that," Hakram said. "They'll be dragging the Woe and the remaining Calamities onto their chosen grounds. The full villainy of the east where they want it, when they want it. They're clearing house before turning their full efforts to the north."

"It has the Peregrine's fingers all over it," Vivienne darkly said. "The man's dangerous enough on the field, but if he has a few months to prepare? It's going to get ugly, Masego."

"She'll have a plan," he said. "She always does."

"Well, we haven't run out of lakes yet," Vivienne half-smiled. "So there's always that."

Masego's lips quirked in answer.

"Still no word from her?" he asked.

"None," Hakram said. "But she'd have returned by now if she wasn't making gains, it's been near five months."

*Or she could be dead*, Masego thought but did not say. Precious little was known of what would await their friend in the Everdark.

"And on your front?" Vivienne asked. "No sign of the Ashuran fleet?"

"They've either found countermeasures to scrying or they keep priests on their ships," he said. "It makes finding their whereabouts difficult. The raids have not ceased, but Father says they'd have to be fools to give that obvious a sign they were about to strike. There's no telling when they'll attack until they're visible from the coast."

"I'll spare no tears for that lot if you manage to bruise them," she said. "But be careful, Zeze. Don't risk yourself for a Praesi city."

He decided, diplomatically, not to mention his agreed-on position when the Ashurans would come.

"And it's going well with your fathers?" Hakram asked. "I know what you found in Arcadia shook you."

"It has been... difficult," Masego admitted. "There have been arguments."

Vivienne's eyes went sharp.

"Do you need a way out?"

He shook his head.

"I suppose you could call it a religious disagreement," he said.

"Coming from the average Praesi, that would worry me," Hakram mildly said. "Coming from you, I will confess to something sharper."

"It will pass," Masego said. "They simply need to accept I will not forever live on their terms."

His friend shared a look, but did not comment. He licked his lips.

"Hakram," he said. "Before Catherine left..."

He trailed off.

"Yes?" the orc encouraged.

The mage folded his arms together.

"No," he finally said. "It doesn't matter."

Adjutant's keen eyes appraised him.

"Are you certain?"

"Faith," Masego mused. "It is had or it is not. There is no middle ground."

"So I've heard," Vivienne murmured, eyeing the orc at her side.

"Then let's cut this short before the Empress succeeds at listening in," Hakram said. "I'll scry you again in an hour with the text we've received, Masego."

"I will be here," he honestly replied.

A round of farewells, and then he was looking down at simple water. A strange sadness lingered in the room, and he turned towards Indrani to comment on it before realizing she was not here. Masego frowned, brushing back a braid. It was not the first time he'd made the mistake, and he was growing increasingly uncomfortable over it. The sooner he was rid of this city and its trouble, the better.

In the end, however, it would be another month before the Ashurans attacked.

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[esryok](#)

You! Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[DroughtBringer](#)

Thanks for covering it.

[erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, and so extra chapter in the corresponding tab. This one is titled "Ye Mighty", and is from Ivah's POV. Character contest continues with Bard vs Captain, link to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16761696?fbclid=IwAR3AUU1z4pB60e-iDWjQklTR-RI5nxAC18xI3kvcrQW\\_w90K2PPePMewUc](https://www.strawpoll.me/16761696?fbclid=IwAR3AUU1z4pB60e-iDWjQklTR-RI5nxAC18xI3kvcrQW_w90K2PPePMewUc)

*Dainpdf*

Gee. This is the hardest one for me, yet. The Bard is such a mysterious antagonist, but Sabah is so complex with her empathetic and wild sides...

*Someguy*

I'm more curious about how Sabah romanced her husband.

*Dainpdf*

I suspect it may have involved surprising amounts of soppy romance. And perhaps a couple blood sacrifices, because it's Praes.

[BartHumphries](#)

I figure Bard will win because she's had like x5 the screentime that Captain has had.

*Big Brother*

Aw, poor Zeze. He's actually growing to miss Archer. Is that a seed of first love budding?

*luminiousblu*

Well, she was beautiful in his mind when she drew back the bow.

*caoimhinh*

That much was obvious when Catherine saw him touching Indrani with a care she had only ever seen him use with books.

Those 2 are a firmer ship than CatxKillian.

*Atagan*

>>Those 2 are a firmer ship than CatxKillian.

CatxKillian was broken over a ew blood sacrifices, is not that high of a bar

*Anonymouse*

We still have CatxUbua

*SpeckofStardust*

Its sad that we know the dead king cant be inside of creation fully without a agreement.

Otherwise the idea that he left everything behind to trap people into becoming his means for returning would hold a lot more merit.

*Gunslinger*

They could be contingencies or maybe it gives him a new body but shunts it back to his personal hell. I really like this

theory as it answers the question question of how he's managed to survive this long.

### *Speck of Stardust*

True, still I think the idea of the dead king being perfect (along with bard for that matter) in terms of setting up to never leave an opening fails hard, Bard has once failed in story (aka she set up the lone swordman) and got F-over at another point (Hierarch) The dead king for all his power, is still below bard's level (going by his conversation with her) his reach is not wide enough to have done major workings in arcadia, just for the off chance of it paying off when someone might travel though it at some unspecific point in the future when they're going to meet him.

Considering it all he could simply full control every body he has ever raised into undeath, including all the people that followed him into his control of hell....

ohhhh.

Shit.

He went off and did his own thing in an out of the way place to gain unimaginable power bound to his oaths. How is that any different to what Cat is doing?

He became a king of death just like cat became a queen of winter. Why has nobody pointed out the additional common points between the 2 yet? They didn't just become gods they are doing the same things they did after achieving it. Of course if cat was doing the same thing she likely would have gone after the Fae which likely would have ended up with her being trapped their like they are... New, a new twist to an old game.

---

Not to mention the staggering parallels between Neshamah's avoidance of story openings by goading the invaders into doing the dirty work for him, and Catherine's own takeover of the Everdark being propelled by the dwarves, up to and including creating a narrative alignment through granting powers without much personal investment into the results.

???

The thing I find interesting is threefold.

1.) The Dead King thinks Catherine is interesting. An 'Immortal' like him and the Bard. Yet, as we know, all Villains are 'immortal'. What's special about Catherine's state as a pseudo-fae? Is it simply her Domain? Or is it perhaps... the fact that she's a 'villain' with no name....

2.) The Everdark and the Drow are an entire culture that's been empowered by the Sve of Night's Domain. Meaning it's

entirely possible to grant power through a Domain to unrelated people. And judging by the Sve's personality it's likely possible to manipulate the way that power is gained.

3.) Doesn't the above sound an awful lot like Names? We know the Wandering Bard has some manner of attachment to the Narrative. What if Narrative is her Domain, and Names are simply the way to gain power within that Domain? What if the reason Cat is interesting... is because she's gained power of her own, OUTSIDE of being a Named, and thus the Bards/Narratives plaything?

### Taltos Dreamer

My guess is that either

- 1) he gets "pushed" back into his domain if he escapes this way, so he can take the body, but has to return to his domain right away
- 2) there is some text that isn't being shared in that agreement allowing him to take a vessel of his choice...something that would cause untold amounts of rage from warlock, necessitating he be taken out during, say, a random high ritual to destroy a ward array that has only been defeated by treachery and has kept the city safe for a very long time (thus there being no real reason for it to be used in this way)?

### Byzantine

>Its sad that we know the dead king cant be inside of creation fully without a agreement.

Do we? He isn't willing to be, but Catherine had the thought that it was part of a Story: He's ensuring he is never the big bad, because there is always someone else that let him out. The monster can survive the story, if it plays things smart.

I suspect they are wrong simply because the Dead King wouldn't leave it up to others to unintentionally copy him, especially when there is a risk they could find a weakness in what he left behind and use that to trick him into a broken shell. No, I suspect the Dead King handled things in a much simpler manner: The Hell he invaded is the one his soul is destined for (It explains both the invasion and Hell and why he chose \*that\* particular hell). Killing him accomplishes nothing but sending him back there, at which point he just calls a spare body he probably keeps lying around.

### *burguulkodar*

WOW! That... actually makes sense. And explains why Ranger "can't kill him".



Amazing, whether or not it is true.

### [tmeenaks](#)

By this theory, the man went and made an entire hell his phylactery. Well, guess that atleast solved the issue of the heroes always getting the mcguffing that kills the villain. Don't think the heroes can steal an entire layer of hell

### [Javvies](#)

Hmmm.

Depending on the definition of "Alive" in use ... that could go very poorly for Malicia. There are states of being where dead would be preferable to alive. Ie, that Hall of Screams in the Tower. Or Akua, before Cat started letting her out for walks.

Another month before Masego is at risk. Good, hopefully Cat is back by then.

The fragments of Book that the Dead King let loose might well be a trap of sorts. But I don't think the impressions in Arcadia are – those would probably have been an unplanned side effect. Also, I'm not sure that Tikoloshe is right when he says that the Dead King must have been killed before by a Hero. Besides ... even if Tikoloshe is right, it'd be far more likely that the Dead King would have a breeding program to provide suitable hosts in Keter/his private Hell, rather than being dependent on finding one when he needs one somewhere in the rest of Calernia.

### *Dainpdf*

He may have known about the side-effect and planned for it, or noticed it afterwards and... "cleaned up" the reflections so they show exactly what he wanted.

### [Javvies](#)

If he's trapped in Keter/the attached Hell without an invitation, as many seem to think, how could he have done so?

At any rate, I'm inclined to say that the impressions in Arcadia are far less likely to be an intentional trap, and even if they were, they'd likely be easier to notice (at least for Heirophant/Masego), than the known fragments of his Book.

### *Quite Possibly A Cat*

I was under the impression that Dead King wasn't trapped, but he didn't like leaving Hell without an invitation. If he has an invitation there is another big villain to be defeated. He's being used like a scary weapon and the "real" villain gets stepped on by Above. Malacia is being used as a

lightning rod or fall girl essentially. And when Heaven squishes her, he goes screaming back down to Hell.

I might be totally wrong though. Of course, that the clause were the protection goes away if Malacia dies doesn't really matter. If Malacia dies the Dead King goes screaming back to Hell.

*SpeckofStardust*

Reread the conversation between Him and bard in Interlude: Empires it is from his point of view and these lines confirm it.

"Neshamah's foot scuffed the stone.

Such a slight sound, barely more than a whisper. He'd not heard it in a very, very long time."

and

"“It has been too long,” he said, voice pensive. “The Serenity remains a lacking imitation. There is a... taste to Creation. A skilled pupil I may be, yet a pupil still.”” Or at least he needs conditions for him to even be outside of Serenity or even be in keter fully, and they are rare to happen.

*Dainpdf*

Nowhere does it say that he needs an invitation. Only that he doesn't come out without one (or at least still only comes out very very rarely).

*Dainpdf*

Mayhap. We do know he has gone outside a few times, however, and he could always have done it through agents. He has plenty of those.

Heck, maybe he got Triumphant to do it as part of that pact they had. Who knows?

Neshamah is millenia old and he either invented or advanced trimegistan sorcery beyond what was previously conceived back when the continent didn't even know what Arcadia was, exactly. He might have the expertise to pull a fast one over Masego when the latter examines a phenomenon he hasn't encountered before (or at least, not frequently).

---

That may actually be the reason he invited them, knowing Catherine would go through Arcadia. Especially since he provided them with instructions on how to reach Keter, which would presumably include the shards he needed.

*Dainpdf*

He also seemed to have been interested in providing Cat with a small bit of guidance – basically a safe bet she'll be a lit sharper on the Bard's backyard.

*luminiousblu*

We already know that you can rip out a person's soul without killing them, that's the loophole Cat used to get at Akua's retainers after First Llesse.

*Richard Gallivan*

I suddenly realize this could end with Akua in Malicia's body. Cat doesn't climb the tower, she stands atop it's rulers shoulders.

I mean, this could work. Akua has to serve cat same as she always had. But she's in charge, and since she's a puppeted puppeter even if some high lord gets the knife in she rolls her eyes and turns his blood to ice. Iron finds itself shattering against steel. Ivah rules the Drow, Akua rules Praes (which she really was born to do, and so in wonderful villian narrative she gets everything she wanted, just not the way she wanted it), and both bend the knee, for the Soverign of Moonless nights and Dread Empress still must serve the Black Queen, a name delayed that re-emerges far more powerful for it's delay.

*Ezario Gerion*

I absolutely LOVE when cast have discussions and plans without the main character.

*Dainpdf*

Interesting. So Revenant's loss of self may be more from the Dead King's method being tainted than any actual problem with Apotheosis. Interestingly, Cat did something kind of similar with weaving herself into Winter for Akua to bring back. This might mean Cat is not Fakerine, after all... Though really, when has Creation not gone with the "screw Cat" option? Also the Gods sound like the sort of people that would have made mortals incapable of surviving apotheosis.

*Gunslinger*

Ohh I like the connection between Cat weaving her soul into Winter. So does this mean that the Dead King did the equivalent for undeath? Bonded his soul with necromantic energy in the fullest so any powerful use of it brings him back

*Dainpdf*

Maybe only for his specific form of undeath (rituals based on his methods)? If he effectively called dibs on lichdom, I will be very, very impressed.

---

His mantle may have been the thing Catherine felt she was touching when she first learned necromancy. It didn't feel unnatural, just alien.

### Javvies

I think that might have been a temporal echo of Winter-yet-to-come.

Remember, when she beat the Duke of Violent Squalls, her victory terms made it so that she had always had the signet ring – making her always the his Heir and thus always touched by a Winter Title.

Wouldn't have worked anywhere but Arcadia, but Arcadia doesn't have all the same rules as Creation, and especially cheats when it comes to Time.

### *Byzantine*

Which explains why her necromancy was always... different. Including being able to do things it shouldn't, like help her control her own body.

### *usernamesbco*

It sounds like either his writings or his specific method of apotheosis have been seeded with a memetic hazard.

That doesn't mean that the Arcadia echoes weren't seeded.

### *Skaddix*

I mean Malicia is smart enough to leave the obvious holes that Akua left but the Dead King has been in the game for a long time.

Oh the Archer and Masego relationship might actually go somewhere and does Masego lines imply he actually gets to sit in the center of the fleet now.

I am inclined to trust are resident Incubus it seems weird to me the Dead King runs into a powerful mage and doesn't talk shop directly at all. Increasing your power by taking control of others does make a degree of sense to me.

I suppose though the Calamities and Woe should wait for the rescue attempt, Ranger needs time to fully recover and Cat needs time to get back with Archer and the new recruits sadly the Drow takeaway the element of surprise for her if she uses them to help save Black. Even if this gives the Heroes time to prep it should

mark the meeting between Cat and Hanno though and I am interesting to see how that goes.

*Dainpdf*

Terribly gauche to leave a second comment, but I came upon two ideas I hadn't before...

First, Warlock did not think he could alter Masego's memories without him noticing within a few months... How long can Cat alter Diabolist's? It has been five months. Though I guess her indirect method might fool those who expect sorcerous shenanigans, it's still a cautionary point.

Second: so the Dead King (allegedly) takes over someone when he dies – specifically mages who have studied and performed rituals he deliberately leaked. That is, in a way, similar to the Bard. It raises the question of what opens one to it in her case. Is it inborn? I wonder if she takes over other Bardic names? Here you are, random Bard, suddenly you're the Intercessor.

Might explain why Neshamah and Cat's bodies are simulacra while the Bard's doesn't seem to be – he takes over undead, Cat takes over Fae, the Intercessor takes over Named.

...or maybe she just springs fully formed from Nowhere.

*Dainpdf*

Uh... I did not intend this to be a reply. Terribly sorry.

[Javvies](#)

As for the memories front ... Warlock would be removing memories outright, and not insignificant chunks of memories, but extended periods of time.

Also, it's only a matter of time before someone who knows what Masego did asks if he has made progress.

Cat's not so much removing as blurring/obscuring relatively short periods of time with similar content.

Warlock is deleting the entire playlist, Cat is switching out one song for a similar one (different group covering the same song).

Or, in other words, Warlock is removing all the Pink Floyd, whereas Cat is replacing one Pink Floyd song with a Brit Floyd version of the song.

So to speak.

*Dainpdf*

I thought Warlock's idea was to remove the knowledge, then alter the memory of the removal, but yours makes more sense. Thanks.

*Jane*

Given that Hierophant harvested the Dead King's thoughts as well as his words, wouldn't he be the best informed as to whether it's a trap or not? I don't deny that the Dead King may have laid an exceedingly careful trap for someone like Hierophant, carefully editing his own thoughts to hide his intent, but it seems less likely to me. I mean, even if he was capable of such a thing, wouldn't the fragments of the tainted book be enough for his contingency?

I can't dismiss the idea out of hand, and Masego should be informed of the possible danger either way, but I think Masego would be the better judge here, despite his inexperience.

*Skaddix*

Hard to tell we don't know enough about the Magic System. But I think the idea of the book is not to possess people persay but to bring people to the Dead King. Beyond that the Dead King probably only tries to take over the best of the best. If Masego or Akua read the book they are worth taking. If the standard Imperial mage reads the book, I doubt the Dead King cares.

As for memory manipulation, Dead King has what 3 Millennium of Experience, Masego has a dozen or so years? It could also be the Dead King cannot actively use his possession unless he is allowed to move freely on the Material World ie until the he made a deal with the Empress he was contained.

---

Well, so did Catherine, and she didn't know about the mind bleedover beforehand. It might have been an unintended consequence, like being trapped in hell.

Speaking of Catherine, is this a foreshadowing as to what will happen when she'll try to transfer her title? I though the idea of making the Sovereign of Moonless Night an item was weird and came out of nowhere, but considering that Neshamah had been called a lich before, and phylacteries are a thing, this starts looking more familiar.

*lennymaster*

Making the title into an object actually makes a lot of sense. For example a crown.

Imagine it, the crown of Callow, or maybe a sword, throne, staff, orb, the very mantle she is wearing, simply handed over to the next in lline after a predefined span of time that actually turns the (legitimate) owner into the holder of the title.

*WuseMajor*

Yeah, I'm inclined to think that a frank discussion with Masego about this theory is probably a better idea than trying to trap him somewhere and extract the knowledge. Masego is not as above emotion as he thinks but he usually reacts better to a logical argument than ...well anything else.

*SilentWatcher*

Finally someone who speaks my mind. Masego was only angry with his fathers for denying the knoweledge whitout even involving him. Now they try it again? Did they learn nothing? That is the start of a story where Masego becomes his enemy. I doubt the memories Masego harvested are trapped. Firstly he needed an Aspect (Witness) to even acess the Echo so tampering of the echo is probably out, second when the Dead King created the Kingdom of the Dead, he couldnt have concentrated on a Trap for someone else, because the ritual seemed highly complicated. The Book of Darkness on the other hand could very well be a Trap, as its highly suspicious Neshama would record his Ritual, which gave him so much power.

*Antoninjohn*

I would not be surprised if Black were captured that he is a plague carrier as in he stored the plague in his body and will release it when he is in Salia

*Skaddix*

I mean the Pilgrim made the plague and it has an incubation period so it seems weird that Black could pull a fast one on the Pilgrim with his own plague.

[Taltos Dreamer](#)

Right? Oops, you villains totally saved the Black Knight. Silly us...heheh

*NerfGlastigUaine*

Damn, this Fathers-Son argument is really coming to a head. Masego will not take this lying down – whatever happens it will permanently burn bridges. Whether Wekesa and Tikoloshe succeed in detaining Masego and excising his memory and whether Masego will cut ties entirely with them remains to be seen.

Loving the interludes and all the important revelations, theories, and developments, but really hoping you get back to Cat's perspective. You left us on something of a cliffhanger after all.

[sugarrollblog](#)

The next time we see Catherine, she may be coming back out to the surface already. It's been 5 months according to this chapter and the way the last Catherine chapter went, it's very easy to imagine the whole of Lotow fell under Catherine's control.

I mean, I want to know what will happen between her and the Sve Noc but I wouldn't be surprised if it gets skipped and story just gets told later.

[Javvies](#)

If there's a timeskip in the middle of annexing the drow, I think we'd still see Cat and Sve of Night's initial encounter/discussion, even if we didn't see the how the whole thing went and ended.

*werafdsaew*

The way the story is going, there will certainly be a Masego rescue arc.

[Javvies](#)

Ah, but who will he be in need of rescue from? Warlock/Malicia? Or Unexpected Heroes?

Also, there's already an inevitable Rescue Black/Amadeus.

Is Cat going to be forced to choose who to rescue? To save Masego or to save Black? Presumably with dire consequences for the one she doesn't save first.

That's totally a Heroic story arc, not a Villainous one.

*werafdsaew*

Faith in what? What is he talking about?

*Nafram*

He probably refers to the fact that he told Cat that Wekesa wouldn't act against him, even at the behest of the empress. He is essentially saying that he either has faith in Wekesa or he does not.

[Javvies](#)

I'm pretty sure it is Faith in Cat, that Cat is still Cat.

*Morgenstern*

Second what Javvies said. My impression as well.



## *Nafram*

Again, they make the same mistake. Masego is not a fool, if they shared their misgivings and that theory, then perhaps Masego would listen. But instead they choose to act behind his back and decide his fate without consulting him.

And the worst part about it is that if they go through with it, then they lose Masego one way or the other.

## *burdi*

its still big chance you now, that black getting caught is part of his plan to end the empire.

when on red vale war he said to grim that the empire not worth saving, and in this chapter wekesa pretty much wondering why black wandering in proceran land. black not care about his life as long his goal obtained.

## *Seabornia*

Am I the only one to think Tikoloshe is a traitor? It seems suspicious that he was with The Witch, who indirectly helped DK come to power – if DK doesn't leave openings, he should have controlled it. Hence, now he can be trying to protect his initial master knowledge – it doesn't mean the books aren't a trap, but I doubt anyone could hack aspect before it came to power

## *Azure*

So Masego is seeing Vivienne as almost regal. Interesting. I think that might have some interesting implications for her name. I miss the rest of the Woe. I hope they aren't separated from Catherine for too much longer.

## *Novice*

Right? I'm sensing some kind of ruler-themed name.

## [\*Tek\*](#)

"He can inhabit different bodies, he could even as a mortal," Tikoloshe said. "But how useful would it really be to wear some farmer's skin? No, he'd need mages. Talented, ambitious, well-trained in the use of their powers. And to ensure they made their way to him, seeds were sown."

The year is 2018. We finally got a character who is a literal meme.

## *Raved Thrad*

Did Wekesa just indicate that the Black Knight has a horcrux somewhere? 🤔

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread

Noticed several typos. On mobile, will go back later looking for them unless someone else posts them first.

*Michael*

In the earlier chapters people always make a fuss about how bad it would be for the Fae to gain a foothold in Creation. Cat, in her conversation with Ubua even compared giving them that foothold with summoning Demons. Why is that?

[Barthumphries](#)

They're not real. They're story-bound monsters who could drag all of us into their literally amoral never-ending wars.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

It's an alien power source that warps people and allows immortal demigods to have a presence in Creation. Not advisable.

*Rup*

...if operating on a different set of logic should truly be called  
..mad  
..the insanity of genius

*Dylan Tullos*

Impossible stupidity confirmed!

Instead of killing Black, they've decided to use him in an overcomplicated trap that everyone sees coming. There's no possible way for that to go wrong.

*Cicero*

Ehh... using Black as bait in a trap in order to negate your enemies massively superior mobility actually strikes me as quite smart and not stupid at all.

*Byzantine*

It's tactically smart.

It's story stupid.

Which is more important?

[Javvies](#)

It's story stupid when fighting a Hero, or, someone playing a Heroic Role.  
They're fighting Villains. And don't realize or are disregarding Cat's tendency to utilize Heroic Roles in the Narrative.

The Story slants things towards Heroes, not Villains, and most never step into the Roles of the other side.

When it comes to Villains, the Story won't give them an edge against superior tactics the way it would a Hero.

So as far as the Heroes are concerned/thinking, the tactical value for them (Heroes, so significant) exceeds the Story value for the Calamities and the Woe (Villains, so minor at best).

The thing is, they should not be disregarding Cat's usage of Heroic Roles and Stories so lightly, they should know about it and be terrified about what they're calling down on themselves. Ignoring the fact that they (and everyone else) should be fucking terrified that Cat has been MIA for months.

*caoimhinh*

I wonder if Catherine being MIA was a factor that influenced their decision of letting Black live and set a trap.

The unknown is a scary thing when making plans, and when Cat reappears with an army of Drow they will shit themselves in panic and disbelief.

[Javvies](#)

Maybe for Pilgrim. He might have wanted Black alive as leverage against Cat/Callow/Praes/etc.

Cordelia Hasenbach is probably similar in outlook here (plus she likely doesn't want the repercussions of killing Black being tied to her).

But Saint (and Bard) apparently don't give a fuck and want to burn the board and start over. It's possible that they want Black as a prisoner solely for the sake of drawing out Cat, in order to get rid of them both before starting over. On the other hand, Bard, at least, should know better than to rely solely on the Heroes vs Villains Narrative when it comes to Cat.

[Javvies](#)

Eh, it's not exactly a bad idea, objectively speaking.  
The point is to draw in the Woe, remaining Calamities, and

whatever other Praesi resources they can manage, into attacking on ground prepared for them. And preferably leverage news of an execution or something into bringing them on at a known time frame.

Unfortunately, this really is more of a Villainous ploy than a Heroic one. That probably won't matter for the Calamities and whatever Praesi resources they bring. That's a Villain vs Villain story at worst for the "Heroes", and Creation won't help the Calamities, turning it into a question of who prepared better, and they're on the Heroes chosen and prepared ground. But against the Woe? And Cat – who has a habit of riding the line between Heroics and Villainy? Who has repeatedly taken on Heroic Roles? And considers Black a Mentor/Father figure? The plan to use Black as a Hostage is automatically Doomed against Cat and the Woe.

The Heroes likely discount Cat and the Woe playing the Roles of Heroes and the attendant hazards of that in this story as far as Creation is concerned because they're Villains and nominally on the side of Evil. Though Pilgrim and Saint really should know better based on what happened with Cat in the Battle of the Camps.

*Cicero*

You know Warlock, maybe instead of imprisoning your son you should just... I don't know, warn him about your fears that this is a trap?!?

*caoimhinh*

Yeah, this is going to backfire horribly to Wekesa, and burn the bridge between him and his son.

Worst thing is, Warlock will probably weep like a father that was abandoned by his beloved son, and not realize he actually did a stupid thing based on personal fears and assumptions. It's their own damn fault that Masego is getting further away from them.

[Antony444](#)

A very interesting chapter overall with plenty of reactions making me wonder how many heads are going to roll to accomplish these objectives...

The more I hear Wekesa and Tikoloshe speak, the more I am convinced the two survival in Creation was entirely due to Black making them avoid the major pitfalls. Amadeus would have known the possible neutralisation of Masego was a monumental bad idea both narratively and strategically and shouted NO! the moment after it was proposed. Sabah would have also likely objected. But there's only Warlock now, with Malicia as his ally. Sabah is dead. Hye is implied to be heavily wounded after

battling the Summer Queen. We don't know where Assassin is and he never fought in the open. Scribe was never considered to be a 'real Calamity.

There are no heroes and Wekesa is overconfident. Moreover, he's taking the position of danger while he has himself agreed the times are past for his generation.

This is a lot of death flags, especially as Malicia has made this battle a pivot for the entire war.

I am wondering: if Warlock dies, is Trikoloshe banished from Creation too?

Malicia selling Procer and almost all of Calernia is not something I saw coming. Half of Procer was already bad, and Cat was definitely right she could afford to bid more, but why give the Dead King everything save Praes and Callow? There's something fishy going on...

Cat has been gone for five months? Well, a lot of people must have very bad nights, thinking where she might have gone...

### Javvies

Selling out all of the rest of Calernia is a way to protect herself. Especially if she doesn't further attack the rest of Calernia and just digs in and fortifies what she's got.

After all, the Dead King has been making minions out of Heroes who attacked him for centuries, if not millennia.

It would turn the Dead King and Keter into an active Hero Magnet, rather than Heroes going after the Tower.

If her gambit works, I think she gets a functionally quiescent border. After all, even the Lycaonese aren't trying to flip on the offensive against the Ratlings, and certainly no Heroes are spawning to do so either.

By promoting the Dead King to Active Big Bad status, the Tower drops in the priority for Above, and doesn't need to deal with a Crusade or as many (if any) Heroes being focused on it.

Or she's got some other plan going on.

Or she lied about the terms she made with the Dead King.

### *RanVor*

Assuming Neshamah is going to respect the terms after taking over the entire continent.

### Javvies

One, Hakram brings up the possibility of a magical contract. A magical contact likely has magical means of enforcement, or magically enforced repercussions for breaking it. In other words, either it cannot be broken, and/or bad things happen if you somehow do.

Two, I'm not sure she thinks he'll succeed to that extent before Above starts raining Heroes on him. Besides, if he gets too close to succeeding, it's likely that Bard would try to bring in the Titanomachy and/or the Elves, if not people from beyond Calernia. Also, at that point, the Dwarves might get involved, since if he expands beyond Keter on the surface, their plan to contain him is worthless. No point blocking off the subsurface of Keter if he owns Procer too.

*RanVor*

Ok, that's pretty solid ground for this kind of assumption.

*Cicero*

Something I thought of.

Doesn't Cat's ability to Speak suggest that she is in fact still alive as Cat after apotheosis?

Since Speaking is an ability she gets from her gnawed on Squire Name, and does not come from Winter.

*lennymaster*

My opinion is that Cat is Cat, that apotheosis demanded its price from her, but that it did not change fundamentally enough to make her stop being the same person, or one that developed from her instead of merely being a slightly imperfect mirage. Nonetheless, there is nothing that suggests that Speaking is not merely an expression of power and or mindset. Or perhaps a skill she developed and intuitively figured out how to use by merely reaching for a different source as fuel.

*Death Knight*

All I'm saying is if the Pilgrim kills Black the Titanomachy will become a fucking peninsula.

[Javvies](#)

Oh, I don't know about that.

Remember, Warlock links to Hells that rain hellfire and burning rock. Instead of burning down below bedrock, he might resurface with a few hundred feet of precipitate from those Hells.

Masego ... not enough info to work with, though he might cooperate with Cat to pull a Fimbulwinter instead.

*Snowfire1224*

Something I just noticed, Masego mentions that Vivienne has grown her hair out and that it makes her look more regal. Perhaps she's going to transition into a name related to nobility of some sort?

*caoimhinh*

I thought about that ever since she first mentioned that her hair was still growing while for any other Named it would have stopped. Vivienne believed it was due to her approaching to losing her Name, so she was scared and stressed over it, but I believe it's fairly possible that she is in a transition to another Name, due to both her desire to be stronger and her new role as something bigger than a mere thief, let's keep in mind that Names change their holder's appearance to match how they see themselves deep down.

Whether her new name has something to do with stealing is unknown (though chances are that it does) but it will be very interesting and she will finally get rid of her inferiority complex. I really look forward to it.

*hikiller123*

stupid questions. What is the difference between a Name and Fey Title. Does the Fey Title Kat has "contain the squire Name". So if there is a Squire candidate do they have to kill her and if she gets a Name does it need to be based on the Squire Name (i.e Knight of some form) or is it like having no Name. Lastly does the Fey Title prevent/supersede/subsume a Name if it is upstaged

*DocTao*

Are we all forgetting what the Saint said? The heroic plan is not to win, it is to reshape Procer. What is the intended shape and how does this fit?

[Javvies](#)

It's not to reshape Procer, it's to burn the whole thing (continent) down and start over from zero.

I think the plan is to turn all of Good-aligned Calernia into something like the Lycaonese and/or Pre-Conquest Callow.

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## Interlude: Inheritance

*"Dearest Edda, beloved daughter. I would offer you words of wisdom or comfort, but after a lifetime of ink I find my hands*

*have finally taken leave of me. I have written of good and evil for many years, seeking truths, but in the end I have no answers to offer. All I have, my heart, is a prayer. That you be kind. That you leave the world a little better than you found it and teach your children to do the same. And maybe, just maybe, one day we will be what we pretend we are."*

– Last will and testament of King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Wekesa had fought three wars in his lifetime, and had slowly come to realize that the Tenth Crusade was nothing like the others.

There'd been so many skirmishes over the years he could hardly recall all of them, so many faces and names and defiant – or accusatory, or castigating, or a hundred different tones only ever hiding the same fear – speeches. Enough dead heroes to make a mansion of the corpses. There was no glory in it, Warlock had known from the start. How many of those young men and women had soft faces, barely into adolescence? Those fights had not been part of a war, though Amadeus fancied otherwise when he murmured of his old argument with the Heavens. It'd been... ratcatching, Wekesa often thought. Trapping and killing vermin before they could grow to be a true problem. Even using the word execution would have implied a sentence, an act of judgement. There'd been none, though. Nothing behind the slaying save the decision never to allow those rats to grow and spread. It sometimes amused Warlock that for all his old friend's talk of the fundamental disparity between the lot of heroes and villains, when given the opportunity to deal out the same treatment he'd not hesitated for a moment.

It was not a deep argument, he knew. The differences were many. Amadeus' high-minded distaste was for a perceived imbalance between what heroes and villains as a whole were allowed to achieve by their stories, not particular cases, and the Black Knight would likely argue that even similar actions would have different meanings when carried out by mortals instead of Gods. Wekesa could and had appreciated, even when they'd first met, that Amadeus was driven by what could be called a philosophical principle rather than mere lust for power. It'd been a refreshing change, after the then-Apprentice's years spent rubbing elbows with the nobility of the Empire. It was a deplorably limited understanding of the world, perhaps, but a notch above what any of their contemporaries had been able to contemplate. In the end, though, it was still missing the forest for the trees. Seeking redress for scales uneven was still putting stock in the scale itself, when it was that thing's very existence that should be questioned. There was no fixing Creation, Wekesa suspected.

And if by some miracle it was, the Gods would promptly break it again.



And so Warlock had put his energies where they rightly belonged: his research, his family and his friends. Disappearing into some remote locale to study in peace would have been short-sighted, unfortunately. An old monster alone in the mountains, meddling in things man was not meant to know? He would have been the proving grounds of a dozen heroes. Besides, keeping strong ties to Alaya and Amadeus' empire had secured to old libraries and a steady source of income and materials. If that meant occasionally making an appearance at court, disciplining a few ambitious sorts and smothering nascent heroism when it sprouted? Well, it was a decent bargain. He did not regret making it, not even now. There'd been some frictions before the understanding was properly reached, of course. Amadeus had wanted him to found some sort of mage academy that'd supplant the teaching cadres of the High Lords, and not quite understood why Wekesa had refused. He'd tried to lower the years Warlock would have spent as headmaster of the institution, before Wekesa flatly told him there was nothing to compromise over. Warlock had helped to create this 'modern empire' of theirs because it mattered to them, not because he himself particularly cared about the state of Praes. The country could be an empty desert and it wouldn't matter to him.

He'd fought the wars that saw them rise on personal grounds, not principled ones.

It was the worst argument they'd ever had and for that Wekesa blamed Hye, who'd left before the Conquest even ended, and managed to both cut Amadeus to the bone and leave him twice in love as before with the same sentence when she walked away. The wound had never entirely healed, and Warlock had ended up paying the price in a deadbeat Ranger's stead. Typical of her, really. She never stuck around for the parts that weren't thrilling, the sometimes tedious spadework of building and maintaining relationships. Tikoloshe had noted it was almost mythically hypocritical of him to blame someone for having bonds only on their own terms, but his husband was wrong. He'd put in the work, afterwards, to clean up the mess between himself and his oldest friend in the world. Hye, on the other hand, simply made do with visitations every few years that Amadeus came back from split halfway between longing and chagrin. Wekesa's long-standing reservations about that arrangement had been the tide that carried him closer to Alaya, as it happened.

When they'd first met her in the Green Stretch all those years ago he'd not been as close as Amadeus to the woman who became Malicia: he and Sabah had shared the seat of designated third wheel as those two strange youths gravitated around each other, everything else falling to the wayside of their long conversations. Still, he'd found he well-educated for a peasant – her mother had been a tutor to a minor noble line, once – and as charming as she was intelligent. He'd considered her a close

acquaintance, and been quite infuriated to hear she'd been unceremoniously abducted by the Sentinels because the waste of skin holding the Tower was hungry for seraglio beauties. It would be years before they met again, after bloodily climbing the ladder of influence, and when Wekesa next saw Alaya there were only shards of the girl she'd once been remaining. He'd grieved for that, but the woman she'd become had been fascinating. Broken, perhaps, but all the more brilliant for it. But there'd been a war on, soon enough, and though they'd fought for her claim his reasons for supporting it had been largely selfish. If Amadeus had been the one aiming for the throne, there would have been decades of war instead of years.

Praesi would have been violently disgusted at the notion of a Duni claiming the Tower, much less one inclined to eradicate the aristocracy.

In the years that followed, however, his opinion had shifted. Alaya was undeniably more fit to rule. She was Praesi in a way none of them were, understood the people she reigned over where Amadeus would have messily carved away at them until they were more to his liking. And though Malicia used the Calamities, she did so sparingly: she preferred to rule on her own merits, without other Named propping up her crown. She asked little of them save friendship and the rare favour. It was an ideal arrangement, in his eyes, and he'd frankly told her as much. The confluence in their opinions had only grown as the years passed, and while Amadeus busied himself with his Callowan projects Wekesa had spent long stretches in Ater for his research. Seen the harsh demands authority made of Alaya, and admitted to himself that Black would not have weathered them so well. The Tower... it magnified what you were. Your virtues, but also your flaws. Malicia had mastered hers, but the same influence would have made something ugly of Amadeus. Perverted his best qualities. Scribe disagreed, of course, but Eudokia had stark blinders. She'd only ever seen herself as a tool, Amadeus as worthy to use her, and so to use everyone else. There was no place for nuance in that perspective. That Sabah had never weighed in on the matter had been telling, he'd thought.

She was ever only so circumspect when coddling one of them.

And now Sabah was dead. Killed by some murderous vagrant from the Dominion at the behest of the Wandering Bard. Wekesa had wept for it, after. For the loss of such a beloved friend, for the hole she would leave in all of them with her absence. It'd not been the same since. Amadeus had become reckless while telling himself it was calculated risk, burning one bridge after another until it'd left him stranded in the middle of fucking Procer with heroic wolves baying at his heels. Alaya had been forced to become increasingly heavy-handed to keep it all from falling apart while simultaneously the particulars of the Woe prevented

her from dealing with them as she legitimately should. Warlock had made it clear that Masego was off-limits, of course, but was increasingly coming to sympathize with her situation. Wekesa and Amadeus had dropped a mess into her lap and then heavily restricted her means to deal with threats not of her own making. It was unfair, and the private admission of that had done much to reconcile Warlock with the necessity of putting his son under house arrest for a few years.

As for the Black Queen, well, Warlock had washed his hands clean of that. He'd help Alaya deal with the aftermath by making it clear to Amadeus that Catherine Foundling had been dead for over a year now, but he wouldn't have the imitation's blood on his hands when his old friend returned. He could hardly serve as a mediator if he'd taken part in the matter in need of mediation.

It'd all grown so complicated, hadn't it? This war was so different from all the others. The civil strife that had seen Alaya rise to the throne, the Conquest itself – they'd been of the same mould, in a way. They'd all been young or in their prime, and still making their mark on Creation. But now that mark was made, and they were being forced to defend it. They'd spread out too far, Wekesa often thought. Sabah had died thousands of mile away from the Wasteland, fighting over some League shithole they'd never seen before and likely never would again. Amadeus had been caught in Proceran heartlands while prosecuting a war that should have been the Black Queen's by right. That there was a Black Queen at all was a reminder of how badly the Callowan situation had been blundered over, and for all that Wekesa sympathized with Alaya she'd hardly handled the Wasteland better. Akua Sahelian should have been abducted year ago, every bit of knowledge wrung out of her mind before she was butchered so thoroughly not even devils would be able to get their due from her. If Malicia had needed a doomsday weapon she should have asked him, not tried to get clever in house already visibly on fire.

And the damned fire had only spread since. Wekesa was not pleased he had to intervene, but who else was left? It'd have to be him. The Ashurans would be broken here, and afterwards he'd free Alaya's hands to deal with the rest of the situation. Feelings would get hurts, cities would burn, but in the end the only people involved who mattered to him were pragmatists. There would be eternity to get over this little scuffle, as his friends had all the others before them.

It was a month full of long silences that passed before the Ashuran war fleet finally arrived. His son and husband remained at odds, though thankfully neither were the kind of men to trade barbs or seek out screaming matches. The work proceeded at a faster pace now that conversation had effectively died out. Wekesa occasionally felt a pang of regret at turning what was one

of the greatest achievements of Praesi sorcery – in his own chosen field of study, to boot! – into what was effectively a pack of munitions, but he could think of no other way. Shatha's Maze had been the main sea defence of the city for too long. There'd been centuries of opportunity for the Thalassocracy to study it, and though last time they'd struck at Thalassina it had been treachery that'd been their means of passing it that did not mean the Maze was unbreakable. That pack of greedy sailors wouldn't be risking an assault at all, if that were the case, and Alaya was certain that they were coming. She still had agents in Ashuran ranks, though entire swaths of her network had been purged before the Thalassocracy declared war.

The ships came under cover of night.

That much had been expected. With scrying being blocked off, it was now watchtowers that served as the city's first line of defence. Considering the nature of Ashuran sorcery, sailing at night even in treacherous waters was hardly difficult and afforded some element of surprise. What had not been expected was that the fleet moved under illusory cover as well. Some kind of sea mirage, Warlock found out, closer to natural phenomenon than Praesi illusions or fae glamour. Much harder to detect than either, though also likely much more difficult to maintain. That bought the invaders two days of unseen advance before they were caught out by a Thalassinan mage attempting to scry the weather ahead of their fleet and finding it impossible to do so. It alarmed High Lord Idriss enough that the man ordered a ritual strike at the area, calling down lightning from the sky, and though the sorcery impacted Ashuran defences harmlessly it did shatter the mirage. Ashur had stolen the initiative, and there was barely a day and a half to organize before they were on the city.

The work on the Maze was mostly finished, but not entirely. It would have to prove sufficient. Mass rituals by High Lord Idriss' mages lent a finishing touch to the trap while allowing Warlock and his son to remain at full strength. Masego's perch out in the corals was fully accommodated with defensive wards and the few creature comforts his son had requested, and he left for it half a day before the Ashurans arrived. The solemnity of the parting eased the tensions between them some, though not as much as Wekesa would have liked.

"I'd still be more comfortable with your father taking the position," Tikoloshe admitted, smoothing away nonexistent wrinkles on their son's robes.

"I see no need to revisit the matter," Masego bluntly replied.

Wekesa discretely shook his head while meeting his husband's eyes. Now was not the time.

"Be careful," Warlock said. "They might be meddlers but there are a great many of them. If it gets out of hand, I'd rather you retreat and we fight over the city itself."

"I've no intention of risking my life for Thalassina, I assure you," Masego said.

He nodded in approval. In this, at least, he had his priorities straight. Wekesa hesitated, then pulled his son into a tight embrace. Masego stiffened but eventually returned it, their clutch on each other growing tight. There were no guarantees, in war. They both knew that all too well.

"Come back to us," Warlock whispered.

"I will," Masego whispered back, voice little more than croak. "You two stay safe as well. I know you'll have walls in between, but rituals-"

"-are never a toy, always dangerous," Wekesa finished softly.

One of the first lessons he'd taught his son. Magic was beautiful and wondrous, but it should never be taken lightly. Great mages had believed themselves to have mastered their powers fully, and always paid for that presumption. There were no exceptions. They released each other and Tikoloshe kissed both their son's cheeks, fingers lingering on his shoulder. Masego was so *thin*, now.

"We'll have a family supper tonight," 'Loshe said. "Just us. It's been too long."

Masego nodded before heading out for the docks, where a ship would await him. They both watched him leave, standing together.

"He will not be that tender with us again for a very long time," Tikoloshe murmured.

Wekesa grimaced, but did not deny it. After today they'd have to bind his powers and take him into custody. He would not forgive them that for a very long time.

"Preparations are done," Warlock said. "The rest we can worry about tomorrow."

Work mercifully took away his mind from it all, for there was much still left to do. The set-up was not particular complex – Petronian sorcery was a straightforward as the Miezans who'd created it – but it was rather laborious. Two-way scrying panels were set up along the city's outer battlements so that Wekesa would have good overview of the Maze and the Ashurans, then anchored in a crescent moon around him as the last touches were put to the circle of power where he'd direct the rituals from. That the defence was taking place on a High Lord's dime meant the

very finest materials had been acquired for this, obsidian from the Grey Eyries and Callowan limestone mixing with half a dozen other substances that put together could have easily bought a luxurious mansion in Ater. As Warlock sat at the heart of the array, four more circles were initiated. Every practitioner in the city had been pressed into service for the purpose, which was rather simple: they were to release sorcery into their attributed circle, where Wekesa would be able to take it and use it for his own purposes.

The recent labour of activating the wards of Shatha's Maze had left too many mages exhausted and on the edge of burning out, sadly, which meant that to make up the losses two thousand criminals had to be slain and their life force provided instead. Wekesa disliked using such primitive means, but it could not be denied that the power resulting was pure and plentiful. If they'd had another week it could have been avoided, but as things stood he'd have to make his peace with it. It was late morning when the preparations were complete, and from that point forward Warlock sat with his eyes closed. Keeping mastery of four circles beyond his own while not actively using the power within required a great deal of concentration. Tikoloshe sat next to him, idly paging through a rather lurid Proceran romance, and though his husband remained silent his mere presence was soothing.

The Ashuran war fleet came into sight halfway past Noon Bell, and so finally the battle for Thalassina began.

It was said that the Thalassocracy had more war ships than the rest of Calernia put together, and it was easy to believe that while looking upon their fleet. More than three hundred ships, flying the colours of the Baalite Hegemony with the masked sun of Ashur set on them. It was not even the full muster of Ashuran might, Wekesa knew. There were still ships out raiding, and smaller defense fleet left to anchor in the Ashuran home isle.

"Around third of those are repurposed merchant ships," Tikoloshe noted, his practiced eye picking up on the signs. "No ballistas on them, they'll be serving as troop transports."

"It won't matter, if they never make shore," Warlock replied.

Ashur took the offensive, as was only to be expected. By now they'd have realized that Shatha's Maze had been activated, though they should still be unaware of the... modifications added to it. Wekesa kept the four pools of power close at hand. Two of those, he'd already decided, would be kept in reserve to detonate the Maze. Only one was necessary strictly, speaking, but best to be prudent. The other two were his to shape in answer to Ashuran assaults, however. After that he would have to draw on his own power, which would be difficult. His preferred field of study was useless on water, and his knowledge of Sabrathan sorcery was limited. There would be no turning the spells around here as he

had done when duelling the Witch of the Woods. It would have been madness to attempt the same tactics against an army that he'd used against a single Named, regardless. One Gifted he could account for, no matter how talented, but hundreds on hundreds? There were too many variables, even if they resorted to rituals. The waters ahead of the war fleet rippled unnaturally, and Wekesa learned forward.

"So it begins," the Sovereign of Red Skies murmured.

It was a ritual, that much was obvious. The limitations of their practitioners were fully displayed as massive amounts of sorcery sunk into the waves but moved only sluggishly: Ashuran mages were known used to working in concert.

"Strike?" Tikoloshe said.

Wekesa studied the sea's surface. The ripples were gaining in strength, but not *forward*. Splitting to the sides? Ah. He smiled.

"They believe the defence is being directed from the underground facilities on the shore," he said.

"We never took down the wards on them," Tikoloshe noted. "There was no reason to."

"Let them waste their first blow, then," Warlock said.

It was an interesting working, he had to admit. Tendrils of water rose from the sea and began spinning like gargantuan drills, impacting the shore with thunderous crack and going straight through the rock. Quicker than simple water should, even rotating. A hardening effect, perhaps? He could see no trace of it, but there was only so much he could find out at this distance. If there'd been anyone underground, they would be dead by now. Eventually the Ashurans released their ritual, the water collapsing. It was either drunk by the earth or remained in large puddles, save for the parts that trickled back into the sea.

"And now they see there are no issues with the Maze," Tikoloshe said. "Meaning it was either never overseen or they struck at nothing."

"Even if they'd wiped out our mages most the wards would still be working," Wekesa noted. "That cannot be their strategy whole."

His statement proved to be correct when ritual began again. It had similar effect on the sea as the previous one, though Warlock noticed the sorcery was going broad instead of sinking deep. Interesting. Not tendrils this time, then.

"They're going around it," his husband suddenly said. "They don't need tides if they can make their own wind, 'Kesa. They're going to spread sea over shore and bypass the Maze entirely."

"They will try," he shrugged, and reached for the first pool of power.

If the ritual was allowed to proceed and stretched out the waters on both sides it would be difficult to deal with – he'd either have to split the power and pit himself against the enemy on both sides simultaneously from a position of weakness or strike twice, which would waste his entire offensive power. Yet Wekesa still allowed them to pour sorcery into the sea. He had to make every strike count, to letting them get to the point of no return would be more efficient. Eventually he had to make a judgement call, being uncertain of the precise tipping point. Closing his eyes, Warlock shaped the power and released it. It came out as pure kinetic force, angled in a loose triangle and impacting the sea with all the strength he could put out. The dark-skinned man sighed as he opened his eyes and witnessed his work. It would have worked better as a Trismegistan formula, he had to admit. Still, even in this manner the strike was massive enough to begin a tidal wave and send it tumbling towards the Ashuran fleet. While the wave hid the enemy from his sight there must have been panic when the enemy mages realized they had to abandon their ritual after investing so heavily in it.

The backlash ought to kill more than a few.

"Something's wrong," Tikoloshe murmured.

Warlock's brow rose. It was true the enemy were slow on the answer, but that could simply be the result of their mages fearing the backlash. And yet... He adjusted one of the scrying panels. Was part of the Ashuran fleet missing?

"They went into it," he realized. "Underwater."

Absurd, unless... The tidal wave slowed. Stopped to a standstill. And then it *turned around*.

"Merciless Gods," Wekesa murmured. "Have they been using only half their mages this whole time?"

If that were true they wouldn't be simple hundreds, they would be thousands. There shouldn't be that many mages in the whole of Ashur.

"That's a repurpose of structure, Wekesa," his husband said. "Slow and horribly sloppy – they brute forced it, I'd wager – but it is. Which they shouldn't be able to do."



Sabrathan sorcery wouldn't be able to handle a ritual that delicate and abstract, the mages would start losing control halfway through.

"Jaquinite," he said. "That was Jaquinite sorcery. They have *Procerans* with them."

Hells and Damnation. The Principate's mages might be backwoods savages, but they were a lot more flexible than the Ashurans. The scope of rituals available to the opposition hadn't just doubled, it was... Hard to calculate, and there were more pressing matters.

"They want to tear down the Maze," Warlock hissed. "And get ships through to assault the remains from both sides."

Which he could not allow, not when his son was in the middle. The wards around Masego should allow him to survive the tidal wave, but he'd be out there alone and surrounded. He reached for the second pool of power without hesitation. There was no time for subtlety: he made a wall of force and smashed it into the waters. The backlash had him flinching, and he felt his nose start bleeding. Fuck. The mages keeping the wave going weren't powerful, but they were *many*. Slowly, his grip on the sorcery began to slip. It'd break, and then...

"**Link**," he croaked out, blood in his mouth.

The relief was almost immediate. Thalassina had old wards anchored around it, and linking them to his working had taken the pressure off his will. The city itself groaned, parts of its walls shattering, but his workaround succeeded. While he no longer had control of the power he'd released, he did control the connection his aspect had forged. It was only cut when the tidal wave broke and collapsed back into the sea, and Warlock let out a long breath.

"My turn," the Sovereign of Red Skies hissed.

He took a third pool of power in hand and let another aspect loose. Ships had been shattered and the Ashuran fleet put in disarray, and that was close enough for his purposes. **Imbricate** shivered across the length of Creation as he matched the sea to the nine-hundredth and thirty-third hell: the sea of blood. The waters began to turn red, bubbling and rising to a boil. It would not be long before the acidity began eating at the hulls. Halos of light bloomed over the ships, one after another. Tikoloshe shivered.

"Speakers," the incubus murmured.

They were not fighting him, Warlock noted. The imbrication was proceeding without being hindered, and the ships were not unharmed. No, it felt like something else. A prayer? A *call*, he

thought. Slowly, something answered. He saw it in his mind's eye. It was not a face, it was too featureless for that. Of what it was made he could not tell, but the glare was blinding. Flesh smoking, Wekesa bared his teeth. He would not bow to priestly meddling. If some entity had come to trouble him, it best be prepared for the consequences. The imbrication he took in hand, abandoning the fleet, and lashed around the not-face.

"Come on, you wretched thing," Warlock grinned nastily. "Let's see how you fare on my own grounds."

It sunk into the depths, the radiance slowly drowned by the sea of blood, and he laughed. Laughed until it evaporated in a storm of blood mist, the thing full and untouched. Not a face, he thought again. It was a mask. Heartbreakingly, impossibly perfect. He looked upon the visage of a god, and that god spoke.

## **BEGONE.**

His bones creaked, his eyes burned and his teeth shattered. His husband was speaking but his ears were ringing. Blinding light came again, not of the creature's making. He'd lost control of the last pool of power and it had gone wild, raw sorcery devouring all near it and shattering the ground. The mask's lips opened to speak once more, a great weight settling on his shoulders.

"Shut up," Hierophant said.

The thing rocked back.

"Seven pillars hold up the sky," Hierophant sang, thrumming with power. "Four cardinals, one meridian."

The pressure vanished and Warlock came back to himself. Through the panel he saw a mask of Light in the sky above the Maze, a terrible radiance surrounding his son. Masego stood alone on his spit of rock, black robes fluttering as he raised his palms. The warded corals around him began melting like snow in summer sun.

"The wheel unbroken, spokes are that not," Hierophant said, voice resounding across the waters. "Thou shall not leave the circle."

Wekesa closed his eyes just in time. It'd been only the smallest possible sliver of attention from Above, he realized. It could not be bound, not truly. But the attempted binding had forced it to retreat, and it had made its displeasure known beforehand. It had swatted down his son, shattered the coral and the wards alike. He was in the sea now, floating. Still alive. Warlock tried to rise but could not.

He was dying, and the Ashuran fleet advanced.

"No," he got out. "Not like this. Not my son."

Tikoloshe held him up, but his husband could not heal.

"I've paid my dues," Warlock hissed. "A lifetime carrying the banner. I am owed. I am owed, *do you hear me?*"

It came like a whisper, slithering across his body. Taking away the pain, leaving dull absence behind.

Below listened.

Below remembered, and paid the debt back in full.

Wekesa stood and knew what he must do. He'd been shown. A gurgled word had rows of runes appearing in the air, the most sophisticated binding on Creation, and with fingers like claws he ripped through them. Scattered the runes, broke the contract beyond repair.

"Wekesa?" his husband said.

"Go, Tikoloshe," he said. "Run. Return home."

His husband's face, so handsome and untouched by time even after all these years, creased in a frown.

"No," the incubus said.

"It will kill you," Wekesa whispered. "It can't. I can't let it. There has never been a devil like you. There may never be again. You are *unique*."

"So are you," Tikoloshe said. "So is he."

"Run," Warlock snarled. "I *order* you."

He laughed.

"And yet here I am," the devil said. "I have been myself for a very long time, 'Kesa."

"Don't waste it," he implored. "After you're dispersed..."

"What comes back will not be me," Tikoloshe softly agreed. "A blank slate. Tabula rasa."

The incubus looked up at the sky.

"I decide this," he said, tone full of wonder. "Of my own free will."

His smile was blinding as the sun.

"Isn't that something?" Tikoloshe murmured.

Wekesa could feel it thinning in his fingers with every passing heartbeat. It would not be granted to him twice. And yet all he could look at was his husband's eyes.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too," Tikoloshe replied, and threaded their fingers together.

Wekesa looked up at the sun and breathed out. He thought of the others, suddenly. *Sorry, old friends. I'll be going on ahead, so it'll be up to you to snuff the candles on your way out. I'll be waiting with Sabah.* He reached out for it then, what they'd shown him. The barest glimpse of the godhead, but oh so gloriously full.

"**Reflect**," he whispered.

For a moment, for an eternity, Wekesa was unto a god.

He snapped his fingers and the world broke.

—

Hierophant woke up among a sea of corpses and driftwood.

He screamed, but did not flinch.

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### *Printemps*

The goosebumps I had when Masego just told a God to shut up (and it did) reminded me of that unforgettable moment when three horn blows were heard and, I think it was Ranker, thought "oh no she did not..." before the knight army appeared out of thin air!

### [BarthHumphries](#)

I'm just commenting so that I get an email update with new comments

### [sivarajan](#)

The Warlock is dead; long live the Warlock?

### *ereshkigala*

That was kinda dumb of Wekesa.

I mean, crusader invasion in a place he has to defend, where his magic specialty doesn't work, with his loved ones also in the battlefield? That's, like, a bazillion death flags right there.

He should have invoked Red Skies over the largest island in the Maze in advance, then let the mass from the meteors slowly spread to turn the narrows into land.

*Fern*

Just another subtle-ish clue that the Calamities really don't have as good a handle on everything as we might have thought. Wekesa is absolutely right, Malicia has bungled this fucking rodeo to shit. Who picks a fight with an entire continent when they don't even have a navy to defend vulnerable ports? In a nation that literally lives and dies on trade? It's automatically allowing the enemy to dictate too much of the engagement. It would have been much smarter to send Black in to the privateer islands and murder his way through the offscreen cast of Pirates of the Caribbean and use what was left of the privateers to harass the enemy fleet. Instead Malicia used up all her political capital playing "who dies first" with the salacious sahelans.

*Barack Obama*

Who dies first, What dies second, and I Don't Know dies third

*Bart*

He had to leave the sea there for them to sail through so that the city could continue to be a thriving port city.

*therealgridlock*

I mean he literally said "powerful mages believe they have mastered their powers, there is no exception"

And he thinks he has it under control, "i mean one is enough but two will be fine just in case"

>Ends up using 3 and losing the last

"Well shit"

Huge flags right there, was just too short sighted to see his own advice.

*Unmaker*

(Un)Holy shit! A demon with free will. Does making him that way qualify as doing a good deed?

So Hierophant, does scaring a good god equal Catherine's stealing resurrection from an angel?

But really, is there such a thing as a Good god in this situation? I thought the non-Above / non-Below gods were neutral.

### NZPIEFACE

Good = Above  
Literally.

*Jonnnney*

If it's not above or below it's a lower case god in which case their good vs evil is dependent upon how they came into being. The god that Sabah killed to gain the Name Captain was the chaotic evil bloodlust of the orcs. The god that the Deoriathe crafted was vengeful good.

*Rup*

"Seeking redress for scales uneven was still putting stock in the scale itself, when it was that thing's very existence that should be questioned"

..yeah "The Gods are Bastards"

...has such close parallel to the 'scales of justice' in our own world

"Great mages had believed themselves to have mastered their powers fully, and always paid for that presumption"

...reminds me of the old quote:

'there are old pilots..there are bold pilots...there are no old bold pilots'

...lastly...what a magnificent chapter..the calamities-exeunt ..bit by bit

*Nivek*

That's a lot of souls that Warlock sent to their makers. Can't help but wonder if he grabbed some while he was leaving, those would be pretty valuable trade goods in the hells and he did sorta turn into a God (not god, God) for a few seconds.

Also, better luck next time on the God-binding Masego (and you know that there's going to be a next time)

*dugasX*

Nah, Zeze's going to use that binding to bind god-Warlock. did say the Gods Below gave Wekesa enough power to become a god temporarily. Once bound, Warlock ascends to become Masego's god-father. hehe

*NerfContessa*

That would be a really fun turnaround.

But I don't think so. After all this is the first calamity we get in detail. It's bound to be final...

*Rup*

...just to check

The list of chapters at the end below is missing "Ye Mighty"

*Yeah Nah Yeah*

Nah, Ye Mighty is one of the monthly bonus chapters. You can find it under "Extra Chapters".

*Josh Brooks*

I find myself coming back to this chapter again and again during my reread just to remind myself this evil pos finally did die. Shame it couldn't have been more painful. Physically I mean. Emotionally it was great.

*dadycoool*

Zeze really did inherit all his good traits while missing his worst ones. Good thing Cat was there to teach him some more good traits and turn him into a well-rounded individual. One that has an unholy obsession with turning pigs into different things, but still.

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## Chapter 68: Poised

*"Obviously you can't kill me now: your enmity is with the Dread Emperor of Praes, and I've already abdicated. I am now but a humble shoemaker, and what kind of hero slays a shoemaker?"*

– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful. Later noted to have made surprisingly nice shoes during his three abdications.

"So is there, like, a branch of sorcery all about lakes?" I mused. "Because if I'm going to keep using variations on the same trick it feels like there should be."

Akua's brow arched, expressing a monologue's worth of disdain without her speaking a single word.

"Lakeomancy," I suggested. "Catherine Foundling, foremost lakeomancer of her age. I could get a stele done like the old

emperors – you know, basically a whole monument's worth of bragging."

"It would be lacusomancy," Diabolist sighed. "And there is no such thing. Even hydromancy is not a true discipline, properly speaking. Like most physical effects it falls under the broader aegis of manifestation."

"That just means we're pioneers, Akua," I grinned. "Look at us, bravely exploring the many ways you can steal, drop or otherwise move lakes."

"Stolen is something of a misnomer," the shade noted, looking down. "We've only borrowed it, practically speaking."

Well, she wasn't wrong. Great Strycht had proved as much of a wonder as Great Lotow, in its own way. It was, well, the easiest way to put it was that it'd been a port. Not unlike Mercantis the city had been raised on a large island, though instead of a river it'd been a lake that surrounded it. A lake that was about as large as half of Daoine, which was rather impressive. Useful, too. It hadn't been this large originally: the basin had been artificially deepened and broadened before tributary rivers were dug into the stone to feed it. Tunnels and waterfalls, some coming from underground sources but others from the surface peaks of the Everdark. Lake Strycht was the freshwater source for an entire third of the inner ring, feeding a complex array of canals and sluice gates that were constantly fought over by sigils. The city itself was a bloody mess – scraps between sigils had sunk entire chunks of what'd once been a single island, leaving some sort of demented urban archipelago instead – but it was full of old sigils and would have been horridly difficult to assault. Drow ships were pretty much either rafts or small woven reed boats relying on oars. We'd seized a few, but it would have taken weeks of constant back and forth to get even a small army across.

Besides, the good people of Strycht had made it clear that we were not only unwelcome but currently at the top of their 'murder and harvest' list. I'd sent a few of my lords – the Peerage, Akua had taken to calling them, and the name had kept – to make polite inquiries about holding a council to discuss the dwarven threat and the cabal founded to answer it. They'd, uh, not taken well to that. Long story short, Soln and its fellows had harvested a few Mighty in a spurt of traditional drow diplomacy before making a tactical retreat back. They'd made enough of an impression that all seven cabals dedicated to maintaining control of the waterways had been called upon. Strycht was going to be swimming in old monsters before the month was out, and until then they'd taken to raiding my sigil's camps on the shore. The damage had been limited and we'd mostly come out on top due to sheer numbers and Winter fuckery, but after the initial probes they'd identified the weaknesses in our defences and begun concentrating



on those. My sigil had taken the Hylia ways out of Lotow after stripping it clean of everything remotely food-adjacent and absorbed another six sigils on its way to Strycht, but while it'd massively swelled it was still a far cry from a real army. It was a confederation of tribes, if anything, bound to me by oaths and fear. Not exactly the kind of troops used to maintaining proper watch rosters and fielding patrols. So with the situation steadily worsening and the opposition refusing to talk, I'd decided a rebuttal was in order.

So I'd confiscated Lake Strycht.

It'd taken about two days to empty most of the basin even with two gates as large as we could make them. Taking every last drop had proved impossible: the tributaries kept feeding it and the basin wasn't even so there'd been pockets of water remaining. Still, in my estimating about nine tenths of the initial lake had been shunted off into Arcadia. What had once been water was now a stinking marsh of mud clogged with drying weeds and fish. It was a good thing we'd never attempted a crossing, because when the lake ebbed low some creatures were revealed that even Praesi would flinch at. Some kind of massive oily octopi with barbed tentacles, blind pale lizards the size of houses and long eels with an inexplicable amount of teeth. Most the monsters had gone through the gates, those that didn't either settling in the larger puddles or going wild as they died stripped of water. It'd been a display of power meant for the recalcitrant inside the city, now perched atop hills or small plateaus surrounded by mud, but it'd also been a form of diplomatic pressure. I'd just killed half a dozen rivers crucial to keeping an entire chunk of the inner ring from going thirsty and done a great deal more damage to Strycht itself.

That lake had been their granary. They lived off the creatures swimming in it, of the weeds and plants now dying for lack of irrigation. The city's drow had wells and cisterns, but the population here was easily triple of Great Lotow. They'd be beginning running out soon, and after that they'd be forced to sally out for puddle water with my Peerage waiting in ambush. The Mighty would be able to stick it out until reinforcements arrived, sure, but what about the rest? Nine tenths of their people were going start withering on the vine. Even if the cabals proved victorious against me in a few weeks, sigil-holders would lose most their sigils to thirst. And they had to know that even if they got my head on a pike, there'd been no guarantee of getting the lake back. How many years would it be until the tributaries filled back even half of Lake Strycht? So I'd sent a handful of my Peerage forward again, to revisit the subject of a council. I'd instructed Ivah to make it clear that if they really pushed me they might just get the lake back directly on top their heads, which ought to make at least a few of them reconsider. Once we had a foothold in the city, well, if the rest dug their

heels in I wasn't above ordering an assault. I'd glimpsed what my Peerage was capable of, during our passage through the ways.

I was glad of the oaths, because I wasn't sure I could win the fight if it ever came to that.

"I don't know about borrowed," I said. "I'm considering keeping the lake, or at least a portion of it."

The slight shift in Akua's stance indicated surprise, though I knew better than to think she hadn't allowed it consciously.

"There is no lack of usable geographic features in Arcadia," Diabolist said. "Archer has brought forward the interesting notion of-"

"Yes, Indrani wants me to start dropping mountains," I sighed. "I'm well aware."

"There are also volcanoes in what was once Summer," the shade reminded me. "Actually triggering an eruption when we need it would be significantly more difficult, but not outright impossible."

"There's basically everything in Arcadia, if you look long enough," I grunted. "That's not why I'm thinking of redeploying the lake."

"Decoration?" Akua drily suggested. "I suppose it's never too late to acquire taste, though I must warn you 'monster-infested underground lake' is rather *passé*. Very sixth century."

Ugh, and she probably thought she was actually funny.

"Well," I brightly replied, "as the foremost lakeomancer of my generation-"

"There is no such thing," Diabolist insisted.

"- it occurs to me I've been mostly, um, dropping large bodies of water on people," I said. "For tactical purposes."

"As one does," Akua agreed.

"It seems like a very narrow use of the ability," I said. "When I have an entire region of Callow that, between you and Summer, was effectively ravaged."

Scarlet eyes narrowed.

"You want to move the lake to Callow," she said.

"I'd have to consult governors and landowners," I noted. "And someone familiar with farming practices. But it occurs to me that

Summer-torched land might benefit from fresh irrigation. Hells, there might even be enough fish left for actual fishing."

"And you want to use a lake born of Creation. because moving an Arcadian body of water might very well have... unforeseen consequences," Akua murmured. "Wise."

I passed a hand through my hair.

"Look, there's so many problems I can't solve with killing," I said. "So it might be time to consider other solutions. One of the reasons Praes has been such a murderous shitshow play of correspondingly shitty and murderous thespians is that the Wasteland is exactly as termed. If I take a lake from somewhere else and sell it to whoever's holding the Tower, it could tip the balance the other way. The Empire wouldn't start starving its way into an invasion every other decade."

Horrifically enough, Diabolist was *beaming*.

"You want to steal pieces of Creation and auction them off to nations," she said. "Dearest, this might be the first of your designs I can say I wholeheartedly endorse."

"It's not stealing," I protested. "You can't *own* a lake. I mean, legally yes and nobody better take mine, but when you think about it in a religious sense--"

"You are preaching to the choir, my heart," Akua intervened. "Admittedly the choir is made of damned souls, but let us not pretend talented singers are usually headed for the Heavens."

"Why am I talking to you about this?" I muttered. "Of course you'd be on board, this is basically Dread Empress Sinistra's plan only with riches instead of hero-delivered death at the end."

"It could be useful to mark some mountain peaks rich in ore, when we return to the surface," Diabolist suggested. "Mercantis would pay a fortune for access to mines where there can be no dwarven claim. And Callow itself is famously poor in precious metals: acquiring a source of mintage would be quite useful."

The worse part was that it wasn't actually a bad idea. Gods knew my kingdom could use the coin and the mines both. What I hated most about Akua was how useful she could be when she put her mind to it, which was always.

"Something to consider in the future," I said.

She studied me carefully.

"There is more," she noted.

"Someone broke one of my cities last year," I frostily replied.

"And so you have hordes of refugees in need of shelter," Diabolist said, delicately avoiding the subject. "As well a myriad of standing structures about to be permanently vacated."

Not to mention a treasury that'd effectively be a glorified war chest and granary until the Tenth Crusade ended, which meant no funds for the kind of reconstruction that southern Callow badly needed. Hakram had produced miracles in keeping the tent cities clothed and fed, but come winter things were going to get ugly. The Waning Woods were too far, and absurdly dangerous to take lumber from if you went any deeper than the very outskirts. I'd seen it coming, of course, and we'd set aside wood and coal for fires, but it wouldn't last all the way through the cold season. And Great Strycht was now a pack of very nice stone districts set atop hills and plateaus, many of which would fit inside a gate. It'd be tricky to get them through without wrecking them, of course, but not impossible. And even ruins would make great building materials, if worse came to worse. There'd be more cities ahead, too. I'd be leading the drow to the surface and until I could settle them where I wanted them to be there'd be a need for something to host them, but it didn't *all* have to be used for that.

It was a little ironic that I'd waited until Thief was gone to start thinking about stealing cities.

"There is merit to the notion," Akua said. "And though you now seem intent on civilian use, there is another side to the coin. If you can take a fortress..."

I could just leave it in Arcadia for later, then plop it out as field fortifications while on campaign. Near instantly. Juniper might just forget to hate Diabolist to the bone for a few heartbeats, if she heard about this.

"They're not heavy on fortifications so far," I said. "I wouldn't get my hopes up."

"We've not yet penetrated deep into the inner ring," she replied. "There may yet be opportunity."

I didn't disagree. If I could get my hands on even just a fort, it'd be a nasty surprise to pull on my foes down the line. Field battles against the Dead King would be a chancy gamble even if the entire Grand Alliance was mobilized, this kind of sudden upset might be able to turn the tide. The first time it was used, at least. Neshamah wasn't the kind of enemy that'd fall for the same trick twice. We stood there for some time in silence, the mood shifting as the conversation ebbed. The sight of the cavern before us wasn't something a few days could get me used to, I silently admitted. The sheer size of it was staggering. It had

the length and breadth of a province, the walls so distant even my eyes found them hard to discern, but the ceiling was what awe me every time. It was uneven, betraying that this was no singular cave but hundreds of them carved into a single place by what must have been decades of hard labour. I'd never seen anything taller save for the Tower itself, and the Tower was millennia of Praesi madness made into edifice. What kind of people had the ancient drow been, to make this?

What had broken them so deeply they'd become a pack of rats scavenging their own ruins?

"Not even Keter is match for it in scope," Akua softly said, gaze following mine. "Fitting, I suppose. The Crown of the Dead is a mere gate to the Dead King's true realm, impressive as it is. This must have been one of the beating hearts of their empire."

"Don't you have a bureaucracy to run?" I said.

"Subordinates must be assessed," she replied. "At my behest you granted Centon much power. If it proves incapable of discharging its duties without my constant supervision, replacement must be found."

And by that we both knew she meant Centon would be harvested and another drow raised in its place. Not killed, I'd set down rules about that, but Night could be taken without killing. The disgrace would probably cut deeper than death, though. Ivah certainly hated speaking of how it'd come to have that name in the first place. It was cold-blooded of Diabolist, but then I expected nothing less from her. Your average Wasteland aristocrat made lizards look warm in comparison, and Akua Sahelian had remained on top of that pack for years.

"Sometimes I wonder what it takes to make someone like you," I said. "But then I remember all I heard about your mother, and I stop wondering."

Her lips quirked.

"And what exactly did you hear, dearest?" she asked.

"Black called her brilliant," I said. "Said that she'd managed to survive Malicia's rise while supporting her enemies with little loss of influence. He was wary of her."

"High praise, coming from the Carrion Lord," Akua noted. "Mother was a creature of nuances."

"You must have hated her," I said. "That story you told me about your friend. No child should have to live through that. Not even you."

"I suppose I did," the shade murmured. "But not in the way you mean. You – your people – marry personal hatreds with your actions in a way we are taught not to."

"Praesi keep grudges too, Akua," I said. "Take revenge. There's an entire hall of screaming heads in the Tower speaking to the truth of that."

"I do not explain myself well, I think," Diabolist said. "I was raised to treat Akua Sahelian and the heiress to Wolof as different persons. I could hate, and take revenge, as the first. The second must be a creature suborned only to ambition. Those among my people who do not learn to separate one face from the other die young."

"That's absurd to me," I admitted. "I can understand necessity dictating your actions. I leapt down that slope years ago. But you can't just pretend it's two different people, Akua. It's still you. Your actions. I didn't somehow fight the Diabolist and spare you. It's all on your head, like it's all on mine."

"Perhaps in Callow that is true," she mused. "But in the Wasteland? We must clasp hands with those who've slain our kin, stabbed our predecessors in the back, stolen riches and appointments. It is a necessary distinction, Catherine. We can make sport of each other, so long as it is that. We would all lose for the stripping of that veil."

"Then shouldn't you?" I said. "Lose, I mean. Your entire philosophy is that conflict breeds strength, yet I can't call what you describe anything but fragile."

She quietly laughed.

"How harsh a judgement you cast on my people," she said. "Will you hold all others to the same standard? The severe Ashurans, strangling their own kind with a rope of rules and tiers. The quarrelsome Procerans, who war with all under the sun out of hungry ambition. And even your own, Catherine. How many teeth-clenching grudges has Callow followed to dark endings?"

"None of the others wound Creation bartering for power," I said. "Or bleed thousands upon thousands in rituals. I have axes to grind with my enemies, Akua, but I know what they are. Where their limits lie."

"Then the issue is of means, not philosophy," Diabolist said. "And so for the greatest monster of all, you need look no further than your teacher. What *limits* does the Carrion Lord have?"

"And he, too, will be held to account," I quietly said. "For what he has done and may yet do."

"Ah," Akua smiled. "And are these the words of Catherine Foundling or the Black Queen?"

"That's my entire point," I said. "They're the same person. That's what responsibility means."

"And mine is that your decisions will always be a choice," Diabolist said. "Between what the woman wants and what the queen requires."

I waved a hand dismissively, tired of the argument. Her logic only held up because it was a closed circle.

"But since you asked," Akua said, looking at the distant city. "I despised my mother. For what she did. For what she wanted from me. But it was Tasia Sahelian that was my enemy, and her I admired until the day she lost."

"Because she was brilliant," I said.

"Because she was everything I was taught to want," she mused. "Powerful and cunning and every bit the match of our Empress."

"Until she lost," I said.

"I severed our relations before I could be dragged down with her," Akua said. "But I would not call that revenge. It was not a matter between us but between the Diabolist and the High Lady of Wolof."

"And do you regret it?" I asked. "Leaving her behind."

I wasn't sure, I thought, what I was looking for. Humanity, maybe. Some speck of a person who had more to her than Wasteland iron and villainy. But what would I even do with it, if it was found? There was no saving someone like Akua, and I did not want to try. A hundred thousand souls demanded otherwise. The shade's face was distant, lost in her thoughts.

"I do," Diabolist finally said. "What a strange thing that is."

"She was a lot of things," I said. "But your mother was one of them."

"She was," Akua Sahelian agreed.

Her lips quirked.

"I should have killed her myself, mother to daughter."

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### *DroughtBringer*

Guys we are so close to one thousand (1000) votes. Go vote and we can hit 1000!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

### *NerfGlastigUaine*

Forget the weekly, we're less than 800 votes away from PGtE beating Ward as top webfiction of the year! Everyone vote!

### *Michael*

1023 after my vote. Also, does anyone else hold Dread Emperors Irritant and Traitorus to be the literal best ever? I crack up and laugh like an idiot over each quote of theirs.

### *Lokesh*

It turns out irritant was just traitorous in disguise. And someday I will claim that even revenant was just traitorous who betrayed death.

### *erraticerrata*

Character contest continues, Hierophant vs Hune. Link to vote below.

<https://www.strawpoll.me/16794917?fbclid=IwAR07-zJQGBZfft87vMfWiq0tpZ7FiilSEbg8yPc3apfD1C98wtNJjih7ub8>

### *SMHF*

Let's face it. This is just a mandatory confirmation for Masego! ^\_^

### *Dainpdf*

This will be a duel for the H's.

Puns aside, we have best mage vs best ogre. On one hand, the very talented and interesting Zeze, coming off a very emotional chapter. On the other, Hune, one of the only characters to tell Catherine to her face that she doesn't believe in her.

### *NerfGlastigUaine*

Honestly, I'm surprised Hune even has five votes. Guess there'll always be contrarians.

### *Dainpdf*

I voted for Hune. Honestly, I think she (or other contrarian characters) should have more screen time. So far, IIRC,



we've had Hune, the Pilgrim and Wekesa tell Cat off for what she stands for. And mostly only Hune from the side of the oppressed.

*stevenneiman*

A good number of characters have called Cat out about specific things, but Hune was noteworthy as the only one who was speaking truth to power rather than speaking opinion from power when they did so.

*Dainpdf*

The Pilgrim sort of kind of counts, having refused to get involved in his country's politics because he knows it would lead to unnecessary bloodshed. The issue, of course, is he is a powerful Named and has the influence that gives whether he wants to or not.

*stevenneiman*

Pilgrim gets some credit for speaking frankly in the hopes of avoiding bloodshed, and more for being willing to compromise to avoid warcrimes even when he couldn't get a surrender, but he was still speaking as an equal, with the assurance that he couldn't make things worse because he was already dealing with an enemy. Hune could probably have gotten Cat to like her without too much effort, but she chose to tell her unpleasant truths and refuse to get swept along in her will. That took a lot of courage, because Hune herself pointed out that Cat could have her punished arbitrarily.

*Dainpdf*

You have a point, though I'll add that with what we've since learned the Pilgrim has in his arsenal he may have some credit for speaking to Cat as equal when he may have been her superior.

*goliath1303*

Wow. I literally feel like we've read 2 different books if you think well of the Grey Pilgrim.

"He spoke frankly to avoid bloodshed"

Then refused to use his influence to end a pointless series of battles because it would hurt Cordelia's position. Even though, due to his truth-sensing power, he now unequivocally that Cat was telling the truth when he spoke to her. Cordelia's hope was worth more than all those lives lost in northern Callow.

Arguably, the whole crusade actually. If he spoke up the entire crusade would have probably been smothered then and there. If he had given her the slightest opening, Cat could have told him about the Liesse Accords. He would have been able to see an arguably better potential possible future that would have left everybody, except maybe Praes, stronger and better positioned to attack the Dead King, Chain of Hunger, Everhart, etc. With the 10th crusade dismantled early on, an undamaged Procer, Callow, Levant, etc could have worked together against those threats and more. Plus they wouldn't have to devote troops to watching their shared borders while doing so.

"He was willing to compromise to avoid warcrimes even when he didn't get a surrender"

Which is only right. Agreeing to mutual codes of conduct when the country you're invading doesn't roll over and let you conquer it unopposed definitely doesn't make you the morally superior side. Really this whole thing says better things about Cat, than Pilgrim. Let's not forget, the terms were not only offered by her, she actually offered BETTER terms. She was refused prisoner exchanges and GP tried to limit her to no devils & demons while arguing that they should get to use angels. He only agreed because Cat made him. It's also not like he gave up anything extra to stop Cat's side from doing something monstrous. He agreed to a reciprocal limiting of extreme options. And he did this from the position of invading army that had turned down an honest offer(which again, he knows sure to his powers) to help them achieve their stated goal. Cat would gate the army of the crusade, and probably done even more to help honestly, straight to Ater. Instead they just wanted to conquer Callow again and divide it amongst themselves. Basically what I'm saying is, you don't get credit for agreeing to terms with the country your invading, especially when they honestly restrict your victim(and that's what Callow is here if we're honest) more than they do you. I actually think you lose all right to be patted on the back for things like that when you're not only the aggressor, but show how thin your justifications really are by turning down the multiple attempts and offers Cat made to try and end the unjust war you insist on prosecuting. All that's one thing though, but did let's not forget that he ran away at the earliest opportunity, and what was his very first action upon doing so? Here's a refresher since you seem to have forgot: he committed the worst(and only that we know

of) war crime since Akua's Folly. He used biological warfare that targeted military personnel as well as civilians. He doesn't get a pass because he's "Good" when his actions are evil.

P.S. This isn't really germane to the story at hand, but there's 1 more action we should think about in the context of GP and war crimes. He smothered his nephew in his sleep to prevent him from uniting Levant against Procer. Whether Procer and Levant sound be at odds or not is irrelevant. There's no 2 ways about it, the Grey Pilgrim is just as bad as, and in some cases worse than, the Evil he fights. I think with just the info we have, it's safe to say GP is a bigger monster than Cat, hands down. Add that to what's definitely happened offscreen, plus everything he surely did in the past without us hearing about it, and you're left with just somebody whose as much of a monster as any who've held the Tower.

"He was still speaking as an equal, with the assurance that he couldn't make things worse because he was already dealing with an enemy."

Except he made it worse. The armies on both sides could have walked away if he had taken Cat's offer.

Basically my stance bike down to: Screw the Grey Pilgrim and the sanctimonious, hypocritical, self-righteous horse he rode in on. He gets no passes for his half-assed attempts at conflict resolution and limiting collateral damage. Not after not only spurning offers made in good faith to give the crusade exactly what the leaders claimed it was after, but resorting to warcrimes while still thinking his side is morally superior. Between him and Saint we see that heroes can be just as bad as, and sometimes worse than the villains. You're not better than the other side just because you kowtow to Angels instead of worshiping Below. Especially not when some of your enemies barely, if at all, pay lip service to the Hellgods while someone the people on your side manages the mental gymnastics needed to be the Heavens axe-man, but mentally absolve themselves off wrongdoing and even responsibility for their actions with "the Heavens willed it". Every human, barring that one radical outlier, is guilty in the angels eyes. Hanno knows that, so every time he clips that coin he's making a choice. He knows that if hhe flipped it for any priest, innkeeper, or beggar he would be forced to kill them. He doesn't do it with every person he meets though, does he? No, he reserves it for the people he want to kill.

Therefore, his whole "I don't judge" shtick is bulkshit.

In my opinion, Hanno and Tariq – the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim – are the most hypocritical characters in the story. Are there ones who are more bloodthirsty, unrepentant, and morally bankrupt? Yes. There aren't, however, any characters that are more hypocritical, deluded, or undeservedly self-righteous. I hope they, mostly GP though, don't get to go out in a blaze of glory, holding back the tides of evil and cursing the hells with their last breath. I want them, him, to die powerless, alone, far from home, and knowing that their death means nothing and everything they accomplished in life will be either forgotten or swept away. It honestly shouldn't be super hard to be on the morally superior side when opposition is people called the Black Queen, Dread Empress, and Black Knight. Somehow the fall short of that though.

*RanVor*

The bar representing votes for Hune barely registers on my screen.

*stevenneiman*

Hune was interesting in her own way, and she might have actually had a real shot if she'd ever had more than one genuine interaction on screen. And since everyone knows that this particular vote is a foregone conclusion, I think a fair few people who liked that one interaction voted for her, not because they think they can get her (I think hune was female? could be wrong, too lazy to go back looking for pronouns) a victory, but because they want to see more of Hune. Still though, Hune's probably the least important character (except \*maybe\* Nauk) to get on the roster, as well as being against a much stronger candidate (in my opinion, at least), and that shows in the results of this vote.

*mavant*

Hierarch. Hye.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

How is this fair at all when all you've been doing lately is writing Hierophant interludes.

*stevenneiman*

Let's be honest, Hune was probably just there to pad the roster out to 16. The innkeeper Cat used to work for got more screen time, and I don't even remember his name. Hune's one focal scene was pretty memorable, but it's all she really got.

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

Wasn't sure if I should vote for Hierophant, but in the end I will not flinch.

*taovkool*

Who, in all the holy hell and damned heaven, is this Hune person?

*Nuke\_The\_Earth*

Ogre, doesn't like Cat much and wasn't seen very often.

*Clmineith*

Not fair.

I mean, Masego is one of my favorite character, but I LIKE Hune! More than some characters for whom I voted before

*Snowfire1224*

After we finish this voting bracket with main characters, we should start another made entirely out of past dread enperors and enpressess who have page quote.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

Irritant or Traitorous will definitely take it.

*RanVor*

Irritant would win by working winning the contest into the first part of his plan.

*WuseMajor*

And then it would be revealed that everyone participating in the contest was secretly Traitorous.

*Michael*

Ha. Hahahaha. Ha. Fell for it again! A band of heroes are after the winner of the tournament. You just saved my life! Another victory for Irritant 😊

*Cap'n Smurfy*

It's taken a while but Catherine is finally starting to Think with Portals.

*Dainpdf*

She even has her own GLaDOS. Except, you know, more evil.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I'm not entirely sure about that. Think about what GLaDOS routinely puts bushels of fully sentient cores through for a few minutes...

*Dainpdf*

There's still some good in GLaDOS... Well, there was, she claims she deleted it.  
With Akua, one digs and digs and digs and it's turtles, I mean evil, all the way down.

[Javvies](#)

Sufficiently enlightened self-interest can look a lot like altruism.

*Dainpdf*

Until one starts talking about the superiority of killing tens of thousands for a zombie army. Or how one's greatest regret with regards to their mother is not killing her. In an affectionate way.

*Anony*

I think that's part of what he's getting at. That obviously wasn't sufficiently enlightened self interest, or it wouldn't have ended with her heart ripped out and her soul stiteched into a cloak.

*Quite possibly a cat*

Think of what would have happened if Akua stabbed her mother instead of her friend.

*Dainpdf*

If she'd tried? Disappointed mother, punished Akua. What would have happened to the friend is harder to predict, but most likely either executed or left for Akua to kill later. Probably the former.

*Mingablo*

It was also a continuation of the Pratchett (mis)quoting.

*Dainpdf*

Oh. I have brought shame myself by not catching the quote.  
Please excuse me.

*Akuabestgurl*

Akua is like an onion!

She has layers!

But every single one is the same and if you try to dig deep you start crying

*Dainpdf*

She's great as a condiment when fried in a bit of olive oil?

*Big Brother*

And again, Akua shows a line of thought about family I can approve of. If a family member must die, it's better to be done by a relative's hand.

*Dainpdf*

Is it? Why? I'd have a professional deal with the euthanasia, if it has to be done. Preferably let the person do it themselves.

*Big Brother*

From a Medical standpoint, yes have a professional do it. But in the manner Akua speaks of, do it yourself.

*Dainpdf*

Let them take it into their own hands. It's their life, it belongs to them. If they ask for help, then sure, but don't take this from them.

*Two* \_\_

I believe the op is not referring to medical euthanasia, but to grudges and family members that have stabbed you in the back and abused you.

*Dainpdf*

Since I don't believe in a death penalty, if there isn't some major reason the person HAS to die I still think they should be given the option of offing themselves.

### *NotQuiteHere*

Isn't that the worst thing you could possibly do to a person? Let them kill themselves? Don't virtually all the religions say that killing oneself results in bad things? And therefore if there is even a chance of a good afterlife why get rid of it for them? Kill them yourself before they get the chance. 'Tis kinder.

### *Nuke\_The\_Earth*

I maintain that killing somebody is wrong, but letting them die is acceptable, so long as they want it and it ends their suffering. Of course, this is very much dependent on the situation.

### *Dainpdf*

What does religion, especially IRL religions that don't exist in Creation, have to do with morality, tho. If someone *\*has\** to die, I'd rather empower them to go into oblivion by their own hand, unless they ask for help. Of course, if they don't have to, I would rather they don't die, but that's not the question that was posed.

### [TeK](#)

That does remind me of Taras Bulba: "Stand still, don't move! I gave you life, I will also kill you!" said Taras, and, retreating a pace, he brought his gun up to his shoulder. Andrii was white as linen: his lips could be seen to move softly, and he uttered a name; but it was not the name of his native land, or of his mother, or of his brethren; it was the name of the beautiful Pole. Taras fired.

### *Nobody*

An even earlier version of this can be found in Euripedes' Medea!

"No! No! No! By the Furies of Hell,  
I'll not abandon them to my enemies and their violation.  
It's all done now, anyway, there's no escape.  
They must die too. And since they must,  
The one who gave them life must end it"

### [Javvies](#)



Hah. Looting natural resources to sell off. And sounds like she's planning on stealing a city or two weeks she's at it.  
Nice.

Lakeomancy.

Cat, this habit is more likely to lead to a title, nickname, or cognomen than a branch of magic. "The Lakedropper", "Lady of the Falling Lakes", etc.

*Decius*

Stolen City.

*Rook*

If she ever fights Ranger, it'll be the Lady of the Lake vs the Lady that throws Lakes

*Akuabestgurl*

Lady of Get Laked

*HandyCapped*

'The lady of Yoink!', definitely.

*AVR*

Other fun things about stealing gigatonnes of water would be the resulting earthquakes & landslides, introduction of foreign and possibly invasive species and, yes, messing with weather patterns. You really could mess up as badly as the Dread Emperor who tried to steal Callow's weather.

With this underground lake she's incredibly lucky not to have had the quakes & landslides already. It's probably noticeably saltier than most surface lakes what with all the cut stone exposed to the water, and even Cat saw some of the monsters. Most of those probably wouldn't enjoy the sun but you never know what would do well outside its native environment.

*werafdsaew*

Hydrology is not my specialty, but why would removing a lake cause earthquakes and landslides?

*Ekmo*

Lake bed dries up and shrinks. Pressure holding the lake sides disappears. Lake sides collapse inwards. Landslide happens.

Considering that lakes can seep kilometers deep into the ground, causing a collapse due to disappearing pressure down

there can lead to a domino effect radiating upwards and outwards. Thus, localized earthquake.

### *Euodiachloris*

Pressure suddenly not being there has a habit of leading to push-back. See all of Northern Europe slowly springing back from the weight of the glaciers being taken off its landmasses... and southern regions sinking a bit as it tipples in response, too.

Mud and rock: more dynamic than you'd think; more fluid dynamics involved than my poor brain like a to cope with. ;P

### *imagesbe*

Catherine is channeling her inner Black, seeing as she's taking entire cities without a fight.

And dammit Akua, WHY DO I LIKE YOU SO MUCH. And not even in the way that I liked her in book 3, where she was an amazing antagonist I loved to hate.

### *NerfGlastigUaine*

Because she's likely crafting her entire persona into someone that Cat, and by extension the reader, can like.

### *mavant*

Akua's new Name is going to be Parfit's Hitchhiker.

### *luminiousblu*

Because she's reasonable.

### *Faiir*

This chapter makes me doubt Akua again. Her talking about Akua and Heiress as almost split personalities makes me think that Cat's questions can be answered by Akua who likes her and not Diabolist who's actually plotting the betrayal.

### *RanVor*

Except that's kinda bullshit, and as such shouldn't be enough to fool Speaking. What Akua is talking about is not split personality or anything like that, but separation of the needs of her social status from her personal desires.

### *Faiir*

That's what she wants you to think! 😊

*Cicero*

The problem is not that Auka is secretly planning betrayal. The problem is that she will serve faithfully and loyally right up until the moment that it benefits her to betray Cat, and then she will betray Cat regardless of having been sincerely loyal up until that moment.

[Javvies](#)

Nah. Per Akua's discussion with Ivah/Lord of Silent Steps in Ye Mighty, Akua has realized that a perpetual cycle of backstabbing and betrayal is fundamentally flawed.

Also, per Akua, her highest priority is survival. Survival only comes through continually proving herself loyal, competent, and useful to Cat – and doing so to such an extent that Cat decides to agree to finding a loophole in the Oath she made to Viv regarding the utter obliteration of Akua's soul.

Permanent escaping/freedom from Cat's hold over her soul is not actually in Akua's interest either – without Cat's aegis, Akua is an instant target – and nobody else is going to keep her soul around in any sort of state remotely acceptable to her.

*RanVor*

If so, then I believe Cat is quite safe, because I have no idea what would have to happen to make Akua's betrayal of Cat not immediately lethal to the shade in question. Nobody, and I mean **nobody**, is going to allow Akua to roam the Creation unchecked again. If such situation ever arises, Cat is probably going to be ultra-fucked anyway so it doesn't really matter that much.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

I vote for the second name of A Practical Guide to Evil to be :

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

An FAQ on Tribute, Tributes and Tributaries.

[Euodiachloris](#)

And tridents. Probably. 🙄

*RanVor*

And trinities. And triceratopses. And...

*caoimhinh*

And Trebuchets that throw TNT-like Things.

[Euodiachloris](#)

That's selling the green napalm of doom and devilry a little short, don't you think?

*Antoninjohn*

Attacking Procer will get the heroes to kill Cat but to Take the silver mines will not and Callow could use that silver better than Procer can anyway

*Someguy*

I'd also suggest stealing all the Houses of Light from every Invading Nation and "donating" them to the Callowan House of Light one by planting them as pseudo-fortresses around the Ruins of Lisse as anti-undead measures. You can't tell me that there wouldn't be hordes of undead crawling out of there years down the line.

*Lark*

Akua has slowly risen to be perhaps my favorite character in the serial, except possibly Masego or Robber. Such a delight to read – I absolutely love how her philosophy is written, and how it forms her character.

It doesn't hurt that her dialogue is reliably fantastic.

*letouriste*

you reminded me i miss robber. I miss a lot of characters actually: Nauk, robber, aisha, ratface (i can't believe he got out without chara development:/) and a few others more minor characters;)

*Metrux*

I honestly don't miss Nauk, but I can understand why some would. Aisha and Ratface needed more screen time, though, so much time in the back, not enough limelight...

*luminiousblu*

To be fair, Ratface and Aisha are strictly background players when you consider the story follows the adventures of Catherine, not Callow. In Callow I imagine both Aisha and Ratface are far more important than everyone but Hakram, including Vivienne, but Catherine, ironically for all her talk about saving Callow, doesn't really interact with the country besides shouting HAKRAM GET THE CROSS

*Excited*

This shit is so fucking surreal and I love it

*Novice*

So uhh way back in the past I may have argued in a previous chapter that Dread Emperors do not get to abdicate. I hereby retract my statements and apologize because of course Irritant would not only abdicate and remain alive but also do it three fucking times. How in the hells did he manage to convince the High Lords to reinstate him again and again is beyond me.

The tyrants of the tower are all mad. Every single one of them.

[Javvies](#)

He was just that good at his job.

Also, the Heroes that came for him to find him abdicated probably took their frustrations out on his successor.

None of the High Lords would have pushed back against him too hard, lest he name them his successor when he abdicated to dodge Heroes.

*Someguy*

That makes so much sense. I'd be surprised if Traitorous did not something similar. Fastest way to get rid of a political enemy is to foist the job on them when Heroes come knocking.

*Novice*

The only time the High Lords dreaded to be named successor. What a madman.

*Dainpdf*

You see, after the heroes were gone, getting back on the throne was just the first step of his next plan!

[Euodiachloris](#)

Well, plotting while taking time out for yourself to do a little of your hobby is only healthy.

But, seriously... leatherwork? Possibly satin, too? Well, so much for my thoughts along the lines of hunting, shooting and fishing. Should have known, really. \*rolls eyes @ own naivety\*

*Dainpdf*

I mean, evil typed tend to work well with satin.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I'm imagining at least once, during some betrayl or attempt at succession, some high lord yells at him "You should have stayed a shoemaker!" and irritant just sighs and wistfully looks out a window, murmuring "I know."

*Novice*

It all makes sense now! But for real though, he rightfully deserves his moniker "Oddly Successful".

*medailyfun*

>How in the hells did he manage to convince the High Lords the shoes he made were that good

*MetruX*

You, sir, deserve more likes. Too bad the system here won't let me give you likes.

*nick012000*

What I want to know is what Irritant's Name was when he abdicated. The Retired Emperor? The Cobbler?

*Dainpdf*

The Dread Emperor?

*Someguy*

The Cobbler formerly known as Dread Emperor.

*nimelennar*

The Tread Emperor?

*letouriste*

i doubt he kept a Name. He probably can take the throne back without one. The heroes kill his successor each time after all so there is no real Named in his way

*ALazyMonster*

The whole terraforming the continent with stolen lakes and mountains, is downright beautiful. It sounds like a straight up evil plan from a Saturday morning cartoon villain but it is so casually practical that it is glorious.

I also think Irritant might be my favorite dread emperor.

*Dainpdf*

Catherine Foundling, Captain Planet villain extraordinaire.

*Dainpdf*

Man... Akua is the gift that keeps on giving. And I mean "gift" in German.

Cat was right, Akua just keeps reminding us how effed up she is. Also, stealing landscape: good idea. Trying to solve Praesi hunger: maybe not the best. Recall earliest lessons from Black.

Javvies

Ah, but she's not (yet) Dread Empress.

Also, her method would be selling water and fertile soil to the Praesi High Lords that wanted it, not telling them to do things. No room for them to launch a rebellion in protest of her policies if they choose to buy what she's selling.

Plus, she's a lot harder to kill off by (arranged) accident or assassination than the typical Dread Emperor/Empress.

*Dainpdf*

So it won't go wrong in those ways, but it turns out that the mountain she stole had the grandparents of some kid who goes on a journey with the blessing of the Heavens and offs her. Or maybe one of the High Lords gets enough power from this to overthrow Malicia and negotiations break down, with the war to depose Malicia creating even more Wasteland.

Or, hell, they don't depose Malicia but the war still happens and destroys large chunks of fertile land.

*Decius*

Just steal fertile land and dump the wasteland on your enemies.

If you can make a portal the size of a fortress, you can either steal the fortress or cover it in dirt. Only do a couple hundred feet or so, wouldn't want to accidentally drop any dwarves on the bottom.

*RanVor*

Everything can go wrong when you're a villain. There's no helping it. Logically, they should never do anything, for everything is too risky to try.

And yet they do things all the time, and not all of them backfire. Amazing.

*Dainpdf*

It's more of a "don't go against the full narrative weight of the Empire by yoursel" than "don't do anything as a villain".

"Fixing the weather of the empire never works because it goes against immense narrative weight" was one of the first things Black taught Cat.

*Someguy*

She also does not need to sell geographic features if "gifting" them could set off political strife.

Transplanting the income generators of the Crusaders into each other's "pockets" near their borders and setting of a bidding war to deny the other access to Cat's logistics services will be enough.

*werafdsaew*

Except that it's the erratic weather that makes the Wasteland the wasteland and not the soil. The water probably can be used to make the Green Stretch more productive though.

*ALazyMonster*

If a large enough body of water is introduced to an environment, and from the description this lake is massive enough to constitute a small ocean by some definitions, it would also shift weather patterns as the evaporating water would alter where rainfall and other precipitation occurs. The wasteland was also described as desert, which I'm assuming is less sand and more large swaths of dried out earth if she is speculating a lake could change things. Also, from the way it was described the lake she currently has in Arcadia also contains the aquatic life and plants which would slowly make the ground more fertile over time.

There are a lot of assumptions that go into this like assuming weather shifts enough that the lake will replenish, the animals and plants can survive in sunlight, there is a basin dug that will actually hold the water, and so on, but the guideverse has narrative smooth over the little details from time to time so these assumptions may just be kinda handwaved in.

For an idea of how stuff like this works you can google draining the entire Mediterranean Sea, which was an engineering thought experiment for doing kinda the reverse the make more building space, I think that was the idea anyway.

*Snowfire1224*



The only thing though is while that is true that would change the weather under normal circumstances, we have to remember that the wasteland was magically induced when a dread empress tried to steal Callow's weather. It might not be that simple, unfortunately

*AVR*

Other fun things about stealing gigatonnes of water would be the resulting earthquakes & landslides, introduction of foreign and possibly invasive species and, yes, messing with weather patterns. You really could mess up as badly as the Dread Emperor who tried to steal Callow's weather.

With this underground lake she's incredibly lucky not to have had the quakes & landslides already. It's probably noticeably saltier than most surface lakes what with all the cut stone exposed to the water, and even Cat saw some of the monsters. Most of those probably wouldn't enjoy the sun but you never know what would do well outside its native environment.

*grzecho2222*

She could steal the Wastelands weather and dump it Keter. Both sides would be happy

*Dainpdf*

Right! Plans involving the Wasteland and weather theft have worked great in the past!

*grzecho2222*

But the Empress was stealing from Callow, which means Heroes, Evil vs Evil plans work out better and who would be opposition in this operation? And what could be worse than weather that actually destroys country without instantly killing it that doesn't insta-kill it, because Narration won't let Praes randomly disappear

*Dainpdf*

The Narrative also won't let Praes's hunger problem be solved, so something will go wrong.

*Yotz*

Was going to mention portalling stuff from the inside of pressurized containers to emulate high yield explosives – but that was already in the recent noosphere strata thanks to certain anime, and before that – to last book of *WoT*.

So, let's up the ante for the future Magistress of Borrowwithoutexplicitconsentomancy, shall we – how about stealing Callow itself? Gonna wager Crusaders and other neerdowells will have one hell of a time looking for a way to invade a kingdom currently residing somewhere in Arcadia...

From other branch of thoughts – of slicing and dicing, primarily: if someone would be able to used portal technique to cut out a slice of Arcadia, and splice it into Creation as a wall on the border of Callow – that could pass as a decent Curtain, depending on the contains of the spliced part of course.

Also

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Leaving ruins or empty cities in Arcadia is one thing, a world like that LIKES that sort of mystery.

Putting a living city there is a different story. At the very least, prolonged life there will make residents... change.

[Euodiachloris](#)

One reason to worry about the critters in the lake. Lovecraftian subterranean horrors + old school fairy tales = yikes.

Yotz

Now image the stories that would be told about thouse insane Callowans, who regularly fish for thouse creatures.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Years ahead in the story, Dread Cthulu comes to creation, for he is not bound to one dimension. The time of doom is upon the land. All will go mad at the sight and laugh and find new ways to kill and to die.

Well, in some places at least. In another, the Callowans look up at the mountain that moves and have different thoughts. "Huh" says Marshall Abigail. "That thing looks an awful lot like last weeks dinner. Bigger though"

"Bet they'd let us keep a piece" said General Krolem.

Abigail shook her head "That thing was Chewy as all hell. Bet this thing is even worse."

Krolem nodded. "No bones. It's not right, biting through something that doesn't crunch. But this one we probably can't cut a big enough piece off to reach bone anyway. We

have to at least try it once it's dead Marshall. I will be sure to get you the best piece"

Once again, Abigail wondered how she'd come to marry this consumption-obsessed orc. Still a vast improvement over a ferret cousin, though.

*MetruX*

The only mortal people to ever live in Arcadia without being Named were the elves of the Golden Bloom, not even the main elves did that, and all elves are practically Named. So... Not the best idea. Taking them there for a while and then coming back? Now that could work.

*Mikasi*

Which anime did that recently? Also WoT?

*Someguy*

Goblin Slayer uses a Gate to the bottom of the ocean as a water cutter.

In Wheel of Time, Androl Genhald uses Gate creatively.

[http://wot.wikia.com/wiki/Androl\\_Genhald](http://wot.wikia.com/wiki/Androl_Genhald)

[Euodiachloris](#)

Um... Androl can pretty much *only* use Gate without accidentally burning himself out or having the weave fizzle out on him, though. A restriction like that quickly teaches a guy to get highly creative. 😊

Also, it's handy to never need to carry scissors ever again. To use on anything.

*Yotz*

\*\*\*SPOILERS ABOARD\*\*\*

*Goblin Slayer*, end of episode 4 – titular Slayer uses a modified Portal Scroll to gate in a continuous stream of water from the bottom of the ocean to use it as a form of a water cutter.

WoT – *Wheel of Time*, in one of the endtail books an asha'man uses portal to gate in a torrent of pressurized lava on the battlefield, using it as impromptu liquid-thrower to eliminate a troublesome army of significant size. Also featured – moving autonomous gates of erratically changing dimensions, swallowing wide swaths of enemies; minuscule gates opened high above the battlefield to use it

as observer drone-cam; hidden in a safe place cannons shooting through a gate which closes afterwards, giving the cannoneers time to reload their weapons and protecting them from harm – and also allowing them to shoot anywhere the gates can be opened...

### [Euodiachloris](#)

You left out the precision leatherwork. He and Irritant would get on, maybe. Just saying.

*iman*

Portable cities and fortress. I like it! Another! \*thor destroy cups\*

*eh*

Hi there, Catherine Foundling here with a deal so great I have to be crazy to offer it, and with all I've been through since I was 16, who can blame me?

Anyway, I've got everything a nation could possibly need. Stuck in the middle of the desert with no water? We'll get you a lake for \$29.99, and if you scry now to the Observatory, we'll throw in another, absolutely free!

No gold in your treasury or iron for steel? We got your back, Peak Mines, mines on mountain peaks are free of those pesky dwarves, allowing you to mine to your heart's content. \$49.99 apiece, and if you scry now you get 25% off, what a steal! But wait, there's more! Order now and we'll throw in a second, absolutely free!

And now on today's biggest seller, Fort-in-a-Pocket! Fighting a battle on an open plain with nowhere to muster your troops? Just drop one of these bad boys in and you don't have to worry about bad weather or outriders torching your supplies! Scry now and we'll deliver it to you, free of charge!

Arcadia delivery takes no responsibility for any collateral damage that may result from is limited to one(1) time only. Terms and conditions apply

*Onyavar*

Before, all gates to arcadia were topological fixed.

I was under the impression that every point of Arcadia had a corresponding point in creation – and now, arcadia is serving as a plane of holding? Where Catherine has immediate access to the point she aims for?

That shouldn't work, should it?

*Letouriste*

More like a gate correspond to an exact point in both creation and arcadia. So you need to calculate where exactly you want to form a gate.  
Everywhere can be gate-ground (even fae cities)

*Shequi*

Great last line 😊

For some reason, all of the Praesi remind me of the Sniper's Creed from TF2

Be Polite.  
Be Efficient.  
Have a plan to kill everyone you meet.

*Yotz*

...ahem...

*Benighted drow, your Queen is here –  
My Power holds you, it's too late to fear;  
All your lives long ago went wrong –  
Let me sing you a little song:  
We'll take the Sve as I can take a form,  
And all of you will form a mighty swarm,  
You will kneel, or 'll be brought down low,  
Crushed and chained by the will of Woe.*

*But worry not – for your Queen has a plan:  
We will go up, and claim you a new land!  
Strength in numbers we'll have on staff,  
So we will have the final laugh.  
Now listen close to what I have to say:  
Prepare to fight, and we will win the day!  
If you're patient – you'll carry on,  
And our foes will all soon be gone!*

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Wait, is Akua using positive reinforcement on Cat to make her more of her ideal leader?

She's been using "Dearest" and "My heart" whenever she's even slightly pleased with how Cat's going.  
I think.

*superkeaton*

Would that be positive, or negative reinforcement?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Positive.

RanVor

Positive for Ubua, negative for Cat.

### Cold Cyberia

>Cat looking over Everdark

"Hmmm. I'm gonna have some of that."

The funny thing is, she could totally sell some of the drow shit through Mercantis. The type of stuff they sell in the Closed Circle auctions include: written invitation to Skade, the original piece of the Tower and the materials Akua used for the Second Liesse.

### Zim the Fox

"Horrifically enough, Diabolist was beaming."  
Oh man. This line had me laughing. It was wonderful.

And yes, Cat, I did find Diabolist funny earlier 😊

*luminiousblu*

"I waved a hand dismissively, tired of the argument. Her logic only held up because it was a closed circle."  
Catherine really needs to learn to stop dismissing or avoiding arguments she can't think of a retort to, it's one of her biggest flaws. Half of her confession episodes amount to "I knew I was wrong but I didn't want to admit it half a book ago".

### Dresden 67

Except she's right here. Akua's philosophy is insane. Praesi nobility is totally ineffectual at everything except infighting. Not to mention when you're dealing with a known manipulator who is smarter than you the best thing to do is disregard everything she says that isn't related to practical matters.

*Jessica Day*

I don't know. A circular argument is a logical fallacy I think warrants dismissal.

*luminiousblu*

1. A circular argument is a logical fallacy, but unlike formal fallacies, informal fallacies don't necessarily mean the argument itself is wrong. "Humans walk on two legs because walking on two legs is what people do" is a partially circular argument, but that doesn't mean that people don't walk on two legs. Dismissing an argument that comprises

entirely of a logical fallacy is alright. Dismissing its position isn't unless you can refute it, and Catherine is pointedly just refusing to engage.

2. Akua's statement isn't circular. It's actually pretty weird that Cat thinks that the argument is circular, and I suspect it's because she really hasn't come to terms with the fact that the private and public spheres aren't naturally unified, and that a genuinely nice person can do monstrous things because it's the best way for his country and vice versa. The argument being made is a pretty basic one in statecraft – the King does what is necessary for his country and people, the man wearing the crown does what he thinks is right, the two don't always coincide and you'll have to choose (in fact, Catherine already has). The simple example Akua used of her mother can be flipped to "you find your (beloved) brother has committed a crime worthy of execution, do you execute him?". Catherine's position of responsibility is a non-sequitur – it's got nothing to do with responsibility, it's about what you need to do and what you wish you could do.

Yotz

Points of view.

Akua posits that Ruler and Wearer of the Crown are two different persons, and it is how it's done, because they are two different persons.

An institutionalized form of artificially induced schizophrenia.

Cat thinks this is wrong, and Ruler *is* the Wearer of the Crown, or at least *must be* – ergo, to wear the Crown rightfully one must change to become a Ruler, otherwise the whole country will suffer consequences; and if one separates two roles – that person must be kept as far away from the Crown as possible.

Usual separation of a Person and a Crown is caused by the inherent conflict between the inhumane prerequisites needed to wear the Crown, and inescapable humanity of one who wears it.

Person who without a shadow of doubt or hesitation will answer "yes" to your flipped question is the only one who is *worthy* to be allowed to rule. That person also will be universally despised – if not outright hated by the populus due to the utter unconcealable inhumanity. But only utter inhumans can rule humans properly.

There also are several major pit-traps on that rout due to parasitic feedback chains skewing the perception of the Ruler, and regulatory capture eventually distancing ruling class from the people they are supposed to rule to an

impermissible degree. By strict sets of imposed rules \*ghm\*Constitution\*ghm\* a rigid cage can be formed to contain the metastasis – or, rather, suppress; by regular pruning of the ruling apparatus with a proper instrument a-la NKVD administrative evolution can be shaped – but only to a degree. All this can be mitigated, of course – all but the inherent nature of the people, without error eventually leading to rise of sun-kings and caligulas regardless of amount of contingencies and type of political structure.

Cue the schism.

*luminiousblu*

>Points of view.

Catherine insists on bringing her personal morality into play where it neither belongs nor has historically been relevant, and where the setting actively works against her. This isn't a point of view, this is Catherine being pedantic because she's obsessed with self-flagellation. Akua isn't literally saying that there are two different people involved. Akua is saying that you need to put aside what you want in order to do what you must.

>ergo, to wear the Crown rightfully one must change to become a Ruler, otherwise the whole country will suffer consequences; and if one separates two roles – that person must be kept as far away from the Crown as possible. A ruler isn't a person. It's not even a group of people. It's an entity that has nothing to do with humans and so pretending that you can morph into one, even in your private life, is beyond stupid, and Catherine has already been confronted with that in the form of Kilian and Akua's continued existence.

>That person also will be universally despised – if not outright hated by the populus due to the utter unconcealed inhumanity.

Says who? Historically, many “inhuman rulers” who were very capable leaders were beloved by the populace.

>There also are several major pit-traps on that rout due to parasitic feedback chains skewing the perception of the Ruler, and regulatory capture eventually distancing ruling class from the people they are supposed to rule to an impermissible degree.

Which is ironically what Catherine hates the most yet is also what Catherine thinks is necessary.

>By strict sets of imposed rules \*ghm\*Constitution\*ghm\* a rigid cage can be formed to contain the metastasis – or, rather, suppress; by regular pruning of the ruling apparatus with a proper instrument a-la NKVD



administrative evolution can be shaped – but only to a degree. All this can be mitigated, of course – all but the inherent nature of the people, without error eventually leading to rise of sun-kings and caligulas regardless of amount of contingencies and type of political structure. I don't know what you're trying to say here. I imagine it's just promoting some constitutional structure or whatnot, though it still doesn't matter.

My point is that Catherine isn't actually thinking about the argument, she's dismissing it. Someone dismissing an argument without engaging with it means they're either convinced they're right or they know they're wrong, and I really do doubt Catherine is as self-confident as she's putting on.

*RanVor*

I've just remember the scene in which Cordelia holds two different positions in an argument in the Highest Assembly – one as the First Prince, the other as the Princess of Rhenia. That doesn't make her schizophrenic – it means she has to separate the affairs of her two different social positions for practical reasons. This is the perfect example of what Akua's talking about – the separation of affairs. And she speaks sense, too – if the Praesi didn't do this, they would quickly descend into the same murderfest that destroyed the Drow. Cat of course misunderstood, partly because Akua explained it rather poorly, but also because she didn't want to understand.

*Yotz*

While that scene doesn't make her schizophrenic, it also only tangentially related to demonstrating the separation of Person and Crown. In that particular example she is a Person wearing two Crowns, and taking actions from behind, making that construct a singular entity.

Now, if she was to enact her duties related to each of the Crowns in full and sooth, and such duties would go counter to each other – that would result in an early onset of the illness in question.

Throw into that mix a notion of “what needed to be done” antithetic to her interests as a living woman, and most of her will would go into mending the schism that will break and devour her otherwise. “Woman wearing a Queenly mask” trope was born not out of idle speculation.

Now, as for separation itself. Pragmatic reasons, you say. Well – yes. While it is, indeed, crucial to proper functioning of the Seat, it is also unreachable due to inescapable inherent nature of the ruler. Without the

separation, Person would be unable to wear the Crown properly, with separation the Crown will break the Person. Schism between the "want" and "need" will break a person, make no mistake. But as people are generally pretty malleable, some compromise between the Person and a Crown is struck – usually with some supportive measures like the codes of honor and laws, or external regulatory organ with proper mandate, be it overly-enthusiastic Cheka commissars, or random impotent qahal a-la constitutional court.

Cue the artificially induced schizophrenia. Its host may be high-functioning, but it still is there. And if there are none, that would mean that there are no separation, and – usually – needs of the Crown are dominated by wants of the Wearer, with corruption train inbound. Outside of that stream of nonsense, person routinely separating its two personalities of, well, the Person and the Crown-wearer is prone to fall into "it's not me" pit-trap, when selfish "needs" of the Person bleeds into the domain of the Crown without conscious intent to do so – which is usually explained away as "I hate you personally, but this is of no consequence – for the King is not me, so you will be executed for totally unrelated crimes before the Crown".

Outside regulators are not panacea, as it is, for they are bound to suffer from regulatory capture, becoming completely useless; or – depending on their mandate – either displacing the ruling organ in all but name, or creating a political machine(s) to puppeteer it.

All this is mitigated in modern structures by limiting time allotted for the Crown-wearing to alleviate the stress, or/and breaking the Crown into little pieces and creating bureaucratic institute complex enough to make the ruling organ useless, therefore delegating the process of decision-making to lower level positions where stresses caused by the schism between "need" and "want" are significantly less profound.

There is a way, however, to eliminate the need for such schizophrenic measures completely. It is optimal and efficient, if overly idealistic.

It is, also, completely inapplicable in concurrent human society due to the inherent nature of humanity being, well, inherent.

I am talking about person changing to such a degree, that Person's "wants" will become Crown's "needs". As long as humans remain humans this solution will be unfeasible and unapplicable in any way, shape, or form – and currently implemented artificially induced

schizophrenia will remain implemented simply because it works and we have no better working solution.

Teal deer: for all her pragmatism Cat comes as highly idealistic in this exchange. She doesn't "does not want to understand" – as I see it – but rather "doesn't want to accept". Would she be able to do it, finds a way to remain idealist, or there will be something compleately different – only time and EE know.

Also, you saying "schizophrenia" as it is something bad. Artificially induced *paranoia* is crucial for the proper functioning of any regulatory organ, mind you. Why other mental mindphuks must be subjected to such prejudices?..

*Yotz*

Also, "what you need to do" versus "what you wish to do" is *the* question of responsibility.

*Jessica Day*

I loved reading your reply.

I think it's worth noting, this argument didn't take place in a vacuum but between Heiress and the Queen of Winter. This does imply a certain regidity of thinking you would not have with say two moral philosophers.

But regardless, I am still of the opinion that Cat was justified in dismissing the argument. Consider the context, the reason they are debating the nature of rulers is that Akua is defending the Praesi. A people who find it normal to follow mad men and summon reality corrupting demons. Further, Akua has suspect motives in this situation.

Considering this backdrop, any fallacy in an argument makes the already suspect words fall apart. Akua sacrificed an entire city full of people for power after all.

Out of context, simply looking at the idea separately... Well, I definitely appreciate your point. I still find I agree with Cat's side in this discussion but it does take further thought to reach that conclusion.

*Yotz*

Why, thank you, dear.

Also – yep, outside of pure speculation nothing exists in vacuum, and if someone wants to interpret words in a certain way – it will be done, be the fallacy real or perceived. Especially in ideologically influenced arguments.

>it does take further thought  
\*silently tips budenovka\*

*Aotrs Commander*

Lakeomancy.

Perfect.

I love the idea of Cat just casually stealing half the continent, just to sell it back to the other half.

[OutspanFoster](#)

I think we can all agree that D.E. Irritant is the best character?

*Naeddyr*

Cat better hope Irritant isn't part of the character poll tournament.

*letouriste*

i doubt cat will win anyway. Hakram, robber and Black have more chances in my opinion

*letouriste*

AND MASEGO, HOW THE HELL I MANAGED TO FORGET HIM????

*Metrux*

I really disagree on those 3, all of them are what they are through her, and would be diminished without her. Yes, even Black. Though I see the possibility of she losing to one of the big monsters, like Ranger, Masego or a Dread Emperor... To bad we don't have a dread emperor competition :V And I'd really enjoy studying history at Praes, full of strange and interesting occurrences.

*RanVor*

The fact that some characters' arcs are dependent on the protagonist doesn't automatically make the protagonist more popular than them. Characters don't exist in a vacuum – the protagonist is shaped by those around them as much as the other way around. It's true that Hakram and Black would be diminished without Cat, but at the same time Cat would be equally diminished without them.

*RanVor*

Not to mention that without Black there would be no plot.

*adam1*

No, Dread Emperor Traitorous for life (and death by betrayal)!

*Rustndusty*

I wonder if Cat could "borrow" part of the Tower. Just cut the top half off and drop it near Liesse. Maybe make Malicia buy it back, or offer it to the Tyrant and the Dead King.

*Snowfire1224*

There's a book, I believe it's called Guns, Germs, and Steel, I haven't read it but I had to watch a documentary about it one of my history classes... but I digress. Basically it explains why we have the world powers we do based off of the resources, basically how much food we can grow in an area, what kind of domesticated animals we have been exposed to (which includes what diseases we have been exposed to since many come from animals), and what metals we can mine in the area. It's what the book claims to separate the haves and have nots of the world.

But imagine the kind of world Cat could make by moving all those resources around?

*luminiousblu*

Just so you know, Guns, Germs, and Steel is a lot of repeating things we already knew and a good amount of shoehorning (it tries to fit China to the pattern at one point and immediately ignores the fact that it doesn't really fit the pattern after the 1400s) and desperate preemptive refutations of racism (way too much of the damn book is taken up by his gushing over Papua New Guineans and how they're actually super intelligent possibly more than everyone else, it makes you feel like he's never been to a rural area). Diamond isn't a historian and it shows quite a damn lot. It's not a laughingstock book since its claims aren't straight up false, but it's looked upon poorly in historical scholarship.

>But imagine the kind of world Cat could make by moving all those resources around?

A world with trade? You know like what happened historically? That's what it amounts to, really. That and large-scale irrigation projects with knock-on effects that will make Anthropocene climate change look glacially paced in comparison.

*Jane*

In fairness, though, it's one of the better pop history books that a person can cite – most other books talking about history targeting the general public are... Of unfortunately low quality. Either reinforcing popular myths, obsessed with debunking popular myths to the point that they forget to talk about actual *history*, or pushing some kind of personal agenda. It's not *great*, but a layperson would still gain some useful insight after they read it.

I wouldn't bring up GGS when talking to an actual historian, mind you, but I also wouldn't start cringing the way that I would if someone brought up certain other books...

*nipi*

Is Cat sure that the fortresses she stores in Arcadia won't be occupied by fae by the time she recalls them?

Also is Akua filling in for Masego for the portal tricks?

[ironvale](#)

Dread Emperor Irritant, is he returning again?  
The proper response when his name is mentioned.

Also, Akua is pulling a Jorg Ankrath.

*grzecho2222*

I think that all Calernias Villains will return along with That One Empress in some kind of All Hells Break Lose moment, partly because Below isn't doing a lot and that would screw over literally everybody on continent

[HannaB](#)

Cat, don't pretend you know anything about having an abusive parent, the only one you ever had is like the furthest opposite from that possible 😡

Akua's opinion is... very person-like

*nipi*

Umm... Cat. Couldn't Thief "summon" fortifications too? Maybe to a lesser degree. I mean she did produce a whole fleet in an instant.

Im wondering why no-one has considered all the ways that aspect of Thiefs could be abused.

*Zourath*

How unfortunate. Cat is making such incredible advancements in new fields of magic, and yet Masego is nowhere nearby. She'll have to tell him all about Lakeomancy when they reunite.

*lucas*

Anyone knows if cat is getting a new name? Or she will only have the mantle now?

*RanVor*

How are we supposed to know that? The only insight we have comes from the chapters, which I assume you have read. We know as much as you.

*Xellos^\_-*

Catherine, Lady of the Stolen Lakes, Mountains, cities, fortress and anything not under a magical shield.

*Alegio*

After some thinking I realized that they most frustrating job in existance is to be a hero that has to kill Irritant. May the Gods be mercyfull with them, couse clearly wasnt

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## Chapter 69: Peerage

*"Traitorous's Law: while redemption is the greatest victory one can achieve over a villain, to function it does require the villain to have at least a single redeemable quality.*

*Addendum: Yes, even if a Choir is involved."*

– Extract from 'The Axiom Appendix', multiple contributors

Some days I wondered what it said about me that I much preferred holding court down in the Everdark than back in Laure. Sure, odds were good that every single member of my Peerage – even Ivah – would turn on me in a heartbeat if their oaths allowed for it, but for all that there was a simplicity to the proceedings that I enjoyed. Callow's royalty was known for a certain lack of pageantry compared to its much wealthier neighbours to the east and the west, but even that relative lack of ceremony could feel stifling at times. I'd spent most of my times prior to the crowning on one campaign or another, and while it was true that the Legions were strictly regulated I'd had the benefit of being a Named in a Praesi institution. Which had meant, more or less, that rules had only ever applied to me if someone higher in the

Empire's pecking order had decreed that they did. Considering Black had been the very definition of hands off and Malicia had largely considered me his problem early on, I'd been allowed to run free.

It might have been for the better if I hadn't. I'd learned a lot from my teacher but in many ways my apprenticeship felt only half-finished. Though I had long disdained the kind of aristocratic someone like Akua brought to the table, I'd since felt the costs of lacking that kind of education. Dealing with Wastelanders and Procerans I'd often been on the backfoot while they turned etiquette and custom into armaments. Much as I hated to admit it, treating with Cordelia Hasenbach without Diabolist whispering in my ear all the while would have seen the First Prince playing me like a fiddle. She'd called me a warlord, in one of our little talks, and she had a point. On the surface that was a stone around my neck, but down here? It was the wind in my sail. I was dealing with other warlords, and even before I'd stolen Crepuscular from Akua's mind I'd known how to speak the language of these people. Seated comfortably on a stone bench perched atop an inclined that less-than-subtly set my Peerage below me, I struck a match against my sleeve and lit my pipe.

My wakeleaf stash was running low, so I'd had to ration the vice, but there was no point in letting the herbs go to waste. I puffed at the sculpted dragonbone shaft, inhaling the smoke and letting it stream out of my nostrils with a pleased sigh. It was gladdening that Winter had not stripped me of all my petty pleasures.

"Evening," I drawled. "I see none of you are missing, so I'll take it that negotiations didn't go too badly."

My court of murderers offered up polite amusement at the admittedly weak jest. The Peerage now numbered eleven Mighty, every single one titled by Winter. Most of those had come from Great Lotow, reluctantly bending the knee after wandering around the outskirts of Arcadia for a while and finding no way out save the one I'd offered. Slaus and Sagas had been the first to fold, remaining where I'd left them and taking the oaths after a single day. The others trickled into my service over the following week as my sigil settled our other affairs in the city. Nodoi and Vasyl had held out for three and five days, respectively, finding no trouble living off the land but no way back to the Everdark either. By then I'd already bullied Losle and Zarkan into oath-taking after a few demonstrations of how dangerous living in places with only one entrance and exit could be when that space could be closed off by gate. Kanya and Soln had refused the longest, the full seven days, and they'd only changed their minds after Mighty Orelik vanished without a trace. Sooner or later, those treading the domain of the fae were found by them. Including Ivah, I'd left Great Lotow with nine titled lords. The



last two we'd picked up on our way to Great Strycht, the sigil-holders of the Lovre and the Vadimyr.

Practically speaking, those sigils had been roving bandits and raiders living off whatever they could take from the weakest nearby territory. They'd had almost no supplies to throw into the pot, which had been something of an issue, but the sigils were also the most battle-hardened I had at my disposal. They'd had as many dzulu as nisi in their ranks, and according to Akua they were the tribes finding it easiest to live under my rules. It made sense to me: with low numbers, they simply hadn't been able to afford the casual cruelties of larger and more established sigils. The other sigil-holders we'd come across on our way to Strycht had been less inclined to bend the knee when presented with overwhelming numbers, so they'd ended up feeding my nascent Peerage instead of joining it. Their lesser Mighty and dzulu had not been so obstinate, so they'd been folded into my own Losara Sigil where Ivah could keep an eye on them. It'd had the added benefit of swelling what could be considered my personal tribe larger than any of the others, always a good card to have in hand when dealing with other warlords.

"Reports, then," I said. "Lord Soln?"

The Lord of Shallow Graves smiled, which was promising. I'd been careful not to play favourites with my Peerage, but I would privately admit that Soln was the Mighty who'd most grown on me. It had taken to its title better than any drow save Ivah, and its continued knack for producing results was a very large feather in its metaphorical cap.

"Talks with the Jindrich have been fruitful, Losara Queen," it announced. "Mighty Jindrich is willing to take the oaths, in exchange for certain considerations."

I puffed at my pipe, impressed but trying not to show it. The Jindrich weren't top dog back in Strycht, but they were widely considered the runner-up to the sigil that was. In large part because Jindrich itself was apparently a fucking terrifying savage that went berserk when fighting other Mighty and sunk entire chunks of island in the throes of uncontrollable rage. I'd expected them to be holdouts, not in the first batch of collaborators. Letting out a stream of acrid smoke, I let out a pleased hum.

"Considerations?" I prompted.

"Jindrich territory holds the largest cisterns of Great Strycht," Lord Soln elaborated. "This is well-known. They would outlast all others when thirst takes the city, and so cabal was forged among lesser sigils to take the water from them by force. Mighty Jindrich requests assistance in scattering the scavengers before oaths are taken."

Ah, these charming drow. You could always count on them to turn on each other even when the enemy was at the gate.

"And Jindrich will fight at our side, when the time comes?" I asked.

"That is so, Losara Queen," Lord Soln replied.

"Then the bargain is struck," I said. "Centon?"

Akua's secretary had been standing in my shadow all the while, stone tablet and chalk in hand, and approached when bid.

"My queen," it murmured.

"Add five auction seats to the due of the Soln," I ordered.

The auction system had not lasted long before needing revision, though we'd never expected it would. Considering we now had almost forty thousand drow on the march, allowing everyone to bid would have been difficult. The simple logistical difficulties of fitting that many people in a single cavern aside, I'd needed a carrot to keep my growing army happy. Oaths bound them regardless of preference, but willing soldiers tended to be a lot more useful than conscripts. The right to attend the auction of Night-filled corpses was now restricted to a smaller number of people, currently four hundred. My own Losara Sigil owned a quarter of that, most of it attributed by lottery so more than dzulu and Mighty might rise, but I'd given every sigil under my banner a certain number of seats and kept the last hundred as rewards to parcel out. Lord Soln would have the right to grant those seats to whoever it wished, both reinforcing its authority over its sigil and giving a reminder that the power's ultimate source was the Queen of Lost and Found.

Diabolist might be a bloody viper but there was no denying how godsdamned *useful* she was.

"Honour was given," Lord Soln said, inclining its head.

"The worthy rise," I replied, the cadenced sentence in Crepuscular rolling off the tongue.

My gaze swept over the rest of the Peerage, and I could almost taste the anger and envy some displayed. *But not directed at me*, I thought. *Not for now, anyway*. It was an ugly little bit of irony that some of the Praesi practices I despised the most worked so well with the drow. Keeping the blades of my subordinates pointed at each other was an old Wasteland game I was beginning to be a fair hand at. *But they will not fight each other*, I reminded myself. *The oaths have seen to that*. The violence would be turned outwards, and put to my purposes.

"I await other fair news," I said. "Lord Vadimyr?"

The most recent addition to the Peerage shook its head. Vadimyr had actually answered a few questions I had about drow and the nature of the titles I was handing out without meaning to. The Lord of Fading Echoes was, well, the owner of a womb. It had risen to prominence late, and birthed a child when it was nisi. I did not choose the titles I gave out when empowering my lords – Winter provided them – so it'd been interesting to learn that my mantle would likely never hand out a title of Lady to a drow. A matter of perception by the beholden, Akua had theorized, and in Masego's absence I had no reason to gainsay her.

"Mighty Karmel founded a cabal with three others to share their water," Lord Vadimyr said. "Together they may well last until the great cabals of the inner ring come to war against us, and so will not consider the taking of oaths."

I nodded.

"Lord Slaus?" I tried.

"The fortune of Mighty Soln was my own curse," the drow ruefully admitted. "For the Hushu are of the cabal besieging the Jindrich, and so have undertaken salvation by strife. They deny any other ending."

Yeah, there were two sides to that coin. For every cornered sigil they'd be twice as many sigils cornering it, and those would be less than inclined to make a pact with an interloper like me. I suspected that if I allowed the internal skirmishes to play out I'd get a willing accomplice out of every major defeat, but I had constraints of my own to consider. My own camp might be fine when it came to water – I *did* have a lake to parcel out – but food was another story. I had over forty thousand drow to keep fed nowadays, and no supply train to speak of. Considering I'd refused foraging raids in favour of assimilating the same sigils we'd be pillaging, the state of our food reserves was essentially a downwards slope with the occasional uptick when we brought in a sigil. Of course that same sigil also brought additional bellies to fill, so the relief was short-lived and followed by even sharper descent. We had maybe another two weeks left in us before emergency rationing started, and after that *maybe* a third before the stores ran empty.

There'd been cattle in Great Lotow, great lizards and some sort of giant moles whose milk Indrani assured me was utterly disgusting, but Lotow was an outskirts city. The wealthy sigils with full stores were further in, and meanwhile we'd already butchered most of the lizards for meat. Several times, actually. The younger ones were smaller but they grew back body parts over several days as long as they didn't lose too much flesh and die from the effort, which had strung out their use some. Strictly

speaking I could afford a week of sitting on my thumbs before matters became urgent but it would be risky. We'd have to take Strycht and its entire stores immediately afterwards or risk circling the drain of our personal reserves while hammering down the last pockets of resistance. Archer had half-seriously noted that since corpses were currently our most common form of loot perhaps grey meat should be put on the table, but cannibalism was a little too far for me. Akua had noted that it was strictly taboo in drow culture regardless, as eating their own kind's flesh was believed to cause rot in the soul and cause Night to seep out.

No, in my eyes were needed to take Great Strycht within the next few days. It'd give us enough of a margin that we'd keep our head above the water while resuming our march into the inner ring, racing ever more harshly against the bottom as we went. It wasn't sustainable, but then it didn't have to be: this was an exodus, not a conquest. Unfortunately that meant attacking soon, and that would be risky business without allies on the inside. Which proved to be in rather short supply, I discovered as the Peerage continued giving me their reports. There were a few offers to help against other sigils but not take oaths, in exchange for water, but the lords who'd held those talks admitted betrayal was more than likely the moment water was supplied. Lord Zarkan, who'd yet to bother hiding how much it despise my very existence, brought a second success with a minor sigil that'd apparently been evicted of its territory by a cabal and was now furious enough to turn its cloak. Five auction seats went to the Zarkan for the success, though that one did not thank me for them afterwards. Lord Nodoi had failed in talks with the Strycht sigil it'd approached but found another settled near the western sluice gate that was desperate enough to take the full oaths in exchange for survival. They were already on their way, and for that the Nodoi earned six seats.

It was Ivah's own report that turned the mood grim, for it'd been sent not to bargain but to gain information.

"Over the last two days I took five Mighty from varying sigils," the Lord of Silent Steps informed me. "As of an hour ago interrogation of four of them has been carried out. From this, two matters of import were discovered. The first is that we have drawn the attention of the Longstride Cabal."

The drow were always eerily well-behaved, at least when I was present, so there was no ripple of murmurs as there would have been with humans. But several of the lords visibly stiffened, which for their kind was a glaring warning sign.

"This is certain?" Lord Vasył pressed.

"Mighty Leslaw is of the Swooping Bat Cabal, of which a lesser member of the Longstride is also part," Ivah said. "It is my

understanding that is the path by which word of our arrival spread. When the cabals of Great Strycht put out the call to war, interest developed."

"You'll have to fill me in on the particulars of this Longstride Cabal," I said.

Ivah grimaced.

"Hunters of hunters, my queen," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "A great and ancient cabal."

Lord Soln nodded, catching my eye.

"They fight only for the glory of the Night," it added. "Only the sharpest blades are invited into the fold. They hold no territory, protect no temple: their only purpose is the death of those they deem worthy."

So not so much dwarven deed-seekers as a bunch of Night-powered Ranger equivalents. That was just lovely.

"How many?" I asked.

"Two hundred," Ivah said. "Never more nor less. One invited must take another's place."

By which it meant murder their predecessor. So I wasn't just dealing with thrill-killers, I was dealing with a full cohort of hardened Mighty who'd either been dangerous enough to kill one of the old monsters or remained sharp enough to kill the young ones.

"How long before they're mobilized?" I asked. "If they're this picky about members, they have to be widely spread out."

"It is hard to say, Losara Queen," Lord Lovre told me. "For while they range far and wide, there are those among them who know the Secret of shadow-striding. That is the source of their name."

"Shadow-striding," I slowly repeated. "Is that what I think it is?"

The drow sharply grinned.

"Wherever there is shadow, their strides may take them," Lord Lovre agreed. "It is a gift from the very hands of Sve Noc."

"And this is instantaneous," I said, disbelieving.

That sounded like teleportation through shadows, which was a bit much even if the Priestess of Night had her fingers in it. Even the Miezans had to sacrifice a city's worth of captives to move their armies like that. *Masego* couldn't fucking teleport, and I'd

seen him order a Princess of Summer to go sit in the corner like a petulant child.

"Not so," Lord Soln said. "It is a lengthening of stride. Not unlike the stories Mighty Archer speaks of your journeys in the Garden of the Splendid."

So cutting corners, not snap-your-fingers-and-it's-done. If the Gloom and the Night were really part of Sve Noc's domain, as I'd come to suspect they were, shadow-striding might just be taking a shortcut through the original domain from which all the rest spawned. Or it might just be an improvement on the shadow-tendrill trick almost every drow with Night could use, only with a difficult relationship with its father and something to prove. Regardless, that meant we were about to be up in our neck in veteran old guard killers.

"A week?" I tried.

"Less," Ivah said. "My captive had no precise day, yet believed they would arrive before assault was made on Great Strycht."

"They don't know when we're going to assault," I pointed out.

"Speculation abounds," my Lord of Silent Steps drily said. "Most common is the belief that within five days there will be battle."

"So four days," I frowned. "Give or take."

This was starting to take shape, slowly but surely. This would be fought in waves. My army had to strike within a few days. The Longstride Cabal would arrive within four to hunt us for sport. The earliest reinforcements from the inner ring cabals would start arriving within a week. If I took Great Strycht before the Longstride arrived, I could lay an ambush for them. Which would pay off massively, if I could tittle even a few of those drow. The shadow-striding trick would allow us to spread exponentially fast, and we'd be able to eat up the reinforcements as they arrived. That would be a tipping point for this campaign, I thought. If I had a Peerage that large and powerful? We'd trample everything in our way towards Sve Noc, swelling with recruits as we did. On the other hand, if we botched the invasion of Strycht we were fucked for good. We'd lose strength in the attempt, and then we'd get hit by the Longstride and the reinforcements in quick succession. It had downwards spiral written all over it. Bold strokes would either win this or end this, depending on how it all fell out. Waiting was essentially giving up the game, and so not even worth considering.

"There is a second matter of import, Losara Queen," Ivah reminded me.

I rolled my shoulder, reluctantly emerging from my line of thought.

"I'm listening," I said.

"One of the prisoners I obtained was a jawor of the Rumena Sigil," my Lord of Silent Steps said. "Privy to intent of Mighty Rumena itself."

My brow rose. If the Jindrich were the runner-ups, then the Rumena were the local hegemony. Their sigil was twice the size of anybody else's, their rylleh were said to be a pain to even sigil-holders and Mighty Rumena itself was rumoured to have died once, gotten rather angry about it and promptly gotten up with a severed spine to smash in the head of the offending Mighty. The only drow in Strycht it was even remotely wary of was Jindrich, and there was cabal essentially every other sigil-holder was part of whose entire purpose was making sure the Rumena didn't eat everyone else. If it was making a move, it would have major consequences on how this battle unfolded.

"And?" I said.

"The many sigils of Great Strycht are turning on each other," Ivah said. "Cabals have split, or been reformed to address more pressing concerns. There is opportunity in this."

"It's preparing to take a swing at claiming all of Strycht," I said.

"Malcontent rylleh were approached, I am told," Ivah smiled. "And the jawor I took was looking for weaknesses in the defences other sigils."

I closed my eyes. This... It might work. If they struck hard and quick while other sigils were already fighting. If they kept the fighting out of sight until they'd harvested enough Night, they could just retreat for a day and let their Mighty digest what they took – after that they'd have enough power to bring to bear that even allied opposition wouldn't matter. That was an additional beat to the dance ahead, and one I could use. If I had eyes in the right place. If I was careful and fast and lucky. I opened my eyes and brought the pipe back to my lips. The fire had gone out, since I'd put talking above smoking, but there was still some wakeleaf not entirely gone to ash. I took a match out of my cloak and struck it on my arm, puffing at the pipe until it lit up again. Waste not, want less. Meeting the eyes of my Peerage, I spat out a mouthful of smoke and let it curl around my face.

"Are any of you," I smiled, "familiar with Irritant's Law?"

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[erraticerrata](#)

Character contest continues: Black vs Champion. Link to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16807270?](https://www.strawpoll.me/16807270?fbclid=IwAR3J1fsB85Ln1W9rxMPyboJA3eQftQC6jBBINFdxE0jfy_JwcB4K965cwEk)

[fbclid=IwAR3J1fsB85Ln1W9rxMPyboJA3eQftQC6jBBINFdxE0jfy\\_JwcB4K965cwEk](https://www.strawpoll.me/16807270?fbclid=IwAR3J1fsB85Ln1W9rxMPyboJA3eQftQC6jBBINFdxE0jfy_JwcB4K965cwEk)

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Erraticerrata, sorry if I bother you, but this week all the updates were posted an hour later than usual, so I wanted to ask whether you have daylight savings or something (for practical reasons: it's 8 AM here in Russia, so I need to know when to get up to post the links on Reddit).

[sivarajan](#)

Yeah, daylight savings time ended on Nov 4.

*Argentorum*

It is Daylight Savings time in the US now. As I haven't noticed the updates being an hour later and I'm on Daylight Savings, I would assume Erraticerrata is as well.

*Dainpdf*

Daylight savings has ended in the US.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5382983/Daylight-Savings-2018-clocks-change.html>

*Soronel Haetir*

Well this is gonna be a lopsided blowout.

*Agent J*

So par for the course? Save for Bard vs. Sabah, they've all been horrendously one sided matches so far. It's the next round that'll be the interesting one.

*SMHF*

I know some people have issues with Black ... but srsly? 10 people voted for the person that killed and skinned Sabah?!!  
0\_-

*Raved Thrad*



Maybe this means Black gets to kill and skin Champion? I would *dearly* love to see (or read about) that.

*Dainpdf*

Eh. The champion is entertaining, and she *\*has\** eaten less people. Plus, Sabah had way less presence (including references) than any of the Calamities.

*stevenneiman*

She might have killed off a likeable character and desecrated her corpse, but remember that most of the major characters, including Black and probably Sabah herself, are pretty amoral. And Rafaella did have a sort of hilarious, gung-ho honesty to her. I actually quite liked the way that she forewent the usual ranting about honor and Good and instead talked about getting free drinks and impressing lovers with Kairos' skull.

*RanVor*

Well, that was a no-brainer, wasn't it?

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*imagesbe*

Is that the one about the first step of a plan can't fail so always be on your first step?

*Two* \_\_\_\_

No, it's

"Irritant's Law: inevitable doom is a finite resource, and becomes mere doom when split between multiple heroic bands. Nemeses should never simultaneously engage a single villain."

*Byzantine*

Aka Catherine is going to make sure *\*everything\** happens at the exact same time. The inevitable doom gets split up and lets her prevail against, well, everyone.

*caoimhinh*

Lo and beware, for when Doom is spread, the Woe descends upon all and the Sovereign of Moonless Nights stands victorious.

*Faiir*

Let me just spread some doom on my morning toast.

*haihappen*

Doom(TM), now with double the flavor and easy spread guaranteed, no matter if refrigerated or not.  
Enjoy Doom(TM) today! And share it with your enemies and friends alike \*wink\*

*Yotz*

*Sylwoos*

Cat good old strategy. When in deep shit, just keep creating more chaos until a opportunity appears.

*d0m1n1c*

When in deep shit, just keep shitting, and eventually, you'll be able to swim your way out.

[onedollargum](#)

Ah, conservation of ninjutsu. A single ninja is an ineffable warrior, a crowd of ninja is a bumbling mob.

*RanVor*

They get in each other's way.

*Raved Thrad*

Does that mean that as you kill the faceless ninja mooks, they eventually get harder to kill, culminating in a fight with a boss or mid-boss?

*Dainpdf*

Depends how much you let the tension build.  
You can generally dispatch all of them without much hassle if you keep the encounter casual.

*Ezario Gerion*

And tension usually builds up between fights. So if you kill them all in one encounter you are gucci. But if you let one enemy survive, he will gather narrative weight, maybe show a flashback, swear revenge etc.

*Shikkarasu*

Headcannon accepted.

*Fern*

just another reason why i fucking adore this serial: the conservation of ninjutsu is a fucking natural law that you risk running afoul of if you fight with too large a group. Hell, we saw that earlier when the crusade invaded Callow: Twelve versus two? They were doomed from the start, the sorry bastards.

[onedollargum](#)

It depends. If you can play it off as a buddy-cop back-to-back battle with your rival where you're forgoing differences to team up against a more numerous foe the narrative weight is towards your winning.

*Decius*

There are no heroes here. But it is villain on villain, so the question is: whose inevitable doom is coming, and is it better to dilute it to have a single chapter of multiple doom or to have a few chapters of inevitable doom?

*nick012000*

This chapter's got a lot of interesting details in it about how the granting of Fae titles works. I guess that the former King of Winter didn't choose to make Catherine the Countess of Moonless Nights; it was a reflection of her own self-image. Presumably it took into account her identity as the Squire of the Black Knight, as well as the fact that she was the Lady of Marchford, and that the Praesi title of Lady was equivalent to the Callowan title of Countess.

*caoimhinh*

Yeah, but you have one error there, she was Duchess, not Countess.

*Allafterme*

Well, she made herself forever successor of a Duke...

---

Actually, we've only seen the Praesi titles of Lord and High Lord (with only seven of the latter, each in their own city), so it stands to reason that the former is rather fluid and dependent on the political situation for any given lord. Also, you forgot that Cat declared war on the King of Winter mid-conversation, which is probably the biggest influence of them.

*Dainpdf*

The King may have chosen what he made Cat – his carving a moon to put in her chest indicates he could at least sense what she was about to become, and he'd had a few millenia more experience with Winter than she has now.

*Rup*

...on a realted note ..out of 11 we have  
Lords of  
Silent Steps  
Shallow Graves  
Fading Echoes  
...would dearly love to know the other 8 Peer names

*byvectron*

King of Winter was trolling-> Moonless Night = black night = Black Knight...so yeah, that makes sense.

*Two* \_\_\_\_

Irritant's law, for those that don't remember it:  
"Irritant's Law: inevitable doom is a finite resource, and becomes mere doom when split between multiple heroic bands. Nemeses should never simultaneously engage a single villain."

[Walter](#)

" if I could title even a few of those drow."

Man, Cat's ability to not admit that she is a slaver is approaching Praesi levels.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Eh, it's more of forcible conscription. They do have timed contracts after all

*Skaddix*

I mean its indentured servitude but that is not much better. Seems more semantics but Cat does a whole lot of that so she can feel good about herself.

*luminiousblu*

Remember that Akua got called a slaver back in the day for retaining the right to execute people below her at whim, even if the soldiers were paid in kind and loot instead of coin (an actual way people were paid in ancient armies). Cat has basically the same thing, they're being paid in Night and she has the right to blow them up at any time with Winter.

*MetruX*

Well, not really the right to blow them up, it's an automatic process for when someone goes against the oaths. Still a kind of slavery, but we must have our points clear.

*Morty*

Well that just sounds like slavery with extra steps.

*Letouriste*

A man of culture, I see:)

*Snowfire1224*

I thought it was because she bought slaves and freed them, but it was mention that the kind of slaves she bought would have no concept of freedom.

*d0m1n1c*

Which is why it's different here.

"Employing" slaves that you bought and "freed" is different from capturing already free people, and giving them the choice between being harvested or taking Winter back Oaths.

I'm not sure which is worse; Cat is essentially a home invader who's home-invading for the sole purpose of stealing the homeowners.

*Rup*

...and justifying by saying it is an Exodus not a Conquest...  
as bigger home invaders aka dwarves are coming

[Dresden 67](#)

Um, Akua was called a slaver because she owned slaves. Remember the Stygian slave-soldiers William freed?

[Walter](#)

Right, right, the 'prisoners with jobs'.

*Vortex*

In all fairness, few slavers grant their slaves the option to opt out of the contract, or empower their slaves with aspects of winter.

*Vortex*

I also want to point out that since the alternative to following Cat is being genocided by a massive dwarven army, there is an element of capturing an endangered species for their own good in Cat's agenda. At least the Drow following her have a chance at survival up on the surface.

*Truthhut*

Sometimes you just want to throw dispensable bodies at a problem until it goes away

*Skaddix*

I guess but didn't the Dwarves force the Goblins to the surface? So there is a high probability when the Drow know they are losing they just leave the Underground and go to the Surface. And considering the powers the Mighty have seems like they be able to carve out a Kingdom on the surface by themselves.

*Forrest*

Other than the fact that when they talked with the dwarves, the talk was of genocide and that the ones that got to survive were the ones Cat took with her.

[Walter](#)

I don't think it is fair to call the choice to die of thirst 'opting out', but I guess technically it is there.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

"There is always a choice."

"You mean I could choose certain death?"

"A choice nevertheless, or perhaps an alternative. You see I believe in freedom. Not many people do, although they will of course protest otherwise. And no practical definition of freedom would be complete without the freedom to take the consequences. Indeed, it is the freedom upon which all the others are based.

-Terry Pratchett,

[Walter](#)

That's, uh, certainly a hot take. From that perspective I guess it IS all the victims' fault. They did after all, freely choose to be chumps who need water to live. Only right that they suffer the consequences of this dreadful decision.

*Oshi*

No they chose to be chumps who can't look outside and notice thier house is burning and the person offering them a way out doesn't want to die the second you get out at your hands.

*Dominic*

I'm going to go with... enslaving the drow in this way is the only way to ensure that crazed, bloodthirsty killers who live only to obtain power don't get free rein to do whatever they like, while also not allowing the more innocent (albeit still totally amoral) lesser drow to be slaughtered helplessly by the dwarves.

Or if it isn't the only way, the other way is killing all the strong drow – I suspect they much prefer this way of doing things.

[Euodiachloris](#)

And, they won't accept cultural reconditioning any other way.

It's very hard to say that the Drow have the full capacity to choose freedom right now – they've been hollowed out and enslaved to the Night drug for how long, now? You can't reason with junkies about how they'd be better off without the drugs until they realise by feeling it that they've hit bottom.

Cat is handing them a way to hit bottom without becoming genocided into the bargain. It ain't pretty. It ain't moral. And, the ethics are shaky beyond belief. But, it might be workable.

And, at the end of this, some Drow may survive to become a form of Drow capable of dealing with wider social groups without being totally ended in the process. 😊 Who knows, they might recover some of what they were before Night came, but if not... They've been unwittingly enslaved before. Indentured servitude looks almost good by comparison to how they got wrecked the last time. 😞

*Forrest*

Yeah, a lot of comments seem to be assuming they are 'free' now, when what I'm seeing here is not freedom remotely. They are in an eternal murder ring that even has a super group that comes by and kills anyone that looks remotely interesting. They are enslaved to the power brought by murder due to this Sve Noc wrecking what was once an actual

society and is now just everlasting violence with a slight emphasis on group mentality.

The Drow seem like they're living in the world of Fallout compared to everyone else's Cyrodil. Maybe a silly comparison, but still.

*Akuabestgurl*

That just sounds like slavery with extra steps...

*Xinci*

Eh, shes barely using them to their starter potential at the moment. I would probably go with it being due to Cat not yet thinking of them as "hers" in full.

*Truthhut*

I have to be honest, one of the reasons I would go villain is for the minions. Heroes never get minions.

*RoflCat*

They get the comic relief, which have insanely high survival rate against traps.

Minions? Dead. Every. Single. Time.

*MetruX*

So what? As long as your minions are not the people you care about, that's par for the course. Like, you can't consider Hakram a minion, even though he's 100% loyal and willing to take on basically any order.

[Euodiachloris](#)

... If Bard is included in "comic relief", then reasons to go Villian increase.

The Wandering Bard gets all sides more dead. <\_<

*Raved Thrad*

Unless you're the Bumbling Wizard (or was it Conjurer?), in which case, minion or sidekick or no, you get killed in your first major encounter. 😊

*Rup*

...not if you are "Despicable Me" 😊

*Dainpdf*



Heroes can have Redshirts, though. And plucky sidekicks!

*Wry Warudo*

Traitorous at the start and Irritant at the end? This has to be one of the greatest chapters ever

*Valkyria*

Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successfull and Dread Emperor Traitorous are just my favourite two Dread Emperors, hands down.

*Dainpdf*

The coming extinction of that class of Dread Emperors almost makes one agree with Akua that the New Order needs to go, NOW.

*SpeckofStardust*

Laws named after dread emperors are just the best laws in 'The Axiom Appendix'

---

Well, yes, they're the only laws in 'The Axiom Appendix'.

*eh*

So, is Catherine's League of Extraordinary Gentledrow a thing? Should we make it a thing?

*GreatDerpression*

Can't just be drows mate, we still need loli's in man sized mecha's, dwarves, gnomes that subscribe to the art explosions. Loli grannies, streakers, and one being who shall not be named whom encompasses all that can be considered 'love'.

*Forgotten One*

Beifeng is that you?

*Antoninjohn*

Winter was shown have the moon as a major part of it in Cat's Winter dream but her nature was that of Moonless Nights, that is probably very significant

*Dainpdf*

Maybe Cat just needs someone to moon her. I bet Robber would volunteer for the job.

*RanVor*

I'm sure he wouldn't mind becoming a lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser lesser footrest.

*darkening*

Y'know, before champion killed captain I could see people maybe voting for her since she was pretty funny in what we saw of her, but with black being such a great character and the backlash from the whole skinning thing, I doubt she'll get more than a handful of people that dislike black.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Can't wait to see how this coming battle plays out. Those shadow-striders are totally hardcore.

So, 40K troops with a lot more to come. These will be significant numbers back on the surface. And no one (except the bard and the dead king, maybe) is expecting them. And Cat can just March them back through Arcadia wherever she likes.

[Javvies](#)

Dead King, yes. Kind of. He probably didn't know about the numbers she's managing to get, by which I mean her success rate in converting drow to her minions. I mean, she's already up to 40k and she's nowhere near done – and it's worth noting that Cat's likely taking a relatively direct route, and probably isn't going to get to a lot of drow cities before getting to the Sve of Night. I'd like to think that Cat is being more successful than he thought she would be.

I don't think Bard anticipated Cat going to the drow, far less Cat being as successful as she has been. But by now, Bard probably suspects something is up with Cat being MIA for as long as she has been. And it's not like Cat has many options to disappear to. So Bard probably suspects drow is over of the options, and knows that Cat is having at least enough success to be worthwhile.

*Dainpdf*

One assumes the Dead King has a way of observing the surrounding underground. At least considering how hostile to him the dwarves seem to be.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah if the Dead King doesn't have scrying capabilities at \*least\* on par with Masego's Observatory (replicated a dozen

times for redundancy and staffed by thousands of specially bred mages) I will eat my hat.

### frolamiz

Don't forget what The Dead King said to The Wandering Bard:

""Were you watching?" he teased.

A little jest, just between the two of them. She was always watching."

She may not have seen her going for the Drows before, but now that she has struck a bargain with the Dwarves and started to recruit an army of Drows, I doubt she is unaware of it. After all, she get to see the script.

### Javvies

Yeah, Archer, eating the corpses of drow is not a good idea. Even the doe think it's a bad idea, which is saying something.

200 top tier Mighty in the Longstriders.

That's going to be a lot of Night.

Wait, what if Cat manages to flip some of them to her side. She can offer hunting Named and mages and so on, maybe even Elves, as bait.

Cat, never stop murdering people with the box instead of thinking inside (or outside) it.

### *GreatDerpression*

What box? There was a box? I simply thought that Cat left the box behind because the corners weren't sharp enough to properly convey the right amount of 'incentive' that she required. So she decided to just bludgeon her enemies to death with reality itself.

### Javvies

In one of the chapter opening quotes, somebody, Juniper maybe, says something to the effect that Cat doesn't so much think outside the box as pick it up and beat people to death with it.

Ah, found it. Book 1: Chapter 27: Callow's Plan:

*"What Foundling does isn't think thinking outside the box so much as stealing the box and hitting her opponents with it until they stop moving."*

– Extract from "A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars", by Juniper of tge Red Moon Clan

Nivek

Did Traitorous really pretend to be “redeemed” by the power of an Angelic Choir just so that he could betray them?  
I honestly couldn't help laughing at the addendum for Traitorous' law.

*Byzantine*

Somehow I suspect it was even more convoluted. This is Traitorous we are talking about.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah that sounds like him.

*Agent J*

No, no, no. This was a two-parter. The mention of the choir is an addendum. It was added in later to clarify the earlier law.

What happened is that Traitorous was redeemed by the heroes to suddenly and shockingly betray them at a moment most inopportune. And so, to prevent future heroes from making the same mistake, Traitorous' Law was written.

Then, he was redeemed again, under the brilliant gaze of the angels of some choir or another. Only to then, suddenly and shockingly betray even the Heavens themselves. And so, an addendum had to be written beneath Traitorous' Law.

The take away here is that somehow, people continuously find themselves trusting a man known as *Traitorous* and are both surprised and shocked when he betrays them. Even the Heavens, apparently.

*MetruX*

I mean, the title usually comes after the emperor's death, at the time he should be known by name, like Malicia. Also, he wouldn't be worthy of the name if he couldn't convince people again and again that he is trustable XD

*RanVor*

What? No. Malicia is a reigning name, the same as Traitorous. Her real name is Alaya. Afaik, reigning names are chosen by the Emperors when they claim the Tower. He was really known as Traitorous all along.

*Naeddyr*

The treason was inside your heart all along.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Malicia" or "Traitorous" are regal names, chosen by the ruler themselves. Descriptors like "The Oddly Successful" or "The Erroneous" are epithets, chosen by the people they left behind to write the histories. For Praesi, an *epithet* of "Traitorous" would be pretty much redundant.

*RanVor*

Why are you explaining my point to me?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Expanding on your point, replying to the comment you had replied to. I suspect I'm still getting the hang of reply-etiquette at this forum, I've been blasting through the Guide over the last three weeks or so.

*RanVor*

Welcome, then.

*Dainpdf*

I mean, he apparently took pseudonyms for a bunch of those betrayals, so the non-Choir time may have been a little less blatant.

Oh, and I think that he may have done it more than once, for it to have become an axiom...

By the way, angelic redemption didn't stick on Cat either. What's that say about her?

*Agent J*

Cat wasn't redeemed, she rejected the notion entirely. So it's less that angelic redemption didn't stick and more that it failed outright.

*Dainpdf*

Didn't work on Traitorous either. Difference is he pretended it did. In any case, the axiom says it doesn't work on people who have nothing redeemable about them. Still wondering what it says about Cat that it didn't work on her.

*RanVor*

The real difference is that Cat had to actively fight off the influence of the Hashmallim, while Traitorous probably didn't even bat an eye.

[coloursofdespair](#)

"Irritant's Law: inevitable doom is a finite resource, and becomes mere doom when split between multiple heroic bands. Nemeses should never simultaneously engage a single villain."  
– Extract from 'The Axiom Appendix', multiple contributors

*Smoloney*

Wait does that law imply that traitorous betrayed a choir because that's fantastic if so

[Euodiachloris](#)

Well, Cat swindled then mugged one, so... We know Choirs are fallible. 😊

[OutspanFoster](#)

You know how Irritanr became a shoe maker? Do you think Nihilis, the Tanner, got a boot made from him?

[Antony444](#)

Good to see the Drow have at least an anti-cannibalism stance... though we don't know if they have the same opinion concerning humans, goblins and orcs. I mean, there must be a reason they're calling them 'cattle'...

A new big battle is in preparation, and it looks like it's going to be betrayal, lies, violence and plenty of big Night powers unleashed...Catherine has now 40 000 drow and eleven Noble-titled Mighty to her sides...and unless my count is off, she has not been two months in the Everdark, so what she has is just the beginning...

I want to have a look at the Grey Pilgrim's face when he will be informed the Black Queen is back with the hordes of psychotic killers in tow...

So far the Peerage is consisting of the Mighty Ivah, Soln, Slaus, Sagas, Losle, Zarkan, Nodoi, Vasył, Kanya, Lovre and Vadimyr.

Ivah is the Lord of Silent Steps.

Soln is the Lord of Shallow Graves, like in the songs.

Vadimyr (female) is the Lord of Fading Echoes.

Chaoes and cataclysm are coming...

*Yotz*

Since cannibalism is explicitly "the act of one individual of a species consuming all or part of another individual of the same species as food", any non-drow is a fair play for a drow.

Recognition or non-recognition of attempts to broaden the definition of cannibalism in regards to other thinking species is a question of deep philosophy and ethics.

There are some more practical reasons behind the taboo on consumption of flesh of your species – which can easily be broadened to your, closely related, or even simply reasonably similar from biology standpoint.

Like, say, prions.

Which were original reason behind this taboo anyway.

*Novice*

So apparently heroes tried to redeem someone named Traitorous and failed. Twice. And on the second time used a Choir. That's mah boi.

*Sylwoos*

Knowing the guy, Traitorous probably tricked the heroes into trying to redeem him with a Choir.

Just because.

*Dainpdf*

Cue catchphrase:

"My dear friends, I have a confession to make. Some creative reframing of the truth may have taken place during the planning of this redemption."

*GreatDerpression*

Prior to an ultimate showdown of Good Vs. Evil, a rope ladder falls down from what now appears to be a Floating Fortress of Evil and DOOM that was previously disguised as a thundercloud. "My dear friends, it is with a heavy heart that I must inform you that I must now take my leave from this Band of Cohorts. Also I must sorrowfully regret to inform you that someone may have potentially 'borrowed' the Scrolls of Sealing required to banish evil from these lands. And said someone may or may not have exchanged them in order to acquire the capital to build and maintain a cloud shaped mobile fortress. Maybe... Probably... Assuredly. Most Assuredly."

*Dainpdf*

"I assure you that I, and my conveniently cloud-shaped flying fortress, will spare no measure in hunting down this thief. Meanwhile, feel free to await my return."

[Screwfloss](#)

"but in many ways my apprenticeship felt only half-finished."

Foreshadowing?

*Metrux*

It's a common trope for a master to impart a last secret/teaching before dying, so why not?

*Raved Thrad*

...except that in Black's case I'd expect him to be a bastard about it in ways only he can.

"Now, Catherine, mind me well: the secret of the Black Knight's Final Attack is that there is no final attack."

*Setrak*

That is actually really good advice for a villain. Because your Ultimate Attack™ is guaranteed to either fail, only work nice, or worse, backfire. If you constantly have The Black Knights Secret Attack in your back pocket and let people know about it you can use every other attack you have because only that attack gets autocounteted.

[sengachi](#)

"The secret of the Black Knight's Final Attack is to lie and tell everyone it exists so that your opponents keep their best counter in reserve the whole fight without ever using it. Well. Really the secret is to keep it a secret that's carefully calibrated to only be available to the heroes because they valiantly redeem your Treacherous But Not Morally Repugnant Lieutenant #3 with three acts left to the climax so it's not obvious you're baiting the heroes, but those are the kinds of details for Adjutant and Scribe to handle. Your part in all of this is to just not have a final attack."

*Iconochasm*

"Is this the part where you impart your Final Technique which I don't fully understand until the most dramatic possible moment?"

"Well, I'm not going to \*now\*."

*Snowfire1224*

Which him not telling her would probably keep him from dying storywise, because as soon as he imparts that secret he is going to die.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

Heh. 69.



Yotz

Which act henceforth would be known as “peerage” among the scholars of the matter.

Aston W

I feel this Sve Noc was the same as Cat once.

Then her domain expanded etc and she’ll become Summer or Winter.

Still a training exercise by the Dead King. Thanks EE.

Aotrs Commander

I just love the implication from Traitorous here.

He was clearly just THAT good at his job.

I bet he could fool Pilgrim, even.

Yotz

*“Ha – and this is where you are mistaken, for the Pilgrim was me all along!”*

SMHF

For some reason I keep imagining there is this one dwarf in the invading army, that has a real personal gripe with the Drow and been waiting for this expedition his entire life. And every time the dwarven army reaches an enemy fortification he runs forward, kicks in the door and goes...

“Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my- OH COME ON!!!!!!”

Zaver SaintCloud

If there is ever a 1-shot of anecdotes or other history, I would absolutely love to see ‘The Life & Times of Dread Emperor Irritant’.

Dainpdf

I’d take Traitorous. He’s just the best.

[sengachi](#)

No no, we need a story of that time Warlock the Unfathomably Stupid brought back both of their undead shades for a teamup mission.

Dainpdf

So... Is it just me that has considered Cat has a whole freaking lake to take not just water, but fish from? Sure, she can't spare the manpower to feed her entire army with fishing, but she can at least extend her supplies' life by feeding the army with fish. Also, they could have stored the giant carcasses of the lake monsters in the Winter icebox for eating later. I had assumed she'd done that, TBH.

*Yotz*

Fishing for them in Arcadia would probably be quite dangerous thanks to the local clowns, and gating them – fishes, not clowns – in with a daily doze drinking water may give erratic results; to that, we know too little about relative farm and fishery outputs and nutrient consumption of the average Drow to make projections about time.

Good point on carcasses – though, this bunch of supplies are currently in the hard to traverse open contested terrain, and any foraging team would act as proverbial sitting ducks waiting for a counterstrike from opforce.

*Dainpdf*

Cat and her subordinates are protected from Fae persecution by her boon, so fishing and not-too-long-term storage of food should be okay. The Wild Hunt isn't likely to frag Cat's people at random either, since their last discipline session... And if they do Cat can put them in line without much trouble.

*Jane*

...So, if she can barely feed her army *now*, what's she going to do once she takes them out of the Underdark? I mean, Callow has a bit of a food crisis of its own at the moment, no?

Is she going to immediately strike at an enemy city to seize their food stores, or something?

*Oshi*

You're assuming she doesn't just march them into a region of enemy territory like say a place with Black in it.

*Barrendur*

Many posters here are making excuses for Catherine's lack of ethics. I shan't, because there's no need: Cat's been making excuses *\*for herself\** for most of the story.

*Yotz*

Justification matters to the just.

Yotz

Well, since despite all the doom premonitions, foundation-laying, and being quite in good in general this chapter is a bit slow on action...

Yeah, this will do nicely

*Bruno Benaković*

I'm just waiting for the moment Catherine realizes she can rip others abilities if they're under her cloak. If she could take Akua's knowledge of language, why not the abilities of the drow she titled and put under her cloak. She would get the powerup she needs for future battles without taking the night for herself. It would imply, since night and winter seem similar, that it's possible to convert one to another.

Actually, this leads me to another theory I have that I think was mentioned already. Calernia is not the first wager of Fate to exist, rather it's the second with Arcadia being the first. But over billions of years, the patterns in Arcadia became so strong that their entire existence basically became predetermined. Night and Winter and Evil and Villain and Treachery all became one concept that fought an eternal battle against Day, Summer, Good, Hero, Nobility. Like smaller rivers that dug into the earth these concepts surged and merged into two huge rivers that went into opposite directions. It would explain why the very concept of Night in Calernia is attracted to Winter, as if it's its mother. And Catherine has already broken the stalemate by merging Winter and Summer in marriage in Arcadia. That same marriage should be achieved in Liesse Accords in the same way, thus ending the wager of Fate in truce.

*Redyls*

Please write a book on irritant and tratorus. I'd defiantly read that

*burguulkodar*

There's nothing to be so defiant for, my good fellow! Simply read it.

*Anony*

"Traitorous's Law: while redemption is the greatest victory one can achieve over a villain, to function it does require the villain to have at least a single redeemable quality.

Addendum: Yes, even if a Choir is involved."

– Extract from 'The Axiom Appendix', multiple contributors

...

.....

.....

.....

...

You wouldn't....

...

Would you?

*Naeddyr*

Sidenote, is it just me, or does the Longstride Cabal sound like a drow version of the Wild Hunt?

The Hunt that Cat happens to be the ruler of at the moment?

*Andrew Mitchell*

In a way, I agree. But Longstride also seem a LOT more badass than the Wild Hunt.

*werafdsaew*

So why did Cat decide to start handing out fae titles? Her fear of some sort of response from heaven is still valid.

*burguulkodar*

So, Cat unconsciously proves here that the Tower's way is very effective, AS LONG as they are oath-enlaved into not doing lots of things she doesn't find acceptable.

I wonder why other Dread Emperors didn't try that before. Probably magical oaths are insufficient, and fae ones can't be broken as easily. That would cut it.

I still kinda wonder if the dwarves could TRULY bring down this whole drow society, even if they are not as powerful and strong as they once were. It would take maybe hundreds of years, if not thousands.

Cat definitely should have asked for a higher price. What she is trying to do here in this timescale is... ahem... *\*almost\** inevitably doomed to fail. But then, plot armour

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## Chapter 70: The Calm Before

*"Own what you are, no matter how ugly the face of it. No lies are ever more dangerous to a villain than those they tell*

*themselves."*

– Dread Emperor Benevolent

"So this is going to be the big one, I hear," Indrani said.

It would have been inaccurate to call... this a habit. It didn't happen regularly enough for that, given the demands on our time. But once in a while, when the silent clamour of a thousand duties and foes became too much, I found there was a fire in a nook tucked away from my army and that Archer was waiting there, feet propped up and bottle in hand. Ironic in a way, that a woman who'd been raised in a place called Refuge had become so apt at providing the same. Like all of Indrani's kindnesses, the seemingly careless granting of them belied the keen perception behind their nature. I tended to think of Akua as the most skilled manipulator among us, capable of spinning exquisite lies at the merest prompt, but some days I wondered. Diabolist was known to get her way, by hook or crook, but I'd had different lessons from her. *The most useful talent is that which no one knows you have*, Black had once told me. Archer drank like a fish, was largely led by her whims and professed indifference as to much of what went on around her. The very last person, in a way, that you'd expect to nudge events the way she wanted them.

I forced the thought away. Suspicion, once entertained, was like a drop of ink in water. No matter how thinned, it would always cloud the brew. I did not have so many friends left that I could afford to start ascribing them hidden motives. The colder part of me noted that willing blindness led to dark surprises and that the duties of queenship demanded vigilance regardless of costs to myself, but for once I turned deaf ear to it. Trust had seen me through the storms so far, and though it had brought me some disappointments it had brought me wonders as well. *In this, at least, I will indulge sentiment*, I thought.

"The Battle of Great Strycht," I agreed. "It will decide the campaign, if not the outcome of our entire stroll through the Everdark."

"Sve Noc, huh," Indrani mused. "She's allowed us our fun so far, but that won't last. It's one thing to throw a rabid hound scraps when there's a bear coming, another when the hound takes a hand."

"We've observed the rules of her game," I said. "What we wield, we took."

"And that'll matter why? This entire place reeks of Below, Cat," she said, and raised a hand when I began to object. "I'm not talking about dusty shrines or red-slick altars. Not even about prayer, really. It's the way this place was made. Kill and rise, kill and fall: every single drow spends their time either clawing for power or slowly dying."

I studied her in the flickering light of the flames, the shadow cast by the twisted rock around us dancing across her face. *Halfway between tattoos and feathers*, I thought.

"You're saying it doesn't matter if they pray," I frowned. "They pay the dues regardless."

"I'm saying this entire place is a prayer," Indrani quietly said. "And we both know whose it is."

The Priestess of Night. Sve Noc. We'd not crossed paths since that last probing look at each other, but I knew she was everywhere down here. In every custom, every ritual. Maybe even every drow.

"That sounds," I murmured, "like a recipe for apotheosis."

It wasn't the first time I'd considered that, truth be told. After crossing the Gloom and realizing the Everdark was a kingdom turned towards itself, ever only sending dregs to the surface, I'd wondered as to the purpose of that. An entire civilization whose foundations had been ripped away and replaced with codified murder and infighting – what sane person would want that? It might have made sense if the entire purpose was to cultivate demigods and send them out. I'd not forgotten my fight with Mighty Urulan, how what could only be considered a second-stringer by drow standards had batted me around and come close to killing me more than once. *Me*. I could, without too much arrogance, claim that among the Named of Calernia's surface I ranked in the ten most dangerous. If the likes of Urulan had been sent to rampage across Procer or Callow, it would have been bloody mayhem. If a cohort of Mighty that powerful had gone? Half the heroes on the continent would have needed to mobilize to end them, and there'd be casualties. I could not deny that Sve Noc's orchard of killers had grown some particularly murderous peaches. But they'd never been *used*, had they?

Night could be grown from harvesting other peoples, but when had real raiding parties last troubled Calernia? Long enough ago the Everdark was just a footnote in the histories of nations, either a pointed lesson in the dangers of following Below or the subject of casual contempt from more 'successful' villains. Which was madness, because if I'd led the army I currently commanded against Diabolist at Second Liesse we would have ripped her to shreds. Hells, unless the Lone Swordsman had a very good story at his back Urulan would have torn through the poor fucker in an hour's work and gone for a drink afterwards. But Sve Noc had never sent her apostles out of her realm, and there had to be a reason for that. At first I'd wondered if it was as simple as where the Everdark was. Surrounded on three sides by the Golden Bloom, the Chain of Hunger and the Kingdom of the Dead. The rattlings were arguably the weakest of those powers, but even Triumphant at her peak hadn't managed to exterminate them

wholesale. *And if there's one thing out there I'd bet on against Mighty, it would be Horned Lords*, I thought. Had the Gloom and the Night been raised as a moat and garrison?

The issue with that was the dwarves. It didn't take a genius to guess that effectively surrendering the entire underground to a rival and highly expansionist power before wrecking your own capacity to wage war except through Name-imitations would have long term *consequences*. Sve Noc, assuming she really was behind all of this, had to have known the moment she put out the Gloom and Night the hourglass was flipped. The Kingdom Under would keep growing, keep expanding, and eventually they'd find a way through. At that point, well, it was only a matter of time until the drow were done. Even if they were beaten back the first time, the dwarves would keep coming with better methods and larger armies every time. Even just putting all the nisi they encountered to the sword would allow the dwarves to send their enemies into a downwards spiral while they swallowed their own losses with a shrug. Evidently Sve Noc's game had worked for a few centuries, but she'd had to know it was a delaying measure and not a solution.

But it'd make sense, wouldn't it? If the Gloom had been exactly that, a delay, and the Night was the actual solution. Centuries of willing sacrifice, swelling the invisible altar as the Priestess of Night remained cloistered in her temple and shaped her own ascension. It was one thing to fight a Named, but a god? Neshamah had called himself that, and he had broken enough crusades the claim couldn't be summarily dismissed. If I was right, if Archer was right, then there was only one question left to ask. Was she *ready*? Had the dwarves come too early, while she was still gathering her might? Or was this entire invasion a trap, the prelude to her ascension? There was no way to know, and I was not too proud to admit that scared me.

"We have no stories, down here," I finally sighed. "I am not used to missing that."

"I'm not so sure," Indrani said. "We've had our share of coincidences, haven't we?"

I cocked an eyebrow at her in silent invitation. Archer glanced at my now-empty cup and I willingly offered it for filling. Drow liquor, this, called *senna*. Made from some sort of giant mushrooms and used to induce lucid dreaming when drunk in small quantities before sleep. It kicked like a mule and taste kind of like mud, but we were running out of surface booze so this was no time to get picky. The good stuff we'd want for celebration, assuming we live through this. I grimaced after knocking back half my cup. This was going to take some getting used to.

"Right, so coincidences," she said. "We ran into Ivah pretty early. Good guide, former bigwig from an inner ring sigil, full of information. That's one."

I almost objected that we'd come fairly close to killing it during our introductory skirmish, but held my tongue. Almost was the domain of coincidence, I wouldn't deny that.

"Then we snuck through between the dwarven vanguard and the main army," Indrani continued. "If we'd been ahead of the vanguard, we would have run into entrenched drow before we had their measure. If we'd trailed behind the army, there would have been no one to take. That's two."

In the first instance we also wouldn't have had the spectre of dwarven invasion to hold up as a banner when bringing in Mighty, which would have massively complicated the process. Much as I disliked what I was hearing, she had a point.

"And then when we run into the vanguard," she said. "Which happens to be run by Named dwarf who can strike a deal with you in his people's name. Three."

"For all we know that's common practice in dwarven armies," I pointed out.

She clucked her tongue.

"Fine, I'll withdraw that one," she conceded. "And replace it by 'we came into the Everdark specifically when the Kingdom Under was invading'."

I winced. Yeah, that was a little harder to argue about.

"We can get lucky too," I said.

"Sure we can," Indrani said. "Once. Twice gets suspicious. Three times is a nudge."

"We wouldn't even be down here if we'd had alternatives," I said. "Hasenbach wasn't willing to deal, Keter got turned on us and the fae would have been... costly. More than we can afford."

"Good timing, isn't it?" Archer mildly said. "Stripped from all palatable options save for the Everdark, then thrown here when shit comes to a head."

"No, I get what you're implying," I said. "We got nudged into this. I disagree because there were just too many moving parts, but even assuming you're right I don't see is what Below gains from this. If Sve Noc's getting her god on, we're the fly in the ointment. They lose a discount Dead King to what, improve my military situation? And you know where I want to settle the drow long-term, Indrani, it'd fuck up a good thing for them."



"You're still thinking with your crown, sweetcheeks," Indrani said. "Lady Ranger used to limit how many her pupils could follow her on a hunt, did you know? Not because more of us would have been a problem, most of the time we were pretty decorative."

"She made it a prize," I frowned.

"And so we fought for it," she agreed. "Kept us sharp, because there was a lot to gain from trailing her on those and nobody wanted to be left behind. Hells, Cat, you got your start in pit fights didn't you? You should be able to feel when the audience is placing bets."

I would deny her, but I still remembered the days before I'd become the Squire in full. When, even with Black's accolade, I'd still been a claimant. We'd fought for a Name bound to Below, and Below had only wanted one person left standing when the dust settled. The similarities were there.

"They still lose out," I said. "She could get her apotheosis and I could get desperate upstairs without allies. That'd be a win in their books."

"Would it?" Indrani mused. "How long has she been at this play, Cat? Long enough even the dwarves ran out of other shit to conquer. That doesn't sound like victory on the horizon to me, it sounds like somewhere somehow she fucked up. And you, well, when's the last time you had a good kneel in front of the altar?"

"Black didn't pray," I said.

"Black toppled a hero-led kingdom and spent decades smothering heroic cribs," Indrani said. "You, on the other hand? You meddle with the methods, but you're also making deals with heroes and trying alliances with crusaders. You're not exactly flag-bearer for the Hellgods."

"And *this* gets me under the banner?" I replied, skeptical.

She shrugged.

"Look, I'm not going to weep for the Everdark," she said. "It's a fucking mess of murder and slavery and if you'd decided to drown the damned place instead I would have clapped your back and called it a good day's work."

Archer paused.

"But we're crossing some lines, here," she said. "This shit with the oaths? It's the kind of thing the old madmen would have tried if they had the right tools. It's a little to the north of slavery, I'll give you that, but it's in the same kingdom and we're not exactly intending to make exceptions. They're all going

upstairs, aren't they? Kids'n all. There's going to be a lot of dead people for you to get an army, and a lot more when you actually *use* it."

"The alternative is the dwarves slaughtering them wholesale," I flatly replied.

"Sure," Indrani said. "But that's not why we're doing it, is it? We came for an army and we're doing what it takes to get one. I've got no issue with that, Cat, don't get me wrong."

She leaned forward, eyes alight with the reflection of fire.

"But let's not pretend we're not sending dues downstairs, by doing our do," she softly said. "That's the kind of lie that ends up costly down the line when someone calls you out on it."

I winced and polished off the rest of my glass before extending my hand for a refill. She obliged without a word.

"I tried to make it fair," I said. "But there had to be a punishment to breaking the terms, or they would never have followed them. I tried..."

The smile that split my lips was rather bitter.

"To make it a good thing," I finished. "To set down rules that would make them better until they were on their own. But I'm using old arguments, aren't I? The same every Proceran and Praesi who stole a chunk of Callow used. I'm *civilizing the savages*."

Indrani gently nudged me with her elbow.

"They're pretty fucking savage, no two ways around it," she said. "But let's keep this in mind, before we start using that trick elsewhere. I'd get over it, but I'm guessing you're going to be chewing over this for a while."

"What does it matter if I mourn it, when I do it anyway?" I muttered.

I might not be bosom friends with Cordelia Hasenbach, but she was right about that much. It meant nothing to weep at what I did if I kept on doing it. *You can stop, or you can own it*, I thought. *Anything else is hypocrisy*. But the thought of the drow loose on the surface, without rules to bind them? No, there was no brooking that. *And so monster it is*, I grimaced. I drank again, the foul brew spectacularly failing to grow on me. I extended my arm across Indrani's lap for a top-off.

"So it's a pit fight," I sighed.

"Where there is coincidence, there is story," Archer said. "Now, we know what happens if you come out on top."

Veins of Winter spreading into darkness, an entire kingdom oathbound.

"What happens if the ol' girl does, though?" she mused. "That's the part worth worrying about."

"Dog eat dog," I murmured. "That's how Below works. If my belly's full, I can shake the world. But if she's the one who devours?"

I'd threaded Winter in Night and forced rules through it. It had come easy as breathing to me, even if the oaths themselves had required thought. Because I was the last of a court unmade, the Sovereign of Moonless Nights. I was that court, practically speaking. It's wasn't impossible to throw around the kind of workings I'd seen fae royalty employ, it just wasn't possible without going fucking crazy. For now, anyway. How long before my Peerage grew enough the alienation no longer mattered? But there was a sea of power, somewhere in me, and if Sve Noc got her hands on that? No, apotheosis would not be an issue.

"She'll make a play in Strycht," I finally said. "If it's my pivot, it's also hers."

Archer toasted to that, grinning.

"Lies and violence," she offered.

"I'm not knocking to that," I sneered.

"If you do, I have a gift," Indrani tempted.

"Is it booze?" I asked. "Is booze the gift?"

"No," she proudly announced.

"Then it's you," I said. "I'm not falling for that."

"Please," she snorted. "I'd ruin you for all others. Besides, I actually went and picked out something for you."

"Stole," I corrected. "You stole something you are now pawning off on me before you're caught."

"Well, Vivi's not around," Indrani mused. "So someone's got to pick up the slack."

I narrowed my eyes at her, reluctantly curious.

"To absent friends," I said, meeting her toast.

She pouted but we drank on it. She went ruffling through her cloak afterwards, setting down her cup. It was a cozy little nook she'd found, barely large enough for two people, and so she'd set down a thick blanket in an incline and we'd both settled there

close to the fire. It was comfortable, and the combined warmth of a friend and a camp fire was oddly soothing. I eyed her curiously as she kept going through her cloak, leathers pulling close on her frame. They were tight, though sadly not all that revealing. Good armour tended to be that way.

"There," she exclaimed, and produced a bit of stone before pressing it into my palm.

No, not just stone I realized. It was a sculpture, though not a very elaborate one. I was admittedly not great connoisseur of the arts, but even to me the work seemed rather bare. Skilfully done, though, I conceded. The androgynous face of a long-haired drow occupied one side of it, the hair growing into the locks of the identical face on the other side. The eyes seemed little more than notches at first glance, but I could barely make out the contours of a character in Crepuscular in them. For one side it was 'all', for the other 'night'. The bottom of the little sculpture had clearly been pried off by blade, I noted with mild amusement.

"... thank you?" I tried.

"Dunno if you noticed, but the deeper into the Everdark we go the more often it comes up," Indrani said. "I asked Soln and apparently it represents Sve Noc."

My brow rose. A two-faced goddess, huh? The term was considered an insult in both Praes and Callow. In my homeland for the implied accusation of hypocrisy, in the Wasteland for the implied single layer of deception. Probably not down here, though.

"What are you up to, I wonder?" I murmured, looking at the stone face.

"And I was going to say we've come so far," Indrani said. "But there you are, talking at stone."

"We were already hunting demigods when you joined up," I replied.

"Sure, but back then we were dealing with everybody's messes," she said. "Now we're everybody's mess."

"Truly, you are the great philosopher of our age," I drily said.

She flipped me the finger.

"I do wonder what the rest are up to," she admitted.

"We're not doing that," I said.

She eyed me with surprise.

"Night before the battle starts, going all reminiscing about the old days and what they might be doing?" I elaborated. "For shame, 'Drani. You should know better."

Archer went very quiet, all of a sudden, and her face was unreadable.

"I sometimes forget," she said, "that you don't realize it."

By brow creased.

"Realize what?"

"That no one thinks like that, Catherine," she said. "At least not all the time, like you do."

"Black does," I said.

"And he is an irredeemable madman," Indrani murmured. "To think like you do, it takes... something. Stepping out of yourself, of who you are, and making a story of it. Like all the world is a stage. How strange it must be, to always act like there is an audience. I can hardly imagine the weight of it."

My fingers clenched in my lap.

"You were something else long before the fae made a title of it, weren't you?" she said. "Mad to the bone."

"I don't-" I tried, but what could I say to that?

What could anyone?

"It's all right, Cat," Indrani said, and patted my hand. "We've always known. Sometimes I just forget."

Slowly, my fingers unclenched. She scuttled back and rested her head on my shoulder. It would have been easier for me, given I was the one a foot and a beard short of being a dwarf, but I didn't protest. I leaned back against her, chin atop her head.

"It's how we survive," I finally said. "By watching out for it."

"I know," Indrani said. "But it's all right, you know? To leave it at the door once in a while. Just for a few hours."

"I'm not sure," I quietly admitted, "that I remember how to do that anymore."

There was a long pause and she raised her head, eyes meeting mine. It was slow. I could have leaned away and it would have been the end of it. We'd go back to drinking, and not speak of it again.

I did not lean away.

Her lips moved against mine and it was nothing like the kiss in Lotow. No awkward clicking of teeth, no surprise. Only the taste of liquor and smoke and hands so warm, claiming the nape of my neck as she slipped into my lap and dipped me back. My fingers slid under the edge of her leathers, cupping her arse, and if this was all an illusion it was one I was willing to believe. I came to myself flushed and hard of breathing, my hands pinned above my head as she pressed a kiss against the crook of my neck. Smirking, I could feel it against my skin. It was an effort of will to speak.

“‘Drani,” I said, lips bruised. “Masego. I don’t-”

*Want to ruin something good, I thought, just because I want this.*

She leaned back, hazelnut eyes considering.

“That is that,” she said. “This is this.”

Deft fingers unmade my belt and I guilty leaned into her touch.

“Just for tonight,” she assured me.

“Just for tonight,” I murmured, and gave in.

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### [DroughtBringer](#)

Guys! We have hit over 1000 on top web fiction! Currently we're at 1,212 which is amazing! Thank you guys for all of your votes, and keep your votes up!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Raven*

Our name is legion, for we are many

*NerfGlastigUaine*

647 votes till we beat Ward in yearly. We will make it happen for the Gods Below deserve the top of EVERY metric

### [erraticerrata](#)

Character contest continues, Aisha vs Ratface. Link to vote below.

<https://www.strawpoll.me/16826350?fbclid=IwAR0Zd-WBtLLzJTQAHIGskEw24B4Ff4Me4UEs18EI98d3JQk5RigM-6Hw4Zw>

## [TeK](#)

Ratface scores a technical lose due to unaccessability.

*naturalnuke*

I miss the Bastard Lord 😞

*Someguy*

I miss him too. With his planning and Vivienne's Aspects linked with Cat's Cates by Zeze, they could have re-mapped the surface of Calernea and swam in nigh-endless wealth.

## [ClickPause](#)

We will pay tribute to the dead.

*RanVor*

Frankly, I didn't expect it to be that one-sided.

*stevenneiman*

Yeah, I'd figured that if anything the Bastard Lord would be slightly in the lead. I guess that in this kind of contest, being in the same order of magnitude might be as close as it tends to get. I don't think we've had any closer than about 30/70, even for ones I expected to be tight races.

I think it's because politics has some built-in catch up mechanics because a victorious party has the best chance to disgrace itself, but here it's just people selected for a degree of similarity (because we all like PGTE enough to read this far and vote in the popularity contest) deciding who they like best. No real catch-up mechanics or second chances.

*letouriste*

there was a close race before. i forgot which one...nauk maybe?

## [Javvies](#)

Heh.

Villain versus Villain in the Everdark.

Sve has the experience and plenty of power, but hasn't done squat with it in centuries – for so long that the drow are basically just a footnote in Calernia.

Presaging Cat versus Malicia?

Actually, I think they might be wrong when they think that the Accords are a loss for Below. Sure, they're imposing limits, but they're limits decided upon by the mortals with the power to impose and enforce those limits. I.e., those with the power are making a decision (free will) to enforce limits on everybody who is unable to prevent them from doing so. In a way, the Accords could be a kind of ultimate victory for Below. Showing that the people don't need to have Above telling them what to do.

*Someguy*

Or the Accords could be the prelude of a 2nd screwup for the Gods Above & Below. Arcadia an unending cycle that went nowhere resulting in failure, Creation shutting out both their influences once Cat implements the Accords worldwide (instead of continental that she's currently aiming for).

*Skaddix*

I doubt these over go worldwide since I believe our dear writer has said we don't leave the continent in this story. Not to mention Arcadia is infinite and not the same everywhere ergo Cat's mantle of Winter might very well be meaningless outside of this continent.

*MetruX*

Winter could be meaningless, but the story is the same in Arcadia, only in different mantles. no matter where. Also, there exist different infinities.

*goliath1303*

It was stated by Masego at one point that in another continent Arcadia would be unrecognizable in comparison to what we've seen and be unaffected by what happened to "our" Arcadia.

[Javvies](#)

Except Below doesn't actually do much of anything to influence those on its side – Below let's those who follow its philosophy do whatever they want.

It's Above that actively and regularly exerts influence on Creation.

Creation locking out Above and Below would serve as proof of Below's philosophy, thus being a Win for Below.

*stevenneiman*

The Accords are, as far as I understand it, a victory for Below and not a tie. Assuming we're all right in assuming



that the Accords are an effort to get Gods out of mortal affairs, that means a power vacuum which ambitious mortals can fill. The Gods Below claim that the fate of humanity should be decided by people with the ambition and the wherewithal to shape it, while Above claims that its influence is necessary for humanity to function. This is reflected in their intervention styles and their Named. Good interferes whenever it can find a suitable pretext, and sets that interference up as a goal for heroes to attain. Their champions are people handpicked by the Heavens because they can do the job, and given the Name the Heavens think best suits them. Evil rarely interferes, and does so only as a counter to the most blatant of cheating by the Gods Above or as a reward given to a mortal who has earned it. The champions of the Gods Below are people who are ambitious enough to reach for a Name and capable enough to defend their claim against anyone else who wants it.

### Javvies

They're kind of a Victory for Below that looks like a reasonable compromise/settlement/tie, if not something of a Win for Above, for the average person who doesn't realize the actual dispute is not actually between what normal people think of as good and evil, but between "do what we tell you to do" and "do whatever you want to do if you can deal with the consequences/ have some free will".

Which means that the non-Hero Crusaders, and maybe even some of the Heroes, are probably mostly going to like the Accords, and have serious questions for anyone who would rather stab it out.

At least, if my impression of what's in the Accords is reasonably accurate.

*Rup*

...thank you for summing it up nicely:

between "do what we tell you to do" and "do whatever you want to do if you can deal with the consequences"

*Cpt. Obvious*

Necro post... I know...

I'd argue that "and deal with the consequences" would fit better than "if you can deal with the consequences"

After all the Gods below doesn't care if you can or can't deal with the consequences. Either you succeed or

you fail, either you gain or you lose. The capable will rise and be stronger for it.

They are Darwinists.

*Dainpdf*

Can sort of see that. We suspect Winter was the draft of Evil, and Winter always wins through diplomacy followed by scheming and treachery.

*adam1*

Actually, I no longer think that Summer/Winter was meant to shadow Good/Evil.

I think the Fae were meant to balance out the Elves. The Elves are a force for Good, as has been mentioned. I think both sides of the Arcadia fight represent Evil striving against itself. The Elves/Fae weren't in direct conflict, but they represented different pulls on mortal forces. Even Summer Fae were a trainwreck for the regular world.

*Dainpdf*

Well, that hypothesis was put forward by Malicia and Warlock. I think they know what they're talking about. Plus, Fae are not of Creation. Kind of makes sense they don't do much good to it.

*Andrei*

To me the Accords seem just as brutal for Above as they do for Below. Below gets a hardcap on the amount of madness they can unleashe but the faith of their followers doesn't really get tested. When you think back to Cats first meeting with the Pilgrim he said that Above's help isn't always requested, so what happens when the hero gets a divine intervention that is against the Accords? Either he uses it in which case Above breaks the deal and gives more narrative weight to Below or the hero discards said help and everyone looses just a bit of faith. In my opinion its a harder deal for Above who are used to last-second bullshittery than it is for Below who just need to lower the madness cap from "Willing to kill 80%" to "Willing to kill 50%"

*RanVor*

I think that if the Accords will end up succesfully implemented, the narrative definition of a hero will change. Instead of the ones going after Evil, they will become the ones going after those who break the Accords.

Of course it will take some time, but I can see it happening eventually.

*Rup*

..willing to kill 50%..??  
Sounds like Thanos 😞

*Jane*

I don't particularly want to be suspicious of Indrani, but something about this is sending up a little chime of alarm.

Eh, I'm probably just reading too much into things. And am being a bit too jumpy because things have been going too well for Cat again.

*Decius*

Don't be suspicious. But she is going to die now.

*Jane*

But how could a character actually be *considerate* and *thoughtful* for someone they love???

Clearly, this must be the prelude to some shocking betrayal instead!

*Fern*

Hah, I wish it were that simple honestly. Maybe it is, though? After all, Cat and Black had their small father/daughter moment and he managed to make it thru Liesse just fine. Hell, if you wanted to narrow it down to romantic relationships, Killian is still alive and kicking up in Callow somewhere.

We aint bury no damn gays around here SON

Still, you can't blame Cat for being careful. Having control over the story is how she's eked out all her important wins so far, she's just trying to make sure there isn't a relationship based pivot that'll fuck her day up.

*RanVor*

But a pair of gays just died three chapters ago...

*Andrew Mitchell*

Well said.

*SpacyRicochet*

Yup... giant death flag, right there.

Dammit, Indrani! Why did you go all sentimental on us the night before the big battle!

*usernamesbco*

I'm suspicious af, but not of Indrani. After that fireside conversation I'm seeing waving flags, burning flares, and blinking runway lights spelling out "THIS IS A TRAP" in story narrative.

This entire Everdark debacle has been as bad as Black's decision to invade Procer.

*taovkool*

Well, the self reflections part was nice. Dues to Below doesn't really mesh with Cat's Callowan sensibilities isn't it? And hypocrisies are just so fun to mess around in.

But we all know what the real big news here are, there goes that ship!

Unless it's a 'friends with benefits' kind of arrangements. In which case, awesome.

*caoimhinh*

It's probably going to be the friends with benefits kind of deal, at least until they go back to the surface and reunite with Masego.

Those two had been oogling each other for a looooong time, so now they are scratching their itch. ( ^ ° 3 ^ ° )

*Dainpdf*

I just wonder how huge the Sve Noc's dying curse will be with this large an accumulated service.

*taovkool*

What dying curse are you talking about? Did it get mentioned somewhere previously

*IDKWhoitis*

Villians dont get resurrections, at best, they get to curse their killer with their dying breath.

(Paraphased)Mentioned by Black Book 2, used by Cat to kill Lone Swordsman at end of Book 2.

*Dainpdf*

I think Cat refers to learning about it from Black, back in First Llesse, but I couldn't find the quotation.

I know he says "We get to cackle on the way down the cliff, or maybe curse our killer with our last breath." in 36 – Madman.

We also get to see it happen in the Hanno interlude, when his mother curses people while killing herself, and in the latest Warlock interlude, where he gets a large payout in the form of divine intervention.

*Dainpdf*

Oh, also Triumphant used it to destroy a good part of the army that killed her, bringing the Tower down on their heads.

Javvies

Depends. While, sure, the Night and the drow are effectively paying dues to Below for the Sve, they're all firmly on the side of Below anyways.

Sve hasn't (so far as we know) done anything with respects to opposing Above/the Plans of Above. At least, not recently.

Also, it depends on who Sve aims at/what Sve asks for with their death curse.

Going after a victorious Cat might be met with rather less favor than Warlock's blowing up the Ashuran fleet to save his son from the Crusaders. Cat, after all, is definitely more likely to punch Above in the balls again – and otherwise be an actively involved part of the Game/Contest between Above and Below. Sve had tried to pull a Dead King and not be involved, but did so poorly/incompletely.

Plus, Cat's got a respectable and recent kill count of Heroes and Above's Crusaders, and is going to need to kill more, is going to be bringing the drow back into play.

Assuming at the dwarves is likely to be more effective

*Dainpdf*

True. I don't think the Sve Noc would be able to get Cat decimated like Warlock did to the Ashuran fleet, but she still might hit her with something fierce.

I was actually thinking whether the Priestess would have more or less favor than the Warlock, and I honestly don't know. I guess we get to find out.

What I do know is I expect something as well established as villains' dying curses to pay off again and again.

*Nairne .01*

The two faced goddess is such an obvious hint at what might happen (though I may be inclined to believe that because I've read the Claymore manga).

### *Euodiachloris*

Yet, I suspect that she is also a candidate for being the baby that the Wandering Bard suggested to the Dead King would need eating, since she's a nascent candidate for apotheosis who seems to have stalled in the crib.

Having said that, Cat is also a squalling brat when it comes to this... The older monsters have deliberately pitted the babies against each other. So, part of me kind of hopes the two get together to bash the pair in the face, toddler-style. 🤪

### *Dainpdf*

Eh... That seems like a stretch to me. Especially since Neshamah seems to have some sort of interest in cultivating other demigods (probably in hopes that they'll tilt the balance between him and the Bard in his favor).

### *Morgenstern*

The "baby" is obviously Procer that both sides want to destroy... the heroes angling for more belief in Above and more heroes cropping up instead of corrupt worldly lords, of course, Bard and Dead King angling for quite different things.

### *Jonnnney*

I'd say the Above is angling towards a nation led by heroes rather than one that produces more heroes. Honestly looking at the 12-14 heroes with the army drowned by the Arcadian lake and the 9 or so heroes with the army drowned by the mountainous lake there is no lack of heroes popping up in procer, but the nation or even most the principalities aren't guided by the servants of above. That's what Above wants, the ability to control or "guide" a nation to serve a greater good.

### *Thea*

But Cat, Akua and Sve Noc make for 3 claimants for 2 faces...

### *Dainpdf*

Fusion? That may have happened if Cat had taken Night for herself. As it is, I doubt it will happen. As an aside, I have also read Claymore! That was great, wasn't it?

*adam1*

I think at the end of the fight Cat will need to absorb the Night into Winter to keep it around at all. If the Night fails utterly, then all of her Mighty might lose their power.

I also think Sve Noc stalled in apotheosis because she didn't absorb an extra-planar power. The Dead King is linked to a Hell, Cat is linked to Winter, and it looks like Sve Noc tried to create a power source with the Night, and it isn't complete enough to fully function as her source of immortality so she has been trying to grow it. Every Drow is born with some Night, and Night can be harvested from other species, so the Night gets more powerful over time, but it isn't ready yet.

*Dainpdf*

Is every drow born with some Night? I don't recall that anywhere. The Night just allows you to gain Night by killing others, and take theirs if they had any.

*adam1*

It is mentioned in chapter 63 that drow die at the age of 60 if they don't harvest more night than they are born with.

*Dainpdf*

True. I guess it passes from mother to child. Quite the dangerous contaminant.

*nipi*

I doubt Masego minds. Probably feels a bit relieved that someone that isn't him will be taking care of that itch of Archers.

*Morgenstern*

Second that. Unless there were some fear of losing Indrani to the person who can give her everything she wants and not just part of it involved. Seeing how the emotional scales weigh out, I don't think that's gonna be a problem, though. There just isn't enough of anything lovey dovey emotionally between

Cat and 'Drani, especially from Archer's side, as was made abundantly clear when they had their talk about Masego.

*Jonnnney*

I'm definitely seeing the makings of a polyamorous relationship between Catherine, Indrani, and Masego with different kinds of real love and affection between them. I've had friends that have achieved something similar platonic life mate primary with occasional or long term sexual secondaries.

*maresther23*

Your significant other doesn't need to be the person you have sex with. Masego is asexual, Cat isn't. This way Indrani and Masego can do the whole in love thing and both Cat and Indrani get sex. The three of them love each other enough for it to work.

*Morgenstern*

I'd pose it a bit differently: They love each other in two different ways enough that it works. Aka Masego need not fear to lose Indrani's love to Cat and Indrani does not need to fear what havoc jealousy could wreak. Because it's just "friendship (with benefits)" for Cat and Indrani, nothing more. That's what truly makes it work. Same kind of lovey dovey might work, too, in general, of course – but that's just not how it plays out here.

*Metalshop*

This whole Everdark chapter has been fantastic, but what I'm really appreciating the most are these little glimpses of Catherine from the outside. Indrani's way of looking at her, the way things are limping along in Callow as a result of her absence, Malicia pondering her disappearance from atop a tower, Masego's bitter philosophical arguments about her with his father; it's all hammering in the point that Cat is significant on a continental scale. Combined with Cat's musings as she starts coming to terms and this is some tip top stuff.

*Nairne .01*

I agree. She rose so much they have to consider her moves. She is not the local villain that's supposed to get slain by an upstart hero candidate anymore.

[\*OutspanFoster\*](#)

As soon as Indrani started reminiscing I was screaming "Staaaaahp!"



Then Cat said it for me

[sengachi](#)

Oh wow, that line from Indrani about the toll such narrative vigilance must take was hard-hitting.

I'm also coming to love Indrani as a character more and more. She's really something.

*Rup*

"narrative vigilance"...nicely put

*eh*

"For one side it was 'all', for the other 'night'."

'All Night'

Plus Ultra?

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

Live in fear,  
'cause I am here.

---

"Splendid, have you ever heard these words? Go Below! PLUS...  
ULTRA!"

*Antoninjohn*

Another Apotheosis for Cat to go through, Cat in the talk with Maogo about Winter Winter was shown to be a type of cloak and we all know that Cat's story about her cloak is that she adds the banner of her fallen foes into it. On the good news, well at least she's getting laid

*Dainpdf*

More like another step in her apotheosis. She's not quite there yet – Neshamah mentioned he gave her the most basic of inklings.

*Nairne .01*

I mean, the "Two"-faced goddess.  
Sovereign of Moonless "Nights"....

Do I need to add more hints?

*lennymaster*

No, I think a melding of the two would have happened if Cat had taken Night for herself, instead of creating the peerage as a buffer. now I think Sve gets consumed as just one more aspect of Winter.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Well said. That is the way this path looks.

*JJR*

"My brow rose. A two-faced goddess, huh? The term was considered an insult in both Praes and Callow. In my homeland for the implied accusation of hypocrisy, in the Wasteland for the implied single layer of deception. Probably not down here, though."

"How many levels of deception are you on my dude?"

"Like 2 or 3?"

"You are like baby, watch this." removes mask "behold it was I Dread Emperor Traitorous the whole time."

*Dainpdf*

Traitorous is on  $n+1$  levels of deception, where  $n$  is the most levels anyone else thinks he is.

*FactualInsanity*

I need someone to draw Traitorous, so I can 'shop his image on top of that one "It was me, Dio!" screengrab from JoJo.

Or better yet, whoever is drawing Traitorous can just draw him like in that grab.

*JJR*

I think you're underestimating Traitorous' ability to deceive with that "else".

To borrow from Horry Patter.

How many levels of deception can Traitorous have at a time?

At least one more than he knows about, of course.

*Dainpdf*

Did you not read the chapter quote? A villain should not lie to himself. Being the foremost expert on deception, Traitorous would, of course, never deceive himself.

Or that's what Traitorous would want himself to think!

[sengachi](#)

You know, it wouldn't surprise me if Traitorous sold his soul at some point (to multiple parties even) \*just\* so that when he died he could 'betray' all of the people who bought a piece by coming back to life and cheating them of their due. That seems like the kind of bullshit Traitorous could pull off.

[Javvies](#)

Nah. Below doesn't do resurrections, just necromantic reanimations as variations on undead. Traitorous was good, but I don't think that even he could have finagled his way into an Above-empowered resurrection.

However, I think it's quite possible that Traitorous sold quantities of his soul in excess of how much soul he actually had. That is, he sold more than 100% of his soul (probably more like full order of magnitude or more of sales in excess of his actual soul) .

And so nobody managed to get any of his soul. And/or he arranged to obtain other people's souls and use them instead – after all, what is more quintessentially Dread Emperor Traitorous than making cultists sell their souls to bring down Dread Emperor Traitorous but actually using those souls to pay off sales of his own soul?

*Morgenstern*

\*ahem

I quote from just the very last chapter before this one:

"Traitorous's Law: while redemption is the greatest victory one can achieve over a villain, to function it does require the villain to have at least a single redeemable quality.

Addendum: Yes, even if a Choir is involved."

– Extract from 'The Axiom Appendix', multiple contributors

*Morgenstern*

If a Choir was involved for a redemption play, why not resurrection? It's what Choirs do, after all, and the obviously DID finagle a Choir one way or another... Just sayin. 😊

*Morgenstern*

the = he -.-

[Javvies](#)

Because you don't resurrect Redeemed Villains, you either keep them alive in the first place to atone in life or let them cement their Redemption with a Heroic

Sacrifice, and you don't get resurrected after a Heroic Sacrifice.

*Rup*

sold his soul at some point (to multiple parties even)  
...dunno why...reminded me of jack sparrow

*Novice*

"A two-faced goddess, huh? The term was considered an insult in both Praes and Callow. In my homeland for the implied accusation of hypocrisy, in the Wasteland for the implied single layer of deception."

I genuinely laughed at this. Oh, Praes.

*caoimhinh*

Ok, I can only say this:

( ͡° ͜ʖ ͡° )

[onedollargum](#)

Just for... All Night. ;D

*Skaddix*

I don't get it...Cat is like reminiscing before a major Battle is bad luck but having sex before the last battle is okay? I mean I guess...

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Yo it is NNN EE, stop corrupting your reader.  
Also the blue ovaries Archer got through... Finally!

*Dainpdf*

Well, Cat is correctly reading this as Action instead of Horror. Genre Savvy pays.

*Someguy*

The sex before battle ensure that both of them will live, more drama fodder for the Zeze/Indrani/Cat triangle since the gods are obviously soap opera addicts.

*Snowfire1224*

Don't forget Cat's crush on Vivienne and Akua's constant flirting with Cat.

It seems the only person in the Woe who is not in anyway romantically interested in another member of the Woe is Hankram.

*Nairne .01*

He is the secret ingredient to that dish...

*Metrux*

Yet we all know he's a flirt go sleeps around, so... As much as Hakram doesn't go with the dish, he's a pretty well known side dish :V

*Jonnnney*

He is the slut of the group

*Zarquon*

Not gonna lie, I expected this to happen on Chapter 69.

*caoimhinh*

Chapter 68 shouldn't exist, then we would get this scene in Chapter 69 :v

But seriously, that chapter felt like filler for me because that conversation between Akua and Cat talking about Lakes and about how Akua wanted to kill her mother could have happened within any other chapter easily, instead of using a whole chapter for that.

Now the sex chapter between Cat and Indrani is not chapter 69, that was the Evil Plan of ErraticErrata T\_T

*Faiir*

I nominate you for the best comment of the chapter award!

*JackBeThimble*

It will, with how long most arcs are going we can expect the act itself to stretch out over at least 2.5 chapters.

*Cthulhu*

Ok. I've held back but I'm now going to offer my wild eyed speculation

I think Sve Noc is Dread Empress Triumphant (May she never return).

The timeline is about right. The story structure is about right. The perversion of the ubderdark is about right.

*Jonnnney*

It is a fun theory, I don't see triumphant laying low for centuries. I mean she conquered the continent in a decade she doesn't seem to be the patient type. It would explain why the dead king didn't have any drow named, but then again he didn't have any dwarves either

*Dainpdf*

Wow.

Love the quote in the beginning, plus the whole inner reflection bit. Contrasts so well with the temptation provided by both Akua – and by Archer herself, interestingly enough – to just believe that pragmatism justifies evil. A callback to “justifications matter only to the just”, if only in spirit.

Also very interesting, the whole thing with the pit fight and Sve Noc. Iron sharpens iron, you keep what you kill... The Gods Below really like ascendancy through slaughter.

I wonder, however: how large is the Sve Noc's dying curse going to be? On one hand, she's basically erected a giant altar to the Gods Below. On the other, she's been passive and achieving much nothings. How much cred does she have?

Have also been thinking about the “too many moving parts” thing. Cat doesn't know exactly how outclassed she was back in Keter, or how the Dead King didn't \*really\* plan for her to win. Also hasn't thought much about how the Keter thing (with her being desperate) is directly related to the dwarves invading, taking advantage of the Dead King marching.

Finally: noooooooooo! My battered, mostly sunk Cat X Vivienne ship! Come baaaaaaack!

Dammit EE. Why do you do this to me?

*caoimhinh*

Something that I wonder is this:

Is Sve Noc actually in charge of the Drow right now?

What was discussed now pointed out to the scenario questioned by Cat a few chapters ago, “Why hadn't the Everdark reduced themselves to just a dozen of demigods holding all the Night to themselves?” and Cat and Indrani now theorize that's what Sve Noc tried to do, spreading her domain, the Night, among the populace and then they would make it grow and she could harvest them all when the time was right and by absorbing back all the Night she would reach Apotheosis.

BUT, remember Cat's conversation with Sve Noc? What Cat saw when she peered into the Night wasn't the Sve Noc sitting in a throne or praying in an altar; what she saw was “A colossal silhouette, limbs outstretched and shivering in pain” so maybe Sve Noc is prisoner of the top Drow now?

Yotz

There is an option of her being hooked up on a parasite feedback. Like Peregrine was forced to relive every moment of suffering of people he killed with Angel's Kiss Fever – hey, forced meme – so is Sve Noc forced to relive every death caused in the name of Night, for she is it. She remembers every dying whisper, every desperate murmur; she remembers death of every victim with acute precision; she remembers... And so she can't go further, for it will be her undoing, nor she able to stop the flow of power, spider trapped in a web of her own making

Which leads to curious option of Gloom being not the moat and walls, but rather cage – with initial plan being goading all the Drow into sacrificing themselves to the Night to initiate the Apotheosis, with point of failure being Sve unable to drive them all to suicide. They managed to establish some resemblance of stable social structure even under the pressure of Tenets, with side effect of her being unable to do anything until the apotheosis would either be completed or fails entirely.

There's also a possibility of Sve and Noc being two very different people...

### [Euodiachloris](#)

If Sve and Noc are the two sides of Night and therefore the two faces of it... both girls missed a trick. The moon might wax and wane, but it also has a completely black phase that allow the cold stars and aurora to really show off.

They're... kind of missing a face. \*glances in Cat's direction\* 🙄

*Hellspirit*

Interesting

*MetruX*

I have to disagree with the thrww of you, Sve Noc has no need for the death of all Drows. She *is* the Night, in the sense that it's her domain, it's part of her, even if others make use of it, at any moment she can call upon anything that is in the Night, so the plan was simply for the Night to grow while she "prays" to Below.

The most interesting part, though, is the thing of villains dying breath... Not all villains get that. Especially when villains get offed by other villains, like when Wekesa killed the Warlock of the time, or when a Dread Emperor is toppled by another villain, they don't get curses, probably

because the cursed dying breath is a purely anti-Above thing. Sure, I could be wrong, but this seems to be the most accurate with all we've seen.

*Yotz*

My notion of hecatomb of the Drow springs from the idea of the apotheosis through concentration of power. While the plan to grow the Night through growing of the Drow is sound, in the core of the Tenets – as little as we were shown of them – is the principle inherently self-destructing for a society. I posit that without bonding influence of the Cabals ryllehs would grind themselves into the extinction long ago.

Now, what that would mean for the Night? It would be concentrated in few nearly-omnipotent beings, remnants of Drow race, forming a new Pantheon for the new All-Highest, Goddess of the Night. Ultimately, they will be dissolved in the Domain of Sve, or sacrificed for the glory of the Night to serve as a spark, jump-starting true Apotheosis.

In essence, what Sve seems to practice the method opposite to the Neshamah's preferred. He builds his own parish to become a physical god, she tries to become a concept. While he wouldn't need such drastic measures as extinction-level hecatombs to sustain himself as a deity – so far as we know, that is – he is also nearly powerless outside of his small pocket universe. Would Sve actually succeed in her hypothetical plan, she will be a concept of Creation itself, for She is the Night, and the Night would be She. Eternal, powerful, free from intervention of Above or Below beyond already woven in the Weave of Creation. And only thing she ought to do, is to sacrifice her race. To the last of them. Pittance in the face of Eternity.

...

Come to think of it, I now have a sneaking suspicion, that Cat's wonder into the Underdark was caused not only by obvious reasons and crypto-obvious DK, but also by certain chronic alcoholic. Who once sicced two Kings, Eternal and Dead, on each other to give them both a valuable lesson – quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi, specifically.

*mavant*

I see what you did there, claims medic.

*Yotz*

/)



*Dainpdf*

That sounds unlikely to me. A Domain seems to be something deeply personal, that one owns. The idea that someone (especially someone with no powers outside the Night they possess) could wield the Night against the Sve Noc is a bit like the idea that someone could wield Winter against Cat. I rather suspect that something went wrong with some form of metamorphosis that she was attempting and now she has a deformed body that causes her constant pain.

*caoimhinh*

But it's still possible to bind her using sorcery, and powerful 'demigod-level' beings are susceptible to the bindings of High Arcana.

I don't think they used Night against the Sve Noc, but if she thinned her domain so much by spreading it in the whole Drow population, then she would be left vulnerable to a treason and the use of sorcery to trap her and use her as a source of power.

Many comments have been talking about any villain being capable of using Below to give a curse to their enemies with their last breath, which I find unlikely but ok, let's consider this: what if the current state of the Everdark, after Sve Noc was betrayed and bound, is her 'dying curse' out of spite towards those that took her gift and condemned her to eternal suffering?

*Dainpdf*

Cat is vulnerable to High Arcana because she's not got just a Domain, she's got Fae in her, and Fae in general are vulnerable to bindings.

As for the Sve Noc being vulnerable, the issue is that, in the end, all the Night belongs to her. I wouldn't find it odd if she could rip it out of someone, or use it to control them (or at least nudge their perceptions or actions).

Plus, the Night is the basis of most if not all power in the Everdark. What else would these drow use against her?

Lastly, I find it unlikely that this is a dying curse, because one, it has affected the entire drow population for centuries, which is a lot. Two, the Sve Noc is capable of communicating, and therefore alive in some capacity. Not that this has stopped, say, Cat before, but it's still a point against especially if the effect is still going. Third, it seems pretty certain that this is the Sve Noc's

domain, and it would be very odd if her domain is fulfilling some dying curse while she's still alive. Instead of, you know, helping her.

### *caoimhinh*

Fae are not the only beings that are vulnerable to bindings. Demons, and Angels too, even the Dead King, seeing as he even needs an invitation and a contract to cross into Creation. The higher power a being has within themselves the more they are bound by rules, the ultimate example being the Gods, who can't step directly into Creation.

Also, don't forget that we have barely seen the outskirts of Drow society, the weakest of the Everdark, and if Sve Noc was betrayed and bound, then that happened centuries ago, we do not know what kind of powers and sorceries the Drow had in the pinnacle of their civilization, before their empire collapsed. My hypothesis was Sve Noc being vulnerable right after spreading her Domain into the Drow population, thus thinning it and weakening herself, think of it as a mage being weakened right after performing a big ritual, there's a window of opportunity there.

We do not know exactly in what state she is, she could be dead and her soul bound to Tvarigu, or she could be in the center of a ritual site that spread her Domain and if she leaves it she dies.

### *Dainpdf*

Except we know she talked to Cat in chapter 54, and she seemed pretty okay with the whole Tenets business. We also know from that chapter that she is Named.

We do not know that the Dead King needs an invitation to come into Creation. It may be that what he needs is to not be the center of any story where he takes the offensive, so he does not *\*want\** to come out without invitation.

As for the Gods, it's also not that they can't come in, it's that they don't because that would spoil their game.

Finally, we know that the Sve Noc(or those she converted) killed the Twilight Sages, those who would have been the greater powers of Drow civilization.

After that, everyone of consequence has Night in them and so can't really go against her.

*Morgenstern*

What about she IS "all Night", the giant silhouette being the NIGHT = her spread out over all the "Gloom", all the Drows, in constant pain because of the constant dying and suffering everywhere? Like, she tried to claim them all, but instead she spread herself out over them all and it's just not working.

*Dainpdf*

Could be. Doesn't mesh too well with the way she speaks in ch. 54, though.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Yes. Save Noc being trapped in the system would explain why she failed to harvest them all or focus and wield them all

*superkeaton*

eh, not particularly fond of this pairing.  
it feels too "Generation Xerox", the apprentice of the Black Knight and the apprentice of the Ranger, snogging? Predictable. I do like someone else pointing out that Cat's constant thinking of things in terms of stories and their outcomes is just a little insane, even if it's a practical sort of madness.

*caoimhinh*

Well, they had it coming for a long time, Archer's constant innuendos and insinuations to Cat, and Catherine constant leering of Indrani, now put those 2 people with sexual tension between them and desires into a series of long months of battles underground, and this is what happens. I doubt they will be a couple, and they said this would be a one night stand (though knowing those two, it's probably a lie, and IRL you can't trust promises made when one is horny anyways), casual sex is likely to happen at least until they go back to the surface.

*caoimhinh*

Also, Catherine was taught that learning stories and thinking in their terms and outcomes was key to understanding how Fate worked and was vital in Black's victories, and it's also what has kept her alive through many things, so she's not really insane, it's no longer madness when it's how reality works.

*Nairne .01*

I think insanity is the term society applies to people who don't follow it's rules.

*Hellspirit*

That would be criminal ^^

But seriously, I'd rather say that "insane" are what people call those who follow rules the people can not understand.

*luminiousblu*

I'm more interested in the fact that at this point, Cat's "bi"sexuality is an informed attribute.

*Skaddix*

I mean Wesaka made her horny. But the Warlock is suppose to be super hot (2nd only to Malicia so far) so saying it takes a Super Hot guy to get Cat horny for guys definitely makes her more Lesbian then Hetero on the scale.

*MetruX*

Bi, hetero, lesbian... As Skaddix said, it's a scale, not a trait, and not even a fixed scale (although it won't ever swing full to the other side, or even too far away). Yes, she seems to have more relations with girls, so she probably likes more girls, though her first was also a boy, and she did wonder before how it would be with Hakram, even if she herself doesn't feel that attracted to him. It's probably more because most of the males around her are not to be touched or not of her liking, while the woman are more of free types ripe for the taking.

*luminiousblu*

He's super hot in an informed way, to be fair. Sort of like how we're constantly told that Ratface was (;\_;) incredibly hot with a body like a Greek statue and a dick five times as large, but it was never really shown.

*Skaddix*

Well it is lit it will always be informed

*Snowfire1224*

I think she mentioned way earlier in the story that when she was still in Laure she had dated a few guys. I think she mention one to Killian when she had asked Cat if she had ever been with someone. Hasn't really been brought since.

*Darkening*

To be fair, the men she spends time with are either, not human, significantly older than her, or Masego, so she's not exactly swimming in options. She's expressed attraction to

both ratface and warlock, and claims to have lost her virginity to a fisherman's son, so while yes, she hasn't had any romantic entanglements with men in the course of the story, it seems to be more due to a lack of available options than a lack of interest.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

She has expressed attraction to both Masegos parents, and once mentioned that if creation wanted her to be a virgin it shouldn't have made the local sailor boys so hot, so there's that.

*Akuabestgurl*

The wheel turns, history repeats itself and the grooves are carved deeper.

It's be weirder if they didn't bang

*RanVor*

To be honest, I didn't even remember that Archer used to be Hye's pupil before you mentioned it. She's grown so much her apprenticeship under Ranger has become a mere footnote in her characterization.

*superkeaton*

That might say more about Ranger's lack of relevance to the story than anything else. Though I seriously suspect that the Pilgrim and his friends might be using Black as bait to draw Hye out and kill her once and for all, so she may become relevant soon.

*RanVor*

You might be right, but it applies to Catherine as well, although to a much lesser degree; I don't really see her as Black's apprentice anymore.

As for Pilgrim's plan, I think his target might actually be Cat, not Ranger. He has reasons to expect her to come to his rescue – freeing a captured friend is a heroic story after all; it fits her modus operandi perfectly. I think he's counting on exploiting her bond with Amadeus to kill two birds with one stone.

*Snowfire1224*

I had a thought earlier today, about Cat and the story in general.

It started with the comment Archer made a while back about how the Woe are wild animals that she basically let in and tamed (although not completely).

You can say she did the same thing with the Wild Hunt, imposing rules on them, same with what she is doing with the Drow now.

There is also, something I recently remembered from early in the story, about how her name felt like a living breathing animal. With how Cat mastered namelore and had to deal with weakening due to a redemption arc one could say she had to tame her name as well, learning how to use it and how ignore it when it lead toward classic villainy.

This also fits with her ultimate goal of the Liesse Accords as they are intended to tame the battles between heroes and villains so that the common people are not harmed.

*IDKWhoitis*

So Cat breaks Stories and Chains, and fits them with nice Leather collars instead?

I like this line of thought for what Cat does, and I don't really see any counterpoints.

*caoimhinh*

Yeah, Cat is the breaker of patterns and reshaper of stories, even a maker of them to some extent. She is carrying Black's legacy of not taming Evil, but directing it, putting order and pragmatism to the chaotic madness that was going nowhere due to blind ambition.

Now they actually hold a real chance to an everlasting victory.

*IDKWhoitis*

Personally I see it more of a change of game more than an end to the game. The Calamities and Woe have transitioned this a game of checkers to one of chess. Parallels can be drawn with Medieval Age politics transitioning from religion and personal feuds to the modern struggle of power between nation states.

The game could technically be seen as "ending", only for a new one to begin immediately afterwards.

*Nafram*

An interesting conversation between Cat and Indrani. I must confess that the question of what purpose did Sve Noc have for the Everdark never crossed my mind

*Nairne .01*

It is a good question.

I wonder, did Sve Noc start before the Dead King and was overtaken (as in a race for apotheosis and power / due to below) or did she try to imitate the Dead King or did she not know of the Dead King at the start?

*werafdsaew*

Sve Noc is likely after Dead King. Remember in one of the Keter shards, when the Intercessor was talking to Neshamah, she referred to the Twilight Sages as contemporary.

*Evgeny Permyakov*

Well. Finally.  
Someone called Cat mad.

[Dresden 67](#)

All Named are mad.

*Metrux*

Seconded. It's part of what makes them Named, especially villains, though Heroes are still definitely mad.

*Jahfan*

Lmao. Only in Praes would calling someone two-faced be analogous to calling them a basic bitch.

*JackBeThimble*

The narrative arc of Creation is long. But it bends towards femslash.

*lqueenofblades1*

RIP Cat. You are now ruined for all others. You fool! Did you not see that this was Indrani's evil plan all along?!

Also, Masego and Cat fighting over Archer would be bad. I really hope they figure stuff out.

[HannaB](#)

Considering Masego is aro ace, I doubt it would even occur to him that there's something to fight over. As long as Indrani is at his side every time he turns to look, that's all that matters. And Cat would do anything to make sure that lasts, even if her own arrangement with Indrani sticks around. This could become a very nice and stable poly angle very easily.

*Skaddix*

I mean he is highly disinterested in sex but Malicia can still impact him you think if he had zero interest whatsoever Malicia abilities would have nothing to prey on.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Strangely enough, that's not how asexuality or demisexuality works: because, you know – still got the human. An asexual can get horny. It just takes special circumstances to pull off a phase shift, it'll only be situational and it is not ever going to be their baseline state.

Malicia has spent how long refining how to muddle other people's baselines with pheromones, hormones and all sorts of shenanigans? Yeah: Zeze felt it – hadn't a clue what to do with it, mind. Typical Spade. XD

PS – Am Ace of Clubs. Or Diamonds. It can be hard to tell, and what you are can change over time as you learn more about yourself. 😊

*mavant*

Wait, are the suits of cards used as classifiers for different kinds of asexuality?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Yup. Although, people tend nit-pick over the Diamonds/ Clubs a bit, Hearts and Spades are pretty cut-and-dried: Hearts = romantic asexuals; Spades aromantic asexuals. Diamonds and Clubs... semi-, demi-, hemi- arguments with cheese. Generally, it is agreed that Diamond-types trump Clubs in seeing the point in romance and cuddles, but both can be situational romantic and situational sexuals – with a running jump and/or a push start involving factors they might not even be aware of. God help the gender fluid diamond/club with very occasional bi tendencies – all the between stools. 😊

*IDKWhoitis*

Malica captures fascination and attention, of the sexual variety yes, but it's not the only tool in her set. If anything, Malica's wards and spells (that she has been noted to be using in public appearances), may capture Masego's attention for a different reason. Like a fashion designer more interested in the materials and procedures used rather than the actual model.

*Aston Whiteman*



Ave Nov becomes Summer Queen.

Escapes from the Under dark, becomes a God and gives Cat a power up and an army. Yay. Thank you EE.

*WuseMajor*

Given how Archer has been drinking out of a flask that seems bottomless, she's taken carousing to new levels, and she tends to do that whole obfuscating stupidity thing, I am honestly rather worried that Bard has gotten to her somehow, taking over her body as she does.

*WuseMajor*

"Archer drank like a fish, was largely led by her whims and professed indifference as to much of what went on around her. The very last person, in a way, that you'd expect to nudge events the way she wanted them."

That could easily describe the Bard. I'm worried.

*Nairne .01*

Not the first nor second one to worried about that.

*nipi*

Or maybe below has their own "Bard" silently nudging things along.

*Metrux*

1. She can't be the Bard because she can fight, a problem admitted by the Bard itself.
2. The Bard is not of Above, she plays for both teams, that has been well documented.
3. It's possible that Bard has gotten to her head... But I find it incredibly unlikely. She is less disinterested and drinker since she joined the Woe, and is only now showing more of it because of the lack of Masego nearby. They both feel it, but she hides it better.

All in all, don't worry too much. Whatever is to come, will come in the story.

*nipi*

Not "The Bard" but perhaps an analogue to her. Although I'd say that's probably unlikely.

As for the Bard. I got the feeling that she is of Above. It's simply that she plays the long game, keeps the big

picture in mind and similarly to the Pilgrim isn't afraid to employ the other side's tools.

*Jonnnney*

Archer and The Wandering Bard merely share a Role of the drunken comic relief party member.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"I can hardly imagine the weight of it."

Well, gets you thinking when you realize the Below still haven't shoved another name onto her yet.

*Aston Whiteman*

Pretty sure the whole Under Dark was a trap for Sve Noc. Or became one. Are there any God vacancies? Maybe one Masego and Cat made.

Oh and an unlimited new realm to explore. Hmm.

Cat won't win this through Godhood. But someone else might...

*Aston Whiteman*

Thanks for your hard work EE. Best story ever.

*Matthew*

Well, Indrani going to die. She literally just walked up and planted a death flag. Which maybe she knew she was doing as Indrani's death would be a meaningful sacrifice which would entice the Gods Below.

[HannaB](#)

GODS BELOW I HOPE NOT

[HannaB](#)

...maybe we the comment section should also take Indrani's advice and lay off the meta a little 0.0

*Nairne .01*

This actually feels like a prelude to another selfmutilation for Cat in Warlock-like manner ("No not my son..." from last interlude.)

*Byzantine*

She tried to plant a flag but Cat kicked it and set it on fire.

Thankfully pre-battle sex is not a death flag in Action. (Now if this was horror...)

*MetruX*

I'll have to disagree, she was stopped before it could become a death flag, and the serious talk with sex in the end is more of a hero trope than villain, and one that comes usually before someone is kidnapped or otherwise needs saving, if it's done before a battle. Yet, those stories commonly end with both alive and happy together.

*Aotrs Commander*

I mean, like... Action movies aside, almost all of the video games romances (such as they are!), heavily fall into the "sex-before-climax" (pun unintended \*headdesk\*), often with a party member/companion... And, to be fair, a lot of those \*cough\*Bioware\*cough\* can have the protagonist be... Praesic Evil (that's a new word I just made up, shut up), so it's not even necessarily even just a hero thing.

*Snowfire1224*

Morrigan approves

*nipi*

Cat. Wonder what the consequences of doeling out fae titles is going to be? Above escalation? Callowan nobles demanding some of their own?

Wonder if Cat will be pruning her winter court a bit before leaving the Everdark?

[\*ahd\*](#)

...Callowan. Nobles. Going up to the Black Queen and \*demanding\* something. On pain of being balky and uncooperative.

That'll be good for a brief instant of comic relief, at least.

*nipi*

You are forgetting the recent death spree in Callow. She needs the nobility more than ever – there simply arent enough others that could fill administrative roles, that are even literate. Remember that talk Talbot had with Hakram – if Im not mistaken that was before Malicias assassins happened.

And I doubt the rest of Callow would be thrilled with only outsiders being empowered.

[\*ahd\*](#)

"Yes, I could take up a lucrative and powerful office under the crown of Callow as a human being, helping keep this country which you love so much running, but you won't turn me into an eldritch monster and enslave me with oaths to Winter in addition, so imma turn it down."

And neither a) a hilarious beating ensues, nor b) the aristocrat just to the left of this one grasps eagerly at the opportunity of office instead, nor c) the aristocrat being asked stops and thinks about what they've just asked for, then takes it \*all back\*.

Well, it's a theory. I don't think your theory will pan out in canon, but one of the Roles of the name of Author is to mess with the audience.

*nipi*

Well we already know from Malicia that it was the Dead King that last influenced their "development."

*Skaddix*

If Indrani dies now wow the Gods are really hating on Masego. The three people he cares about the most in quick decision and Black on the chopping block they deserve him slaughtering the Gods at that point. Brought it on themselves especially since a fight in the Underdark is purely the purview of the Gods Below.

Still i think its too early for a Woe to Die for good. Especially with only Cat around to see it.

*Jonnnney*

Death is unlikely, but I could see some trauma stealing away her carefree nature

*Azure*

Warlock kept insisting Catherine is a simalcrum and not real. She's basically creating herself using Winter and story narratives, which Indrani just pointed out to her. I wonder how much giving in to sex with her, was Catherine trying to feel a bit more like a real girl.

Not a huge fan of both of them together tbh. It's just frivolous and meaningless sex, that's basically put a death flag on Indrani's head. They're in a horror movie and the two horny teenagers just had sex. What's next they split the party and go off alone?

*Morgenstern*

All I see is an action movie, not a horror movie. 😊

*Morgenstern*

So, well, who knows? \*shrugs  
I guess it could be either.

*Suprime*

So the two faced goddess statue meant to represent the sve of not... errr anybody notice that it fits cat as well? There's cat as we all know and love her... then there's her other side Akua... and akua has taken over her body before leavening a bit of weight to the whole two faced thing...

*Zaver SaintCloud*

The mention of a Pivot here got me thinking; Cat doesn't really have a Name now, in the traditional sense. She has the powers sure, but went way beyond Squire when she took on the Mantle of Winter. Is Winter going to be her gimmick forever? I can't see any Named abilities, no matter how strong, even coming close to the versatility offered by Winter.

*Aston W*

And what about Summer?

*MetruX*

What if her Name is \*about\* Winter? We saw fae Named before, she could very well get a Name that allows her to better use her Winter powers, just like Warlock's aspects weren't what gave him power, but empowered his already existing magic. Or she can get something from "outside" to help balance and smooth out her Winter, like Masego, whose Aspects have nothing to do with his main ability, Magic, but complement it incredibly well, with miracles.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

If she defeats Sve NOC and Black finally dies she may well become the Black Knight in more ways than you might have expected.

*Morgenstern*

Still against the notion of Black dying at al... =/

*Skaddix*

I assume she gets a Name if she wins. Winter is powerful but with Cat's may self appointed limitations, it doesn't seem to make her any different then your average powerful spellcaster. Cat is a mage now she just doesn't have the formal training

which is why Akua was doing way more impressive stuff while in charge. Named Abilities are pretty awesome in contrast.

*TotesOlive*

Archer better not die. Masego is going to need someone to bring back his sanity after he commits genocide on an entire country...

[doominator10](#)

Just a thought, when Cat comes back with a horde of Winter titled drow at her tail, how are the Wild Hunt going to interact with them? I can imagine those fae bastards liking the drow like a playfully curious but too dangerous dog does a cat.

*Morgenstern*

Yeah, and then the vicious cat sets the dog running by scratching its nose open to bleeding...

*Vhostym*

Poor Masego, he's really missing out here. Not only does he watch his father and dad die, but he misses out on an excursion that relates to yet another Apotheosis (either attempted or actual). I mean, killing Warlock and Tikoloshe was cruel, but now when Cat returns he'll learn that he also missed out on the chance to witness another miracle, this time related to his personal obsession.

*caoimhinh*

Not to mention he is missing the Girl to Girl action between the two most important women in his life. ( ^° 3 ^° )

And yes, I know he's got no sexual drive, but still. Besides, Indrani will teach him to appreciate such activities.

*Clay*

"I studied her in the flickering light of the flames, the shadow cast by the twisted rock around us dancing across her face. Halfway between tattoos and feathers, I thought."

I feel like something's going over my head.

*Xinci*

So some thoughts

Archer has suprised me once again in two ways 1. Being she doesnt think of her self on the stage of life

2. She is much more patient than I thought, though this helps to explain her wide interest of behaviors and checks. She is slowly but surely building up to be something better. She isnt like her

master in straightforward brashness towards greatness, or perhaps some of her Masters patience was learned by her. She has always been patient given the things the wide range of subjects she has learned to understand, quite masterfully done really. After her first heart to heart in the Everdark with Cat, where she proved that her goal is Mightiness and Proof of worth rather than outright "Being". I thought of her goal as smaller than what she professed at the beginning. That she wanted to be "big". The true momentousness of that would be aligned closer to her mentors current role(She appears to be a tester of the forces of everything old and powerful on the board, a occasional checker of their situation). She is rather whole as a being due to growing patiently through all these collected experiences. Slowly growing stronger til she becomes a piece too big to ignore I suppose. I am impressed, I thought she was going through a resting phase with the Woe til she transitioned but I suppose she shall simply have a greater pivot with them.

Now onto Sve, I was wondering at the system Sve created and amazed by its potential. I now at least understand how she could have become a god properly, though unsure of how she would get her sacrifices in. Her peoples ability of the Night can allow them the portions of power,culture,skill,knowledge and inheritance of the people they take from. She could have organized specialized bands to pass on their knowledge wrapped up in a "form" and then integrated into the rest of the Drow as a Path( Similar to the current Sigils). Each path being a specific branch of configurations of the current integrated Night. As long as each form is splintered enough to be separate but still extrinsically connected to the whole(thus potentially needed a resting phase for properly disseminating the right amount of new power to each branch along with the central tenets of the Night). By doing this she could gradually make a interconnected networks of cultures. And eventually each Path of the Forms would develop Named. And all of them would be connected to Sve by the Tennets she set up. She truly could have conquered quite well after that combining different Mighty into different teams to bring in more parts of other cultures so as to make her people more whole. She would have been a goddess quite easily depending on what she took. The only things being a issue would be dues, heroic stories of things stolen and sought, and keeping the Night vitalized and connected among all those different fractured bits of power.

*XML4ever*

Looks like things in the Everdark are coming to a head... Thanks a lot, errata, for the chapter! I'm really looking forward to how this finishes, since I'm guessing it won't all go Catherine's way easily.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Aww Cat, you should know better. You resolve sexual tension AFTER a big fight, not before! That's a death glag!

Vivid

Holy shit I was playing league, and I just noticed that ionia is a lot like callow, noxus to praes and demacia to procer..  
mind=blown

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## Chapter 71: Ozone

*"A ruler must consider all necessary injuries before beginning to inflict them on an enemy, for through repeated opposition they will learn your virtues and your faults. Strike once, thoroughly."*

-Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

*Nefarious' own Dark Council had once held session in this room, though in practice it had been the Chancellor's council and not the Emperor's. Amadeus had sat at this table before, when nominally in the service of the Tower, but he much preferred the current circumstances. It was only the two of them here today, as if often was: only Tyrants losing their grip on Praes regularly called full sessions. Those who felt secure in their rule did not bother with the pretence of seeking the opinions of others.*

*"We can't keep this up much longer, Maddie," Alaya said. "The last time taxes ran this high for more than a few years Pernicious lost his throne."*

*It would have been easy to engage on the basis of technicalities, Amadeus thought. Dread Emperor Pernicious's reign had been plagued by constant rebellions for reasons broader in scope than mere tax rates: his attempt to raise a new capital replacing Ater in the heart of the Wasteland, his inability to keep a Chancellor loyal for more than a few months and his failure to take the Blessed Isle back from the Kingdom of Callow despite three sieges. Still, it would have been beneath the both of them to play that particular game. Allie would not have begun the conversation were there not a true threat looming out of sight. Not for the first time, Black wondered how many such messes might have been avoided by putting the nobility of the Wasteland to the sword after the civil war.*



"I understand the burden is most keenly felt by the most influential among them," he delicately replied. "But the Reforms have produced tangible results, Allie. We're building an army truly capable of winning the wars to come."

She leaned back into her seat, and even after all these years that she allowed herself such weaknesses in front of him warmed his heart. She'd come in formal dress, today, but left behind her proper regalia. As in everything she did, there was deeper meaning to be found. Formal attire for matters of state, lack of crown to make it clear this was a discussion between partners.

"I know that," Alaya said. "You know that. But in court, they can speak of the fortune being sunk into the Legions of Terror without conquest to show for it. The Truebloods are pushing for either immediate war or dismissal of the military taxes."

"That would be disastrous," Amadeus bluntly said.

"The amount of professional soldiers we're fielding is nearly without precedent in Imperial history," she mildly pointed out.

"It's not about winning the battles, Allie," he sighed. "Our core legions under Grem would have been capable of evicting the paladins from the Blessed Isle as early as two years ago. It's the aftermath that's the issue."

"I understand you have worries about heroes," Alaya frowned. "And I don't agree in the slightest with the time table suggested by the High Lords. Yet I do have to wonder if your level of caution is actually warranted."

"We can't leave them banners to gather around during the occupation," Amadeus said. "Not the Order of the White Hand, not the Fairfaxes, not even the knightly orders. It's not a question about the practical power of those entities, it's what they represent. The Principate had massive city garrisons during its own occupation and they changed nothing. As long as there was a Fairfax loose, Callow still had fight in it. From there it was a question of what would give first: Callowan stubbornness or Procer's willingness to bleed."

"One rarely takes the pot when betting against Callowan spite," Allie conceded, tone darkly amused.

"We're not just planning the war, Alaya," Amadeus said. "We're preparing for the peace afterwards, and moving before the pieces are in place for that is wasting the entire effort."

"Concessions will have to be made," Allie said. "I know you have your doubts about the Imperial governorship system-"

*"It's ripe for abuse," he flatly said. "And abuse unmakes all of this. The rule we bring must be, if not just, then at least fair. I trust not Wasteland lords to know even the shadow of that."*

*"Then I'll wrangle a role as overseer for you," Alaya told him. "If nothing else, we can use the limits we place to weed out the ambitious when they overstep."*

*Amadeus rose to his feet, pushing the chair back.*

"This is the moment where I agreed," Black said, turning towards me. "The first mistake I made after the war, though it would not be the last."

My feet were on solid ground. Stone, the Tower's own. I scuffed my boot against it and flinched at the sound. It felt too real. I'd had Name visions before, but this was... different. I'd never had any agency in them before. I glanced back up and found him patiently watching me.

"Black, what is this?" I asked.

"Remonstrations," he said. "Old favours were called in."

My fingers clenched. I did not like the sound of that in the slightest.

"What happened?"

"Unimportant," he dismissed. "It is your latest campaign that we must speak of, Catherine."

"You shouldn't know I'm here," I frowned.

"I know a lot of things I shouldn't," he smiled, but the trace of mirth vanished quick enough. "You head towards a debacle. I am ashamed you cannot see as much, for I must have failed you deeply for that not to be obvious."

"I came here because everywhere else was a dead end," I bitterly replied. "Even you, playing your games in Procer. How'd that turn out for you?"

"My flaws are many, but no excuse for yours," Black chided. "This scheme is flawed. Oaths can be broken, and bereft of that why would any of them obey you?"

"It's a blinking game," I told him. "If the Heavens break the oaths, there's a nation's worth of drow loose in the middle of their backyard. They can't afford that."

"There is no win condition to your plan," he bluntly said. "Only different ways you can lose or put off those losses. You cannot

even claim a purpose for this army you'll mass beyond the current wars."

"That's not true," I bit back. "I know exactly where I'll settle them."

"And where would that be?" he skeptically replied. "Your kingdom would not survive the process."

I paused. It was an effort to keep my face loose.

"It's fated," I said. "I doesn't need to be me who does the heavy lifting."

"Fate is a useful tool," Black said, tone irritated, "but it does not-"

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth, interrupting him.

"So *that's* what this is," I mused.

His face blanked. He'd always been eerily pale, but as blood-red lips split into a fanged grin I saw he'd become pale as driven snow. Our surroundings broke apart, ripped away by howling winds – entire chunks of not-Tower whisked away by the raging blizzard. The two of us stood ankle-deep in the snow, facing each other. Above us there was only an endless pitch black night, unknowing of moon or stars. There was only one source of light in here: the burning blue eyes set in my teacher's face.

"And so we resume the lesson," he said, voice echoing of Winter.

His sword left the sheath with a quiet hiss and he advanced. Around us I felt other silhouettes rise and there we no need to look to know whose they were. It would be the Woe, at first. Then Juniper. Aisha. Ratface. Nauk. Robber. Pickler. Kilian. Everyone I'd ever shared a laugh with, everyone I'd ever given the smallest speck of affection to. Anyone I'd ever loved, no matter the manner of it. This was not an unfamiliar sight. While my armies struggled through the Battle of the Camps, Masego and I had been... otherwise occupied. I'd visited his own fever dream, taken him out of it. Mine though, I'd never spoke about. With good reason. They would come for me, swords high. They'd curse and scream and die and poison everything we'd ever shared with their last words. Then I'd stand alone, for a heartbeat.

And it would start again.

The backlash from our broken gate had entrapped Masego in his own desires. Mine, though, had ground away at me one murder at a time. Winter did enjoy matching its torments to the disposition of the tormented.

"It *would* be capable of doing this, it's true," I spoke out loud.

The raging winds drowned out my words to even my own ears, but that hardly mattered in here.

"But it would also have known about Black," I calmly continued. "You could only reach old Name dreams, couldn't you?"

I paused.

"No, more than that," I corrected. "I've never had one of those with the Dark Council room featuring. You're riding a vision I could have, if my Name took the fore. You can probably look at most of what I've dreamed before as well. But for the personalities, you had the bare bones that gives you with guesswork grafted on."

The fakes ceased marching towards me and I took a deep breath before raising my hand. Will against will, that was all there was to it. I ripped away the veil and met my enemy's eyes. Deep and perfect silver on pitch-black skin. The last time the glare of them had blinded me, but we were in *my* head now. My rules ran deeper than hers.

"I've gone rounds with demons and fae, Sve Noc," I said. "If you want to fuck with my mind, best sharpen your game."

The drow's long hair flowed endlessly behind her, turning into gargantuan strands of Night the further they were from the silver light. She did not seem pleased.

*Child*, she said. *Your arrogance beggars belief.*

"Mine?" I laughed. "You think you get to win this because I'm close to your domain? *I carry mine with me*, Priestess. And you stepped in it of your own free will."

*Your doom comes*, she said. *You will drown in despair, alone and lost.*

"And we got off to such a good start," I drawled. "Whatever happened to 'I await you in Tvarigu'?"

Sudden rage suffocated me. A wrath beyond understanding, beyond any single person's capacity. I buckled under the weight of it, but there was something behind. Small, almost like a whimper. Fear, I thought. There was fear.

And wasn't that *interesting*?

"That wasn't you," I said.

Sve Noc snarled.

*All is Night*, she proclaimed.

"Which are you, I wonder?" I grinned, slow and mean. "The rider or the horse?"

She did not answer with words. The pressure should have crushed me. Would have, if this was her realm and not mine. But old words echoed and rippled, the whisper of a pair of crows surrounded by a sea of birds of paradise, and it washed over me like rain. It was not my truth, but I had partaken in it.

"Uninspired," I said, and the dream shattered.

—

My eyes opened with perfect clarity, lacking the transition between sleep and not.

"That's a little off-putting, I'll admit," Indrani sighed.

I wiggled out from under her arm, already missing the warmth, and sat up. The blanket slid down, baring the upper half of my body, but Archer didn't even bother to leer. She just snuggled deeper into the covers, to my mild offence.

"Dare I ask?" I said.

"The heartbeat thing," she elaborated. "I got used to the cool and skin and stopped noticing when it wasn't there, but it started up the moment you woke up. How does that even work?"

"Fuck if I know," I admitted, passing a hand through my tangled hair. "Zeze says it has nothing to do with pushing blood anymore, so it might just beat when I remember it should."

The fire had gone out while we slept but that changed little for me. The sensation between different temperatures still came to me, it just... didn't matter. It was more like a colour than a feeling. It wasn't the same for Indrani, though, because my toes informed me she'd put on pants at some point I definitely remembered taking off. Among, uh, other things. I cleared my throat awkwardly. Indrani cranked open a bleary eye.

"You're not gonna get all skittish about this, are you?" she said. "Considering how enthusiastic you—"

"I remember, yes," I coughed. "It'd been a while, 'Drani."

She laughed musically.

"Yeah, well, it shows you've been mostly with women for a few years," she said. "You're a lot better than I thought you'd be at giving h—"

"If you keep dishing it out, it'll burn out the embarrassment," I tried.

She mulled over that for a moment.

"True," she said. "I should probably ration it out."

She finally deigned to rise, pushing herself up and stretching out like a lazy cat. Considering the blanket had completely fallen, that did rather interesting things to a frame I was now intimately familiar with. She caught me staring and grinned.

"Already?" she smugly said.

"Any port in a storm," I sneered.

"Ouch," she said, putting a hand over her heart. "That one drew blood, Cat."

Not really, if her deeply amused tone was any indication. I rested my bare back against the stone and closed my eyes to wallow in this passing moment of peace. Soon enough I would have to arm myself for war and strike the first blow of the Battle of Great Strycht, but just for a little while I could enjoy this. The world outside our nook could remain a faraway abstract a little bit longer. If I'd done this with someone else I might have feared that it would change what lay between us, but not with Indrani. She had a rather cavalier attitude towards bedplay, as a rule, even if she'd largely refrained from indulging since becoming part of the Woe. That'd been a choice on her part, though. She was attractive, a well-known war hero and Named besides: if she'd actually sought out company, she wouldn't have spent a single night alone since Second Liesse.

"And what great thoughts are we having?" Indrani said, sitting up at my side.

I opened my eyes and found her looking at me with fond amusement.

"I was wondering about the self-inflicted nature of your dry spell," I admitted.

"Was trying something," she shrugged. "Still on the fence about it. Besides, you're one to talk. When we first met you could hardly keep your hands off the redhead."

Kilian, I thought, but no pang of blurry regret came. It'd been a while since it had ceased to. It'd seemed so much more important when I was in the middle of it. But now my hours were filled bargaining with empires and waging desperate wars, when the stewardship of Callow did not swallow them whole, and the intensity had faded. It seemed such small thing, compared to what was behind me and what still lay ahead.

"It was new for me," I admitted. "I'd never stuck that long with anyone before. Never wanted to, either."

"Heartbreaker, were you?" Indrani snorted.

I shrugged.

"I knew I was going to leave someday," I said. "So there was no point."

"I can't imagine you married," she admitted. "Or even settled down."

"I was kind of proposed to the once," I mused.

She grinned.

"Now *this* I've got to hear," Indrani said.

"I used to work at this tavern in Laure, the Rat's Nest," I said. "The owner hinted pretty heavily that if I married his son I'd inherit the place after he died."

"Truly a love story for the ages," Archer commented gravely.

"He was kind of an ass, and pretty busy ploughing our bard," I noted. "Harrion didn't push when I made it clear it wasn't happening, he was a good sort. Now if *Duncan Brech* had gotten on his knees, my tender maidenly heart might have skipped a beat. That boy was fit like you wouldn't believe."

"And no one else has tried since?" Indrani said, sounding genuinely curious. "I thought popping out heirs was the queenly thing to do."

"Talbot mentioned it once or twice," I agreed. "And everyone influential with spare kin paraded a prospect at court. But I've no intention of staying on the throne, so why bother? I was only ever a temporary measure."

The Foundling dynasty would be short-lived, which was probably for the best. If a successor bearing my name got into even half the messes I had, they'd be more curse than king.

"We children of dew and lightning," Indrani murmured. "Transient and terrible in our passing."

She did say beautiful things, sometimes, for all her cheerful crassness.

"Where's it from?" I asked.

"Some poem the Lady taught me when I was kid, from far across the sea," she said. "Her father loved it."

"It's a big world, isn't it?" I said. "We've seen more than most on this continent, the two of us, and it's still such a small fraction of it."

"It's not about how long we last, I don't think," Archer said. "Who could possibly live long enough to see it all? We just have to make the most of what we get."

"We're probably the first humans to walk the Everdark in a few centuries, if not more," I offered.

"Oh, we'll do a little more than just walk," Indrani said, lips quirking.

The certainty in her voice forged a smile of my own, though it faded after a few moments.

"I dreamt, while I slept," I said.

"Winter again?" she asked. "Hakram said whatever you're seeing must be pretty fucking grim, if you're not even willing to talk to *him* about it."

"Yeah, well, Winter doesn't do nice as a rule," I muttered. "But it wasn't that, at least not tonight. I got an important visitor."

"No shit?" Archer said. "Our old buddy Sve Noc showed up? What did she want?"

"They, I think," I said. "And I don't mean it the way it's usually meant for drow."

"A two woman show," she frowned. "Didn't see that one coming. They tend to watch each other's back the same way Praesi do – considering where to plunge the knife. Did she drop in for a bit of trash talk? It's only traditional before villains throw down."

"She wanted me to believe that real bad, by the end of it," I said. "But she played tricks early on trying to get me to answer questions."

"O Mighty Catherine, would you pretty please tell me your battle plans?" Indrani mocked in a high pitched voice.

"That I wouldn't have minded," I admitted. "It'd mean she thinks it could go either way. But what she was actually asking was where I intend to take the drow down the line, and I mislike the shape of that. It feels like she's playing a different game."

And Captain's death was proof enough of how costly that sort of disconnect could be.



"We're the outsiders here," Archer said. "It was given we'd have to go in blind. But two heads, huh. Wonder how that came about."

"I'm more interested in how it can be used," I said. "The first one I spoke with had a fairly different take on this mess than the other."

"Think there's an angle there?" she asked.

I breathed out slowly.

"There was a story I used to love when I was a kid," I said. "The orphanage was an Imperial institution, when it came down to it, and the tavern I worked that was heavy on Legion clientele. Neither was in the habit of peddling Callowan stories to impressionable young minds."

I half-smiled, thinking of those days where the trifling had loomed so tall.

"But I got my hands on this old book at the Rat's Nest," I said. "Called *Stirring Tales of Chivalry*."

"Was it all about lances and ladies?" Indrani asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes.

"It was water damaged, so most of it was just blurry ink – probably why the family never managed to pawn it," I mused. "But there were a few stories in it that were readable, and one I must have read a hundred times. It was about this giant ogre, you see, that lived somewhere in the south of Callow. It had two heads and it could do magic, so even though knight after knight tried to slay it all that happened was that it made a house of their bones."

"They call their city in the Wasteland the Hall of Skulls, right?" Indrani said. "It holds up."

I imagined General Hune would have some issues with the story if she ever heard it, but then most my high-ranking officers would have problems with Callowan folk tales. They, uh, tended to get killed in them. To popular acclaim.

"So there's these three knights that head out to slay it," I said. "One's strong, one's quick, the last is clever."

"Clever survives at the end," Indrani immediately predicted.

"The last one listed always survives, you're not impressing anyone," I grunted. "Anyway, they go up to the ogre one after the other. Yes, bad tactics I know so don't even start. Strong and

quick get fried, because magic is perfidious and all that. Each of the ogre's heads eats one of the dead."

"I thought it was using the bones for its house," Archer said.

"Look, I never said it was high literature," I said. "Clever knight goes up, and then says 'I surrender', flatters them and says they're invincible."

"And then it asks which head is going to eat him after he dies," Indrani said.

"Exactly," I said. "The heads start arguing, the clever knight makes it worse, and eventually one head clubs the other in anger and they both die."

"I thought it was a mage ogre," she said.

"It also had a club," I sighed.

"This is why people make fun of Callowan literature, Cat," Indrani said, not unkindly.

"My point," I said, valiantly pressing on, "is that creatures with two heads can be of two minds."

There was a pause.

"Was that all?" Archer asked.

"There's another version of it that I came across later," I said.

"No doubt it will be as stirring as was promised by the title," Indrani replied, smothering a smile.

"In that version, the third knight is a young Elizabeth Alban," I said.

"The Queen of Blades herself," she said. "She plies a clever trick as well?"

"No," I said. "She straight up murders the ogre, because that's what Elizabeth Alban *does*."

That surprised a laugh out of her and so I left it at that. We shared a comfortable silence for a little while longer, until I could no longer even slightly justify lingering. Reluctantly I rose up, somewhat pleased she was finally taking the time to ogle my nakedness, and picked up my clothes. I shimmied on my trousers as she reached for her leathers and I was surprised by the muted intimacy of getting dressed together. It wasn't domestic – the word would never feel anything but forced matched to Indrani – but it was a kind of closeness we'd never shared before. There

was, I thought, nothing to regret about last night. Belts tightened, weapons at our hips, we left the dead fire behind us. There was a war to wage.

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### [erraticerrata](#)

Character contest continues: Thief vs Lone Swordsman. Link to vote below.

<https://www.strawpoll.me/16839911?fbclid=IwAR3lvqMjH3TRFfJSGrHAXDKMBcjIvJvLQU33fTuSMnesDob7F3lUXvqUNQ4>

#### *Novice*

Oof, this is a hard one. Ol' Willy was a great first antagonist for our Cat showing how heroes can be such bastards early on while Thief is currently showing great character development.

*taovkool*

Vivi, absolutely no contest this one.

'Yoink', remember? That one was awesome.

#### *Dainpdf*

Dark and stabby vs Light (fingered) and sneaky. I'm taking Vivienne. William was fun, but in the end he didn't get enough camera time to beat Thief. Plus, Yoink is still one of the best scenes in APGtE to date.

#### *Novice*

To be fair, Thief couldn't stab shit.

*Andrew Mitchell*

True. More 'stealy' than 'stabby'.

*Decius*

Why stab shit when you can steal it and then plant it in your enemies' boots?

*goliath1303*

It's a good thing that **Lone Swordsman** was described as dark and stabby, and Vivienne as light(fingered) and *sneaky* then. That could have gotten confusing otherwise lol.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

Going for Lone Swordsman. He's just... he's so fucked up yet so compelling. He's a terrible person, he's racist, he's shortsighted, his end game was horrific on the scale of Second Llesse, his greatest regret was entirely his own fault, and yet... there's something so human about him. He starts a caricature of stupid anti-hero good, but his interlude chapters flesh him out without changing him. They do nothing to redeem him, and yet I still agree wholeheartedly with Bard

"Oh, you poor Contrition fools. You break my heart every time."

*stevenneiman*

I personally feel like Thief just seems a little bit more well-rounded. William honestly always felt kind of like a badly-written D&D character more than a person to me. Thief always felt to me like her flaws and anxieties were more real, where for William they seemed like they were just a particularly fucked up generic tragic backstory tacked onto a mindless drone of the Heavens. I found Hanno a much more interesting take on the same idea, because he felt much more like he had actually made a choice rather than being a victim of the Hashmallim, and even if he was just as much of an obedient drone he owned it.

*Metrux*

That's probably the diferent between Contrition and Judgement. Just like the pilgrim's story is diferent, cuz he's from... Uhh... Don't remember the right word. Anyway, each of those seek out not only diferent types of people, but diferent ways to interact with them. Contrition is all about "you have no choice, just accept and contrite", which gets melodramatic easily.

[HannaB](#)

Grey Pilgrim is Mercy. And utterly terrifying.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Ain't no mercy like a cruel mercy. 😊

*stevenneiman*

All of the Choirs are variations on the theme of a virtue taken beyond the extreme of madness and further corrupted by the dictatorial nature of Good. Contrition twists a victim's conscience until their own mind is a torture device, and further fails to recognize any virtues but its own. Judgement claims to have be the only justice, never

mind that it just decides who serves Good and then kills anyone who doesn't. Mercy seeks to minimize suffering, but it doesn't recognize that suffering can be the best option or that serving Good can cause unnecessary suffering. Of note, for all their talk about alleviating suffering, Mercy basically tortured Tariq because he couldn't come up with a more elegant solution to the problem they gave him to solve and because it knew he wouldn't call bullshit. We don't know too much about Endurance, but I suspect that it drives its adherents to persevere long past their mental breaking point, and to persevere even when it becomes clear that they're on the wrong path, not that they have exclusive rights to that particular failing if William is any indication.

As a sidenote my personal headcanon is that the Pilgrim has become addicted to the power rush he only gets when he's protecting heroes. He doesn't recognize it, but he actually chose to go to war with Cat rather than accept her offer to gate the Tenth Crusade straight to the Tower because he wanted to protect heroes when the war he could have avoided put them in harm's way.

*NerfContessa*

That's a very astute view, methinks.

Thx.

*Sen*

I'm not trying to sway the votes or anything, but before we forget about Will, here's the throwback: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/02/10/heroic-interlude-riposte/>

Start from "You know what it means, right?"

:')

*RanVor*

I meant to vote for Willycakes, but Thief yoinked my vote.

*Morgenstern*

Second that..

*stevenneiman*

Huh. Looks like Ratface made a comeback. He was at about 30% when I voted but it looks like he won.

*Darkening*

Man, he was winning two to one from the moment I saw it.

*superkeaton*

Oh William, a failure to the end. But a third of the votes ain't a bad showing, so cheers to that.

I hope your sister forgave you and I hope that Hell was worth it.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Javvies](#)

I like the version with Elizabeth Alban.

Playing games inside Cat's head never ends well.

Huh. Sve is playing games with themselves.

I wonder how Sve has differentiated its component selves. Perhaps one closer to the original pre-spreading of Night Sve, and one closer to the Night Sve created.

*Someguy*

Just killing Sve Noc works. the problem is the how. Using Winter to eat Night is obviously a "Bad Idea" so I suggests bashing both heads together brutally.

*Dainpdf*

Other question is "can they be killed while the Night exists?"

Their interest in Cat's use for the Drow post their apparent demise indicates this is at least a "not easily".

*Rook*

Sure they can. The same way the king of winter and the queen of summer were killed without shedding a single drop of blood or damaging their mantles.

This isn't a street brawl, this is a war of domains. Specifically, domains that make a statement out of endlessly devouring whatever it defeats. Two snakes trying to swallow each other.

You don't win this fight by shoving steel through a mortal throat or stopping a heartbeat. It's won by superseding the other player.

*Dainpdf*

A dangerous assumption to make, considering how Cat made specific mention that assimilating the Night was a trap.

Also, the Sve is Named, not Fae. Their nature is less fluid than a fae's. Plus, the King of Winter may have been no more, but he left behind a King of the Fae. Something tells me we want nothing of the Sve left behind.

*Decius*

Why kill them? Surely the \*Duchess of Moonlit Nights\* can easily vassalise Night.

*Dainpdf*

\*Moonless?

And Cat already has Diabolist... Taking the Sve sounds like one (two?) monsters on a chain too many.

Let's not forget how Cat killed Akua herself... That's not a story she wants to be on the other side of.

*werafdsaew*

Irritant's Law

*Dainpdf*

That only works if there's no collective story – a band of heroes, for example, don't get in each other's way.

Unfortunately, there are stories about keeping multiple things caged – Kairos even told one, of one of his ancestors who kept a bunch of animals.

*Antoninjohn*

Why kill when she can be made to take the Oath

*RanVor*

Forcing Sve Noc to take oaths would be the most complete victory Cat could ever hope to achieve in the Everdark... Except the Dwarves might consider it a breach of the contract, and I don't have to say how bad would *that* be, do I? It's safer to just murder the shit out of her.

*Antoninjohn*

The deal was that any Drow she picks up are to be unharmed by her when she leaves and for yet to get rid of Sve noc

*Morgenstern*

Sve Noc said it themselves: Oaths can be broken. That's why.

*Morgenstern*

Although Cat is right, too, if you look at it from another way – she would dearly pay for breaking the oaths...

*Aston W*

Why kill when you can dump both of them in Arcadia as Summer and Winter Gods?

*Morgenstern*

I don't see that working as long as Cat still needs the Winter mantle for herself. Also, she wanted to give it to someone else...

*Dainpdf*

Well, Sve went into Cat's Domain and didn't get frozen and snuffed, so I think she's been the most successful invader yet.

I guess invading whole she's dreaming may have helped, as may whatever immense power the Sve's Name gives them.

*WuseMajor*

I suspect there's a Priestess of Night and the Night itself. And I don't think the Priestess is in charge anymore.

In fact, That might be why Cat is down here. Two potential immortals, two queens, one lost in her Mantle, one mostly supressing hers. The one who manages to take real control it is likely the one who wins and becomes a true immortal Villain.

I hope Cat spots that and manages to carve a way around it, because it looks like Below is hoping to combine them together into a really powerful pawn.

*Jessica Day*

I was just about to write something like this when I saw your comment. Now I don't have to. 😊

*Nash Equilibrium*

Darn, I was kind of hoping this would be a new name coming to the fore, but I can't say I'm surprised or disappointed. That said, there being two minds involved with Sve Noc seems almost too literal. Though it does lend itself to some interesting ideas for how the current ascension play might have stalled.



*Dainpdf*

Well, a new Name wouldn't have been Black's successor, so Name dreams wouldn't be likely to involve him.

*FactualInsanity*

Yeah, but tell me honestly you didn't think it was Black making contact in his dying moments to pass on a few final lessons to his pupil. It was a beautiful bait and switch, for the first few paragraphs.

[HannaB](#)

I thought it was him... but I didn't think he was dying because I'm stubborn like that XD

*FactualInsanity*

Well, I didn't mean literal "head on the chopping block, sword already swinging down" dying moment. Just, you know, aware the end is nigh, so cashing in all the chips. :3

*Morgenstern*

No, nothing like that. Just him realizing most his own plans failed and how, thus having to rely on his plan for Cat and thus contacting her because he thinks she, too, might fail. But only for a the first remembrance. It became clear VERY quickly during that talk following the cursive that nothing fit together...

*Dainpdf*

I wasn't sure about dying moments, but yes, I did get jebaited.

*JackbeThimble*

This could easily be interpreted as Cat starting to reach for the Name of Queen of Blades, it wouldn't be the first time she's drawn parallels with Lizzie.

*1queenofblades1*

For the 100th time Queen of Blades isn't a name lmao. We already have WoG that Elizabeth Alban was simply called that because she was just that much of a badass.

*Morgenstern*

To be fair, that doesn't mean that nickname couldn't ever be turned INTO a real Name somewhere down the line. We have

enough proof that new names DO crop up (aka Hakram and Masego).

*Morgenstern*

I don't either think that one likely, though.

[HannaB](#)

Names are more literal than nicknames. Cat would actually need to be famous for using blades in some prominent and notable fashion, for that to be a Name for her.

*goliath1303*

I'm so glad **somebody** else gets this! When I read these comments I can't believe how many people think they're being soooo clever with Names like:

Warlord Catherine the Squire, Queen of Callow, Duchess of Moonlit Nights

Protagonist

Wraith Queen

The Dead Queen

Skeleton Queen

Queen of the Winter Night

Queen of Ruin

Winter's Knight

Bleak Queen of Callow

Winter's Regent

Bleak Beast

Warqueen

Slayer

Queen sword

Eldritch Knight

Those are all *actual* names people suggested in the comments of the carriers surrounding Second Llesse. I truly don't understand how people haven't grasped that a Name has to, first of all, be something that you would actually call somebody in a story. Who has heard a story about "Protagonist", "Queen Sword", or "Winter's Regent"? Second, most Names are more of an archetype than a proper noun/title.

Then, there's things like "Warlord Catherine the Squire, Queen of Callow, Duchess of Moonlit Night" just don't work(I've seen so many variations of something similar to this.) It's way too long, Warlord has no cultural significance to Callowans, WoG is Warlord is an orc only name, Squire is a Name on its own, and no part of it other than Queen of Callow(We know that Callowan monarchs weren't Named by default. They would have a name in addition to their title.) and Squire, had any

significance to Cat's people. Why tf would she be called "Bleak Beast"? I'm not even gonna elaborate on that one.

Actually, I'm just gonna end there. Sorry for the rant, it's just something that has bugged me for a while lol.

*Na*

While I doubt Cat will end up with a name like that, for queeny reasons rather than bladey ones, it might not have been a name \*then\* but maybe Lizzie managed to carve a deep enough grove into fate for it to be one now.

*Euodiachloris*

When you get a queen whose first choice is "slash and slice the thing" and they come with enough determination to slash and slice a lot of things, well... \*shrugs\* Get *another* queen like that, and you're getting a pattern started.

Third time is probably the charm.

*Aston W*

Feels like Cat needs to lose Winter soon. Or give it away.

*Darkening*

Considering her body is an artificial construct created out of Winter magic and her soul is threaded pretty firmly into Winter now, that feels unlikely.

*Skaddix*

Ah two heads, two minds, this will be an interesting trick although Cat is right Captain went down because the Calamities rolled into a land when they didn't fully understand the stories they be dealing with.

*Dainpdf*

That, plus Black didn't know what the enemies' objectives were. He misread both Tyrant and Bard.

*Rook*

The problem is that Cat doesn't have any inkling of what stories Sve Noc is working with. Even the skeleton of a drow story is going to be exceedingly dangerous. This might be a grave, but it's the grave of a giant that makes the Kingdom of Callow look like a newborn babe in comparison.

The only way I can see her avoiding the same pitfall Black ran into with Bard, is to start utilizing her peerage properly and draw more knowledge from them. It'll be near impossible for her to make the right moves unless she at least understands what game her opponent is playing.

*Morgenstern*

Yeah, if she can rip knowledge from Akua, why not from her "Peerage".

[Euodiachloris](#)

Leaves a question open... Do even the current Drow know enough about the older tales and tropes? Or has Night carefully extracted important aspects from their collective memory?

*Me*

What a "coincidence" that Cat and Sve "mirror" each other so much. Both can enter each other Domain, both soon will gain a rank up, Sve has someone else within it's Night, Cat has a Villain within her Winter.

*Dainpdf*

Cool to get another piece of dialogue with Sve Noc, nice to know what Cat's dream was. Also fun to get a bit of interpersonal relations going.

In terms of theorizing, I guess the dual nature of Sve Noc is an interesting bit, though I find it hard to go anywhere with it; the fact that she wants to know what happens to the Drow after is very worrisome and might be reason enough to just execute all of them, need for an army or no.

Oh, and thank you for the chapter!

Now that I'm done being nice...  
This is filler! Filler night!  
And no one's gonna save you  
From the two-day wait to write!  
You know it's filler! Filler night!

*Morgenstern*

Sve Noc wanting to know what will happen to the drow could either be VERY worrisome – or, actually, not worrisome at all. Some part of her might be rather willing to hand over – if only the terms are right and her people stay protected. \*shrugs (Nah, probably not very likely... but still. There's something about that fear. And also the acknowledgement of the first pieces of Night Cat encountered that Winter was "akin", but not quite the same – AND more powerful at that. Squirming like an

Igor to please its master / soothen a more dangerous predator into letting it live...)

*Dainpdf*

I don't think the Sve care a whit for their people. Not with what they've reduced the Drow to. Not as anything other than tools.

Now, if, similarly to Cat, they have found a way of imprinting themselves into their Domain, I could see it. Could also be some other sort of trap.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Anyone saw how Cat copied Black's retort from Liesse?  
"Uninspired"  
And it's been really long since we have Name dream now.

*Antoninjohn*

What has Cat become that the breaker of the Twilight Sages feels fear?

*Novice*

It's not that she's fearing Cat so much as she's fearing her other self.

*RoflCat*

Probably this really, heck Sve Noc might literally be Sve (Priestess) and Noc (Night) in a sort of the Holy Trinity... Unholy Duo? way where they're both the same and separate entity at the same time (a theme that's been mentioned with Cordelia before)

Noc saw Cat does her murder thing, and welcome her, even if it'll results in the story Akua told Ivah, because worthy rises and here's Sovereign of Moonless Nights.

Sve, on the other hand, either see what Cat's trying to do, or is afraid for her position, and is trying to deal with that.

*FactualInsanity*

A Blasphemous Brace? A Profane Pair? A Corrupt Couple?  
I don't know why I felt the urge to look up aliterations.  
Not like Holy Trinity is aliterative.

*Halinn*

Dammed Duo?

## [Euodiachloris](#)

Alternatively, Akua is going to get a wonderful chance to see what happens when you reach for apotheosis while firmly clinging to a compartmentalized life-style to cope with, you know, ruling without coping with personal responsibility for what you do.

The woman as a private person and her public persona as the priestess might... have become two actual beings sharing a single space thanks to the influx of power. Which could well then have stymied the attempt to complete going all godlike.



*edrey*

also, two selfs could be 6 aspects, that would be unholy crazy

*Snowfire1224*

I freaked out in the beginning and thought she was having a name dream, until I thought about it and then realized she wouldn't be having one until she got a new name, if she ever gets a new name, and nothing climatic enough has happened yet for that to happen.

Wonderful ogre story, it seemed to me to be making fun of a stock fantasy story side quest.

*medailyfun*

What do you mean "nothing climatic"? She slept with Archer! That deserves a Name

*Snowfire1224*

When writing my comment I thought about trying to make a joke around that but decided not to.

Not sure I want to know what kind of name she would get from sleeping with Archer.

*Raved Thrad*

How about "Fuck Buddy?" At some level, Cat doesn't really want to have to fight her way through all of Calernia, and ascending to heroic (or villainous) office as The Fuck Buddy just might help her not have to do so. I mean, seriously, who wants to kill their Fuck Buddy? I'm betting even Pilgrim wouldn't be able to say no to her, and once she's slept with a couple of the more influential heroes Callow might not only be safe, but it would have heroic defenders wanting to make sure their queen, and by extension her kingdom, are safe. I'm sure Champion would love to jump on that.

Not Hanno, though. He's such an emotard no fuck buddy will ever be able to turn him into anything other than a self-hating whiny turd. He *needs* to die.

[sengachi](#)

I really, really love how Indrani and Cat's night together and the morning after have been written. It's just really good and sidesteps all kinds of cheap tropes and drama for some really genuine connection of a classically unusual sort.

[sengachi](#)

Also, a bit of meta commentary:

Authors redefine and create new tropes every time they write. What stories are is changed a little with every new word. Erratica, the way you're redefining and adding to the body of relationship tropes with this character interplay is something very worthwhile, and I'm genuinely grateful to see the little marks you're helping whittle into our collective consciousness of stories.

[HannaB](#)

and is this first time in this story that erratic has actually managed to have two characters have chemistry past their first sleeping together  
no consent issues this time, no dissolving one's personality in favor of just being 'the one to sleep with'  
nice

*OneConfusedChild*

Agh, I need someone to clarify for me. This whole time, iv'e been under the impression that Cat isn't named anymore. Is that wrong??? What I thought was that Winter just put itself into the general shape of a name because that's what Cat was when it did its thing.

But now we have name dreams going on??? I sort of figured that kind of thing had stopped.

Send help, very confused.

*Snowfire1224*

I she said it felt different frok a name dream and from her conversation from Sve, I think Sve Noc was recreating a name dream to mess with her head

*Yotz*

Sve Noc using an unborn vision that Cat would've had is her Name was still with her. Since Cat's Name was replaced by the Mantle those visions remain unrealized. Sve Noc called in some favours to hijack one of such visions being under the wrong impression that opposing actor is one of the usual Named. Which leads to following:

>You're riding a vision I could have, if my Name took the fore.

Have Sve been better prepared and wore the flawless image of Black, she would, probably, still be caught by Cat cause to her current inability to experience Name Visions.

*RanVor*

Wait a sec.

Sve Noc (whichever one it was) has went into Cat's dream disguised as Black. That means all "Black" said wasn't actually backed by real Black's narrative expertise. Does that mean that the "oaths can be broken" thing is a legit threat Cat needs to prepare for, or was it just wishful thinking on Sve Noc's part meant to poison Cat's mind with doubt?

[HannaB](#)

the second, most likely

Black doesn't think that way, actually. Oaths can be broken, everyone can betray each other, but he doesn't think love is a weakness and he's ridden this far on Power of Trust and Power of Friendship. This is not a particular issue he'd have gone for, I don't think

*Cicero*

It seems to be some matter of argument as to whether whatever remains of the Squire counts as a name anymore.

It's sort of like asking if a person is wearing a cloak, and that cloak is ripped to shreds, but the person keeps on wearing those shreds, is she still wearing a cloak?

*Na*

I don't think the metaphor holds up unless you stitch those threads to a new cloak and start wearing that. The whole thing seems kinda ship-of-Theseus-y; she's not the Squire, but also isn't not the Squire either.

[Dresden 67](#)

We got clarification on this back in Chapter 10: Alegro:



'It would have been a lie, though, to still call myself the Squire. No one did anymore. I could still feel the bare bones of that Name, some days, but the flesh and muscle over them was Winter's. Whatever I'd done in Liesse, when I had broken Masego's scaffolding, it had ended my tenure. I had no aspects anymore'

*JackbeThimble*

Yeah Cat's totally in love, you can tell by all the denials.

[HannaB](#)

Well, she loves Indrani as a friend already.  
I think this is a start of a wonderful poly thing ♥

[sengachi](#)

Queerplatonic relationships are A+.

*Raved Thrad*

Well, whatever else he might do, we know that if they reach out to Masego, at the very least he'll watch and not flinch.



*SilverDargon*

too soon

[Cassandra Riordan](#)

They are super cute and I hope things work out for them.  
Romance is good for her. 😊

*eh*

Sve Noc, a.k.a Trust Nobody, Not Even Yourself: the character.

*haihappen*

Trust is a weakness.  
Or: An entity divided in itself cannot stand!

Two minds in the entity of Sve Noc could be the whole reason why Drow society is fucked: If they struggle for dominance inside the domain, trying to devour each other, this may influence all of the Night, and the Drow with them. The whole society collapsed because the conflict, however minor, spread with the domain, consuming their ability to work together.

The only solution to this would probably be to BREAK Sve Noc, TAKE the now loose domain of Night, and let it FALL into her own domain of Moonless Night.

*medailyfun*

maybe not break but split?

### NZPIEFACE

Ok so...

Sve Noc -> Winter Dream -> Amadeus council room -> Amadeus memory.

boi that's a long rabbit hole.

*Jay*

So, I really want to get into how much I loved the last chapter and the morning after portion of this chapter, cuz I've definitely had of minor ship going on for them at least although I definitely ship Archer with Heirophant more. BUT i have been fucking WAITING for a 3rd court of Fae to form EVER SINCE Cat's Apotheosis. The aftermath of the previous courts merging hinted (to me) that they had essentially become Spring Court (although they could be Fall.) And ever since Akua has been around as a shade ive been waiting for the shoe to drop and become the new Summer to Cat's Winter. With the tones being set throughout the Drow arc, i FULLY expect Sve Noct (or at least the Night) to become Fall.

### HannaB

Spring and Fall courts already exist

### Dresden 67

It was clearly stated that Summer and Winter became the Court of Arcadia.

*Ermanti*

The only issue with that is Cat still having access to Winter, and her ability to make a new Winter court. The Court of Arcadia will become, inevitably, the new Summer court, only with vastly more Fae in its ranks. This whole arc has been about the creation of the new Winter court. To balance out the vastly more powerful Summer court, Winter has to subordinate Night. Conversely, should Night win, then the current Court of Arcadia will become a Day court to counteract it (Same principles apply really). with corresponding Dawn and Dusk courts. The WInter King knew this, which is why the his gambit left all the power of WInter in Cat's hands. The purpose wasn't to end the cycle, but rather leave a way for the courts to absorb new stories, so it can mirror the way Evil has been changing since the ascension of Malicia and the Calamities, and now the Woe .

Now Arcadia has access to all of the stories of Callow and the Drow, leading to a very different Winter and Summer dynamic when Winter inevitably returns to Arcadia.

*Jay*

“four Courts of Arcadia – one for each season – but the delineation between them isn’t clear. They don’t all exist at the same time, either.”

Interlude: Gate; book 2

*Aston W*

Thank you for the chapter EE.

Look forward to no filler Friday.

*Yotz*

So, I- -w-a-s- -b-e-i-n-g- -l-a-z-y- -t-h-i-s- -M-o-n-d-a-y- I undertook a quest for a poetic inspiration – which was, admittedly, for naught since I couldn’t find a vid of *Es Y’Golonac* online for the life of me. T\_T

...oh well, here’s something romantic for our lovebirds

And – as a special “two-for-one” for the world that waits for their wake

[Antony444](#)

So the Priestess of the Night has two heads and it’s not a metaphor...pity for her at least one is going to roll, if she continues to bungle things so badly. Challenging Catherine in the heart of Winter...tsss...

Looks like the chaotic battle is for Friday, can’t wait for it...

*1queenofblades1*

So basically what that story told us is that Cat will just straight up murder Sve Noc instead of fucking about with elaborate tricks. Because that’s just what Catherine Foundling does. She murders the hopes and dreams of hundreds like a good and proper villain. Then she skewers them like a kebab and plants their corpse by the side of a road.

*Drunken Dwarf*

Huh so Sve Noc’s failed apotheosis might stem from the fact that she tried to preserve her old self to avoid what the Warlock feared and in doing so ended up as a broken monster with both a new and old Sve controlling one source of power. It certainly doesn’t help that the other Sve seems more story bound and aloof of mortal matters like the fae are.

### spencer

> the whisper of a pair of crows surrounded by a sea of birds of paradise

This is a pretty metaphor. Hopefully it becomes clearer as we get a better picture of Sve Noc's abilities. Are the two faces the crows, and the birds of paradise their domain?

Also, "birds-of-paradise" can refer to lots of things, from a flower (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strelitzia>) to a startling variety of bird species ([https://juanvelascoblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/birds-of-paradise\\_final.jpg](https://juanvelascoblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/birds-of-paradise_final.jpg)).

### tyizor

It's funny that the most common one (the swan and the dove) aren't listed. Notably the swan was known in a lot of Anglo Saxon mythology for being the bird of heaven. (Bird of paradise)

### *Shequi*

This is Cat's recollection of the Court at Ater, IIRC. She and Black are the Crows. The Court are the Birds of Paradise, and the whisper is Black's Arc Words: "We Do Not Kneel"

### *Hellspirit*

Does one have to be named in order to ride stories? In the way of beating an enemy that is so much more powerful? With named the stories tend to even things out to balance out the narrative, but would this work in Cat's current state?

### *RanVor*

It's the matter of narrative weight. The more narrative weight you have, the more the story pulls you along; whether this is good or bad for you depends on what you're trying to do. The Names are, in essence, signifiers of the narrative weight – they codify your place in the story. That's why people with enough narrative weight usually become Named. Cat's mantle, coupled with her position as the protagonist, gives her enough narrative weight to qualify as a Named for narrative purposes, even though she's technically not.

### *Wolper*

Cat's fae title is Name-adjacent – and is powerful enough without aspects and a specific Named story, that universe is giving her the narrative attention a 'main character' gets that is normally reserved for Named without actually being one.

A Name is an attempt to shape a person who is close enough to a storybook ideal into the actual ideal itself – if a person is already fitting that ideal as good as any Named, then the fact that she doesn't or possibly can't have a name right now doesn't matter – she's still filling the role a Named person would in the story. It's possible she has more flexibility than someone with a true Name, in that the world is not trying to make her go down the specific paths that a Squire would.

If she changes her plans and attitude and behavior to fit any random villain name that would fit with her powers/resources, then her stories would probably fall into similar lines as those names.

[crysjal](#)

Having a Name is a sign that you are important to the Narrative and influence it. Without having a name you can still have influence but whether you're aware of the narrative and your impact on it as a whole is a separate thing. It's been shown that the many generals don't understand the narrative. It might be that only Named can perceive it.

*RanVor*

Well, not really. I think it's more like Named learn to work with narratives through experience because they directly influence the outcomes of their actions. As we've seen with Archer, they don't have any inherent understanding of narrative patterns. I believe everyone can learn to recognize narratives, but most people don't because it doesn't affect them directly.

[crysjal](#)

Pretty much every Named character has admitted awareness of the narrative at this point, whereas non named either do not acknowledge it or just are not aware of it in what looks suspiciously like some sort of mental interference with non Named characters just putting it down to Named shenanigans and simply rolling with it. Just because some refuse to accept or act within the narrative doesn't mean they don't believe in it. Archer admits it exists but she doesn't want to let that affect her worldview as she states to Cat. Cat does the exact opposite of that, acting constantly within the narrative and trying to control it.

So essentially my point is that Named have a significant impact and in turn have a greater awareness of the Narrative. The only major non Named players currently are Cordelia and Juniper at this point and they haven't demonstrated any thoughts towards a narrative weight. Cordelia has set into motion the crusades but she clearly

had very little if any at all awareness of the narrative and it's impact (as Saint told her in a roundabout way).

Unless you can demonstrate a conversation where non Named discuss the narrative outright and it's not brought up indirectly by Named?

*RanVor*

The very existence of the Names makes narratives common knowledge. Most people don't acknowledge the narratives because they have no direct influence on their lives, not because they're unaware of them.

Named have greater awareness of the narrative because they're much more bound by it. I'm not denying that. What I'm saying is that this knowledge is not inherent.

The wording of your last paragraph is unfair because it excludes the scene back in book 1 in where Juniper explained pivots to Cat, which disproves your point in rather direct manner. We were clearly shown that Juniper had much greater awareness of the narrative than Cat, who had been Named for months by then.

[BarthHumphries](#)

Your character contest had some sort of invisible box that links to an ad. I tried to "verify that I was human" and when I went to click a square it took me to some ad page that wouldn't let me back out.

Android (latest), Samsung.

*tragicsuburbanite*

She is Sovereign of Moonless Nights, and will not allow any silvery orbs in her domain.

*Rup*

"if not just, then at least fair"  
..the very heart of 'Practical' Evil...

We children of dew and lightning  
Transient and terrible

... 🙌🙌😊

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## Chapter 72: Outflow

*"For though these armed men may carry banner and obey a prince, without justice they are only bandits."*

– Extract from "The Faith of Crowns", by Sister Salienta

It'd be the first battle in a few years where I wouldn't have Juniper to run my army for me. I hadn't quite realized how much I'd come to rely on the Hellhound even before the blades were out, when it was all words and maps and trying to figure out how not to get your people killed. Not that map were all that reliable down here. I had four different tracings from mosaics, each contradicting each other on pretty major points and one insisting rather boldly that this entire cavern was actually three dozen miles to the west and I was sadly mistaken about what my eyes were seeing. I'd settled on having a chalk outline of the former islands and lakebed drawn on a slab of polished granite, well aware it would be imprecise and actual distances would be a guessing game. It'd been strange, though, looking down at a battlefield and not having Juniper leaning over at my side. Frowning over the latest imperfection in the war engine we'd raised together, muttering under her breath about Ratface being a tight-fisted twerp. She never would again, I realized with a start.

Ratface was dead.

There would be a reckoning for that, one day, I thought. It seemed a small sin when compared to all the many injuries levied unto Callow by the Empress, some likely to become actual legend in years to come, but it counted to *me*. As Diabolist might say, a hatred belonging the woman instead of the queen. *Won't matter if I don't make it through this*, I reminded myself. It wouldn't either, I knew, if I survived in failure. Only victors ever got to truly settle their grudges. The grim thought called me the order. Perhaps, I decided as I studied the chalk battlefield, it was for the best that my marshal did not hold command for this one. Juniper's art of war was one of discipline and manoeuvre, of bold tactics and vicious traps. It was the bastard child of the way the Legions of Terrors had won their wars, and for all that the faces of my legionaries had grown paler over the years the heart of it remained forged out of the Reforms. A core of well-trained infantry empowered by specialists, professional soldiers costly to train and equip but who could usually beat significantly larger enemy armies.

Like much of what Black had wrought, for the three Imperial marshals might have been deep contributors but there was no denying the central architect, it prized skill over power. It was almost more a set of tools a brilliant mind could use to produce spectacular results than a proper army – it was fortunate that there'd been so many promising generals to be found when the

Reforms first took place, and in retrospective the number of them that wasn't human did much to explain the sudden gains of greenskins and ogres in what had once been a very human institution. At least near the top. Few of the old Black Knights had balked at sending orcs and goblins into the meat grinder to the west when campaigns got going. It was a good model, I thought, though to maintain it in the long term Callow would have to build a War College of its own. Talented officers did not grow on trees. It had its limits, though. Procer had made that clear when it'd tossed a sea of conscripts at the two passes defending Callow and effectively accepted every trade in soldier's lives, knowing they could afford the most spendthrift or rates and still come out the victor. The Legions, and even the Army of Callow, were armies built for a certain kind of war.

They would be lost, down here, so it was for the best Juniper was not here to go mad over the coming mess.

I would have liked to claim I had something as neat and pretty as a three-step scheme, that I'd read the opposition and would make them dance to my tune, but the unfortunate truth was that I was an outsider down here. Even now that I'd stolen Akua's fluency in Crepuscular and I could read most runes as well as speak the tongue, a lot of what was taking place was beyond me. I didn't have the Jacks and the Eyes feeding me reports of about who despised who and why, I didn't have histories or supply assessments or even more than bare bones scout reports about enemy strength and position. The traitor sigils we'd approached had provided information, sure, but how much of it could really be relied on? They had objectives of their own which didn't necessarily entail my own army coming out on top, no matter what they said, and without an easy way to independently confirm what they'd told me I'd had to make some choices half blind. At first, I'd tried to get as many solid numbers as I could and work from there. I had a good idea of what the Rumena Sigil could bring to the table, for example, because a lot of people in Strycht hated them and wanted them dead.

But then I'd tried to get a solid notion of what the Jindrich could field – the Rumena were the most powerful sigil by far, but there was a reason the Jindrich Sigil was the undisputed runner-up – but all that accomplished was making clear the scope of the problem. Mighty Jindrich's envoy, fresh off the pact we'd made behind the back of the rest of the city, had informed me they had around one hundred and fifty Mighty of varying ranks they could bring into the fight when time came. We'd bribed three lesser sigils going thirsty with blocks of ice for information on the same subject, since ice was a lot easier to transport and didn't require a highly visible fairy gate to deliver, and we'd gotten three different numbers between one and four hundred. Now, at the scale of the kind of battles I'd fought on the surface, a variation of a few hundred wouldn't mean much. But down here?



It'd made no sense to me. All the sigils had small territories, were bound to keep a vigilant eye on each other and constant raids should give them a good idea of enemy strength.

Diabolist figured it out first, because we *had* gotten some very precise out of those bribes that was the same over all three reports. Small details, like the first rylleh under Jindrich being able to shapeshift and the four shapes it could use, or that the third and fourth under Rumena usually fought as a pair. It wasn't that the drow were shit at spying, I knew they weren't. There was a Secret that was pretty close to fae glamour, after all, which was why Ivah had taken so well to it in the first place. It was just that, in fights between sigils, usually the only people that actually mattered to the outcome were the ten, fifteen strongest Mighty. Raids succeeded or failed depending on who was leading the attack and the defence. Why would anyone bother keeping track of how many dzulu there were when a single rylleh could tear through an entire cohort without even working up a sweat? We could and had gotten mostly reliable information on those particular individuals, but getting irritated that no one could give me good troop assessments was rather missing the point.

I wouldn't win or lose the Battle of Great Strycht through dzulu and lesser Mighty, so instead of getting lost in a maze of unreliable reports I needed to focus on the aspects that would actually make me come out on top. Namely, that most of those people were at each other's throats if not actively trying to kill each other even as I planned. When you looked at it through that lens, the situation was a lot less grim. For one, my own army was larger than the Rumena Sigil's and I'd bet on my Peerage over their Mighty any day. My lords had lost nothing of their old prowess and gained much from Winter. Considering the Rumena were the most powerful tribe in Strycht, that meant I could expect that if it came to a slugging match I could come out on top against any one sigil – barring an unexpectedly powerful Mighty fucking up my day, which was admittedly quite possible. The crux of this, then, would be preventing the sigils of Strycht from actually unifying against me. Which wasn't nearly as hard as it should have been, given that I was an eldritch invader of dubious purposes and origins. Unfortunately, there was also the Longstride Cabal to account for.

Two hundred of the most dangerous Mighty in the Everdark apt to pop out at any moment to come straight for my head, and probably the Peerage's too for good measure. They weren't here for territory or wealth, all they wanted was the glory of crushing me. Which meant negotiating with them in any way was effectively impossible unless I could punctuate my offer with 'or you will immediately die', and even then it might be a toss-up. I'd picked the brains of my lords for a little more on the Longstrides, wondering if the angle of promising them a battle at a designated

time and place could get them off my back long enough to deal with the Strycht sigils. I'd gotten some pretty heart laughs in response, as my Peerage assumed that I was actually joking. Cultural divide, I decided. The whole glory in battle thing was tied pretty heavily to honour, back home, but in the Everdark was the word was only ever used in the sense meaning 'respect'. The whole rules of behaviour part of drow culture had been pretty much ripped out and replaced with the Tenets of Night when Sve Noc decided it was time for a regime change... however long ago that'd been.

Since sidelining the Longstride Sigil wasn't an option, I had to either secure the city before they arrived or make them part of the plan somehow.

The clean play was taking care of Strycht first. Ivah and my Peerage had found me the right tools to get that particular pile of dry burning, which would weaken the opposition before we struck and allow us to take it with moderate casualties before they realized what was happening. Give or take a few angry sigil-holders. Then before the Longstrides arrived we'd consolidate, harvest Night and title the willing before the enemy struck. Most my Peerage had been proponents of that course of action, betting on a proper ambush laid in Strycht to take care of the problem. I had issues with that plan, though. I'd taken enough cities in my time to know that soldiers walking through the streets wasn't enough to actually establish control. That held twice as much for a place like the Everdark, where the nisi might not make the kind of mess an occupying force would have to deal with in Callow but millennia of tribal rule ensured there would be significant resistance among the drow 'upper class'. In essence, anyone with a speck of power not under oath not to stab me in the back would the moment it looked like there was a chance it might pay off.

Wouldn't be much of an issue if I *did* put everyone with a speck of power under oath, but practically speaking that'd take days we didn't have. Establishing order after a battle always took longer than the fighting itself, and the margin of manoeuvre was thin enough as it was. I could have put the finest minds at my disposal to work on solving that – well, mind, Archer tended to solve her problems only one way – but there was a larger problem behind. Aside from the shaky foundations we'd be making our stand on, when the Longstride Cabal showed up we'd be the only enemy on the field. The totality of their efforts would be dedicated to killing me and wiping out my Peerage, with everything else a minor distraction at best. Sure, I could try to drown them in fresh recruits. Send every dzulu and Mighty I had after them, in warbands led by the Peerage, but casualties would be brutal. And when they converged on me, because they absolutely would, the kind of workings I'd need to pull out to stay alive would probably level Strycht and the people living in it. Evacuating

the city in advance was certainly possible, but it'd also be hanging up a sign warning them of the ambush.

So either massive civilian death toll or the cohort of hardened killers drunk on Night came in forewarned. One I refused out of principle, the other had decent odds of leading to a rout.

Which brought us to the other option. That one had been cooking in the back of my head since I'd first gotten Ivah's reports. The sigils in Great Strycht were, well, at each other's throats to put it mildly. Starting a city-wide fight in there would be about as hard as starting a fire with a jug of oil and a torch in hand. Once hostilities erupted, there would be no banners and uniforms: only a lot of scared and angry drow attacking everything looking remotely like a threat. That was the thing with civil wars, wasn't it? It was hard to tell who the enemy was. Sure, infighting within actual sigils would probably be minimal while they were in the middle of a battle. But cabals would split and even nominal allies would have to wonder what was going on and if the other ones were in on it. A very volatile mixture that could be made much worse with a few nudges, personified by a cheerfully murderous Indrani. For once, her ability to pick fights with anything sight could actually come in useful! Deep down I'd always known there would be a payoff for that eventually. This part, in and of itself, wasn't significantly different from what an attempt to seize Strycht would be like.

Which was where the... interesting part came in. The Longstride Cabal, as my Peerage had noted, were not exactly the diplomatic kind of crew. Oh, to have survived this long they probably must have *some* degree of moderation. Otherwise another band of old monsters would have put them down by now. But while Great Strycht was further into the inner ring than say, Lotow, it was far from the heartlands. I tended to compare it to Marchford, in my mind. An important city, given the lake if loomed over, but not a major player – like Laure, Liesse and Vale had once been in Callow. The Longstrides could come in here and expect to be the biggest kids on the block because, well, they actually would be. Now, combine that with the way drow usually behaved whenever they stood even an inch over another drow and throw in that their cabal hunted powerful entities for sport? The moment someone gave them lip they'd answer with blades, and from there it would escalate. Sigil-holders would know what they were dealing with and likely withdraw if given the chance, but to be able to do that they'd need to have a clear idea of what was going on and the presence of mind to make that decision.

Both were pretty rare things, when in the middle of an all-out battle that would determine whether you and your tribe survived the night.

Akua had called it fighting fire with fire, when I'd put forward the notion, but I disagreed. That implied a degree of control we wouldn't have after the blades came out. It was more like... fighting a battle by starting another half-dozen battles. I didn't have to win, not exactly. I just had to lose less than everyone else. Just enough that I got to take home the prize when the dust settled. We'd used our last few days to put the pieces in motion for what Diabolist scathingly named Operation Damage Control, all coming to a head on the day we believed the Longstride Cabal would arrive. Spending the last night with Indrani should have cleared my mind, but instead when the hour came I had a fresh worry to chew over. I still believed that the plan, if it could be called that, would serve its purposes. There would be setbacks, but I still had cards up my sleeves. I hadn't wasted my days since Great Lotow, or forgot the hard lesson the duel with Mighty Urulan had taught me. If I fought the same way I had since claiming my mantle, I would lose. *Badly*. Preparations had been made accordingly. But that wasn't the worry, was it? There was only one thing I knew this morning I hadn't last night.

Sve Noc would act. Not down the line, not through intermediaries. She'd strike, today and straight at me. If this really was a death match for Below's favour, then the chosen would have to bleed. And that changed the nature of this battle, didn't? I did not feel like a coincidence, that's she'd shown her hand only this late. When the wheels were already turning and it was too late to stop them.

"A good morning to you, dearest."

I did not turn or reply. Behind me the camp was stirring for war, preparing to march. Below me plains of half-dried mud stretched out all the way to the distant plateaus and hills of Great Strycht. My fingers drummed against the hilt of my sword, the gesture failing to settle me. Diabolist was not offended by my lack of reply, simply coming to stand by my side.

"Did you enjoy yourself, at least?" Akua drawled.

I glanced at her, eyebrow rising. Did she... Well, I supposed it hadn't been the most discreet of trysts. Drow senses were shaper than those of humans, even those that weren't Mighty, and the shade's were sharper still.

"Sve Noc paid a visit to my dreams," I said.

I had no intention of discussing how I spent my nights with Akua Sahelian. She was not the Scribe to my Calamities, part of us in her own way. I would not forget how she had come into my service, no matter how useful. Or how tiring. That was the part that surprised me, how *tiring* it could be to hate Diabolist. The Doom of Liesse was reminder enough, but sometimes it felt like I was flogging myself with the memory of it.

As, no doubt, she intended.

"Her purpose?" she asked.

Whatever whimsy there'd been was gone. She understood perhaps even better than me the seriousness of that.

"Information," I said. "About what I'd do with the drow, if I led them out of the Everdark. About how I'd deal with the Heavens if they meddled."

Scarlet eyes tightened.

"That such an entity would consider surrender is highly unlikely," she said, pausing to allow me to contradict her.

Both assessing and fishing for fresh information with the same sentence. Fucking Praesi, I thought half-admiringly.

"She was definitely hostile," I said. "And tried to overcompensate when I caught her out. All doom and damnation. But she slipped up – there's two of them, I'm almost certain. And they're not necessarily aligned in their opinions."

"Now *that* is rather interesting," Akua said. "I had previously assumed that her lack of action was the result of either rules or indifference. Power akin to a god's does tend to come with the limitations of one."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow at her.

"I got a pat on the back and a badge from that order's grandmaster and I'm not feeling all that constrained," I noted.

"You've only ever used a fraction of your power," Diabolist said, and raised her hand to prevent me from replying to that. "For good reason, I am aware. The alienation would endanger you. Yet that is why such entities have seats of power, Catherine. The Dead King rules the Serenity. The Priestess of Night rules the Everdark, or close enough. There is a reason my ancestors raised *pyramids* to gather power, darling one. The summit stands on the steps, and is greater for it."

"I do rule a kingdom, Akua," I reminded her. "You know, little place between Praes and Procer? There was a coronation a while back, in between the constant fucking wars."

"Ah, but do you rule it as Sovereign of Moonless Nights?" she said. "Hardly. Even the Wild Hunt are merely in your service, not true vassals. You bound neither the Woe nor the realm to your mantle."

"Making Arcadia but worse out of my home isn't exactly in the works, yes," I flatly replied.

"And so you have not grown roots," Diabolist said. "An apotheosis incomplete, so to speak. Did you not wonder why the Grey Pilgrim and his ilk are so desperate to remove you from the throne?"

"I'm a villain ruling Callow," I said. "I don't believe we need to revisit the whole Calernian balance of power argument, Gods know I'm tired of hearing about it."

"The Carrion Lord ruled it for decades," Akua said. "And, to be frank, the legitimacy of your rule is only marginally better."

I frowned. It was a pretty sparse forest she was describing to me, and as a rule I tended to think I understood heroes better than she did. But she was a villain, in a way I'd never really been. From a people who'd been fighting heroes for centuries. She might not always be right, she often wasn't, but once in a while her perspective did allow her to see things I didn't.

"Roots," I said. "That's what you're implying. The Peregrine worries about me growing roots in Callow."

"It is one thing to slay a villainous queen of Callow," Diabolist said. "Quite another to seek the destruction of the immortal Black Queen, the wintry personification of centuries of her people's grudges. The first is a threat. The second is another Dead King, one whose armies can march through the realm of the fae."

"He knows," I said, then hesitated. "Or at least suspects that I intend to abdicate."

"And so you were handled with gloves," Akua said. "Deals and stories, marching armies instead of a Choir unleashed. You ascribe this to the man being reasonable, but he is a *hero*. If that decision was made, it was made because he feared that cornering you would see you tumbling through the threshold of apotheosis complete."

Or he could have been genuinely trying to limit the damages the country would suffer. If he had started calling on Choirs, I'd have needed to escalate accordingly. *But when the pivot came, I thought, he backed Hasenbach. Backed the crusade victorious at all costs. He was willing to play within certain boundaries, but only so long as he'd win.* The trouble with Akua was she would be convincing even if she was wrong, because she was a persuasive person period. I was unwilling to put any stock in it before I had Hakram and maybe Masego serving as advocated for the opposite thought.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "For now, the war is down here. And it's Sve Noc we're facing."

"Part of her, at least," Diabolist mused. "I wonder if the simplest answer is truly the correct one."

"Simplest?"

"One is the pyramid," Akua smiled. "The other standing atop it."

A rider and a horse, I thought. I'd considered that as well.

"It would explain why we're not fighting the Night," I said. "Just something using it."

"Strife, mother of a thousand opportunities," she quoted in Mthethwa.

An old proverb I would have been able to name the home of even if she'd spoken it in Lower Miezana.

"I need you to do something for me," I said.

She turned to face me completely. In Masego that would have been a notice I had his full attention, but with her I always had that. Even when she pretended otherwise.

"I had role given in the battle to come," Akua said.

"I know," I said. "But this is more important."

"And what exactly do you need of me, dearest?" she asked.

There were a lot of ways I could have answered her. Some true, others euphemisms or a hundred different shades of flippant. It'd helped me over the years, the quips. Allowed me to make it a joke or a game, anything but a reality so often ugly. But if I was to let the monster off her leash, then she should be given her due.

"Folly," I said.

Akua Sahelian smiled, and in that smile lay the promise of things great and terrible to behold.

---

[\*erraticerrata\*](#)

Character contest continues: Juniper vs Warlock. Link to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16852975?fbclid=IwAR3UaE1yMW0pBbz0L0LjGzBa9oVsmblpwYophs1BZTZj\\_JYmeDs3ElAXbE](https://www.strawpoll.me/16852975?fbclid=IwAR3UaE1yMW0pBbz0L0LjGzBa9oVsmblpwYophs1BZTZj_JYmeDs3ElAXbE)

*Dainpdf*

Poor Juniper, having to fight Warlock just after we had a fond send-off, with her having been offscreen for quite a while.

Oh, and could we have a link to the updated bracket, please?

*Dainpdf*

Huh. Surprisingly tied, as of now. With Juniper winning. Unexpected.

*FactualInsanity*

Not really. Warlock was cool and powerful, and ooohh, and aaaaahhh, but he was never likable. Now if it was Juniper vs 'Loshe, given the development his death revealed it would probably have been a landslide, but Wekesa? The end was flashy, but didn't reveal much more substance than we already knew he had.

*Dainpdf*

Eh. I liked the insight we got into where his priorities lay. In the end, the thing that most mattered to the man who had all that power at his fingertips, who cared so little about any morals and any laws of man, who always said none of the wars really mattered because the true concern was the nature of Creation, was his son. Family.

If that is not a great humanization of a character we were introduced to as a monster, ineffable, alien in his thinking and completely evil in his actions, I don't know what is.

Compared to that, Juniper has mostly been in the background since the College, and even then we really got her mostly through her function: she's the general.

*FactualInsanity*

**If that had been a revelation at the end, it would have been a poignant point. But we knew that about Wekesa practically since we were introduced to him. It was implied in everything stated about the backstory of Masego. In how he threatened Cat if his son should ever come to harm. Etc. etc.**

So it didn't change my opinion of him, because it didn't reveal anything new. He was human and relatable from the get go. He was also a jerk, to pretty much anyone who was not part of his family, from the get go. Even before he casually stranded who knows how many legionaries in a Hell without notice, because he couldn't be bothered to



think of them as living beings and at least warn them about it.

Yeah, Juniper is more background noise than fully fleshed out character, but at least she's likable.  
:shrug:

*FactualInsanity*

I don't know what happened to the bold tag there. Only the initial "If" was supposed to be bolded. My apologies.

*Dainpdf*

Being likable does not figure into it so much as being interesting, for me. It's much easier to make a character likable than believable.

As for Wekesa caring about his son: yes, we knew about it, but not necessarily the extent of depth. Masego was almost all he could think about the whole chapter; we finally see Warlock a bit unsure what to do, and it's when deciding how to talk to his son after all that's happened. Plus, he arguably died due to how muhh effort he expended looking after Masego.

*FactualInsanity*

Well, the poll asks "who is your favourite character", not "who is the most interesting character." So you're bound to have wildly differing voting priorities. At the end of the day for me Wekesa wasn't as interesting and impactful as he was for you. Which is fine. That's exactly what we're voting for! 😊

*HandyCapped*

It was pretty much revealed in it's fullness at the trap of diverging paths or whatever it was. Remember how his death was described?

*Dainpdf*

In a way? This did not include the point about just how much thought and effort he's constantly putting into his family.

[Screwfloss](#)

I'm not sure you understand what a "popularity contest" is.

You *do* get how worthless a metric it is, at least.

*Dainpdf*

The thing is, at least as I interpreted it, they meant "likeability as a person" – which doesn't really matter, because I'm not looking for a friend, I'm looking for a character.

I don't really decide on whether I like a character based on whether I'm rooting for them or whether I'd like them if I were to meet them.

Granted, the fact that a character can get one to root for them can be an indicator that the character is deep and interesting, but it's still an associated symptom and not the actual qualities.

*stevenneiman*

Juniper has a realistic but simple character. All she has ever cared about is the study of war, and everything she's done has been a reflection of that. We've been introduced to her through her function because her personality in a very real way IS her function.

*Dainpdf*

And so she is... Not one-dimensional, but close. And while that may be realistic (is it?) it certainly does not make her very interesting or... I'd say human, but then I risk confusion because she is not a human. I guess person-like will suffice.

*Shequi*

That's not true though: She cares about family; see her questions to Cat about her mother when the idea of open rebellion against the tower were first raised, and her reaction to her mothers' death.

*goliath1303*

Tied but with a winner is definitely a situation I've never heard of before...

*stevenneiman*

Not actually unbelievable that Juniper is winning. I think there's a degree of tribalism among the fans, so characters in her faction have a distinct advantage even if the other character is cool. Still with the similarities I noted and the Cat-support offset by the tragic death, it's really anyone's race at this point.

Also, assuming the link works properly,

<http://www.bracketmaker.com/tmenu.cfm?tid=470805>

*Dainpdf*

To be expected. We're seeing this from Cat's side, so we naturally identify.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Do we have any Anthropologists inna house?  
'Cause y'all (and myself, but not me or I) tend to try to dissect & discern the folks that populate this here Fiction, attempting to figger out motives and aspirations based on what they sez, either within Cat's perception or from an Interlude of some other character's perspective... This here Work is populated by characters a bit more varied than the population enjoying reading and either applauding or denigrating the Author's style, intent, depiction, characterization, world-building, etc..., But we all get along, even if we disagree. I like that.

*lennymaster*

We simply all agree that minor differences in personal preference aside Guide is quite simple the next best thing since sliced bread.

My kindle library holds more than a thousand books and I have read or am still reading more than a dozen webserials, but none, not Legion of Nothing, Metaworld, Mother of Learning or even Super Powered when it was still going has captivated me even remotly as much as Guide does.

There are books, that surpass Guide in specific elements, such as worldbuilding (Honor Harrington), character development (Anita Blake), humor (ChaoSeeds) or magic/skill/tech system (Schooled in Magic). But none have such a cosistendly high level in all these and more aspects.

*AVR*

It doesn't matter a whole lot whether Warlock or Juniper wins anyway; the winner just gets to lose to Vivienne.  
Thanks for the link BTW.

*stevenneiman*

ooh, this one's tough.

The interesting thing is that in many ways they're very similar, aside from Wekesa's tribalism. They each have a single interest and everything they do is either in pursuit of that

interest or else a way to get distractions and wastes of time out of the way so they can return to their interest. Both are cultivated as allies because that interest is very useful for war, even by the few people they consider friends.

*naturalnuke*

I mean, Wekesa gets my vote for both going out with a bang, and doing it to save his son.

And that was a hell of a bang...

*stevenneiman*

I voted for him because he's more interesting, and I tend to vote for the character I consider more nuanced and interesting (which is why I supported Vivi against Willy). but it was a tough call.

*sutortyrannus*

More of a snap than bang, I'd say. 😊

*Ternbugkle*

Looking forward to his Son finding out, I expect great and terrible things.

Lightning splitting the very atoms of water to make a hydrogen and oxygen cloud that explodes leaving heroes briefly on a dry sea bottom before it collapses back on all sides leaving them crushed by the depths.

*HandyCapped*

Would require a metric fuckton of magical juice. Considering that the separation is more costly and assuming that in using magic there is inefficiency, it's better just to conjure up some kind of magical bang.

*mavant*

It's not even clear that our molecular chemistry applies in this world, really.

*Nordvegr*

I don't suppose convincing can be done to keep polls open for longer? I work long shifts and have missed several despite my desire to vote, and I don't get my two hours off work unless it's a government election.

*ruduen*

Something Something Vote Something!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Hooo, boy. Hard to say if there's going to be a city left afterward, if Diabolist's getting to play around that much...

*warriormonk19*

I'm hoping to see us beat Ward in the yearly votes as well. We're only ~700 votes behind!

*NerfGlastigUaine*

Yes! As I've been saying last few chapters, we must dominate ALL categories! Come on guys, we can do it!

*Nuke\_The\_Earth*

Interesting bit about voting, if you constantly refresh your vote it only counts as one, whereas if you let it expire then vote again, it'll count multiple times.

*Aston W*

Vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Antoninjohn*

You win the battle by starting another dozen battles

*beleester*

The Foundling Gambit – set everything on fire and hope that you're less flammable than your opposition.

*mavant*

Credit where it's due, I think this is the Dan McNinja gambit.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I thought it was the Dr. McNinja method?

*mavant*

IIRC it was his father who suggested it and did it first.

[Javvies](#)

Letting Akua off her leash seems like a terrible idea, even loosening it seems like a terrible idea.

On the other hand, collateral damage isn't going to be a major issue, and there aren't really any noncombatants or anything Cat cares much about keeping safe or avoiding damaging.

Huh. I wonder if Akua's right about the possibilities if Cat were to more fully embrace her position.

*Dainpdf*

Well... as Akua herself said, there is good reason Cat isn't doing that. I suspect there is also more to it. The form of apotheosis Akua described, where alienation turns Cat into a glorified fae queen, essentially puts her back within the schema of the Gods.

As for letting Diabolist loose... Yeah. If I were to play devil's advocate (sounds appropriate, considering who we're discussing), I'd say that maybe this redirects stories about Akua being let loose into one's where she destroys Cat's enemies, but at a terrible cost, instead of ones where she destroys Cat.

*naturalnuke*

Familiarity breeds ambivalence!

Or was it contempt?

*Dainpdf*

Familiarity breeds exhaustion.

*Dylan Tullos*

Javvies:

Thief just woke up screaming "Don't do it, Cat! Don't do it!".

She has no idea why.

This is pretty much the exact opposite of what Cat promised Thief. Instead of keeping Akua firmly under control, she put her in charge of the drow. Now she's instructing her to do a Llesse on a drow city.

At this point, I think Akua is probably the most important member of the Woe. She's constantly with Catherine, she advises her on everything from magical rituals to affairs of state, and she's basically Cat's Chancellor.

Notably, Cat has become much more Evil while working closely with Akua. She's forced Mighty into contracts that are slavery in all but name, drowned thousands of lesser drow, and she's currently planning to unleash the Butcher of Llesse. When Thief

finds out about this, she might justifiably conclude that Catherine isn't listening to her at all, and start looking for alternatives to a Queen whose closest adviser is Akua Sahelian.

[daegone823](#)

She has protected drow from the dwarves  
-is removing a tyrant who caused the downfall of her own race just for power  
(effectively stopping another dead king from rising)  
- managed to curry yet more war assets and possibly a contract with dwarves who never work with evil empires  
-All while keeping her fae side in check

*Letouriste*

Both your comments show clearly how facts can be shown in completely different ways. All depend of the narrator

[Euodiachloris](#)

Funny how subjectivity works. 😊

*MetruX*

And even funnier how people tend to ignore the subjective nature of some things to say their own perception is better... We all do it, especially when we don't notice x)

*NerfGlastigUaine*

We all say our own perception is better, the question is whether we back up our perceptions with facts and logically sound arguments while also acknowledging the subjectivity of the matter or we ignore every argument we don't like.

*HandyCapped*

Not solely narration. Press armies have always been common, both in our universe and in-universe. This is practically a voluntary press army(which already wars against the idea of a press army and alleviates the situation), where they get their most sought after recourse in spades as a trade. This all has a nice extra of saving their race from fire sure extinction. It's arguably not very nice, but make no mistake, despite Cat's philosophical flagellation, this is *\*very\** far from slavery. Indentured servency at worst, something a lot better at best.

Now, letting the butcher of Liesse run free for a while is probably against their earlier agreement, but the reason and situation is completely different, too. That's

important in a world extremely dependent of setting. Only future will tell on that one.

*Dylan Tullos*

HandyCapped:

You can make a case for Ivah and the lesser drow who volunteered to take oaths in exchange for power. I agree that's indentured servitude rather than slavery.

But the Mighty that Cat trapped in Arcadia didn't "volunteer" at all; she stranded them in Arcadia until they agreed to take oaths. Cat trapped them in a dangerous situation and offered to "rescue" them if they accepted her nonnegotiable terms. That's the very definition of slavery.

Before Thief left, she told Cat not to trust Akua and not to let her off the leash. Akua is now running the drow for Cat, and she's about to carry out another Llesse for Cat.

*RanVor*

You know, it all sounded very reasonable until I remembered how you argued for genocide of the Praesi some time ago. The Drow are basically Praesi High Lords, but more overtly murderous, so do they deserve to be exterminated or not? Or does it depend on who's doing the exterminating?

[daegone823](#)

I thought the Woe's whole motive was to break apart systems in place "a woe unto all", whereas the Calamities were to subjugate and exert pressure on systems through might makes right. Whereas one is meant to control a system already in place ushering in a sort of forced peace the other is throwing an explosive at a machine that while old has functioned for eons.

In this respect the Black Queen has not deviated from the modus operandi of the Woe and has kept to there breaking of systems through the most efficient means.

There is probably a fallacy in here somewhere though.

*RanVor*

What are you even talking about? I was just pointing out hypocrisy, that's all.



TeK

Well I was waiting for a battle, but got a cliffhanger. Still, interesting chapter, especially the perspective on Peregrine.

*ALazyMonster*

The weekly formula is that there is almost always a cliffhanger on Friday, sometimes an interlude is in its place, you can kinda predict where the breaks are going to be because of that. Behold the meta-story of the book about people who try and meta-game fate/stories.

TeK

Nah, I'm just salty that I'm going hiking for the next week or so, and I wanted to leave on some satisfying moment, I dunno. It's personal stuff.

*Oshi*

Its not news about the Peregrine though at least not to anyone but Cat. We were shown from the beginning just what he is and what he will do. He told us so himself when he spoke to the Cutter of all things.

*IDKWhoitis*

This isn't so much breaking the chess board over the head of the opposition, as really setting fire to the opposition then stabbing them in the eyes with their own queen and king.

I wonder if Akua's reasoning is why Grey freaked out when Akua was inhabiting Cat's body. Did he think that he had failed, or that Cat had taken another step further down the ladder? Like can he see Akua's soul or did he only notice a change in Cat's?

*naturalnuke*

Well being that Cat's soul was so fucked up that Cat's mind shattering like a glass under pressure just made her feel refreshed(refer to Masego giving her knowledge from Shard), I find it hard to imagine the Grey Pilgrim would notice that any one of the many patchwork stitches of her soul having more control than another.

---

I'm pretty sure he knew it was Akua from the fery beginning. Consider their exchange in interlude Kaleidoscope VI (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/06/04/kaleidoscope-vi/>):

Catherine's body isn't looking any different from usual, here, so the Pilgrim must be looking at the soul. There's a chance that he meant that Catherine's transformation when so deep into Winter is troubling, but he's already shown he can ignore this if necessary. In contrast, Akua's soul being long extracted, bound to a cloak's collar and then shoved into Catherine's body is definitely something that would catch his attention.

"What needed to be done," the Black Queen calmly replied. "My side doesn't get to walk away clean, Pilgrim. I see you've been tossing around resurrections like they're godsdamned solstice treats, too. Charming. Not going to have any long-term ramifications at all."

The monster paused, then leaned forward.

Akua's response may be interpreted both as telling the Pilgrim that him putting his hand to the scales was a narrative invitation for her to get "resurrected" as well, and as offer for him to think about actually resurrecting her at a later date.

"Surrender," the Great Elder said. "Abdicate. It is not too late."

Tariq replies with pretty much the same conditions that were constantly offered to Catherine, confirming to the Diabolist that a redemption into a Good name is still an option, and gets the same kind of retort.

"You would argue this, after slaying thousands?" the Pilgrim asked.

"I feel like we might need to revisit the concept of foreign invasion," the villain noted. "Specifically the part where it has fucking consequences. Like, you know, people dying. You'd think that one would be a given, but apparently you're slow learners. Wahwah, my attempt to conquer a – sort of – sovereign nation wasn't met with flowers and a godsdamned parade. It's almost like we're not happy about the whole thing. Go figure."

I'd like to point out that the phrasing "You would argue this, after slaying thousands?" implies that casualties inflicted by Catherine personally are significantly larger than the ones inflicted by the armies, which isn't true. However, if he's addressing Akua, then this turns into a reminder that he can't simply leave alone a mass-murderer who killed more people than the both present armies combined. When hearing an extended (and roundabout) explanation of why she considers herself already having suffered consequences of her failed conquest, he responds with understandably sceptical "And you think your reign a better alternative?"

"Hells, Pilgrim, I was born to rule," the Black Queen replied with a toothy grin. "But I'll settle for getting you fucks out of my backyard, this once. Any takers?"

The monster's gaze swept across the crowd of Bestowed as she idly emptied her pipe and put it away within her cloak. The only answer was Light blooming and weapons raised.

Akua straight up says she was born to rule Hells. I know she kicks ass in this chapter, but I can't wrap my head around everybody in the comment section missing it. At best some people remarked that this phrase is out of character for Catherine. But after Akua realizes he wouldn't budge on the subject, draws the line of what she considers her due and effectively closes the negotiation, she doesn't harm heroes that much either! Her section of the interlude starts with her musing about playing a hero herself, and then she proceeds to throw around attacks an average hero would easily shrug off. The only serious attacks are on people who have a healer on hand (Silent Guardia, Forsworn Healer) or heavy hitters (Saint of Swords).

#### NZPIEFACE

Holy shit, I didn't see that "I was born to rule."

- 1) She's letting her Akuaness flow out into her disguise, I find that highly unlikely.
- 2) She's trying to make Catherine a permanent fucking sovereign. Seeing this chapter...

*medailyfun*

Nope, trying to view Pilgrim's words as directed to Akua is just like trying to view Cat's words to Athal as directed to Malicia. A doubt he would try to appeal to Akua's conscience.

>Akua's response may be interpreted both as telling the Pilgrim that him putting his hand to the scales was a narrative invitation for her to get "resurrected" as well, and as offer for him to think about actually resurrecting her at a later date

It just does not make sense, she did not need resurrection at that moment and I doubt she implied herself being killed any soon. I believe the ramifications that would disturb Pilgrim's dreams were about his resurrection leaving people 'different', that was mentioned somewhere later in the text.

---

> Nope, trying to view Pilgrim's words as directed to Akua is just like trying to view Cat's words to Athal as directed to Malicia.

Now see here, take a look at these quotes and tell me, who are they directed at: a random servant that is irrelevant in the greater scheme of things (by his own admission) or an ally that she regrets moving from "unreliable" into the "has to die for any of this to work" category.

"Negotiations can fail," the dark-haired woman replied. "I knew it was one of the possible outcomes even before I learned there'd be opposition."

"Now you sound like him," the Black Queen said, rolling her eyes. "I can realize when I've been outbid. Malicia was always going to be willing to go that extra mile I'd balk at. We'll see in a year whether the Dead King feels like riding a different horse."

"I'm freeing you as of right now," the young woman said, and clapped his shoulder gently. "That should be within my rights, I think. And you're certainly welcome to tag along, if you want."

"Callow," she said. "Back home."

That'd been a lie, he thought. The tells were there, though much harder to pick up on than before. There must have been more to her short conversation with the herald of the Crown than a mere dismissal.

"I'm not going to make you, Athal," she said patiently. "I genuinely think you'll be better off with us, but I can see why you wouldn't want to leave and I'm not going to force you. I meant it, when I said you're free. You can decide for yourself."

"I guessed that'd be your answer," she said. "You were a kind and pleasant host, Athal. I hope you'll be treated as you deserve here."

*Morgenstern*

Totally out of character for Catherine to be that scheming...

AKA To me, she totally talks like someone who would have liked a slave that was gifted to her to go free, one she liked at that (and, as an only scheming notion for a NOT-schemer like Cat, one who might have important information about the Dead King and his realm after all, even if he himself does not see how he, the menial servant (who gets

around very much) could be that important). Nothing in there hints at her having understood she was talking to Malicia herself. Being Cat, she would otherwise directly have CALLED HER Malicia. And not spoken to said servant OF Malicia.

If we would have to interpret that as you suggest – that would be AKUA talking there and not Cat. It simply does not fit Cat's character description to the reader at all to be talking like THAT if she had understood it was Malicia. What she WAS thinking, though, was that she might be talking to the DEAD KING himself. That HE was taking over Athal (at least at times). And that suspicion was made rather obvious as one Cat DID have, directly in the text... Thus, Athal has more importance than he implies, aka, yes, she IS speaking to someone who is of more import (through either the knowledge he was, unwittingly, or contrary to what he claims – or him being the Dead King or being an earpiece for the Dead King that He listens through) – but it not's because she somehow suspects \*Malicia\* behind that.

### *Morgenstern*

Second that one. I also view it as a direct reference to him talking about "what have you done to your soul" -> she basically replies "hells, what have YOU done to OTHER PEOPLE'S souls".

### *Morgenstern*

Ehrm... Shows strange and not quite as visible as it should have been here... that (first!) comment starting with "Second that one" was related to medailyfun's post.

Whereas, the second one (starting with "Totally out of character for Catherine to be that scheming..."), which is shown above the actual first one... is related to .. ehrm.. the post from the person with a blue something and no name (I guess the dashes are supposed to be the comments nickname?)..

### *Drunken Dwarf*

The thing is though if the Pilgrim had noticed it was Akua, or even someone else controlling Cat's body, he would have destroyed Cat story wise. What I got out of this dialogue was that the Pilgrim was trying for a story set up where the hero's go into the villian/monster's domain and slay it. Akua was defending Cat's war acts and her position of rule to muddle the monster story he was going for. Even Akua's leak at the end, which really was a cheeky play on words against the Pilgrims truth telling, would fall under defending Cat's

rule. It's honestly scary how well Akua played the Pilgrim's story, while acting as Cat, so much so that he decided it would be better to let the Saint do her thing rather than speak.

Although I do have to agree that it looks like Akua might be going for a redemption story herself, maybe even trying to steal or benefit from Cat's.

*Jane*

I'm reminded of how Ivah already views Akua... The story of how a vicious shade leveled a city in the Underdark is going to be a particularly dark Drow legend for ages to come. Or it would, if the story of how the Drow left the Underdark wasn't already going to be filled with legends.

Incidentally, "The immortal Black Queen, the wintry personification of centuries of her people's grudges" sounds like the perfect description of Cat already. Pilgrim is right to be worried, and probably *should* have called down a Choir on Cat's head. Not that it would have helped, given that she's the main character, but at least he'd have felt he'd done everything he could.

*Dainpdf*

Well, the issue is that, on one, Cat is *\*not\** a personification. And that's good – means she's still reasonably human and thus has free will. Unlike the Fae.

As for calling on choirs, it is inviting Cat to escalate as well, with catastrophic collateral damage to both the country and the army, which they need for the Crusade. And/or put Cat against the wall, from whence she can rise as a demigod.

[daegone823](#)

Pilgrim called on a plague was that because Black was using his aspect of lead so much or did black during the time he was waiting on his ship with all the corpses figure out the Pilgrim's trick and think that he can also do an equal trick as the below can interfere when good interferes.

*Dainpdf*

I think that only applies to direct intervention. The plague was just the Pilgrim revealing that he's more than a single trick – he's the Good side's Wekesa. Or Zeze, as you will.

*Jonnnnz*

I am still not giving Pilgrim any slack for using biological weapons. I get that good in this world means

"advances the plan of the gods above" rather than anything to do about behavior (else Champion would be a villain for basically murdering whoever she feels like, and Adjutant would clearly be a hero for a Name that is all about helping someone else)... But straight up mass murder outside of combat in order to improve his chances of winning is basically Liesse with heavenly approval

*Dainpdf*

Not disputing that. One may argue he killed less people and the objective was defense, or that Black was already harming civilians and so this served the greater good, but the act was still abhorrent.

*Nafram*

Well, this should be interesting. This confrontation could see our time in the Everdark come to an abrupt end, should Sve Noc be slain here and not in the seat of her power. It fits, in an odd way, the Longstride Cabal is the strongest force Drow have to offer save for Sve Noc herself, and they are coming to play on the decisive battle, furthermore, if Cat's certainty is to be believed, the Big Bad herself is coming to the party too. Should Cat win, then the Everdark has no more cards to play, and that means an endgame is upon us. Of course, it could be that Sve Noc escapes with the greatest among the Longstride Cabal and unifies the rest of the Drow under her banner for a final battle, so there's that

*Dainpdf*

I assume this is only their first clash. There could be up to three of them.

The meta reason to end it abruptly, of course, is the fact that we're 70 chapters into this book, but given the amount of chapters we've had that didn't really move the plot forward much I don't think EE is much concerned about that.

*Kirroth*

So the battle plan is intended to follow Cat's usual pattern, as other characters have often commented on. To cause as much chaos as possible with the expectation that her foes will suffer from it worse than she and at the end she'll be bloodied but standing at the top of the heap. It plays to her strengths but is getting a little predictable.

Or should I say, that WAS the battle plan. Now there's a new one. One that calls back to Akua's Folly in scope or intent. Which is a frightening thought even if it means her chances of success

have gone up. Being too repetitive is a bad tactic and a worse narrative.

*Dainpdf*

When "causing chaos" becomes predictable, there are two options. Cause order, to surprise the enemy... Or ramp the chaos up to unprecedented levels.

I think we know which one Cat has chosen.

*Skaddix*

Hmm makes me wonder if Akua will try to take the power of Sve... assuming her Pyramid theory is correct. Not exactly impossible since Cat really doesn't understand much about magic although Archer does but if Archer is not close enough.

*Dainpdf*

She *\*has\** been forbidden to partake in Night. We can only hope that impedes or at least stalls such a plot.

I have also considered that the Sve may have or will visit Akua's dreams and propose treason in exchange for... Well, probably just a change of master, but then Akua gets to pull a Kairos and backstab the Sve as well.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

She's been forbidden from partaking in it, but what about literally being it?  
What if her plan here is to turn herself and Cat into a new hybrid Sve Noc of both Winter and Night.

Sovereign of the Moonless Night, after all.

*Dainpdf*

Hopefully she needs to imbibe it to become it? Or the inability to do so makes it harder?

As for becoming a dual being... I guess? It doesn't seem to be exactly how the Sves work, though. Seems like one is the Domain itself, or something like that.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Dunno man, might actually make it easier. Like, imagine if Akua took part in Night. Sve Noc would have influence over her.

Since she doesn't, it would mean that Sve Noc can't intervene with Akua from the inside.



*Aston W*

Winter is coming. Twice. Or Death City. 2.

*Aotrs Commander*

No, she did that last night.

I am not sorry.

*Dainpdf*

Well, we do know the Pilgrim does not mind a little civilian slaughter to make his omelets.

However, it does not mean he didn't also wish to limit civilian slaughter. After all, when he argued for moderation it was never by saying Cat would escalate, always by pointing out her well-intentioned core.

I suspect that Above certainly has weighed things the way Cat thinks, and that it was a factor in the Peregrine's thinking. He has the learning to know of apotheosis.

But that does not mean that sparing lives did not also figure into it.

Besides that... Cat is crossing a lot of lines, here. Indentured servitude, shaking hands with genociders (and helping them), and now Folly? Below must be happy.

*Dylan Tullos*

Dainpdf:

Have you noticed that Akua agrees with pretty much all of Cat's decisions lately? That's a red flag.

*Dainpdf*

Her approval *\*should\** fill Cat with shame. Also worry, because she made her career on exploiting that kind of thinking.

*nipi*

Aaaand we are seeing a lack of such emotional pangs.

*Dainpdf*

The slippery slope is noticeably slicker when you get ice involved.

*Skaddix*

Well Archer also made this point. Sure Cat likes to think of herself as pretty Neutral but there is no true Neutral in this World. You either High With Above or Down with Below. Sure you can be less or more in either Direction but I don't the Gods lets you play it that neutral when you are a major player. Ranger gets away with it because she is small time player so even if she is slightly on the side with Below, she is not doing enough for Below or Above to care. By small time I mean ambition wise not power wise. She is like Goku, she only really cares about training and fighting the Best and her friends. The wider picture doesn't matter to her.

Cat though doesn't get to play neutral, she is taken the Mantle of Winter and Runs a "Good" Country. Its not really a shocker that Cat is slowly sliding to Villainy due to the Gods Below forcing her hand and having Akua whispering in her ear. Vivienne was the counterbalance against Akua but she is gone. Archer doesn't really care. Hakram and Masego are decidedly Evil. Just look at how hard Cat is struggling to convince herself she needs to get rid of Akua. Now that is not to say she won't because Akua will probably make a play to get free eventually but if Akua just stayed as useful advisor probably not. Especially since Akua is the only one Cat has on her team with a knowledge of Politics. And that is honestly why Vivienne is in trouble in my book long term. Cause Long term she doesn't really do much. Her spy network someone else can run and her combat utility is useful but limited. Maybe her recent change will fix that but I am not sure a clash is inevitable with her as the only Goodish character surrounded by Evil or Neutral at Best.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Uhm... The Hierach just pick the 3rd option so there are choices between upstairs and downstairs.

*Skaddix*

Did he the way I see he forced the Bard out but the Bard did get him off his behind and into the game.

*Morgenstern*

Uhm yeah... and his reply in getting off his ass was not to \*chose\* any of the sides, but a big fat FUCK YOU to BOTH sides...

*Morgenstern*

Choose... \*sigh

*Dainpdf*

Archer is pretty firmly on the Neutral side of things. She's not got a stake in the game of the Gods, nor does her Role bind her to either side.

Cat doesn't seem to have issues with arguing she needs to kill diabolist. She's just getting tired of the constant mental vigilance necessary to live with an adversarial master manipulator right over her shoulder.

As for Vivienne, she did contribute quite a bit in the past... And if the chess interludes were any indicator, she's going to get even more involved from now on.

*Skaddix*

I believe its been stated no Names are truly neutral by our writer. Some are simply closer to the middle line then others. But I agree she doesn't have a real stake in the Gods Game beyond being a Woe Member.

I am more saying the fact that Cat has to keep telling herself that and complains about the constant vigilance means in my book said vigilance will eventually slip up.

Eh no. Her biggest move was stealing the Sun combat wise. Beyond that even she herself notes that anyone non Named with skill could run the Spy Operation as well as she can. So her primary role has been the Good Angel on Cat's Shoulder. But in terms of overall value to the Woe when it comes to Military, Magic and Politics she doesn't really contribute much hence her crisis of faith with Hakram. My point is I don't think she is the least important Woe member as of now and I don't see that changing any time soon.

*Dainpdf*

I am not sure it will slip up in the sense I think you mean. As Cat said, she has an excellent reminder. She won't find herself liking and accepting Akua.

She might, however, lower her guard in the heat of the moment and get stabbed in the back.

As for Vivienne, she has a distorted view of her own usefulness – the crisis of faith with Hakram shows he valued her work more than she did.

[Javvies](#)

No instance of a given Name is neutral, but there are Names that can be a Heroic or a Villainous Named in different instances of the Name. I.e., Squire can be a Hero Name, usually leading into White Knight, or a Villain Name, usually leading into Black Knight. Likewise, the Names of Thief, Archer, Ranger, etc. are not alignment-locked. For that matter, I'm pretty sure Adjutant and Hierophant could end up being alignment-independent Names as well.

*luminiousblu*

"If Bai Qi [the guy who executed 200k surrendered prisoners of war effectively out of spite] agrees with your battle order, it should fill you with shame and is a red flag." That's basically what I'm hearing right now. It's a bad person with no moral fetters, so if you have his/her approval that means you're making a huge mistake. Note, however, that I haven't mentioned that he's the only general in his historical era to have not lost a single battle and died to political intrigues with almost a hundred victories under his belt.

You can call Akua evil – the Chinese called Bai Qi "heartless and without human decency". You can call her a monster – the Chinese called Bai Qi "the Butcher of Men". But you can't just not acknowledge her area of expertise and pretend that her plans are always bad simply because you don't like her, because even though everyone hated Bai Qi, people still honoured him as "Mars". Just because Akua agrees with a plan doesn't mean it's bad – I would argue that most of the time, if Akua thinks your plan is bullshit for reasons other than her values, then it's probably bullshit and that if she thinks it's good, it's probably at least decent.

This is the woman whose spellcraft is on par with Masego, whose acting nears Malicia, who played fucking everyone up until the very end of Second Liesse and who needed [four] named directly involved (Catherine, the Squire; Amadeus, the Black Knight; Vivienne, the Thief; and the decoy Amadeus, Assassin) to bring her down, one of which was also a Duchess of Winter, not including the bullshit she assembled outside which took on multiple legions, Warlock, Hierophant, Kegan, so on so forth and just about fought them to a standstill.

*Dainpdf*

You forget Akua did lose. And yes, she had all of those people take her down... because her methods ensured that many people would come to take her down.

It's called Akua's Folly for a reason. Because it was foolish. Plus, what Diabolist views as "effective" often translates to "diametrically opposed to Cat's whole life objective".

Getting approval from Akua is not like getting approval from Bai Qi. It's like getting approval from Napoleon when fighting for democracy in Russia in the winter.

You know he was great, but he also failed catastrophically, and his methods were adapted to his view – that of concentrating power in himself.

*luminiousblu*

I'm not denying she lost. I'm denying that her plans are bad. You have to remember that she lost, essentially, because of something not even Malicia or Black saw coming. Even then you basically needed a bunch of other bigwig Named to help. She lost, but she lost narrowly against overwhelming odds, which says something about what she can pull off when she set her mind to it.

>because her methods ensured that many people would come to take her down

And they still would have failed, had Winter not shown up out of nowhere and had Hierophant not evolved into Hierophant during the experience.

>it's called Akua's Folly for a reason

Because she lost and therefore it was folly, yes. But if anything is consistent in this work. it's that folly isn't folly until you actually lose. Winning is what matters – Akua lost, so her plan was foolish. It doesn't, however, negate all the other plans she put up, nor the sheer effectiveness it had in evening the otherwise overwhelming odds.

>diametrically opposed to Cat's whole life objective

If Catherine has such a poor grip on herself that she can't measure her own life objectives then she doesn't really deserve to make her own decisions. She has a relatively strong grip, though – which is why she views Akua's advice as something to be heeded carefully, but weighed against her own values. The entire point is that unlike the posters in the reply chain, Cat realizes Collar Fairy isn't stupid, and while she makes a few poor decisions once in a while, most of them are incredibly sound.

>Getting approval from Akua is not like getting approval from Bai Qi. It's like getting approval from Napoleon when fighting for democracy in Russia in the winter.

No, it isn't. It's like getting approval from Napoleon in a war situation. The only thing you'd take with a grain of salt is when he recommends invading a large land territory in the winter. Napoleon was a legendary general. He fucked up once and it was the end of him, but that doesn't mean that he wasn't the guy that entire nations avoided fighting. Akua's advice should be taken with a grain of salt. Disregarding her advice, or avoiding what she advises, is beyond stupid, because if Napoleon tells you that you should put your cannon on the left he's probably goddamn right.

*Dainpdf*

Akua would have lost anyways. She might not have lost to Cat, but she would have gotten pwned by the Pilgrim or some equivalent in short order.

Akua is a representative of the old breed of villain. A good one (whether as good as Kairos is up to debate – I think not), but still limited by that.

Oh, if Cat hadn't managed to kill her, and she had gotten through Black and the eventual Wekesa (which is not certain), she would have done a bunch of damage before Above put her down. But she would not win. She can't.

Also, Akua's plans only work if one cares exclusively about one's own power, or maybe something like the old Praesi customs. Something like what Cat wants, the preservation of lives? Using Akua's plans without curation would result in throwing the baby out with the bath water.

*RanVor*

Isn't it the entire point that the game is rigged and villains can't win no matter how good they are? This doesn't tell us anything about a actual quality of Akua's plans, only that the Heavens are unbeatable. But you're disregarding the fact that this is Evil vs. Evil situation and the Heavens are not going to interfere. In this case, Akua's plan might actually work very well and have relatively little long term consequences.

*Dainpdf*

No long term consequences? That's not how summoning at least three demons and opening a Greater Breach works.

As for whether Akua would have won, that's exactly my point. She might have won victory against Black and Warlock (though I doubt it), but she was charging headlong into all the stories and roles that saw her head on a Crusader's pike by the end of the month.

Taken overall, her methods do not succeed at reducing collateral damage, effecting lasting change, or keeping her alive.

As Cat said on chapter 54: "Fine, I didn't mean to impugn your talent at short-sightedly endangering the very fabric of Creation to try winning battles you ended up losing anyway on account of being kind of a fuckup."

*RanVor*

I'm sorry, but I can't honestly discuss anything if you keep changing the context of my argument to fit your your position instead of actually addressing it. This is not Second Liesse and you know it. The conditions are completely different. The Heavens won't defend the Drow. Also, Akua won't be completely free to do whatever she wants. That means no demons and no greater breaches.

*Dainpdf*

Well, you were the one who brought up her past as evidence of her effectiveness. My point was that Diabolist is good at a specific type of game, and that playing that game in itself is already a mistake. Cat has a lot to learn from Akua's toolbox, but to learn her outlook or general strategic sense would be disastrous.

*RanVor*

NOPE. You were the one who brought up her past as evidence of her ineffectiveness. I said her past is evidence of nothing. Second Liesse doesn't give us any indication whether Akua's methods would be effective IF THE HEAVENS WEREN'T A FACTOR, which is the case here. But you had to warp my argument into defending the Second Liesse. Again. I'm starting to think you're doing this on purpose.

*Dainpdf*

The point is that Akua's way of thinking wins battles and loses wars. Cat wants to win in the end – she wants to build something lasting.

Her thinking is also one that eschews mitigation and ignores collateral damage in favor of brutality. Also not something Cat would want to get in the habit of doing – she generally wants to keep at the very least her army, but normally also the battlefield.

Additionally, it's not about the Heavens. It's about the sort of story and Role into which Ubua naturally casts herself. Stories and Roles that end with her dead and her goals destroyed.

*RanVor*

And why those stories end like that? Because of the Heavens. Unless you honestly think Akua is now in charge (in which case I see no point in continuing this discussion), you have to see how far removed the current situation is from that. So why do you keep insisting it's relevant when it's not? The Second Liesse would have failed anyway because its ultimate target were the servants of the Heavens, and you just can't beat the Heavens. Fortunately, Cat has enough common sense not to use superweapons against the Heavens. Against the Drow, however? As long as Cat doesn't suddenly go batshit crazy, it's fair game.

*Dainpdf*

Stories are a thing, beyond the conflict of Good and Evil. Evil vs Evil has its stories as well. And, again, it's never about just this one battle. It's always about the war. Sure, the Heavens and their servants are unlikely to intervene in the Everdark, but narrative momentum gained down there still applies once Cat goes back to the surface.

As I said, this is the kind of thinking that contaminates. It looks like a good option because all the best poisons do. Much like absorbing the Night way back was a perfect solution and Cat didn't trust it, the old Praesi ways aren't something one should seek to emulate.

*RanVor*

Wrong. Stories are MADE OF Good and Evil, FOR Good and Evil, BY Good and Evil. They are literally



patterns that have been repeated until they started to enforce themselves. Good always wins at the end not because that's how it should be, but because it's been happening for so long Fate has accepted it as a default state. Mainly because the Heavens have been cheating since the dawn of time.

Sure, the narrative momentum will at least partially carry over to the surface. But it will be narrative momentum of a different kind, because the conditions are much different and so is the story. Obviously you have no trust in Cat's ability to detect narrative pitfalls if you think she would not just approve of, but come out with such an initiative without seriously considering potential consequences first.

*Dainpdf*

There are stories involving Evil alone, and also stories involving more than one evil. There are stories involving Good by itself, and others involving neither party necessarily.

For one example, one might recall the stories that appeared in Second Llesse. No real Good side there. The stories in Arcadia didn't feature the opposition of Good and Evil but Summer and Winter... Stories are more than just that one conflict.

As for trusting Cat's ability to avoid bad narratives, I trust that she will dispose of Diabolist eventually and not go too far into her views, although it may take a loss or two. No one is perfect, but Cat seems very capable of learning from past mistakes.

*RanVor*

This discussion is getting increasingly pointless. Let's just agree to disagree.

*Dainpdf*

On the last point: Akua's overarching ideals, the first principles from which she builds her thought, are the problem. They sabotage her at the root, so that she is useful for her skillset as a toolbox, even for tactics, but not for strategic thinking.

Cat can use Diabolist to cast, word oaths, read people, or even make specific plots – and even in those cases

curation is advised – but to have her advise the overall strategy is just a bad idea.

### [Hakurei06](#)

Akua and Folly. Well this should be fun.

*Someguy*

“For though these armed men may carry banner and obey a prince, without justice they are only bandits.”

– Extract from “The Faith of Crowns”, by Sister Salienta

Incorrect. Without taxpayers giving them salaries they would just be bandits. “Justice” is the bullshit propaganda of whomever shouts the loudest at whichever period of time is politically profitable to do so.

*FactualInsanity*

While I am inclined to somewhat agree, a protectio racket would fulfil the salaries condition, but would not make them not-bandits.

I.e. it's somewhat more complicated than that. Justice may be a delusion, but the important bit is that it's a **shared** delusion.

*Unorginal*

Who are you preaching to here? You can debate the foundations of government elsewhere in a fic that isn't about there objectively being good and evil even if that good and evil don't exactly conform to human perception?

*Kail*

It's from an extract written by someone from the House of Light, they would obviously believe in their so-called “Justice”.

*luminiousblu*

Salienta is the poster girl for moralistic stateship. Her rival is the person who wrote this place's version of The Prince.

### [Rey d`Tutto](#)

That would be the Dead King, the Hidden Horror, etc.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

I'm still wondering who she's going to give the throne to. I find Talbot a very unlikely candidate.

So she needs to find a candidate that can be a proper "Good" King/Queen for Callow. I feel like she'd have to weave her death into a narrative like that for it to be a proper story.

### NZPIEFACE

I just realized she's probably going to fuck off to the Whitecaps after all this Callow stuff.  
Natural defence for Callow. Snow. No one really claims it.

### HannaB

she could be another Ranger: her own little circle that nobody is stupid enough to fuck with, the country she helped make off to the side keeping up diplomatic relations

would be nice

### *medailyfun*

I can see the parallels between Abigail story and one of Cat's alternative lives shown in four-fold something in Book III thus story-wise she becomes a good candidate

### NZPIEFACE

I mean she'd be a Good queen, yeah, but I'm not too entirely sure about her ability to govern people.

### *WuseMajor*

I'm betting Thief's name transition is to Queen.

### NZPIEFACE

Is Queen even a Name? Names usually are long set into tradition, or come about as some unbelievable weight upon the world.

### Rey d`Tutto

Queen of... Theft, Yoink, Spies, Grudges?

### *RanVor*

That would make no sense. Callow already has a queen. Vivienne getting the Name of the Queen would send her on a narrative crash course with Cat. And no, it doesn't matter that Cat intends to abdicate. She's the queen NOW, and that's the only thing the narrative cares about.

### Mental Mouse

Probably Viv, possibly Abigail. Or most likely, she learns to accept that the throne is her proper place.

*TotesARealPerson*

Anyone else worried that finally getting the Archer x Cat sexytimes payoff right before the big battle might have just set Archer up to die?

*Zaver SaintCloud*

Under normal circumstances, the rules we have seen regarding Stories would see that as a possibility. However, given that The Woe are slowly but surely replacing The Calamities, the death of any major Named in Cat's group seems highly unlikely (at least until the very end).

*Exec*

This chapter felt a bit less focused than recent ones, like a stream-of-consciousness ramble, but it was still interesting to see Cat's perspective on the battle ahead in full.

Hopefully the next chapter is "The Storm"!

*RanVor*

Oh man. Oh. Man. I can't wait to see how the Catherine's Folly plays out.

*IDKWhoitis*

My guess (probably far off the mark) is that Cat is about to imbue the Ice she is handing out, and the water around her, with "Still Water" magic to turn the whole city into a roving madhouse of death. With everyone dying and reanimating, no one is going to truly know the true scope of the attack.

Every Sigil is just going to think that another Sigil has allied with Cat and is attacking them with a "touch of winter", which while not wrong, probably wouldn't understand the practical differences between Winter fueling someone's power, or winter using someone Corpse as a construct.

The city will eat each other alive, and when Sve or Longstride shows up, they might try to slaughter the city wholesale as it seems like everyone is tainted by Cat. Thus forcing the city to their knees, and onto Cat's side by force.

Has just the right mix of Necromancy, Mass-Genocide, Chaos, and Psych-Warfare to qualify for a Catherine's Gambit or Akua's Folly depending on the angle.

*Rup*

immortal Black Queen, the wintry personification of centuries of her people's grudges.....

Now THAT sounds right for Cat. ..but she is dead set against it 😞

### [Euodiachloris](#)

The fairy queen Callow didn't think it needed and certainly never wanted... But, once they got her, had to admit they paid for her in instalments over many, many generations because, well, she does fit like a glove. Also, nobody pays a grudge back quite like the Black Queen does.

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## Chapter 73: Feeder Bands

*"The rat it bites the rat  
On the tail, the tail, the tail  
The rat it does grow fat  
And swell, and swell, and swell  
But a rat will bite the rat  
On the tail, the tail, the tail  
So we'll sing the chain again."  
– "Growing Horns", a Lycaonese nursery rhyme*

The first blow struck in the Battle of Great Strycht was an illusion.

Glamour, to be precise, woven by my own will. I'd seen no need to waste strength by making it too elaborate, so it'd remained a simple streak of blue light high up in the 'sky'. In of itself it did nothing, but it didn't have to: it was a signal. If my army stepped into the city uninvited, we were the enemy. The ones everyone would be aiming at, and even the few sigils who'd struck pacts with us would think twice before coming out on our side. Whether it was to see if we could match the opposition or simply to bleed us a little first to have a better position after the battle didn't matter, since I couldn't afford those kinds of losses. No, I needed blades to already be out when we struck. Thankfully, Ivah had provided me with the means to ensure that. The Rumena Sigil, Gods bless their ambitious souls, had decided that the barbarians knocking at the gate was the right moment to make a play for the control of Great Strycht. My Lord of Silent Steps had learned as much after grabbing one of their lesser Mighty and interrogating it thoroughly. Not so thoroughly, though, that it had died from my lieutenant's attentions.

So we'd made the songbird sing a second time, this time in front of the inner circle of the Jindrich Sigil. They'd been the natural targets for sowing dissension, and not just because they'd already made a deal with me. See, the Jindrich were the second most powerful sigil in the city. They'd opened negotiations because they were under attack by a cabal of lesser sigils going after their water reserves and agreed to take oaths under condition of those enemies being humbled, but they weren't bound to me. Not really. It was an alliance of convenience for them, and those were not to be relied upon. But this changed things. As the second best, the Jindrich would have to be annihilated if the Rumena were ever to fully take over Great Strycht. More than that, we'd hinted that the sigils attacking them were doing so at the invitation of Mighty Rumena – which, for all I knew, could be true. It didn't matter if it was false, though, because from the perspective of Mighty Jindrich it made sense and confirmed its worst suspicions. It was not hard to get people to believe the worst of each other when they'd been feuding cyclically for a few hundred years.

So my alliance had become a little less shaky, and I'd put it to work. The Rumena had been the kings of the island for a very long time, and never been all that nice about it: to the extent that there was technically a cabal including most everyone else dedicated to keeping them from devouring the rest of the city. That meant they had a lot of enemies, and that the Jindrich had... well, allies was a bit of a stretch. Sigils they'd fought with more than against for the sake of keeping the Rumena in check. Mighty Jindrich had reached out through envoys and warned them in advance of the plot, which was exactly what I'd needed. If my people had done that, it would have been taken as naked plot to incite civil war. Which, dues where they were due, it was. Coming from Mighty Jindrich, though? It had a reputation as an implacable berserker, not an intriguer. Put that together with our songbird, and you had all the necessary ingredients for a discreet coalition. Once it'd been assembled, the hard sell had been making it wait. Understandably, the drow preferred being on the offensive if there was going to be a battle: Mighty were no strangers to collateral damage, and they'd rather it happen on Rumena territory than theirs.

So Mighty Jindrich had 'tricked' me. It had assured its allies that it'd managed to convince me to send a force into the field to back them up, small enough the risks of it turning on them afterwards was minimal. But there was a catch. It'd only managed to wrangle that loan on a specific day. Namely, the one where the Longstride Cabal was suspected to be arriving – not that they knew that. The rest of the coalition had reluctantly agreed to the delay, weighing that my own people sharing the losses was worth the risk of discovery implicit to sitting on a plot like this for a few days. I was pretty sure that when the time came, Mighty Jidnrch would actually turn its coalition on us if it

thought we'd been weakened enough to be beaten. That was fine, though, because I'd betrayed it first. Ivah had dug up from the prisoner that the Rumena had approached ambitious rylleh instead their target sigils and we'd helped clean up those leaks by providing the names we have. Not of the exact rylleh, sadly, since we didn't have those – the prisoner hadn't been that high up in the Rumena Sigil. But sigil names had been given and their sigil-holders had picked out the most likely treachery candidates for killing before they joined battle.

But we'd held two names back. Akua had removed them from the head of the prisoner just to be sure it wouldn't sing an inconvenient song even if prompted. I'd been inclined to think that even if we did nothing the enemy would find out, but best to be sure. It was now a certainty the Rumena knew there was an attack coming, and that meant they'd be intercepting it on their own chosen grounds. And so an illusory streak of blue light got the first round of betrayals started even as my army moved out. It was the signal for the coalition to begin its attack, for the Rumena to begin their counter-attack and my own plans to begin.

The drow were a fair hand at betrayal, but I had the Fairy Godmother of Treachery in my service.

My drow set out in warbands, treading the half-dried lakebed quietly. Soldiers would have moved in formation, according to precise orders, but I had none. Only warriors, and those couldn't be made into neat companies with designated officers. They'd move and fight as tribes, led into battle by the members of my Peerage. I'd studied the grounds for days and spoken with drow better learned in Everdark warfare than I, ultimately coming to the conclusion that there would be four different skirmishes that would dictate the outcome of this battle. Two would take place to the east, near the islands-turned plateaus of the Jindrich and the Hushu – respectively our main allies and the leaders of a cabal of four mid-tier sigils that'd remained aloof from the intrigues unfolding across the city. That sector would be the most volatile, since the two different skirmishes could easily turn into a single broader pitched battle if we weren't careful. That the Hushu and their allies would get involved was a given, but on what side they would fall in this was anyone's guess. Those fronts had been named, respectively, Spear and Dice.

One would take place to the north, in what had once been a lake-within-the-lake. The drow called it the Flowing Gardens, as it'd once been an entire district of small stone islets covered in sculptures and greenery. A place of leisure for the ancient drow, where pleasure ships had lazily drifted between enchanted metalwork that sung songs when touched by the breeze. It'd been centuries since those days, though, and now the Flowing Gardens were an eagerly fought-over battleground. The district had both water and food, after all, and the entire thing had been fed

lakewater through a complex system of canals and sluice gates: holding those was a sign of power among sigils. My confiscating of Lake Strycht had lowered the waters within until the majority of the sections had become little more than large scummy ponds whose dirty waters were still fought over brutally by the minor sigils occupying the district and its outlying regions. Most members of my 'allied' coalition under Mighty Jindrich were from there, and my assessment was that the Rumena were going to hit them hard and early to keep them from assembling. Which would draw opportunists from the warlike sigils in the region, making it a beautifully chaotic mess. As a front, it'd been named for what it was going to turn into: a Pit.

The fourth and final front would be in the centre of the city. It would be the slowest to come into being, and at the start wouldn't even exist. The Rumena Sigil's territory was to the west, a five large and comparatively rich islands serving as the heartlands of their tribal possessions, but the fight would never get that far. The forces going after Mighty Rumena and its warriors after being freed from other fronts would pass through the central district of the city, since it was the quickest and easiest path, which meant that was where the ambush would be waiting. It was good grounds, I'd been told, for that kind of fighting. The centre of the city was filled with old temples and administrative complexes, set on a massive plain of solid rock. Every single building was separated from the others by deep grooves carved into the stone, more or less small canals, and the drying of Lake Strycht had turned the place into a labyrinth of bridges and corridors on three separate levels. A good spot for the Rumena to await an enemy force, after they'd devoured the sigils currently occupying it. It'd be hard to concentrate troops there, and either attacking Mighty would stick together and risk lesser warriors being casually wiped out or they'd separate and a hundred small duels would erupt on bridges and alleys.

We'd called that front the Woods.

I stood on a promontory as my army moved out, beginning the trek to the battles, and below me stood those that would lead them in battle. There'd been a fresh addition to my Peerage, a twelfth member. The Agus Sigil weren't part of Strycht proper but they'd held territory close, and been half-mad with thirst when Lord Zarkan found them. Mighty Agus had not been difficult to talk into becoming Lord Agus, though it seemed uncomfortable with its new role and wary of the rest of the Peerage. With good reason, I thought. Before oaths were taken, most of those drow would have wiped out its sigil in an afternoon's work and done so without batting an eye. It was the weakest of my lords, and knew it. The others did not share its mood, though. There was the scent of eagerness in the air, like they were itching for the fight. They probably were, I admitted to myself. Drow were not the kind of people to leave power unused after it was gained, and they had



gained much from bargaining with me. I took a moment to gaze down at them in silence, wondering how many would survive the day.

"Today," I stated, "we take Great Strycht."

There were hard smiles at that, but no cheers. That was not the drow way.

"I won't waste your time with a speech," I said. "You all know what I'm about – we'll be dancing on the edge until the last beat."

I had their attention, though not because of any eloquence on my part. What came next was what they'd waited for all this while.

"And now what you actually want to know," I smiled. "Lords Nodoi, Losle and Zarkan: yours is the Dice front."

Zarkan was hard to read, because it hated my guts and that was usually the main thing to be found rather than anything more nuanced, but the others were easier. Relief. They knew their job would be mainly containment.

"Lords Slaus, Vasyt and Sagas, yours will be the Spear front."

Nods, poorly-hidden surprise. Given that Mighty Jindrich would be there, the expectation had been that either Soln or Ivah would take the lead there. They were, after all, the two most powerful of my Peerage. And those I trusted the most, though that was not a hard hill to climb. I had other plans for those two, though.

"Lords Soln, Lovre, Vadimyr and Agus, you will be serving as our strategic reserve," I said. "You'll be hanging back for the initial stretch of the battle."

Disappointment from Lovre and Vadimyr, I found. They'd been the most recent additions until Agus, and were eager to prove themselves in a battle that wasn't waged against my own army. Agus was pleased, unsurprisingly. Soln, though? Soln understood. It knew I wasn't finished speaking.

"For the duration of the fight, the three of you will be under the command of Lord Soln," I said. "To be deployed as it judges necessary depending on how the fronts unfold. Unless I give an order otherwise, Soln's words are good as mine."

That they liked a lot less, save for Soln, since it was the closest I'd ever come to raising one of them above the others. They'd have to get used to it, I thought. This was not the last large-scale battle we'd fight, and some order would have to be forced onto our manner of warfare.

"Honour was given, Losara Queen," the Lord of Shallow Graves smiled.

"You know my intent," I simply said. "See it done."

It wasn't a coincidence I'd picked those four. Soln had the closest thing to battlefield acumen there was to be found in my pack of warlords while Lovre and Vadimry had led raiding sigils. Their Mighty were the most battle-hardened I had at my disposal, and the most used to fighting in a group. Agus would be a weak link wherever it was sent, but putting it on the roster would allow Soln to send warm bodies into a growing mess without committing my best troops.

"Lord Ivah," I finally said.

"My queen," the Lord of Silent Steps replied, inclining its head.

"You'll be with Archer and myself," I said. "We're taking the Pit front."

"By your will," Ivah smoothly replied.

I gave them a last look.

"They'll remember today," I said. "What part of that story you end up being is up to you, my lords."

They bowed, and to war we went.

—

They army marched together most of the way before splitting up front by front, sneaking through mud and reeds. We stayed out of sight, as much as could be done on largely open grounds, and my own sigil was the last to part with the reserve under Lord Soln. I came out of that journey pleasantly surprised. I'd never considered drow to be proper soldiery, but this kind of business was well suited to their skills and I'd underestimated them in some ways. Oh, I still winced at the idea of them in a shield wall. But the march we'd just done in an hour would have taken half a day for legionaries. Even dzulu could keep up a pace that would exhaust humans and orcs for hours without tiring, and they'd walked across mud like it was solid stone. Never a step missed, or a boot stuck in a mire. More interestingly, they'd done this so quietly I could hardly believe they were an army on the march. My Peerage would be a threat on the battlefield, but I was beginning to grasp how dangerous lesser Mighty and dzulu could be out of it. They climbed up slopes like spiders, leapt from stone to stone with the grace and easy of hunting cats.

How hard would they find it to climb a wall in the dead of night?

But those, I told myself, were thoughts for another day. Ivah guiding our warriors, we circled around the eastern fronts to get to ours unannounced. Going through the territories of sigils

would have been quicker, but also risked skirmish. I did not want to start spending lives before we even got to the Flowing Gardens. The war had begun without us, it was plain to hear. The sounds of fighting carried across the void and echoed, making it hard to tell who was winning – if anyone at all – but it was too early in the day for anyone to be trying for knockout blows. For now the sigils would tentatively send out their lower ranks to probe the waters, hesitant to commit their most powerful Mighty until they had a better idea of what the opposition had brought. The main force of the Rumena should be busy taking over the central district, too, with only traitors and hunting bands out on most the other fronts. Save, I had guessed, the very front I was headed towards. Here they would want to break the core of the coalition early, before wind could touch its sails and they got a real battle on their hands. Still, with a little luck the fighting here would be limited between the two sides while the undecided local sigils watched on.

As it turned out, I was not going to get lucky.

My sigil crept through the mud quietly until we reached what now looked like a stone wall but must have once been the edge of a constructed island. Ivah had been ordered to lead us to the outermost edge of the district, close to one of the smaller sluice gates, and it had delivered. Its days spent marauding in the dark had given it a good notion of Great Strycht's layout. I left my warriors at the bottom of the wall, going ahead with Archer and Ivah. The masonry here was fine and the stones polished by centuries of water, but I would have been able to climb this without too much trouble even before I'd become the Squire. We went up without a sound, Indrani disdaining my offer of a palm to jump off of in favour of a running leap. The top of the wall was a long rock pier, flanked by a structure where the sluice gate could be raised or closed, but it wasn't either of those that drew our attention. The sound here hadn't carried well, I decided, probably because all the sectioned parts and the ponds had broken it up. But now that we were up here, we had a decent look at the battle unfolding in the Flowing Gardens and it was a fucking mess.

"I'm counting at least eight sides," Indrani murmured, kneeling behind a large stone cleat.

"More," Ivah said. "Some sigils have yet to intervene. You can see their lookouts lurking at the edges of the fighting."

It discretely pointed a finger and I followed the direction. Yeah, it was right. I could make out the silhouettes hiding within giant glowing ferns. I hesitated, just for a moment, because the place was a bloody nightmare. It was hard to tell where sigils began and where they ended: every islet was a melee, most fought between several sigils. There were two pairs of

warbands going at each other with what *had* to be rylleh that I knew for a fact weren't part of the coalition. They'd just... seen an opportunity, I supposed. The Rumena I could make out from the rest, mostly because they were slightly organized and winning most their fights. Either they'd come with some of their finest, I thought, or their lower ranks of Mighty were heads and shoulders above everyone else's. It took me a few moments to figure out who was leading their expedition, since their forces were split. But near the southern edge of the Flowing Gardens there was a warband of maybe two hundred drow everyone was avoiding like the plague, and a triumvirate of Mighty positively reeking of Night that stood atop an islet while overlooking the mess. I got confirmation of my suspicions when one of them faced down and spoke at one of its warriors, a runner leaving immediately towards one of the detached Rumena warbands.

These were their officers, then.

"Archer," I said. "Find a perch."

"Gotcha," she shrugged. "At will?"

"Try to draw in the bystanders," I said. "Clip their lookouts, see if that gets them moving. After that..."

"Yes ma'am your queenliness," she grinned.

She legged it, already stringing her bow as she went.

"Ivah, reach out to our beloved allies," I said. "I don't want to get in a brawling match with the people we're supposed to be propping up."

"As you say, Losara Queen," the Lord of Silent Steps murmured. "And after?"

"Return to the sigil," I said. "I'll be busy making friends."

That got a hard grin out of it, all teeth and malice. *You learned that from us*, I thought, and it almost troubled me. We were not teaching the drow kind lessons, and one that there would be a reckoning for that. It vanished into thin air, the glamour fine enough even I lost track of it, and slowly I rose to my feet. I looked down at my awaiting warriors, still at the foot of the wall.

"Over the top," I ordered. "Forward, Losara Sigil."

Even as they began to climb behind me, I cast an eye at the Rumena officers. Good, they hadn't noticed me yet. Time to make my entrance. I let Winter loose and smiled, inhaling deep of the smell of blood and fear wafting from the battlefield.

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[\*erraticerrata\*](#)

Character contest continues: Robber vs Assassin! Link to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16873146?fbclid=IwAR3tTPRZZjgukGZCzDy6TIYgpUG1wKTg7wZk7InDNzuZbljY\\_wETuWd0HZQ](https://www.strawpoll.me/16873146?fbclid=IwAR3tTPRZZjgukGZCzDy6TIYgpUG1wKTg7wZk7InDNzuZbljY_wETuWd0HZQ)

*Andrew Mitchell*

No contest IMO. How could anyone vote against the Lesser Lesser Lesser Footrest?!?

*RanVor*

I could.

*sutortyrannus*

Nobody even likes you anyway.

*RanVor*

Thanks.

*stevenneiman*

I'm not criticizing you for having a different opinion than me, but I'm genuinely curious. Why did you pick Assassin over Robber?

*RanVor*

Then prepare for disappointment.

The main reason was that I was annoyed by some more hardcore Robert lovers, and I figured he's going to win anyway. That was the decisive factor.

Other than that, well, Herbert's a fine character, but he's more hilarious than interesting. And although I tend to laugh every time he appears, he doesn't really bring much to the story by himself. Assassin, on the other hand, has this aura of mystery that makes every scene he's in incredibly thrilling.

Ok, Robber fans, you can lynch me now.

*NotQuiteHere*

Robber looked up at the Duchess Of Moonless Nights, then pointedly around for any signs of pursuit. The Mighty they'd escaped from were gone, it had been foolish of him to come here, but he had to tell her.

He said, in the most solemn uncharacteristic way possible;

"I have something to confess."

"What?"

"Actually, I'm Assassin."

*RanVor*

That would be very funny in the context of this particular poll, but Robber and Assassin were both present at Second Liesse.

*Tsura*

Pretty sure it's been stated that Assassin has some tricks that would allow that to work

*stevenneiman*

That's reasonable. Our dear Lesser Lesser Footrest is certainly entertaining, but there's not a huge amount more to him. I honestly think the most interesting thing he's been involved in was the revelation that he's basically the goblin version of macho, and that was more of a lore/culture thing than something about Robber himself.

*stevenneiman*

I'm honestly surprised that Assassin did better than Hune. I guess that the mystery of Assassin and the long time since Robber's been on screen making mayhem must be having an effect.

*Darkening*

To be fair, Assassin's been pretty interesting both times they've appeared on screen, whereas Hune has had like, one scene where she was kinda interesting.

*stevenneiman*

True, but Hune was actually the focus of a scene where all Assassin's ever been is an aside in someone else's scene. The badass of the Tolltaker was enhanced when it mentioned that she managed to kill them for real, and most of the other scenes they've had any part in they were just a part

of Black's schemes.

The paradox is that there's too little information for me to find the Assassin interesting, but if more was revealed it would detract from what makes them interesting at all.

*Aston W*

Thanks EE

Vote:

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[DroughtBringer](#)

We were up at 1,000, and now we are down to 700. Guys! Keep voting!

(Link for redundancy)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Nuke\_The\_Earth*

Reminder that letting your vote expire before re-voting makes it count once per week instead of just once. Smells a bit cheesy, but it's the way the site works.

*SpeckofStardust*

This feels like a filler chapter to be honest.

*Whisperings of dawn*

This feels like a filler arc to be honest

*JackBeThimble*

You're entitled to your opinion. To me the entire third book felt like filler and this is the best this series has been since Willie Angels went got his.

*Stormblessed*

It's hard not to have no 'filler' chapters in a work of fiction at all.

I'm not sure I 100% agree with the word filler here. Perhaps lower energy, or just less happened.

That being said, this sort of chapter is necessary; it's just more noticeable in a web serial vs a completed work.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Not action-packed, sure. But, "filler"? Not IMO.

A very necessary chapter that will provide crucial context for how this battle will unfold over the following (five? I guess) chapters. I loved hearing the details of Kat's plan.

*Dragrath*

Yep without knowing the plan how can we know how much it will fall apart without being told given this will be a pivotal battle 😊

*Andrew Mitchell*

Great point. Because OF COURSE it's going to fall apart.

*Aston W*

But still great fight scenes.

*Skaddix*

Yeaeh the Masego & Warlock Interludes and the incoming Black Rescue Arc have really taken the wind out the sails of the Underdark for me. I note those two things cause they are recent. But also I kinda want to see what eat the Baby means for the Dead King. Basically just more interesting stuff is happening or about to happen elsewhere.

Especially since the final clash is coming so early Cat really hasn't gone that far into Dark Elf Lands but Sve Noc going to show up for final clash already? Which is good I guess means we get out of this arc as fast as possible but it does make this arc feel pretty Filler. I mean I like the Ladies but eh the material and foe they are going up against are just not entertaining and they get along too well as well so no real internal tension. Just don't feel the tension at all especially since it just feels too early for Indrani or Akua to die especially after Masego just lost his parents.

*Metrux*

I think you got confused, this is not a final confrontation. This is Sve's first strike, the first time she is actually getting directly involved, which still doesn't mean she'll be here in person. The way she was depicted I expect a series on increasingly stronger moves on her part, until she can't simply throw her weight and needs to go in person.

*Argentorum*

Cat and Akua have named great Strych as Cat's Pivot in the Underdark. Either she succeeds here, fast enough and with enough remaining forces to deal with the followup attacks from deeper Sigils under Sve Nocte's control and the Longstrider Cabal, or she doesn't and she dies.



Meanwhile, Sve Nocte has been at the business of ascension for centuries now, and that she hasn't succeeded means she's *\*failing.\** So, Strych is her pivot too. Either she eats Winter here, or she will be eaten by it.

Either way, Strych is shaping up to be the climax of the arc, as far as we know in universe. It could be a jebait, but given the Masago and Black interludes foreshadowing much more interesting things going on up top? I don't think we're gonna be here for another three cities and then Holy Tvarigu. At most, from here's it's a straight shot to the end and the Sve's last stand.

*Skaddix*

Thanks you explained that better then I did.

But yeah basically this arc feels filler because far more exciting things with more relevant characters is about go down elsewhere. Obviously Cat, Indrani and Akua are important but the foes they are fighting and the characters meeting don't really compare to the possibilities elsewhere.

This arc reminds of something like Mass Effect where you can go recruit all the races but you don't have to.

[HannaB](#)

Okay, but Cat popping out of the Underdark with 40k+ drow?

And a deal with the dwarves which means the Tenth Crusade is going to run out of weapons unless it stops fighting her?

And enough money to allow Callow some stability?

This is the game changer that's going to fuel Cat's next leap in status for the fifth book.

*Aston Whiteman*

You forgot the 100k Undead Drow Akua brings along.

*KageLupus*

Give the shape of the battle that is about to unfold this chapter was pretty much a necessity. Cat is going to be juggling a few dozen fights on multiple fronts, including the expected surprise visit by the Longstriders.

In-universe, Cat and the rest of the group have had days to really plan this fight and know all about the different factions they are playing against each other and how to best position them. But for us the readers, this whole complicated

plan would quickly turn into nonsense without an info dump giving us the necessary context.

Filler implies something that was added to take up space but does not contribute to the overall story. This is as far from that as you can get. This is the chapter that is going to make the next three to five chapters actually make sense.

*Metrux*

I agree, this here is like the training chapter right before a new power is shown on-screen. It may seem to be preparations only and not that exciting, but it's exactly what's needed for the more action packed parts to go smoothly.

*Antoninjohn*

An hour over a swamp what would take professional Army of Callow/ Legions of Terror half a day on flat and the Legion of Terror move fast compared to Procer, now add the magic Gates and you get a Nightmare to fight even if you see their move a month in advance

*Gunslinger*

So powerful in fact that I expect them to be thoroughly nerfed when they reach the surface. Maybe they'll be weak outside the gloom or weak against light or something.

Either that or Cat's next enemy are the elves

*Skaddix*

Yeah basically Cat is just winning too much and has too strong of a team. Its one thing when the Named Woe Members are so good and her army is strong when its a normal enough army. Well trained core sure but it wasn't supernatural.

But not she is got Fey and tons of Winter Enhanced Drow on top of that and Epic Teleport to strike anywhere at anytime..she is the overdog now not the underdog. Yeah sure the Crusaders might have numbers on Cat but do they have enough numbers to fight the Dead King and Procer when all their opponents have armies that are simply on solidier per soldier basis way better?

*Hastien*

I think a disaster or betrayal at the end of the arc will see Cat lose most of her army or she'll use it almost exclusively against the Dead King or Praes. If she uses it to fight Procer the heavens will one up her in a heartbeat. They were willing to pull a literal manifestation of God to spearhead

an invasion fleet, they'll come down hard at the slightest excuse. In the form of the heroes following the Grey Pilgrim suddenly becoming Ranger Tier if I had to guess.

I'll bet Cat breaks the armies of the dead shortly after Klaus dies, then goes the the Grey Eyries to subjugate the goblins and capture Foramen. That's maybe my favorite part about this story, you can make the wildest speculation and still be surprised.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I like your speculation. Mine is that the goblins are going to come on board without fighting Kat, because she'll offer them more freedom/respect/land/whatever than they every have had under the Tower.

[HannaB](#)

Cat's next enemy is the Dead King. She's going to back Procer up against him.

*RanVor*

Frankly, I don't see it happening. She is probably going to face Neshamah somewhere down the line, but Malicia is a much more pressing concern right now. Also, if she helps Procer now, the Crusaders will just turn around and invade Callow again. There's no time for gratitude when you wage a Holy War.

*Jane*

Ah, preparing for the classic Cat "Betray Fucking Everyone" ploy, I see.

*Morty*

Isn't that the traditional Praesi ploy though?

*MetruX*

Oh no, Praesi just are always prepared for any betrayal, and for being on any side of the betrayal. When an opportunity appears, they just go for it. Cat actually creates the openings explicitly so she can maneuver others into a better position for her inevitable betrayal.

*taovkool*

A good overview of the Losara Queen's Sigil. That Soln is going to be trouble in the long run, I can tell. Battlefield geniuses with insufficient loyalty tends to be a pain in the ass to deal with.

Wonder what happens next after Cat won over the drow.

[HannaB](#)

as I understand that's the cabal, not the Sigil. Those were leaders of different Sigils, all sworn to Cat

*Caine*

Have you ever thought about publishing chapters in parallel on RoyalRoad or similar, as a way of reaching out? Keep the chapters outside of here a month or so behind, draw some more audience to your story?

*Aston W*

I'm guessing that's not actually Cat.

Not yet anyway. Until an excess of power is used.

Well done for the top web serial EE.

So another 20 chapters until the Night Arc is done. And interludes.

When no Heiress Ghost appears in the chapter... brawl changer.

[Javvies](#)

Interesting.

Yeah ... changing the drow culture away from chronic betrayal and teaching them to be smarter in battle and strategy is not going to be without side effects.

On the up side ... if you have them under oath for long enough, you might be able to make a lasting deal with them that they won't reflexively double cross you over.

Five or six battles – the four fronts, the Longstriders and whatever play Sve makes.

*MetruX*

I think the Longstriders are already part of Sve's play, but that's just personal opinion and not really supported by anything shown. Yet, this wouldn't be all one way or another.

*JackBeThimble*

This whole arc almost feels like a reconstruction of The White (or light-brown Iroqirish) Savior trope. Sure she's bringing order to the savages and ending the hobbesian war of all against all but only in order to harness them for her own selfish ends

with any benefits that accrue to the conquered being ultimately incidental (i.e. just like real empires).

[doominator10](#)

Theirs is indeed the business of empires.

*Ternbugkle*

Have you heard of Gurkha?

All she needs now is a suitable wasteland to resettle, perhaps in the roots of the mountains south of her country.

*fbt*

i liked this bit, tyvm! I mostly skim the comments for the occasional posts from the author or Jane, but i'm enjoying the story very much.

[Antony444](#)

Procer should throw themselves to the ground and pray Catherine will never try the strategy Black used to burn several provinces. They think it was bad? Amadeus had at best twenty thousand, most of his force was humans, orcs and goblins, and he needed to weaken himself fatally to increase their speed. Cat has several thousand drow marching at least three times faster, she has portals and she can put massive illusions.

In a war of movement now, Catherine can refuse to engage any host of the Crusaders, and decide where and when she will deal with her enemies. Good luck defeating that, especially as she has manifested her intentions to transfer fortresses for tactical support...

*Wry Warudo*

In a way, Cat has already decided against that. I mean, Bonfire was basically her gating around burning provinces in Procer, which she vetoed since it would cause the rest of Calernia to see her as a bigger threat as well as the heavens escalating against her.

*Andrew Mitchell*

That's a good point. It hasn't stopped the heavens from escalating though, so perhaps the idea will be revisited. Maybe.

*werafdsaew*

Black explained it very well: the difference is between AN opposition and THE opposition. Same reason as why the Dead King think that conquer ing Procer will lead to his doom

*Big Brother*

This is the Grand Melee all over again. Betrayal after betrayal!

*Darkening*

Yeah, it reminded me of that immediately. And there's no Juniper here to be a better tactician than her.

[Euodiachloris](#)

If you throw a pebble in the Everdark, how many betrayals can you precipitate before it lands on the ground?

*Someguy*

All of them.

*Metrux*

Define all. I think some of them can be started more than once.

*Byzantine*

$2^n$ . Where  $n$  is the number of living, nonliving, and nonconforming entities that have, do, or will exist in the entire history of the world.

*RanVor*

No wonder the Lycaonese are so grim, considering they have to listen to this creepy shit throughout their early childhood.

[Euodiachloris](#)

A childhood isn't complete without a good baker's dozen of nursery rhymes that scare you witless. And, a good score of them that later trauntise you as you revisit them with your own kids, thanks to now having a better idea of what they're talking about. 😊

*Daemion*

You should read the traditional German fairy tales and morality stories. They have everything. Crime, death, torture, body horror... and the end is rarely happy. ^^

*Aston Whiteman*

Once Cat unites the Under Dark will she travel to the Chain of Hunger next?

Winter is hungry. Always.

## *Darkening*

I doubt it for many reasons. The Named rat she fought in Keter seems to have given her some wariness towards them, given her earlier comment about betting on Horned Lords over Mighty, they're even more feral than the drow, so they'd be almost impossible to control and organize even with oaths, and she's already got her drow army, she doesn't currently need more than that to keep Callow afloat long enough for Juniper to get the Army of Callow ready for war.

*Aston Whiteman*

Yeah but there needs to be a Chain of Hunger chapter arc..

## *Valkyria*

I don't really like how so many talk how all of this is "just filler" and "has not much to do with the main story" or something along the lines.

For me this just makes the story more realistic.

I mean come on, life is not just about day long battles, fighting your arch nemesis and taking the heads of bothersome heroes. Sometimes you just gotta lay low, take a bit of your own time and casually evade the everdark for some sparkly new recruits.

## *Valkyria*

argh i meant invade... someone please let us edit these comments!

*MetruX*

Denied, please enjoy our suffering! :V

## *Valkyria*

This, right there is True Evil. May the gods Below take this tribute you send them xD

## *HannaB*

^^ this

I don't think people who say that understand fully how much there's going on in this arc.

1) Cat's going to end up leading a host of at least a hundred thousand drow. That's bigger than Callow's and Praes's armies put together, and will be a game changer for the next book on a level compared to Cat going from a solo Named to leading a legion between books 1 and 2, going from leading a single legion to being in charge of the Ruling Council between books 2 and 3, and going from putting out Praesi fires to just being fucking crowned Queen of Callow and flipping off Malicia

between books 3 and 4. That needs to be EARNED. So far, the last 'third' (structurally) of each book has been a lead up to this leap in influence: the melee, First Liesse, Second Liesse. True, this time Cat isn't actively in the center of where her interest lies, but this structural buildup is still the biggest plot thing in this entire book.

2) Cat is going to murder a goddess. Like, she's been told that she's basically a nascent deity herself, and now she's going to put that theory to test by killing Sve Noc. Considering dwarves have hired her to do that, I doubt she's going to straight up fail, erratic doesn't trip up the setup that much – this is a Practical Guide to Evil, not A Story Of Failure. Cat is going to change the status quo on the entire fucking continent and set herself up as an entity on the level with Sve Noc, proven by murdering her and taking her place. This is not only a huge plot thing, but also a huge internal change in how Cat views herself and her place in the world, and that's why we're getting so many thinking/feeling/talking chapters lately.

3) Whatever the fuck is going on with Akua. She's a character in her own right, even if she hasn't been getting POV lately, and her arc and development did not stop at her death. She died at best in her early twenties, more likely a teenager, and there's a looooot of room for her to grow. There's definitely SOMETHING going on in her head, and us not getting to see what is no accident.

4) Indrani! Is Cat going to have a love interest she has actual chemistry with? Is this story going to have a healthy and adorable poly relationship? How does Cat's party function anyway? All of these questions, and more!

5) So where DOES Cat stand in relation to Good and Evil? Winter is nominally narratively linked to Evil, but we've seen Summer which is nominally narratively linked to Good – this link is just a vague association, it's not actual alignment. Just being a Sovereign of Moonless Nights does not make Cat a servant of the Gods Below. Her Name, for whatever its remains are worth, is still transitional, and she's rejected her status as Black's successor which was what linked it to Evil to begin with. Neither Adjutant nor Hierophant, the new Names Cat's party spawned, have anything inherently Evil to them, and Archer and Thief are explicitly neutral. The Gods aren't okay with this uncertainty, and we're going to be finding THAT out. Which is of course inherently linked to the question of what the fuck Cat is going to actually do with the drow, and how what she's doing with them right now is going to shake out, because Good and Evil aren't just labels to sides in chess, sorry shatranj. This is a pretty Big Thing going on.



What people who complain about filler mean is that they want to know what's going on in Cat's actual sphere of interest – Callow. This definitely is different than usual, but well... proactive, not reactive 😊

*Andrew Mitchell*

Yes! So much going on. Thanks for the explanations/reminders.

*Skaddix*

The issue is multiple.

I think a good deal of people don't find the conflict interesting or with much tension. As I said above the proverbial wind has been taken out of this arc by the Interludes. Masego's Parents dying means its extremely unlikely Indrani or Akua dies here so people want to see his response. The Save Black Arc is also incoming featuring a trap by the Heroes and should feature a clash of the Big Names on both sides which is naturally more exciting.

That point goes into the second. The Underdark been a bit too easy for Cat so far, she has not met many memorable characters and is building up a massively overpowered army in terms both size and average power level. People tend to prefer their protag to work for it and be an underdog. Cat is looking like a massive Overdog with 100,000 Winter/Night Enhanced Drow that is the biggest army on the continent with an average power better then anything but maybe the Dead King.

Third, A Hero is only as good as the villain or in this case the protagonist is only as good the antagonist. Sve Noc has so far been mostly absent and not especially interesting in comparison to The Bard, The Dead King, Tyrant, Empress, Grey Pilgrim, etc. Yeah she hasn't much time to make an impression but that is the disadvantage of being introduced so late in the series, you got come out of the gate swinging. It also doesn't seem like she will be reoccurring either so feels like a one and done which adds to filling of filler. It doesn't help that she is coming out early to face Cat. Cat hasn't gone that far into Drow Lands and the Big Boss is already coming out for the Pivotal Clash? That adds to the filling of filler.

Fourth, yes there has been some interesting relationship dynamics sure. But the more interesting part that quite frankly is the Masego reaction which we cannot get to until he gets back in the story. Also split the party arcs have a tendency to fill like Filler.

I am interested in Akua making her move though.

*Mikasi*

See, my problem with the idea of a Save Black arc is whether or not Cat will bother. She did kinda stab him and tell him the results would be dire if she ever saw him again. Will Black being captured play into next arc? Probably, but I doubt it will be the main theme.

Masego's dad's dying was kinda coming. I was less surprised by that, though it was a great chapter regardless of all of the preceding death flags.

Note, I'm also coming from a position where I started with not caring about the drow, and now I'm interested to see how Winter changes them once the Night is gone.

*Skaddix*

I don't see why it wouldn't since it will bring all the major players besides the Dead King together at one location. Cat probably won't have much of choice. Masego has made it clear he wants to save Black and he should be even more resolute with his parents dead to save Uncle Black. Ranger is going to want save Black ignoring the Masego/Archer/Cat Triangle is she going to say no? 40% of the Woe have reason to go and the member who do constitute most of Cat's Named Firepower.

I am not saying it was a surprise. I am saying it was a significant game changer as it shifts the balance of power to the Woe and should lead to some great development for Masego. But mainly it reduces the tension by making it less likely anyone important dies in the Under Dark. Especially with the aforementioned Save Black Arc coming

[HannaB](#)

I'm just sitting here like "people dying is not the only OR the most interesting source of tension" meditating on Cat's position wrt Good and Evil y'all have fun

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm not wild about the battle scenes, but Cat is leveling up on several counts (Winter, troops, strategy), and she needs to. We're also seeing more development of her relationships with two of the more cryptic characters in the plot, Akua and Archer. Akua in particular... I don't trust her containment at all.

*Aston Whiteman*

+1

[ironvale](#)

Nice setup chapter. Time to flick the dominos.  
Some people don't know what filler chapters mean.

*Brett*

I get the feeling Kat's going to pull a fast one on the gods below. She hasn't really dealt with their manipulations to much. The story has been set that two evils will clash and whoever wins will be even more powerful (and more tied down to evil). Not w/ winter powers or Kat w/night. Kat knows this, and I think will use Akua to bait and switch the story. Evil fights evil and whoever wins, Kat can finish off. Akua wins, tries to take the power of night and backstab, Kat triggers a contingency oath that kills off Akua. With both evils gone, she can slip out with her army.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Interesting theory, thanks for sharing. Let's see if you're right over the coming chapters.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Doubt it's going to be that. That plan sounds like it has so many flaws that it would never work.

*Shaerick 68*

Oh, Cat, what monsters are you making...

*Barrendur*

When commenters refer to something as "filler", their meaning may simply be that they find the material boring or tedious, something to plough through, skim over or skip outright. By \*that\* definition, the entirety of the Underdark section seems like filler to me; something tedious I plough through or skim over.

Exacerbating this problem for me is the way Catherine becomes steadily less interesting as she becomes ever less sympathetic/comprehensible/believable. I'm reading the story now for every character who \*isn't\* Catherine, whom I'll admit I've always found a pain and now find a bore.

*werafdsaew*

That's not what "filler" means. Filler is something that does not advance the plot, so therefore can be cut out without affecting the story.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I get it when people say this arc is filler, not this chapter in particular.

Personally, I feel that this arc can be considered “filler” as it’s set-up for something much larger when all the Woe is back together. We could end this after the next battle and just go through a time skip I figure that everyone would be all fine and dandy with the result.

*RanVor*

So am I to understand I’m the only one who actually likes the Everdark arc and wants to see more of it?

*Andrew Mitchell*

No. I’m enjoying it too!

[Euodiachloris](#)

You’re not alone, mate. It’s just that the vocal minority of readers are het up and vocal.

[HannaB](#)

No, it’s just that people who do don’t complain in the comments as loudly!

*daniel young*

I too enjoy me some crumbled ancient empire looting:)

*Aston Whiteman*

Free. Quality. Story. Every. Week.

Complaints?

Minimal.

*Isa Lumitus*

“The Fairy Godmother of Treachery”

Any chance that will become Akua’s official title? It’s an awesome description.

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## Chapter 74: Eyewall

*"My husband thought himself a cynic for believing that men so often race towards the bottom of the barrel. I found it charmingly idealistic that he believed there was a bottom at all."*

-Queen Yolanda of Callow, the Wicked (known as 'the Stern' in contemporary histories)

Leaving the gate open wasn't an option, not really. The more my opposition saw that trick in action, the higher the chances they'd figure out how to counter it. Rubies to piglets there was some Night equivalent to the Pilgrim's miraculous beam o'death, and I could not afford to be knocked out of the battle literally moments into it. I'd adjusted my tactics accordingly, and so after five heartbeats I closed the opening. Gravity and mass turned the water into a massive hammer blow coming down on the Rumena, but I wasn't dealing with amateurs: of the three 'officers', two immediately fled in shadow form and the third was swallowed by a hulking shape of Night moments before the impact. Neither would have been a bad answer, if water was all I'd brought to the table. Instead I strung Winter and loosed it again, turning the entire ploughing mass into ice just as if fell on the drow. There'd been two hundred of them, when I'd opened the gate. The vast majority of that had been dzulu, and those died instantly when the water hit. The lesser Mighty were crushed by the ice, and the two officers who'd fled in shadow form found themselves stuck in it.

The last, though, I knew to be untouched. The Night construct had taken the impact without flinching, and was now tearing its way out. It'd been too much to hope for to take out the enemy commanders with the first blow even if it'd been a sneak attack. Didn't mean I was going to make it easy on them, though. Even as my sigil flowed around me, heading into the fray without a single battle cry, I seized the reins of the ice I'd crafted and slapped my palms together. The entire construct contracted around the Night-shrouded drow at the centre and I felt its defense flinch. My lips stretched into a grim smile when I realized I'd forced the other two officers back into drow-form as a side effect, bloodying them in the process. There was another pulse of power and the Night-construct began pushing back. I could make this a slugging match, I thought, but that would be missing the point. I didn't want to annihilate the Rumena, I wanted to drive them back to the central district after weakening them. Their sigil was, after all, a part of the force I intended to put between myself and the Longstride Cabal.

Another exertion of will had the ice collapsing into mist, a thick fog that would blind them for a while. Good enough that I could move on, I decided.

A quick glance told me that the Losara Sigil had added a fresh current to the mess in the Flowing Gardens but hardly affected the entire lay of the battle. At our angle of entry, we were taking the pressure off one of the coalition sigils – making a semi-stable line of battle on the northwestern side. I didn't intend to meddle there, since Ivah had been ordered to return and drive away any Mighty that were too much for them to handle. No, I'd go make friends of my own. The half-dozen islets in the middle were so chaotic a melee I couldn't even tell exactly who was fighting, but to the northeast a Rumena detachment was tearing through a mix of sigils both 'neutral' and allied. A good place to start. Wings of shining light burst out of my back and I took flight, rising above the mess to hurry things along. I went high to avoid distractions, but even then I still had to dive out of the way of a javelin roiling with Night some Mighty tossed in my direction. I could have batted it away, but why take the risk with a trick I didn't know? My brow rose, however, when after arcing a dozen feet above me the javelin finished the curve and flew in my pursuit. Someone had it out for me, huh.

Evidently I'd made an impression.

I was quicker than the projectile, so I was less than worried, but I slowed my flight to allow it to catch up. Not close enough to hit, or even explode if that was how that was supposed to end, but close enough the Mighty controlling it might think it had a chance to clip me. I angled my flight downwards after reaching the battlegrounds I'd picked out, javelin howling behind me, and landed in a crouch. The two Mighty in front of me, who'd been hacking at each other with obsidian blades, paused and turned towards me.

"Surprise," I said, and turned into mist.

I took solid form again half a dozen feet to the side, just in time to see the javelin strike them. It did not, to my surprise, explode. In the heartbeat where it hung in the air between them, tendrils of Night came boiling out and wrapped around to the Mighty. Almost instantly they were dragged into the projectile, leaving behind only half-finished screams. No trace of a corpse. Whoever had tossed that, I thought, wasn't fucking around. I checked if there was another flying towards me just in case, but there was nothing coming so I pressed on. It wasn't difficult to find the Rumena: I just had to follow the screaming and the runners. A crew of four stood in a loose diamond formation, steadily advancing through the opposition. I ran through the melee, drow parting around me cautiously, and leapt on the one at the front. Even as I swung my sword towards its throat I saw it begin to turn, surprise passing in its silver eyes, and I could tell exactly when it realized it wouldn't be able to raise its own sword in time. And yet there was no fear to be found. I learned why a moment later, when the strike that should have

carved through its throat instead shattered my blade. It'd been like throwing an egg at a wall, I thought.

It countered smoothly, blade coming down to hack between my shoulder and throat, but I kicked at its side and used the momentum to throw myself backwards. The tip of the iron blade came within an inch of my nose as I landed on my feet, and immediately I pushed forward. I couldn't allow the four of them to strike in formation, it was bound to get messy. Shifting its footing skillfully the drow began a backswing. Unfortunately for it, I slid down between its leg and grabbed its left ankle as I did. Hoisting it up was easy as lifting a feather, and I rose even as the other three Rumena watched me with visible surprise.

"Look," I said. "It's just *really* hard finding a weapon that won't break. Bear with it."

"You-" the Mighty at the back started, Night blooming around its wrists, but it was interrupted.

I took my angrily flailing mace and smashed it into another drow. Bones crunched, though they snapped back into place with a hiss – jawor, then, since they had more than a single good trick – and the drow went flying. The other flanking Rumena tried to slide around and ram my back with a spear, but I caught my drow-weapon by the throat and used it as a loudly protesting shield. The spear pinged off like it'd hit steel, just in time for me to sidestep two hissing whips of Night wielded by the fourth. They snaked back around towards me, but I batted away their tips with my drow after releasing its throat. My mace screamed in pain as the Night punctured its flesh, dropping its sword. In a show of good drow sportsmanship, my disruption of the Rumena advance was followed by an opportunistic attack from other sigils. The left side of their force was swarmed by an angry sigil so thin on Mighty it must have taken a brutal beating before I arrived. Sadly, drow opportunism applied to everyone. An arrow flew at my back, the head of it glinting with shadow, and I had to pivot so my mace could take it in my place after I seized it by the crook of the neck. Heat licked at my fingers as the arrow failed to pierce through but dark flames charred the Mighty's skin.

I was kind of impressed it hadn't passed out yet.

My drow weapon was beginning to try wrestling my wrist into loosening, so our love affair had sadly come to an end. I crouched low and spread out my stance, heaving it in the same direction the arrow had come from. Halfway through it flicked into shadow-shape, but to my amusement our friend with the bow shot it and it fell to the ground with a scream. Well, no longer my problem for now. The Rumena had identified me as the person whose head needed to be on a pike before they got their footing back in this section, so I found myself swimming in Mighty soon enough. We played for a while, my frown deepening as we did. They

were outclassed against me, but the longer I got them striking at each other by weaving into their midst the more I realized these were bottom feeders as far as Mighty went. Maybe there were a few jawor in there, but not a single rylleh. Most of those were ispe, the lowest kind of Mighty, with maybe a few pravnat – practically speaking those were just ispe showing promise, but drow were touchy about titles – thrown into the mix. But they'd been wrecking the opposition, and I could see why. My own sigil had ispe, and the Rumena Sigil's made them look like bumbling amateurs. The fact that I'd yet to fight dzulu here was telling, too. I'd been told that the Rumena made up almost a third of Strycht on their own, but I hadn't though they had quite that many Mighty to spare.

The quality of the opposition was going to be a problem, if these were their third-stringers.

As if to reinforce the point, I got a lesson in why Mighty Rumena had judged that three officers were enough to take care of this front. Three falling stars impacted the battlefield, less than a breath of delay between them, and as stone and drow went flying the Mighty I'd ambushed earlier made their entrance. Steam drifted off their frames as they rose in unison, unbothered by the fact that most casualties resulting from their landing had been of their own sigil. The Night construct from earlier flared, and I finally got a good look at it. It looked like stylized panther, though one vaguely humanoid and standing on its forelegs, and its eyes were empty sockets. I could feel the power coming off of that, and to be frank I did not want to find out what'd happen if I got hit with it. The other two advanced with long tridents of bones held in loose grips, fanning out in a circle. I could fight them, I thought. The collateral damage from it would hurt their sigil more than anyone else's. But I'd already accomplished what I'd come for, disrupting their success in this sector. There was little to gain from an all-out brawl with these three.

"Well put," I said, "But if I may retort?"

I opened a gate behind me and retreated through it. The cold breeze of Arcadia scattered my hair as I strode across the waters of what had once been Lake Strycht, ice forming under my feet. I cast a look back to see if they were following, and to my pleasure they were. I quickened my steps as they followed in hot pursuit, one of them stretching out its shadow for the others to walk on as if it were a solid thing. The exit gate beckoned, and I called it open with a thought before leaping through. The one we'd entered through was already closing, so my pursuers wasted no time in following suit.

All four of us started falling, because why would I make the gate lead to the ground when I could *fly*?



Wings burst out of my back again and I left for greener pastures as they fell impotently back to the floor, landing in the middle of the bloody central melee. None of them would die from it, but they'd be stuck in another fight they had no time for. Another arrow flew towards me, this one without Night woven into it, and I almost struck back blindly where it'd come from. Luckily I glanced first, and found it'd been Archer who'd fired the shot. Frowning, I crafted a platform of shadow under my feet and landed. Indrani was, rather unsurprisingly, surrounded by corpses. It'd take too long to make my way to her, so I closed my eyes and took a shortcut.

—

The corpse rose, the lingering warmth chased away by Winter coursing through the veins. Archer eyed me skeptically, nocking an arrow.

"Cat?" she asked.

I spat out a glob of blood and phlegm.

"You have my attention," I croaked out.

"Left corner, three sigils massing," she said. "Tickled their lookouts, but they're playing the waiting game even under provocation. Should I start shooting leadership or do we leave them be?"

The dead drow's neck was horridly stiff, but I forced it to turn with a snap and followed her pointed finger. Couldn't make it out from here, I wasn't high up enough, but from up in the sky it'd be no trouble.

"I'll handle it," I said. "You should- oh *shit!*"

—

Height was no guarantee of safety, in a fight like this, even if my distraction lasted only a few moments. I didn't see what broke my platform but it vaporized my right foot with it and I began falling again until my wings slowed it to a halt. Which was exactly what my enemies wanted, as it happened. If it'd been the three Rumena from earlier going after me that'd have been fair game, but it wasn't: four Mighty from a sigil I was pretty sure I was theoretically allied with stood atop long pillars of Night and were forming a globe of the same around me.

"Really?" I said. "Fine. Have it your way."

I snuffed out my wings, opened a gate under me and fell right through. Arcadian air howled around me and I crashed into the water, ripping open a gate under me. The sudden whirlpool drew me

in and I fell along with a mass of water more or less over the sigils Archer had pointed out to me. Streaks of shadow immediately flew up but a flick of the wrist had the water around me turning into a large spike of ice I casually tossed into the midst of the gathering warriors. I landed among screams and fleeing dzulu, brushing off my shoulders. The sigil-holders would be on me soon, but my eyes were drawn to the corpses I'd just made. There was Night in them, though like with all dzulu not much of it, but it was fading. Going away, and I could quite say where. I tugged at the chain binding Diabolist to me, allowing her to see through my eyes. I felt the trace of her presence come, lingering only a few moments before disappearing. She tugged back one, a message received. Had she already known? Quite possible, if this was happening all over the city instead of just here. Then the Mighty were on me, and the time for musings had passed.

Three sigil-holders, each with a pair of rylleh backing them. Difficult to deal with, if I'd intended on fighting them. Instead I tossed a few spears of ice at them to get them riled up and began a retreat. They followed, and our merry chase began. I could have called the Flowing Gardens the stuff fairy dreams were made of, but I'd *had* fairy dreams – and this was much more surreal. We danced through canals where vines had grown thick and sprouted thorns and hooks, bursting through faded poems carved into stone. Tortured sculptures of bronze and obsidian sang dissonantly as shards of Night were tossed, stirred by the wind in their wake, and towering trees whose only produce were leaves red like blood shook as Mighty rode shadows in my pursuit. A sluice gate of oily metal was torn open like parchment as I leapt over it on translucent wings, the sigil-holder who'd done it looking like a creature of nightmare in the light of the glowing flowers and ferns it'd torn through in its haste. And everywhere we went, drow fought and ambushed and bled on stone and water. There were Hells, I thought, not even half as grim as this. I stoked their anger with darting strikes followed by vanishing into mist, clipping a few with ice spears to little more effect than mounting frustration on their part.

They didn't realize what I was doing until we'd barrelled into the central melee, and by then it was too late.

It was such a mess down here that another few Mighty in the crowds hardly made a difference, the fight ebbing for a moment before forming anew around them, and just like that my job was done. The Rumena were losing here now, though the situation was slowly turning around as the warriors from the section I'd flipped earlier joined up with their fellows. It must have gone quite badly there after I'd left for them to outright abandon the fight. Good. The cauldron was near the boiling point, a little more and they'd be ready. In my absence, the Losara Sigil had pushed deep. Moving as a cordon along with our allies, it was

moving slowly but surely towards this mess. Seeing my sigil's symbol as war paint and adornment was surprisingly moving, but it ended up costly. By now, my identity was no mystery to the people I'd tangled with. And if they couldn't pin me down themselves, then there was one way they could force a fight.

Three falling stars hit my sigil, and in the span of a single heartbeat I lost at least two hundred warriors.

Gone, in a shred of flesh and bone and stone dust. People it had taken me months to bind and empower, dead in the snap of a finger. I clenched my fingers, pushing down my fury. War could not be waged without losses. I rose in the sky and dived for them, deciding that gating close to them was too much of a risk. In the time it took me to arrive, I lost another hundred drow. The Rumena officers slaughtered them with contemptuous ease, be they dzulu or Mighty, and only ceased when I landed at their back. I rolled my shoulder, weaving a glamour without missing a beat.

"All right," my illusion said. "You got me here. Now what?"

"The worthy take," one of them said. "The worthy rise, Losara Queen."

I circled around them, footsteps muted, but one of them must have had a trick to see through that because the two with bone tridents ignored my glamour and turned towards me. The Night construct erupted for a third time tonight, the blind panther roaring out, and they charged. There was, of course, one thing they hadn't accounted for. The leftmost drow ducked under an arrow, batting it aside, but there'd been a second shot hidden in the curve of the first and that one took it in the throat. It gurgled, unsurprisingly still alive, but then its throat began burning green. Indrani had spent quite a while with Robber and his miscreants, hadn't she? She'd been due a few new tricks. That one I immediately discounted as dead, flesh reknitting or not, and that left me two to deal with. Or it would have, if Ivah hadn't cut into the dance. My Lord of Silent Steps moved with unnatural agility, waiting until the bone trident had struck out before... moving. The description failed to convey what had taken place, though. One moment it'd been standing in the way of the weapon, the next it'd been behind the Mighty and striking with its own glass staff. Afterimages followed a heartbeat later, revealing how it had moved and the whole affair reeked of Winter.

It'd skimmed the edge of Arcadia, I realized with a start.

Move along the boundary between it and Creation, steps silent and sudden until struck. Merciless Gods, I couldn't do that. Was it the true face of its title? Or was it just better at using power, after its centuries as a rylleh? It'd didn't matter, I thought, at least not right now. Its opponent was far from dead, even

after taking the blow, and I still had one to contend with. The shaped Night pounced, carrying the drow within as if it were lodged in the belly, and if I'd not batted wings to hurry my retreat it would have hit me. As it was, the panther's claws tore through the stone beneath us and it turned to face with as its tail swung. As suspected, I did not want to get touched by any part of this. The thing was, I couldn't really afford a slugging match with a rylleh when I was supposed to be getting this cookpot off the fire. Not even an obviously powerful one. There was a part of me that found it only natural to get down in the mud and brawl, but I couldn't afford to fight that way anymore. Not with the kind of opponents I had, these days.

I'd done it at the Battle of the Camps, and what had that gotten me? Nothing I'd done there had actually mattered until the gate had been opened, and the Saint of Swords had batted me around until I fled. Keter had been more of the same, struggling through one messy gambit after another while a dead elf and a Horned Lord made sport of my best efforts. All this had happened while the fucking Dead King as good as named me a peer, while he'd be able to handle those matters easy as picking apples. Not because he was more powerful, because terrifying as Neshamah was Winter's abyss ran just as deep. But because he knew how to use that power, while I muddled along using only the barest portion of mine. *Akua* was better at using these powers than I was, and she didn't even have a title. So what did I have that neither of them did? Because that was the question, wasn't it? If I was going to sit at the same table as Sve Noc and the King of Death, then I needed to prove I had the qualifications to claim a seat. Catherine Foundling, the woman who brawled with rylleh and lost limbs by the dozens before finally putting it down, did not have those qualifications.

I looked at the Night construct, watched its legs bend as it prepared to pounce, and I shaped it in my mind. I'd never done it simultaneously before, but why couldn't I? Maybe I wouldn't have been able as the Squire, but the Squire was dead. Devoured by a harsher mantle. *How many of my limitations*, I thought, *are self-inflicted?* I could be mist or hard as steel, I could grow wings and walk away from the loss of half my body. Lies and mirrors, and what was this but a different kind of lie? The panther skimmed across the ground, unnaturally swift, and I let Winter flow into me. Fill my veins and my lungs, steal away my breath. I embraced it, as I had in Liesse, and formed what I had shaped in my mind's eye. The first gate opened in front of the Night construct, and it slowed by a fraction as it prepared to leap over it. That was enough. Another two, caging it in a triangle. Another two, above and below. All of them leading to the bottom of the Fields of Wend, that depthless glacier lake at the very heart of Winter. How many miles of water were there in it? I didn't know, not for sure. But water came out from all sides, and in a heartbeat Night and drow were crushed like a bug

by the gargantuan pressure. I breathed out and the gates closed as one, leaving behind only water and flesh made into paste.

No, Catherine Foundling had no place at that table. But maybe the Black Queen did.

I looked back, found the battle had gone on uncaring of what'd just taken place. Just another current in the sea. It was time to get them moving, I thought. Soon enough the Rumena would have taken the central district, and the madness in Great Strycht needed to be brought to its climax. I couldn't get all these drow moving with my own power, it was true. It'd take hours to go around killing every sigil-holder and asserting command, assuming it was even possible at all. But I'd been taught by a man who had been an artist in the ways of ruling through fear, and his lessons had not all gone to waste.

"Retreat," I called out to my sigil. "As planned."

I left them to the grisly business of disengaging from a furious melee while I reached for my power one last time. Terribilis the Second had once said that a threat was useless unless you'd previously committed the level of violence you were threatening to use. I didn't agree, though, not exactly. It was useless if the level of violence you were threatening wasn't believable, I'd say instead. And I'd stolen a lake in front of these people, used it as a weapon and bribe both. They would believe quite a bit, coming from me. Even as my sigil began fleeing towards the heart of Great Strycht, to the surprise of their foes, I wove a glamour. A gate facing upwards, and through it came a deafening rumble. Illusory molten stone flew out, landing on the muddy lakebed and the edge of the Flowing Gardens, smoke and lava following as the glamoured volcano erupted in full.

The Losara Sigil fled, and every godsdamned drow in the north followed close behind.

---

[\*erraticerrata\*](#)

Character contest continues: Grey Pilgrim vs Scribe! Link to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16885880?  
fbclid=IwAR0RBzeixuUpXME\\_JMLA906Fvsts47y2fXQAXd\\_UHqpzuVT5B\\_q8BT3t0KQ](https://www.strawpoll.me/16885880?fbclid=IwAR0RBzeixuUpXME_JMLA906Fvsts47y2fXQAXd_UHqpzuVT5B_q8BT3t0KQ)

[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

Well, because I'm late, I'll just comment here.

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Antoninjohn*

All that xp that Cat's been getting has paid off, Cat has leveled up

[Javvies](#)

Hmmm. She rejected the Name of Black Queen once before.

Most of your limitations are a mix of self inflicted and inexperience/ignorance, Cat.

I do like the gate cage of doom.

Ah, illusory volcanic doom. That one might be worth remembering for fighting on the surface. I mean, you already dropped a lake on an army – threatening to gate in a flood of magma/lava instead of water might be effective, too.

[sengachi](#)

The trick's only working here because of the drow's lack of cohesion though. We literally just saw that there are Mighty who can casually see through Cat's glamours, clearly the glamour isn't working on everyone. But it's working on enough drow to have the desired result.

The problem with surface-side coordinated armies though, is that if one good mage or one hero with decent eyes sees through the glamour the whole army will know within thirty seconds.

[HannaB](#)

Depends on the size of the army, imho.

[ClickPause](#)

Nah, it saw through her quiet steps, not through the glamour itself.

*daniel young*

The difference between glamour and reality for a fae is very thin so a good army ignoring the glamour may soon find themselves being stabbed in the back by conjured fae troops.

*Quin*

Thirty seconds can do a lot of damage at the right time. Just ask any operation that involves scattering the infantry to

decapitate the head of their army of to create a key weakness you can exploit.

*Sparsebeard*

She rejected the Black Queen, but she can still be the Back Queen :).

*naturalnuke*

The true Back Queen is obviously Akua 😊

*haihappen*

Akua is no Black Queen, she is the Shade of Doom and Treachery, the Architect of Folly, the Usuper of Power.

*Rup*

...Fairy Godmother of Treachery

*Akuabestgurl*

Also the collar fairy.

*RanVor*

No, Akua is the Back**stab** Queen.

[Miles](#)

Heiress to the throne of Callow and her drow armies of all things.

[sugarrollblog](#)

The typo has been corrected but the Back Queen will be remembered.

*Byzantine*

She didn't reject it. The rug got pulled out from under the transition by Black's actions.

*Satyr*

This one always confused me. Why would Black scattering an ancient artifact make her less of a black queen? Black was never under her command so it shouldn't matter that he didn't obey her.

*Argentorum*

It's because the Doomsday Device, and Cat accepting it's continued existence and use, was her Pivot into the Black

Queen. It was also the first time that Cat aligned herself with Malicia over Black on this choice, making the pair of them into the Dread Empress and the Black Queen.

When Black destroyed the device, the narrative weight of that moment shifted. Instead of it being Cat's choice, it was Black's so her Pivot was stolen in that regard. In addition, she no longer had any reason to be on Malicia's side so the narrative importance of her siding with Malicia over Black vanished as well. No pivot, no weight, no name.

### HannaB

Oh NICE. I'd missed the "siding with Malicia over Black" implication.

IMHO, another thing it did was enable a shift in Cat's own thinking. She'd been getting invested in Sunk Cost Fallacy courtesy of Malicia, believing the weapon would be useful in part because of how much it cost to get it. With the weapon gone and the decision out of her hands, she can take a step back and acknowledge that using it was, in fact, a terrible idea to begin with.

I don't think Catherine herself liked, or would have liked, the person this pivot would have made her into. Black did her a huge service.

...and on that note, I do wonder what to make of this.

### *Necronomist*

It wasn't about Black obeying her, he just broke the story of an independent Callow allied with Praes that would have given her the name Black Queen.

### *MetruX*

A problem to that might be that surface dwellers know what is winter, and that this is her mantle. So she would quite nicely see this as "not part of her mantle". If she had both Summer and Winter, this could be quite possible for her, however, and I'm sure Winter has an equivalent to be used, so why she didn't use, and instead made a Glamour... Seems like part of a plan.

### *Michael*

But dropping lakes and stuff isn't a Winter thing. The only reason she isn't dropping volcanoes yet is that she still has to do some prep to make them erupt. Lakes are just so much more convenient.

### *Darkening*



I mean, if she knew where a volcano was in Arcadia I'm pretty sure there'd be no problem with her doing this. Might be worth exploring Arcadia a bit at some point for useful gate locations once she actually isn't pressured on all sides.

*Byzantine*

She could do this. Even if she can't steal an arcadian volcano she can just use two gates: One from a volcano into the sky in arcadia and one in arcadia below that that opens in the regular world.

Probably not worth the effort, but meh.

[sengachi](#)

Cat's still got a long way to go in terms of fully utilizing her power, but it's really something to see her finally thinking in terms of 'what are the upper bounds on this power?' rather than 'how can this improve my fighting style?'. I'm loving this progression, the time and care and thought it's taken her to get here, and each individual step has been so engaging to watch.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Normally I'd say the moon's the limit, but uh...

*Skaddix*

Yeah although Cat's Problem compared to the Dead King for instance is the Dead King is Sorcerer by trade ie he knows what Magic can and thus has a way better understanding of the powers.

Similar to Akua when she takes over she does way more impressive stuff now part of this she has less morals and thus self inflicted limits but also she has more understanding of what can be done.

Basically I am saying Cat could stand to learn more about magic.

*Someguy*

>'how can this improve my fighting style?'

Well, currently Cat has integrated the use of [Drow-Chucks] into her repertoire and has proficiency in [Projectile Defence].

As for the 'upper bounds of this power', I prefer creative uses of limited power to "Throw Bigger Rocks".

*eh*

All Ivah needs now are a fedora, a trench coat and a katana and he's all set to be Lord of \*teleports behind you\*.

Also, it seems lakeomancy is a lot more potent than the old snake in the collar gave credit for.

[daegone823](#)

Kind of hyped to see the wild hunt leader see the new lord of silent steps. Wonder if they will have a fight or other fae things. I mean one is indebted to Chat by oaths and is treacherous the other is a vulcan who sees his dead compatriots as food. They should have a lot to talk about.

Of topic: Speaking of you think the fae are like living it up now that they broke the cycle of drama that they have been living in or our they depressed.

[HannaB](#)

Probably living it up, making new shitty stories to promptly get locked into for cycles and cycles

*superkeaton*

Finally, Cat's starting to actually use the incredible power at her fingertips. It's take her too long to really start experimenting with it. I look forward to weirder body morphs and trickier portal usages.

*Vhostym*

I wish I could feel the same way about that scene as you do. To me it kind of fell flat, because despite the internal monologue the actual use of the power was more of the same portals she's been using all of book 4. It was an improvement on the usage, certainly, but only really in the case of a change of precision, not of kind.

I'm hoping that she eventually does more in the way of either body morphs, or general winter usage beyond mere glamours and falling lakes, because while she definitely has a neat trick up her sleeve, I wouldn't say she's currently leveraging her mantle in as varied a manner as what an experienced Named could do. Especially the cheating sorcerous Named. Seriously, 2 aspects in and Masego has not one general combat aspect (though maybe Ruin can be used in that fashion) and yet is the greatest heavy hitter of the Woe.

*usernamesbco*

Catherine's approach to problem solving has been stabbing problems until they weren't a problem anymore for awhile now.

But pulling her punches because too much violence is bad.  
Then angsting about it.

I liked her better when she was being clever. I hope the  
Everdark arc almost over.

*TheRingLord*

Do the thing...

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Jacob Hollander*

I did the thing

*Novice*

Akua once used devils and demons to acquire the name of  
Diabolist. Now Cat is slowly being known for bending water to her  
will. Step aside Akua, hydromancy is now a true discipline  
confirmed.

P.S. Cat is now adept at making people wet. Just ask Indrani (   
 ° 3 ° )

*eh*

Cat is Evil!Korra confirmed.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Evil!Katara, more like. Bloodbending (for a given definition  
thereof), necromancy, icebending, lakebending, spirit-style  
illusions, darkness and occasionally brawling, stealing,  
stealth and running... Cat's the most worrying kind of polar  
waterbender and shaman there is.

[daegone823](#)

Random Fae in Arcadia: Out on a stroll to visit my family  
and do some fae stuff maybe go fishing.

1st episode

"Oh shit what are all these drow doing here"

"Did she trap a whole kingdom of drow in Arcadia"

2nd episode

"Is that the winter queen, why is she being chased by drow,  
shes a queen and they are drow"

"I am definitely telling the other fae about this"

3rd episode

"Where are all the lakes going!!!"

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Cat finally realized how she's been fucking up, yeah?

I always thought it was weird that she kept brawling, now I know she truly doesn't need to.

*Aphorism*

All hail the Back Queen! May her lumbar ever be supported!

*Aston W*

And Akua gets her undead army..

*Andrew Mitchell*

Yes. I think so too. Lots and lots of powerful drowning corpses

*Letouriste*

I wonder what she will do to that sigil betraying her so early...

*Rook*

Nothing different from the rest, most likely. The drow are all so utterly transparent in their treachery that it's honestly kind of refreshing, you know?

*IDKWhoitis*

Are we all just going to gloss over Cat just taking over a dead body she had no prior contact with and taking through it? Because this could lead to officers in the Army of Callow carrying around dead heads as a "radio" to give field reports. Imagine Robber just talking to Cat directly, in a way that anti scrying spells cant stop or detect?

Like oh shit.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Can't detect? Oh boi, you obviously haven't heard of the trope where priestly heroes can sense undead.

*Gunslinger*

Didn't priests have a problem banishing her (Akua's) undead during the Callow battle.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

They couldn't kill it, but they sure as hell sensed the undead.

i think

*IDKWhoitis*

They knew Undead Necromatic constructs were a factor when dealing with Catherine, but were hilariously unprepared as to how to deal with them.

While the Named priests and other names may be able to detect undead, the heads in question wouldn't be UNdead until Catherine calls in for a field report. A semi-consistent schedule can be set up with Robber retreating away from the enemy and awaiting the call. Then once the call is over, the head stops being an UNdead and returns to its inactive normal dead state.

[Swishy Sword](#)

I'm betting that it's because the priests normally banish the powers of Below, which are usually used to animate. Buuuut if you happen to animate them using some other power such as, say, the Fae energy of Arcadia... well, there's a lot less the priests can do then. Maybe.

*Andrew Mitchell*

She had to see them in this case, I think. But maybe that's not a limitation.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Why would Cat need to see them at all? Have you forgotten that sight is just a byproduct of the construct which she bound her mind to?

[HannaB](#)

Yeah, well, her mind is still bound to it. She does not seem to have effective perception of the outside world when she dismisses the construct (I think she refers to her eyesight returning after reforming from mist). Just because breaking the camera doesn't break the computer it's feeding the data to, doesn't mean the camera isn't essential to its ability to work with that data.

*Hastien*

The theory does have precedent, during Black and Hanno's 2nd battle Hanno had an amulet that blocked scrying but didn't interfere with necromancy. I wonder though, it used to be that she needed a mostly intact corpse to work with, just a head

would be convenient. If it works at great distances or through the ground it could be a game changer in communication methods. It'd suck to relay hundreds of messages a minute though, better have Akua do it.

[HannaB](#)

Yeah, the downside of this is that Cat would have to do it personally. It makes a great radio for a small team, like this, but when commanding an army delegation is key.

*Snowfire1224*

I'm picturing Robber in a Hamlet pose talking to cat through the dead head now. Thank you.

*RanVor*

If you think you've found a new method of doing anything that is completely hero-proof, think again. They may not have the counter right now, but they will inevitably find it soon because you just can't out-bullshit the Heavens.

*MobyJunk*

Headphones?

[Antony444](#)

Reading this chapter and comparing it to the Battle of the Camps... Well, I don't think the Crusaders are going to be happy the Black Queen is happy to be back.

This battle is pure chaos and humans in this mess would be lambs to the slaughter.

Frankly, with the level of manipulation Cat is learning battle after battle, Above will need each time to muster a considerable group of heroes to stalemate her, preferably with the Grey Pilgrim, the Saint of Swords, the White Knight AND the Witch of the Woods leading them. Which is of course more or less impossible, if the Dead King is busy ravaging Northern Procer.

Interesting strategy with the illusion volcano and a particularly ominous thing to say when Cat admits she needs to be the Black Queen. Can't wait for Friday and Sve Noc's intervention...

[benthelynx](#)

But above has decided that Cat is more the threat to stop than the dead king. At this point at least.

*werafdsaew*

Don't forget that the Giants (or Titans?) and the Elves still exist. In fact I think one of them will be unleashed since Cat is basically unleashing the Drows.

*ALazyMonster*

I'm liable to believe that the elves will remain on the sidelines as they do perpetually since intervening could piss off the bard even if they genuinely did want to help, which everything we know about them claims otherwise.

The giants might be a possibility but we don't know much about them other than they might be a vaguely good race. I'm inclined to believe that they are closer to true neutral than anything as what we do know has shown that they hold grudges, are in tune with nature, and helped protect the independence of Levant, which more just shows they are on their own side and might help others if the mood strikes them. Maybe. We really don't know much about them to make these calls so all this is shots in the dark.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I don't think the Elves will remain on the sidelines. Above is going to need something extra to counter Kat's Drow horde. I'm looking forward to seeing Elves vs. Drow. What we've seen of Elves is OP, but the new, improved Drow should be a good match.

Maybe that then means the Giants are going to come into play? As you say, we really don't know much about them. But we do know enough about them for me to think that they are going to be significant.

You're absolutely right that this is all shots in the dark. I think that's what makes this so much fun.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Especially because the dwarves drop molten lava on things.

Though are we getting a discussion of the night being sucked out of the dead rather than harvested?

*ByVectron!*

My thoughts, exactly- with what the Queen is learning, by the time she gets back, even if she adds no new drow to her army, she could likely roll through the Crusade with ease.

Generals? Portal squish.

Troops? Flash flood and shadow swarm.

Stubborn Named? Flood, freeze, portal drop from a mountain.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Thoroughly enjoyable chapter. Nice to see Kat discard some of her limitations. Loved the scene where she was using one of the Mighty as a mace and then as a shield.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Does anyone have any theories on the bit with the disappearing Night and Kat pulling Akua's leash so Akua can take a look?

*Darkening*

Could be Sve Noc stealing all the 'free' night in the area to empower her chosen champions to fight Cat? Dunno.

*Rup*

...or..Sve Noc needs it for Apotheosis...but then she could just take from the living drow...so i am confused

*stevenneiman*

I think that Sve Noc can take back all of the Night any time she needs to. Her current setup was intended to distract everyone from the threat she poses by making her not look personally powerful and keeping her Mighty out of the way sufficiently that everyone would just write off the Underdark while she slowly amassed enough power for apotheosis.

*Someguy*

The same plan Father used in Fullmetal Alchemist, the whole city has an array under it powered by Night that uses everyone in it as a sacrifice.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That's actually pretty clever and makes a whole lot of sense which means it's going to fail at the last step.

*SilentWatcher*

it was a "loudly protesting shield" ^^

*daniel young*

Well damn that was awesome. I'm glad cat is finally being to grasp just what she has become. The soul of winter need naught bow to deepest night, for chill cares not from whence you come as all things freeze in time.

*Shaerick 68*



With the rapid power Cat is gaining in this arc, I can only imagine what horrors she's going to face back on the surface.

[HannaB](#)

My guess is "oh that whole thing with the Dead King invading Procer".

I don't think the crusaders are going to be able to stop him on their own.

*Aotrs Commander*

The funny thing is, if Cordelia and the Grey Pillock hadn't pushed her, she wouldn't be skyrocketing up to make the Dead King nervous. But no, "Good" always has to have its own way, and now they're going to pay for it – with luck and time, by the end of the series, possibly permanently.

Also, using enemies as mace.

Class.

Finally starting to push the boundaries of what she can do without human limitations?

Classier.

Cat is the best.

[Euodiachloris](#)

You can imagine the new "keep in line, or else" threat: "do you want to be her next club?". XD

*Skaddix*

That seems like some projection when has the Dead King shown he is worried about Cat? Heck he helped push her in the direction of Apotheosis. He has shown he is worried about the Bard because he doesn't understand her but Cat nothing of the sort. Probably helps he is the strongest Sorcerer on the continent and should have no trouble containing a Fae. Akua managed it well enough.

Now Cat bringing a Drow army kinda is on Cordelia although you could make the case that the Bard, Saint and whoever is next up after Cordelia would have gotten a Crusade going no matter what. And Malicia would have brought the Dead King in no matter what in response to the Crusade. Honestly, the simple issue for Cordelia is her political situation would have made it impossible to make a deal with Cat.

*Aotrs Commander*

I was being hyperbolic in the suggestion that if Cat continues to advance in power that she would achieve a level that would make the Dead King (the current arguably top tier opponent we know of) concerned. With the implication that "Good" would by that point, be Well Screwed.

...

Cannot... resist.. urge...to... make... dubious... crack...

...

Like Indrani was last night!

...

I'm so sorry.

...

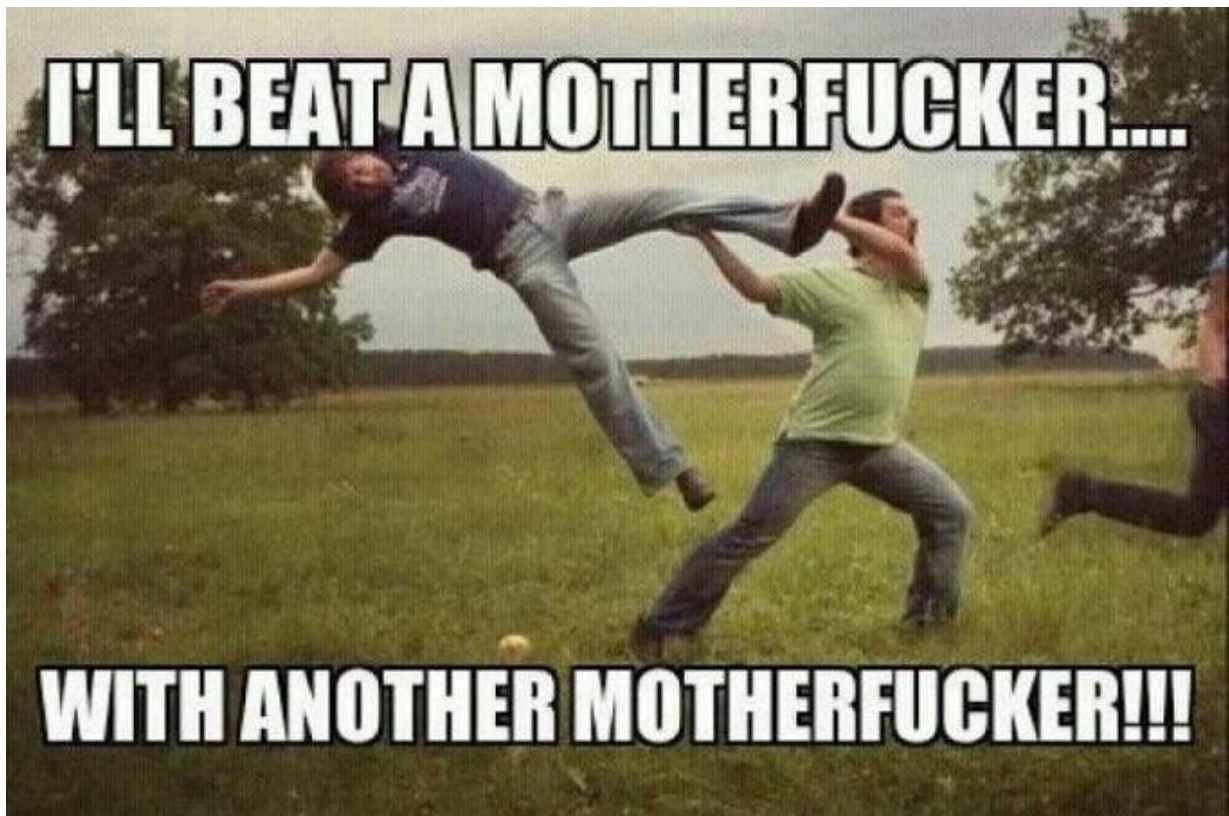
(I am not sorry.)

*stevenneiman*

I agree. I don't think the Dead King was all that concerned about Cat, he just wanted to get in on the action and not let the Intercessor be the only one working to manipulate her. Also, I think he knows that if she reaches a similar status she'll be more effective at diverting the Heavens' attention and giving him a free hand than actually opposing him.

[Switch](#)

Sometimes you just have to beat a motherfucker with another motherfucker.



*stevenneiman*

Now both her allies and her enemies are joining the club.

[Imtiaz Ayon](#)

Frowning, I crafted a platform of shadow under my feet and landed. I think instead of shadow its going to be ice

*Moginheden*

The Black Knight used platforms of shadow, and the Squire used shadows a bit too. Cat is starting to transition to Black Queen so she might use a shadow platform instead of an ice one, (but she has been using ice platforms recently.)

It's always been weird to me that both characters create a platform with no supports, but can't just make themselves not need a support.

[ayon96](#)

She doesn't have a NAME and nothing in the recent chapter suggests that she is beginning a transition. Her mantle makes ice. She made platforms of ice in the past. This is probably just a typo

*Xinci*

Winter is Ice and Shadow. Cold in the Dark. There is no problem here. She has used them cojointly before.

*Moginheden*

She is thinking of herself as the Black Queen in this chapter. That's part of a name transition, (and others already call her that.) This chapter is looking like a Name pivot to me, using shadow would be another flag since it's something she hasn't been doing for her platforms since she got ice.

*RanVor*

While I'm pretty sure it was a typo, what you're suggesting here makes a lot of sense.

*Snowfire1224*

Everything about this is great.

I think thw highlight was Cat's living weapon.

[ironvale](#)*i*

Welp, Kat just started her involuntary drow club. The first member was helplessly hanging around, not knowing its duty. Such an epic flail.

*Pantasy*

Considering drow values, it's an effective way to start off on the right foot and have them put their neck on the line for her.

*mavant*

We do what we must,  
because  
we can

*Andrew Mitchell*

Reference acknowledged. 😊

[HannaB](#)

for the good of all of us!

*RanVor*

Except the ones who are dead.

*stevenneiman*

One thing I've never gotten is why there are so many drow with any real power. Sure, there's a lot fewer important drow than any normal culture, but that's still thousands upon thousands of them. There's pretty much one process by which Night gets transferred, and that process almost exclusively goes to a single drow who already has Night. In a normal society, many people are allowed to exist even under the most uncaring of tyrants because a leader's power is proportional to the number of followers they have. Not so in the Underdark, where a leader would be better off harvesting all of their Mighty and killing anyone who isn't vital to feed or equip them personally to increase their own power and reduce the threat of competition. The most sharing that would make sense would be a few people expressly intended to harvest Night and give you more of it than they keep for themselves. The idea of attrition in particular seems baffling to me. If a Sigil gets into a fight, they don't get worn down bit by bit. Whichever side keeps the ground after a fight ends recovers ALL the power lost by both sides in the course of the fight. The closest thing a sigil could suffer to attrition is crushing defeat which they escape from in a much reduced capacity. For a sense of what it should be like, consider America. We have fairly weak laws limiting the power of businesses and very rich individuals, and as a result a lot of wealth is concentrated in the equivalent of Mighty and Cabals, but there are unarguably still restrictions on what the rich and powerful can do, both legal and practical. Now imagine what America would be like if rich people had no need for accountants to manage their wealth, no need for an economy populated by other people to spend that wealth in, no fear except that someone richer would pick a fight with them and take their money, and it was legal, possible, and socially acceptable for rich people to murder anyone and take all of their money. Now imagine that the more money they had the easier it got for them to do all of that. Pretty soon America would have a population of one all-owning god-king and maybe a few powerless favored servants who amuse them enough to be allowed to live.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I can see where you're coming from and you've made me consider why Night isn't more consolidated than it currently is. IMO there are a few factors that may play a role in preventing more consolidation than we see.

1. There's already a lot of consolidation. The Mighty and Rylleh are getting more powerful as we get towards the centre where Sve Noc awaits. Maybe the process you outline is correct but it's still ongoing. Maybe it just hasn't had enough time yet.

2. All Drow need food and water, and maybe have some social needs as well. This applies to Mighty and Duzzul alike. The

Drow social hierarchy provides Mighty with others to do all these menial tasks and to meet the social needs, even if it's just a Duzzul to murder whenever you feel like it.

3. Even powerful Mighty are not totally without competitors. It's a pyramid with Sve Noc on top. A band of slightly less powerful Mighty can (given the right circumstances) form a Cabal and bring a more powerful Mighty down.

4. Even if a particular Drow was too powerful for anyone else to topple. What would motivate them to take the time and effort to exterminate all other Drow? We know that powerful Mightly don't get any value from harvesting Drow who are too far down the power hierarchy from them.

Any or all (or none) of the above could play a role and others can probably think of more reasons. Interesting thought exercise!

### [sengachi](#)

No one rules alone. No one can coordinate a whole society alone. You have to delegate to someone. But in this society, if the person you delegate to is too weak they'll inevitably be killed. That means to avoid untenable turnover you need to give up at least some power to your minions. And if you give them some power, it had better be enough that they can really hold their own, because otherwise they're now just juicy tasty targets instead of targets.

But then it gets worse. Say you've got enemies. Enemies who would love to raid your flock of harvestable drow who do stuff like feed you and clothe you and maintain your quality of living. Well you can't be everywhere at once and you probably need to sleep (or at least would like leisure time to enjoy all that power you've gained). So you need multiple someone's who can stave off enemy incursion while you're not around, or at the very least make such incursions costly and/or delay them long enough for you to get your pants on and get out the door. Or maybe you want to be able to raid multiple places at once or execute feints. Two vs. one combat is also just a godsdamn nightmare, so by giving a minion some power you can get a return on combat power versus a solitary enemy that's much greater than what you've given up.

And then while a super drow could just not rule and instead wander around raiding and enslaving random drow to get by, such a solitary super drow would be a big obvious target for a cooperative cabal looking to score some easy Night. I don't care how good you are, if you're alone and you need to take a shit and two dozen enemies with reasonable power jump you when your pants are down, you are going to have a bad day.

So yeah. There are plenty of logistical and tactical reasons why a drow sigil holder would need a variety of powerful minions under their command to operate.

*eaglejarl*

Things Cat could be doing with her stated powers:

Open a small portal immediately in front of herself and another immediately behind her enemy. Stab forward and into their back.

Same as above, but time the portal creation such that the enemy punches itself.

Portal cuts.

Does Arcadia have outer space? Can you portal someone into a vacuum, or into the sun? (Which canonically exists and is a thing that can get stolen!)

Open your lake-blaster portal directly under their feet, facing up.

Exactly how real is a glamour? Will a glamour of toxic gas kill someone? Will a glamour of goblin fire burn?

Unfortunate that Cat's world lacks the chemistry to know about F00F and ClF3, but such is life.

Cat's shadows can replicate physical objects. Can they replicate moving parts, like a loom, automatic drill, etc?

If she can create shadows, that means she can move light around. Can she grab all the light from a huge area and use it as a super magnifying glass? Or perhaps a laser?

She could portal-drop corpses into random areas, then animate those corpses remotely. All the fighting, none of the vulnerability of your own body. (Obviously, still subject to some kinds of magic.)

What is Arcadia's sun made of? If she opens a portal that leads directly into it, what comes out? Heat, light, plasma...?

She can transform her body. Can she do all the Mr Fantastic tricks? Using herself as a slingshot, making her arms longer to punch from farther away than expected, running faster because of longer steps, enveloping (and crushing?) someone...? Making her arm super long and thin so that she can send it down someone's throat and into their lungs, then make spikes shoot out to rip the person apart from the inside?

She can create shadow constructs and glamour at range. Can she do what I just described with shadow / glamour instead of her own body?

Can she create constructs inside someone's body?

Can she turn to mist and get into someone's lungs? Interesting way to accompany a friendly without being observed, and an easy way to kill enemies.

### NZPIEFACE

Why would Arcadia have an outer space? It's not based on any laws of physics.

Pretty sure the glamour isn't physical in any way.

I think the "shadows" thing is her ability from when she was Squire.

The sun in Arcadia isn't a "physical" physical thing.

The Mr.Fantastic stuff kinda requires her body to have properties of rubber. I thought she was ice.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Love the creativity here. It reminded me of HPMOR and the Two Year Emperor. And then I looked at your username. 😊

*Xinci*

The most intruding things in this chapter are the cost/cause and effect relationship of the portals. Surely other beings can sense the gates in Arcadia, maybe even are attracted to it if they are of Winter. Each portal may go to a different part of the boundary between creation and Arcadia, and between it and those places seems to have differential distance to that boundary. Power echoes out through Arcadia from Creation, depending on the story/current state of the area the gate opens up to. I wonder if any creatures still exist in Winter's Arcadian lands and if so how they have changed with time. Truly I wonder what kind of things a glaring beacon of Winter might attract if you have multiple such beacons opening up holes to creation. So I wonder what she could effect with multiple gates, with multiple boundaries. Could she make them vibrate/move in different patterns and open up different gates at different times? What would happen if she kept maintaining them? Could she play dimensional music with gates to weaken or strengthen boundaries and Call and Shape things that went through them? What is the effect of making so many gates, how does it echo through Arcadia? Cat still needs to become \*more\* but this has a lot of potential for breaking the world if she does it right.

### beginner fishing tips

Thanks for the chapterLikeLike

*Satan*



Can we get a Rylleh?  
Then Cat's new Name can be Cthulu.

---

## Chapter 75: The Eye

*"There is more power in blood spilled willingly than unwillingly. The latter is simply a great deal easier to obtain."*

– Dread Emperor Sorcerous

I would have compared it to herding cats, but as far as I knew those didn't take time in the middle of a rout to backstab allies or enemies, depending on who didn't watch their back closely enough. Well, maybe Praesi cats. You never knew with Wastelanders. I kept the drow moving even after we'd cleared the area that was being affected by the 'volcano' by more or less stomping out any knot of bravery that formed. After the second time Mighty who tried to stand their ground and rally their warriors got a gate opened above their heads the message was received. I was sinking into Winter at a prodigious rate, no to ways around it, but nowadays I had more than just Akua to dump the principle alienation into. Twelve hardened former Mighty on top of Diabolist meant I could keep this up for quite a while without going all monologue-addicted, and if it came down to it I could try to disperse some of it into the drow who'd simply taken oaths. There were shards of Winter in them as well, after all, put there to enforce the terms. It didn't quite feel like I'd be breaking our bargain if I did that, but somehow I suspected it was close enough I wouldn't like the ensuing backlash. A desperate measure, if need be, but not to be used before that.

The front we'd named the Pit was effectively finished, the chaos within being poured into the dawning mess at the centre of Great Strycht, but while fighting there I'd taken my eye off the two fronts to the east. There were risks in that, which was I'd put Lord Soln in command of the reserve to hedge my bets. It had authority to intervene as it deemed necessary to keep the wagon on the road. It was about time to see how that'd worked out. I remained with the retreat until we reached the outskirts of the central district before putting Ivah and Archer in charge of the situation and dismissing the glamour and taking flight. The false sky of the cavern was mercifully unburdened by fighting, and the height allowed me to gauge how the situation was unfolding over the entire city. There'd been two battles planned in the east, fronts named Spear and Dice. The former I wasn't overly worried about, since the Jindrich would be taking the lead there and their sigil-holder was infamously destructive. The latter was a

different story, as it involved a cabal of four sigils informally led by the Hushu, which presumably weren't in on any of the plots coming to a head. If they pushed into the other eastern front, that whole section of the city would become a massive melee I lacked the tools to properly handle.

Considering the 'plan' for the Battle of Great Strycht was to drive everyone and their genderless sibling into the centre before the Longstrides arrived, there was a lot riding on Lord Soln's ability to cope with the situation.

What I took in from above was a mixed bag. The reinforcing Peerage I'd sent to back up the Jindrich had been enough to punch through the delaying force sent by the Rumena on the Spear front, by the looks of it. They were in full retreat, harassed by coalition and Peerage drow as they made for the centre. Considering the amount of Peers I'd sent east I was rather surprised it was harassment and not annihilation I was looking at, but the explanation was not difficult to find. The Hushu and their allies had taken the field and decided to be clever about it. Instead of launching a hard assault that would see my Peerage diverted from the pursuit to deal with the situation, they were marauding around the flanks and striking fast before withdrawing. The Peers and sigil-holders in command were hesitating, reluctant to allow the Rumena to retreat unimpeded when the Hushu attacks were so lukewarm. The three lords I'd assigned to that front had gone with the understanding that containment was their main objective, so they were tacitly allowing it to happen even if it thinned their ranks. Presumably judging that the overall losses would be greater if we fully engaged. The reserve under Lord Soln was closer to the centre, in an incline between two islands-turned-hills, and so hidden from view. There'd been four sigils assigned to the reserve, before hostilities erupted, but only two were still hidden down there: the Soln and the Agus, so at least the overall commander was there to answer my questions.

Instead of staying up there and drawing attention, I landed next to the reserve and dismissed my wings. The drow parted around me, many of them bowing as I passed, and I returned the gesture with a silent nod. The Lord of Shallow Graves awaited me with Lord Agus at its side, gravely listening to dzulu giving reports. The conversation died as I strode in, the two Peers inclining their heads in deference.

"Losara Queen," Lord Soln said. "I heard word of your success to the north."

"Drew in everyone I could and sent them running into the central melee," I agreed. "I'm more interested in the situation around here. Have the Hushu and their cabal declared for a side?"

"Their own, presumably," Lord Agus sighed.

"They attacked the coalition and the Rumena both," Soln calmly replied. "Though with the retreat of the Rumena, we are now the only blood left to be shed."

"I take it you've something in the works," I said, glancing around pointedly.

There were, after all, two missing sigils.

"I sent the lords Lovre and Vadimyr to circle around Hushu positions," Lord Soln agreed.

"That'll open another front," I pointed out. "Instead of push them into the centre, which is what we're actually after."

"So I said, Losara Queen," Lord Agus muttered. "So I said."

"I intend to launch an assault myself as they do, my queen," Soln explained. "Along the ridges of the southeast."

I frowned, trying to remember what I'd seen of the battlefield from above. It would make a corner connected to a line that led straight to the centre, more or less, if you counted the forces currently pursuing the Rumena. If I had to guess at the intent, it'd be forcing Hushu and friends to head towards the centre to avoid being assaulted from two sides. If we'd been fielding a disciplined army I would have given it decent odds of working out as Soln wanted, forcing movement through pressure, but as it was we'd be compounding a gamble with another gamble. *And even if it works out, we're wedging the Hushu and their allies in between the Losara Sigil and the rest of our forces*, I thought. Considering my sigil had already taken harsh losses at the hands of the Rumena, if the Hushu went all-out against them they might outright collapse. That'd be... bad. Without my own forces out there to stoke the fire, there was a decent chance the 'neutral' sigils there would rally and retreat rather than remain participants in the bloody melee. Soln, I thought, had good instincts. But it was trying to fight with an army we didn't have, and its core mistake was trying to maintain control over a situation that was already too chaotic to handle.

"How long ago did Lovre and Vadimyr set out?" I asked.

"Less than half an hour," Lord Agus said.

"Right, so we've still got time to manoeuvre," I frowned. "All right, here's what we'll do. The entire force holding back the Hushu and their cabal is to collapse immediately and flee towards the centre."

The two drow stiffened with surprise.

"The casualties-" Lord Soln delicately began.

"Will sting, I know," I said. "But your way is as likely to lead in a slugging match we can't afford as it is to drive them to the centre. So instead of forcing them, we'll bait them. That many sigils in a rout? They'll come after them with everything they have, eager for the harvest."

"And we are to simply look upon the situation and wait?" Lord Agus asked, with what I suspected to be a hopeful tone.

Not the fiercest of fighters, this one.

"No," I said. "You two and the two sigils Lord Soln sent out are to attack them from behind once they've committed."

I paused, meeting the Lord of Shallow Graves' blue eyes.

"Lord Soln, force them into the centre," I said. "With everything you have."

The drow softly laughed.

"And I believed myself to be ruthless," it said. "It will be as you say, Queen of Lost and Found."

Lord Agus was a lot less sanguine about essentially throwing both our 'allies' and several of our sigils into a boiling broth, but kept its dismay largely off its face.

"Will you be accompanying us in this, Losara Queen?" it asked.

"Sadly, I suspect I'll be needed elsewhere," I said.

If only because the last thing I wanted was to be surrounded by my own warriors when the Longstride Cabal showed up.

"Do either of you know where Mighty Jindrich is?" I continued.

"The Rumena angered it enough it grew wroth before they were driven back," Lord Soln said. "It was last seen heading out in their pursuit, its mind lost to rage."

"Find the largest concentration of wreckage and corpses, it shall not be far," Lord Agus noted.

"And Mighty Rumena?" I asked.

"Has yet to take the field against us," Soln said. "Though there is word it might have participated in the taking of the central district. It is largely under that sigil's control by now."

"So the dance awaits me in the middle," I mused. "Fitting. Lord Soln, I trust you'll be able to carry out your orders here?"

"That much I can promise," the Lord of Shallow Graves smiled.

"Then wade in their blood, my lord," I said, and translucent wings burst out of my back.

I was thousands of miles away from any orc, but their traditional farewell had hardly ever been more appropriate. I shot back up into the sky and wasted no time before heading out towards the front we'd named the Woods. That district had been the centre of ancient Great Strycht in senses more numerous than the geographical one, even a swift glance made that clear. It was a labyrinth of temples and great halls, each its own little island surrounded by a deep canal and tied to others structures by curved bridges and arches of stone. The sheer vividness of it startled me, for until now I'd seen drow tastes run towards mostly colours grey and dark. Here though, strange and half-faded patterns of blue, red and white covered every surface. Orange and gold served as the colour of the sky in sprawling mosaics where the moon was depicted as a feathered wheel of white-tipped red, the stylized heads of snakes and drow gazing down at the bloodletting from every corner. The depredations of time and abandonment were easy to find, collapsed roofs not since repaired and broken walls serving as makeshift doors, but I was surprised to see some of the paints had been freshly touched up.

Some of those mosaics were splattered with greyish red, though, and that wasn't paint.

A square tower with colourful turrets on the corners burst open at the base, and just like that I'd found Mighty Jindrich. The drow was massive, the largest of its kind I'd ever seen, and covered from head to toe in a featureless carapace of pure Night. I watched, reluctantly impressed, as its fingers sunk into the sides of the same tower it'd just ripped up and it repeatedly smashed the whole thing down on a pair of Mighty until there was nothing left but bloody paste. Then it tossed the whole thing into a temple and screamed monstrosously before leaping into another fight. This was, I thought, my primary ally in this battle. I sure knew how to pick them. I was almost distracted enough that I didn't see the javelin coming, but not quite. There were fires all over the district and trails of smoke going up into the sky, but as the projectile sailed through a large plume I caught sight of the stir it caused and dipped below with a bat of my wings. I raised a brow when I realized there was no hint of power in the toss, save in how far it'd been thrown, and that even if I'd not moved it would likely have missed me. Had some enterprising dzulu decided to bag queen and glory with the same throw?

I'd be sure to praise their guts, before the messy retaliatory murder.

I flew around the plume of smoke and found where it should have come from, eyes landing on a single drow standing atop one of the

tallest towers in the district. That was strike one. Even far as I was I could make out the looks of it. It was, well, old. Its grey skin was deeply creased, its pitch-black veins visible through it and though tall it had grown visibly stooped. It held no weapon, attired in a strange belted tunic of obsidian rings. Almost like mail, I thought. Its hair was long and white, going down almost to its waist. That was strike two. Its dim silver eyes met mine all the way across the distance, as if it could see me just as well, and I could not feel a single speck of power from it. That was strike three, and so the drow might as well have 'dangerous, take caution' tattooed glaring red on its forehead. It did not attack a second time, simply waiting. *Not an attack*, I corrected. *A way to grab my attention*. My eyes dipped to the large cloth belt it wore, and the Crepuscular I read on that only confirmed what I was already suspecting. Wings narrowing behind me as I dove, I landed smoothly in front of the Mighty Rumena.

Mantle of Woe fluttering as I rose to my full height – which was, rather unfairly I felt, still shorter than the bent old drow – my wings folded behind me. I wasn't dismissing those before I got a clear idea of what was taking place here. I'd read a lot of faces, in my time. I'd watched humanity slide off my teacher's true face like water off clay, the utter blankness of fae bereft of stories. Shades of contempt by the dozen, angers both principled and personal, too many flavours of hatred to count. Irritation from creatures considering me an insolent child, pity from the likes of the Grey Pilgrim and even casual dismissal from the Saint of Swords. Mighty Rumena stood out from that multitude, because all there was in its gaze was attention. Pure and unfettered, as if the weight of it left no place for anything else. It was uncomfortable, to have someone take in all of me so deeply. It didn't feel like scrutiny, and I realized the source of my unease a moment later. I'd seen that look in another pair of eyes: Masego's, when he'd come into his aspect in Arcadia. When he'd witnessed it all with impossible clarity.

"Mighty Rumena," I said. "Your invitation was received."

"Losara Queen," my foe simply greeted me.

It had a calm voice, I thought. Unruffled, unhurried. Like nothing could really affect it. It was old and powerful enough it might not even be wrong about that. It glanced down at the messy fighting below, the screams and blood and fire swallowing up the district.

"I remember this city," Rumena said. "From when it was at its height. The jewel of the south, second only to Tvarigu in beauty. It brings me no pleasure to layer ruin over ruin."

"And yet," I said, "here we are."

"There are only a few of us left, Losara," the Mighty said. "Those who knew this land before Night fell upon it. In Strycht, Jindrich is the only other – and it was young when we lost the wars. Too young to understand the true depth of the loss."

"But you weren't," I said.

If it wanted to talk while my designs unfolded, I had absolutely no objection to that. If we engaged it was going to be the kind of mess that'd make devils blush, and while my forces below weren't winning exactly they were carrying out my plan perfectly. It was hard for them not to, when the entire plan was to create chaos and that was the natural state of the Everdark.

"I was a general, honoured twice for victories won in the Burning Lands by the Twilight Sages themselves," Rumena said. "One of them, I think, against a people whose blood you hold. The look has little changed since those nights."

My fingers tightened. It was implying it'd fought the Deoraithe, at some point, and there was a little problem with that: neither the Kingdom nor the later Duchy of Daoine had ever come under drow assault in recorded history. There was the Golden Bloom in the way, after all. Which meant I was talking to an entity claiming it'd been alive before the elves arrived on Calernia. Three thousand years old, I thought, at least. Gods. It might be the single oldest thing I'd ever met save for the Dead King.

"And now you're a sigil-holder in the remnants of the old empire," I said.

"My army followed me," the Mighty said. "Already they were rylleh and jawor, though the titles had different meaning then. None of them survived the passing of the years. The Night is not a forgiving sacrament."

Sacrament, I thought. Not just a domain, some Name's power manifest. It'd always felt too large, hadn't it? And I had wondered why no drow seemed to be born a mage. This whole time, had I really been looking at an entire people wielding Below's equivalent of Light? Miracles of the darkness, purer in nature than even the stuff devils were made of.

"You saw it happen, then," I said. "What Sve Noc did."

"I knew one of the sisters," Rumena said. "And now know her better still. She is in my blood, in my soul."

Sisters? My eyes narrowed. And it'd called the Sve *her*. There was something significant about that, I thought. A detail I was missing.

"They broke you," I said. "Your entire civilization."

The drow shook its head.

"Not them," Rumena said. "The Twilight Sages, in their wanton arrogance. How tall stood their pedestal and proud they were of it, until the nerezim cast them down. Only then did they regret the height."

My blood ran cold. For a creature that old and powerful to call something *wanton arrogance*, how terrible must it be?

"What did they do?"

"They sought to kill death," the Mighty said. "But leashed it instead. We were to live forever, you see. As gods. And we did, for a time."

The old drow's lips twisted into a bitter smile.

"Then we lost the wars," Rumena said. "And while we raged and wailed of wealth lost, of glories unmade, the wise Sages knew terror. For the nerezim put entire cities to the sword, and our immortality *narrowed*. They had borrowed from what would never be. And with every defeat the debt grew closer to that moment where it could no longer be repaid."

"They didn't make you immortal," I spoke slowly, piecing together what'd been laid out for me to find. "Did they? They stole years from children not yet born. That would never be, because their parents were slain by the dwarves."

It was one of the fundamental laws of sorcery, wasn't it? That you couldn't make something out of nothing. I had not forgotten that glimpsed conversation between Neshamah and the Bard, where she'd implied the Twilight Sages had been mages.

"And so our end loomed, Losara Queen," the Mighty said. "The balance dipped closer to irredeemable disaster with every fallen city. Until the two of them took action."

"The sisters," I said. "They made the Gloom. They made the Night. Before the point of no return was reached."

There was a long moment of silence between us, as the sounds of the slaughter below drifted up to our ears.

"Before?" Mighty Rumena smiled. "O Queen of Lost and Found, did you not come here to rob a corpse?"

I shivered. The old creature laughed.

"Dead, every last one of us," the drow said. "You thought Sve Noc the cause of our ruin, and you were wrong. You thought them the cure to our disease, and you were wrong again. Our most beloved betrayers did not save a single soul. They... delayed."



"It makes no sense," I said. "The Gloom yes, but the Night? It incited slaughter. If instead they'd encouraged childbirth, raised your population, you might have gotten out of it. You've had centuries to recover since those wars, you could have evened the scales."

"You do not understand," the Mighty said. "It was too late, Losara Queen. *We were already dying.* But those clever sisters, the wicked and the merciful, they struck a bargain."

And I grasped it, then, what it was that I was being told.

"The Night is the only thing keeping any of you alive," I whispered hoarsely. "And the slaughter isn't a mistake or an unforeseen consequence, it's the entire point. Every kill is a sacrifice. Willing. Eager, even. Merciless Gods, Archer was right – this entire realm is an altar."

"The greatest in all of Creation," Rumena said, ruinously proud. "Witness and weep, Losara, the glory of the Firstborn: we alone, of all peoples in the world, have cheated death *twice.*"

"But it couldn't last," I said. "You had to have known that. The dwarves were going to come sooner or later and it was all going to fall apart the moment they did."

"The Night was not an answer," the Mighty said. "But it could be understood as a question."

And another part of the puzzle fell into place.

"Apotheosis," I said. "Through brute force. Trying every possible application of power through hundreds of thousands of Mighty so that a path out could be found."

And I had thought myself inelegant, for merely blundering my way into my mantle. The sisters were trying to force the lock by trying every possible key.

"Was it?" I asked. "Did they find a path?"

Pale silver eyes considered me calmly.

"Come now," Rumena said. "Why would the Shrouded Gods grant such a boon, when our base terror kept their altars slick with blood?"

"So they failed," I said. "Rumena, there's another way. I can help with this. We don't need to fight. Winter-"

I bit my tongue.

"You knew that already," I finally said. "And you still struck."

"You are right, Queen of Lost and Found," the Mighty said. "You can help with this."

As a sacrifice, one last to finally even the scales. And I'd been a good sport, hadn't I? The Everdark entire might be an altar, but I'd consecrated Great Strycht with thousands of dead just so Sve Noc could properly open my throat over its ashes. Even as my alarm mounted, part of me could not help but admire the game of the Gods Below. They'd played their hand flawlessly, hadn't they? It didn't matter to them whether the drow rose from the dark as the Winter Court reborn in shadow, or if the Priestesses of Night devoured my mantle whole and unleashed madness on Creation as a two-faced goddess. No matter who won, they won as well. That was their way, I was beginning to understand. They didn't move like Above, trying to force a victory in every fight. They only ever fought when they couldn't lose.

"Why tell me any of this, if we're going to fight?" I asked, warily backing away.

"To give them time to surround us," Mighty Rumena said.

The roof exploded beneath our feet, and the Longstride Cabal entered the fray.

---

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Our votes are dropping low! Make them not!

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

"And I had thought myself inelegant, for merely blundering my way into my mantle. The sisters were trying to force the lock by trying every possible key."

So Cat but worse? Damn.

JJR

I've brute forced things in video games before. 4 digit combination locks are the limit though, longer than that I'd probably get bored and give up. And the sisters have been at it for how many centuries? Well, whatever else you can say about them, their not quitters.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

When you've got an eternity to make eternity last for an eternity, you tend to have patience.

*Dainpdf*

Eternity is not so much itself when the dwarves are after you.

---

Ye Mighty, we heard you like immortality so we liquified all your experiences, so you can backstab everything while you try to escape entropy.

[.....](#)

\*\*\*WORM SPOILERS AHEAD\*\*\*

Reminds me of the entities in worm, giving powers to humans and encouraging them to fight one another so they can harvest intelligent solutions to problems and novel applications of their powers and technology.

*therealgridlock*

Well the worms had the end goal of reversing entropy, so all their powers still obeyed entropy, even if it stole from another copy universe to give to this universe, since the worms exist across all of time and space and just sorta run all possible copies of a thing til they harvest enough conflict, their main goal is to steal novel tech from species and recreate it themselves.

There's a reason Ward doesn't talk about beating the cycle, the worms have to face an unwanted truth, that entropy comes for us all, and humans will never stop fighting.

*Dainpdf*

Well, they had a couple hundred thousand Mighty helping...

*NerfGlastigUaine*

A 4 digit lock still has 10,000 possible combinations. Your patience is still amazing.

*Levi Kalden*

It seems to me a lot like evolution in its principle

[erraticerrata](#)

Character contest continues: White Knight vs Ranger! Link to vote below. (As a side note, I have an internal betting pool with my friends and I'm rather amused by how badly I'm doing in it.)  
[https://www.strawpoll.me/16898889?fbclid=IwAR0uD9CG0wdL8IGWT30t-A8GRbrq29gZWym1LwzirgdLTWHYL\\_nR\\_icoWqA](https://www.strawpoll.me/16898889?fbclid=IwAR0uD9CG0wdL8IGWT30t-A8GRbrq29gZWym1LwzirgdLTWHYL_nR_icoWqA)

*luminiousblu*

So is it canonical that Praesi cats will backstab allies? Cats already act like nobility in our own world...

*Someguy*

I thought that was already proven with the Sentient Tiger Army?

*Digitize27*

I thought it was an invisible tiger army?

*Cap'n Smurfy*

No the invisible army was a different one. The sentient Tiger army was the one that backstabbed the current Emperor.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

#7 on Top Ten Sentences no one ever thought would be written

*CipherSKT*

i thought it was sentient Tapirs

the tiger army was the invisible one

[Javvies](#)

No, the tapirs ate an Emperor, and the precedent of the tigers committing treason was applied to the tapirs. As such, they could be executed for treason, but they were found ineligible to seek a claim of succession by right of killing the Drad Emperor.

*Darael*

... because, to be precise, they were sentient (like the tigers, and therefore legally capable of treason) but not sapient (and hence not eligible to claim the Tower by right of conquest)

[NZPIEFACE](#)

You know, if you want your character to win, you can place them as the first option. I think there's a paper somewhere talking about how that's the more favoured option when people are unsure what to pick.

*luminiousblu*

That's only the case when you're unsure who to pick. There's basically a single head-to-head so far that wasn't a landslide victory, so it wouldn't have made too much of a difference.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

The brackets are at <http://www.bracketmaker.com/tmenu.cfm?tid=470805>.

*Dainpdf*

Would love to know your bets once the voting is done. I have made several wrong predictions, myself.

*The Verbiage Ecstatic*

So far, betting based on seed has been a pretty good strategy: only two upsets so far, and both of those were close seeds: 9 beat 8, which barely counts as an upset, and 10 beat 7 (Victory over Foreign Despots!). Looks like it was a well-seeded tournament!

*luminiousblu*

"Well, maybe Praesi cats."

Ah yes, Praes, where even the housepets are looking to further their political career and gain an upgrade to sweetened milk for dinner, every dinner.

*naturalnuke*

Unlike man eating tapirs cats can prove sentience and claim the Tower.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

I feel like we now have a Law of Conservation of Ninjutsu on our hands. The enemy bringing in the group of nameless, faceless ringers who will ambush Cat, who is now taking the place of the hero.

*Byzantine*

Oh yeah, definitely. This is not going to end well for the Drow.

*naturalnuke*

There is only a finite amount of doom after all. 😊

*lennymaster*

God I love conversations like this! It shows just how much effort an author puts into their story, by the readers being able to make predictions, without the story becoming the least bit boring. There is predictable, or as Black would put it; Uninspiring, and there is predictable, because the author showed the readers so much of the world it becomes alive and understandable to people that did not think it up themselves.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Thanks for explaining so well what was, for me, just a half-formed thought.

*Dainpdf*

Let's hope that ends up weighing more than the sheer numerical disadvantage. Black did make a career of showing logistics \*can\* overturn story and sorcery both, in enough quantity.

*Andrew Mitchell*

And planning. Black was very strong on planning.

*Thor*

I think it was less that logistics could overcome story and more that if you fulfill the requirements of a story in a way that doesn't cost you too much good logistics and planning can make up for the loss.

*Dainpdf*

Even a good story will not let someone beat off a sufficiently more numerous/well armed/well trained army. That's basically how Black conquered Callow. And part of why, for Cat, fighting Summer in Creation was very different from in Arcadia.

*Byzantine*

Ah, but that isn't what Black showed.

He showed that logistics and a knowledge of the stories can be used to turn the story on its head. The second part of that is a requirement, not a suggestion, in this world. Problem here is if anyone present knows stories, it's Cat. The drow are in way over their heads. They got to cheat death

twice: The first was on their terms. The second was on Below's. To follow the pattern the third time they will cheat death? That will be on Cat's (Winter's) terms. It wouldn't do for them to cheat death on their own terms for the third time. That would be boring.

*Dainpdf*

I can't spare the time to find the quotation right now, but I am pretty sure it was said at some point that Black had demonstrated that stories must bow to sheer logistics, if there is enough of the latter.

Actually, I'm pretty sure Cat said the same about fighting the Fae in Creation (as opposed to in Arcadia): logistics matter on this side.

Also, I don't think it's as set in stone as you say. If it were, there'd be no tension to this moment.

[HannaB](#)

I mean, Cat always has the option of just bailing to Arcadia, and can fly where Longstriders can't. Logistics kind of favor her here, imho.

...admittedly we don't have any proof Longstriders can't fly. Now THAT would be epic

*Dainpdf*

That, plus bailing to Arcadia assumes they can't hamper her movement into the portal somehow. Also means she'd need to get Indrani, and give up on her Drow army...

[Javvies](#)

The sentient tiger army one of the Dread Emperor's created committed treason, and I suspect they count as Praesi and as cats.

Damn, that's a long time.  
And that suddenly makes things a whole lot clearer about the "Why" behind the current state of the drow.

This is not according to plan. Rumena is working with the Longstriders and Sve.

Fortunately, Cat is very good at improvising her way to victory, usually via murdering the everliving fuck out of her enemies.

*IDKWhoitis*

Alright, so the drow need to repay the debt of life. And theoretically Winter is enough.

So we have a rough measuring stick to measure Cat up to. Cats power is worth nearly 3000 years worth of drow lives.

So assuming there are roughly 500,000 Drow alive, across the entire Everdark, and the normal lifespan is about 60 years, that's 50 generations. So Cat is worth millions of Souls in terms of magical power. Going full tilt, she could recreate Keter several times over and still have some power left over.

*Someguy*

So when dealing with Below you need proficiency with Contract Law, Financial Systems Management and "Creative Accounting".

*Letouriste*

Seems like hell alright

*naturalnuke*

Ah yes, Creative Accounting, the byproduct of Vague Graphs and Approximate Estimation.

*haihappen*

I never doubted economics classes should feature bloodletting...

*Luminant*

I'd say it's more along the lines of practically infinite. She is an Immortal, the ruler of half of the prototype of creation. She just doesn't know how to bring it to bear.

*WuseMajor*

She knows how to bring it to bear, she just doesn't want to pay the cost of doing that.

*lennymaster*

More like; does not know how to skirt the edge of what she is willing to pay.

[sengachi](#)

Their normal lifespan is, I'm guessing, more than 60 years. The unnatural precision of their Nightless lives is because any years past 60 were sacrificed in the original ritual.

*taovkool*



This Mighty Rumina person might be an old asshole and a dickish one at that.

But damn it all, you have to admit, the old man had style.

*Agent J*

Wait, old man? Rumena is a female "it", right?

*taovkool*

One of the dialogue mentioned it was a 'he'. So I just thing of him as a guy.

*Antoninjohn*

Well Cat does have Akua as a back up plan and she did know that Sve Noc would be making for Winter now

*edrey*

i cant help but think in the song, the girl who climbed the tower " to join them and rest in the shadows," that's just too fucked

*Xreno*

That song is basically a summary of the whole story of Practical Guide to Evil.

*NerfContessa*

Indeed.

Another thing that shows how incredible the setting is.

Just needed to be said. 😊

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

Well... Shit.

*werafdsaew*

Well it looks like Cat's rolling-over-her-enemies arc is over, and some readers have complained about that being unexciting.

*Aston W*

Time for interludes?

The Drow are going to be very dissatisfied when they find Cat has no power and dumped it already..

Akua Time.

[HannaB](#)

So Rumena is the one who's been trying to keep old paints fresh, huh.

I really hope they survive this. Or anyone else from their time who still remembers the old drow culture, so they can rebuild it in the new realm Cat brings them to, whatever that is.

This culture deserves to be reborn, one way or the other.

*luminiousblu*

Does it? Deserve to be reborn, I mean. Part of the point of a culture is that it is the product of the time and the circumstances that created it. Circumstances which no longer exist. Some things pass, and bringing them back for the sake of nostalgia is pretty senseless.

[HannaB](#)

Yeah, I picked the wrong word.

It deserves to be rebuilt. To be remembered. To not be forgotten. Drow deserve to have their culture, their history, what they'd lost.

*Dainpdf*

Also, considering their culture was what birthed this whole mess, I'm not sure there would be any good in bringing any of it back.

[TeK](#)

I would not consider blunders of a bunch of demigods to be a culture. Otherwise, Callow needs to add goblinfire to their cooking in the list of their worst cultural achievements.

*Dainpdf*

It sounded like their culture was already somewhat focused on raiding and sacrifice before the fall, though...

And, well, Cat got the goblinfire thing from Praesi. No fair pinning that on Callow. You can probably say "a sword in every attic" is part of their culture, though.

*nipi*

Wonder if Cats going to end up the same for the drow as Black is to the orcs?

*Andrew Mitchell*

At least equivalent, probably more.

*Aston W*

Three times cheat death. Winter.

*Shequi*

Third time's the charm...

*Vin reisling*

Fell for the monologue cat.

*Andrew Mitchell*

A conversation, not a monologue. But yeah, she certainly fell for the trap which was cleverly set with just the right bait. Juicy information that Kat really needed to piece things together.

*Shoddi*

This would fall along the lines of "Never give a mage time to cast".

*SMHF*

Is it still a trap if it doesn't change anything about her plan?

She wanted to lure every major sigil into the fight in the middle of the city... which she did.

She wanted to start her fight with Rumena away from her own army... which she did.

And she wanted to do all that before the Longstrides showed up... and they just did.

So maybe I'm missing something but I'm not seeing a "OH SHIT" moment here!

*Andrew Mitchell*

You know, that's a really good point.

The only 'oh, shit' I can think of is that she's surrounded by the Longstride Cabal. I'm pretty sure that wasn't expected.

*RanVor*

Do I understand it correctly that the Night is pure power of Below?

Oh boy, Masego's gonna be pissed that he haven't come along.

*Cap'n Smurfy*

The Hierophant, vivisector of miracles, missing an entire race wileding Belows equivalent of priestly miracles in order to forge a goddess? Oh he'll be furiously frustrated.

*Ephemeral*

Not to mention that this is probably the largest long term Ritual ever performed...

*Dainpdf*

Cat will have to bring some back for him to examine.

*Rup*

.."furiously frustrated"..???  
..that's a nice turn of words...Cap'n 🍷

*Andrew Mitchell*

Ooooooh, good point. But I think he'll be able to catch up because there's no way Kat's not coming out of this without Night added to her arsenal. If not personally wielded then certainly via Sve Noc, Akua, or the Lord of Silent Steps.

*Dainpdf*

That was a great chapter quote. One of the most appropriate yet.

And so the mists part. We see, now, the shape of things – at least in part. The Drow are, in a way, exactly what Below wants – servants so deep in debt they can't afford to stop paying, even as the interest compounds the amount owed, if anything, faster than they can pay.

As for the end... It seems the Drow knew what Cat was planning and had a counter ready. She didn't want to fight the Longstrider Cabal but now she has to face them, plus Mighty Rumena, apparently without Archer. Let's hope she has a plan.

On another note, the true nature of the Night sheds some light on that "offering" Cat was made when she entered the Everdark. Good on her, not acquiring that sort of ugly debt. It's interesting, how Above gifts miracles to basically all their priests and a lot of heroes, while Below does it only to those they own.

*RanVor*

Above do give their miracles to their priests and heroes, but don't they own every single one of them, in a sense?

*Dainpdf*

Not in the literal one that Below owns the Drow. While Above has the Good guys eating straight from its hand ideologically, the Drow literally depend on sacrificing their own to Below to survive.

Although, now that I think about it, the Heroes that get the most Light are the choir-touched. And they have all been essentially hollowed out and filled with Above's purpose...

Still, Heroes and even angels can fall. The Drow can't renege on Below. And, actually, the demons can't either. Don't know about devils. Interesting thing, that in this way Above is more permissive than Below. Weird inversion.

[benthelynx](#)

Can't they? Wouldn't that be Cat's ideal endgame – to steal the drow from below?

*Dainpdf*

Considering they owe them more lifespans than they have?

The only reason any Drow lives any length of time is the Night. And since they mostly kill each other, the amount their civilization as a whole pays back each year is most likely inferior to the amount they borrow via births.

[benthelynx](#)

Debts only matter if you have to pay them – and fae trickery with contracts is an old story, as is Cats approach to Gordian knots.

*Dainpdf*

Fae contract trickery is generally them swindling someone, not them helping someone get out of a Faustian deal.

[benthelynx](#)

Not that the most recent chapter seems to be going that way.

*Dainpdf*

No one here is an oracle. I hope.

[Tohron](#)

Next line:  
"All according to plan."

*caoimhinh*

Remember Cat's famous words in her first trip to Arcadia:

"We're going to bullshit so hard it becomes a prophecy."

*Andrew Mitchell*

Oh, I hope not. She can't have prepared for this exact situation. But I'm sure she's prepared some contingencies that will be useful.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Exploded into the fray and into Arcadia.

...

At least that was what has been telegraphed.

I'm curious to see what really happens.

*Nairne .01*

Honestly this is a very annoying move EE. Now that place in me that craves for awesome chapters has stirred and it hungers for what kind of resolution you will give us.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Given how well this series has unfolded, I'm 95% sure EE will deliver an awesome resolution to this crisis.

*lennymaster*

Does anyone know where I can find as much of the song as has been revealed?

[simeraz](#)

if you are talking about the girl who climbed the tower there

[http://abridged-guide-to-evil.wikia.com/wiki/](http://abridged-guide-to-evil.wikia.com/wiki/The_Girl_Who_Climbed_The_Tower)

[The\\_Girl\\_Who\\_Climbed\\_The\\_Tower](http://abridged-guide-to-evil.wikia.com/wiki/The_Girl_Who_Climbed_The_Tower)

if not sorry do not know

*lennymaster*

Thanks!

*Zaver SaintCloud*

I suppose this should be a given, but.. the Gods Below are dicks



*Andrew Mitchell*

Yeah, they are. For the first time, I'm now thinking of them as active agents in all this.

[sengachi](#)

I like how Cat uses the lowercase possessive 'my lord' instead of the honorific 'my Lord'. It's a nice touch.

*superkeaton*

I am now quite fond of Mighty Rumena.

*Kletanio*

I don't quite understand the nature of the deal with Below and where it went wrong. Further, why Night is holding this at bay. Can someone help explain it to me?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

So the Twilight Sages fucked up. They tried to make drow immortal. That worked for a time, kinda. Then they realized the immortality came from killing a fuck ton of drow. To stop all drow from dying off, Sve Noc made a deal with Below kinda, and took a massive loan with no intention of ever paying it back. She's keeping the whole drow population alive with Night, as well as researching how to make them immortal without it.

*Komplode*

Do I regret staying up all night waiting for the chapter to come out? Guess I'll find out tomorrow at work

*Tirion*

Rumena: "I'm distracting you, you big turd blossom!"

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## Chapter 76: Storm Surge

*"Quite literally not what I was aiming for, but I can work with this."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II, as her flying fortress began falling on Laure

Why was it always explosions?

Everybody always tried to blow me up. Akua, Pilgrim, too many Summer fae to count. Even William, and he didn't even have powers that made it easy for him – he'd used godsdamned munitions. Was there some manual you got when you became Named that set it out as a preferred tactic? Just once, for diversity's sake, someone should start with fire. Or ice, or even bloody lightning. Sure I'd dabbled in the explosion method myself so some – viper tongues one and all – might call me a hypocrite for complaining, but in my defence this was reaching a point where I'd received a lot more explosions than I'd dealt out. Once more, this savage world of ours was proving to be deeply unjust at its core. I was probably going to be blamed for this too. This tower would prove to be some deeply holy place to the drow, and good ol' Catherine Foundling would be charged with desecration of some fancy Night temple. It was getting as bad as the goblinfire, which for the record I didn't use nearly as often as some people implied.

*Thinking of you, Hakram.*

"Would, like, shadow snakes be too much to ask for?" I said.  
"Sure there's a lot of phallic symbolism involved, but-"

A hole the size of a watermelon formed in my torso, scattering my organs in a shower of gore even as I fell. The Longstrides either had a very dark sense of humour or they weren't the most stirring of conversationalists. There were six – no, seven, one was half-veiled by an illusion of Night – drow below and they went about their assault with calculated professionalism. The explosion that'd made an abstractly-patterned portrait of my insides all over the stone had blown me back towards the wall, where a blanket of shadow was already awaiting me. The acid trick again? Best not to test it out, I decided. My wings were smothered in strands of Night the moment they tried to move and take me out of freefall, but I had other options. The gate opened under me, and after a few heartbeats of falling through Arcadian sky I gated back out atop the now-roofless tower. Mighty Rumena was still perched at the edge of it, standing unruffled with its hands folded into obsidian-ringlet sleeves. I killed my wings and formed them out again, getting rid of the interfering Night, and landed on the opposite side with largely accidental grace.

"You seem irritated," Rumena noted. "Is your attempted enslavement of my entire race proving too troublesome for your tastes?"

"That one was a fair shot," I conceded. "Are you not taking part in this kill-a-queen festival?"

"Humans," the Mighty sighed. "Such impatient creatures. All in due time, Losara Queen."

I liked to think I wasn't so much of a fool as to fall for the exact same trick twice in a row, so even as we spoke I'd started moving. Just because I'd found seven of the Longstrides so far



didn't meant that was all of them. The sudden attack had not been a pleasant surprise, but my plan was still working out at the moment – as made clear by the fact that I'd been ambushed by a small pack, not the full roster of two hundred. I learned why this particular lot had been the vanguard the moment I leapt down to temple's roof a few dozen feet below and to the side, when they smoothly walked out of the shade cast by statues. In a loose circle of which I was the centre. I was going to get surrounded no matter where I went, wasn't I? Shadow-striding, my Peerage had called it. I was kind of a pain I was no longer the only one on the field with an unfair mobility trick.

"So, you're Longstride Cabal," I said. "Are we not even going to have a round of introductions? Pretty rude of you, I have to say."

I didn't have eyes in the back of my head – although I could actually grow those, I'd found out, I still hadn't figured out how to make them function properly – so I could only make out the appearance of the five relatively in front of me. Not unexpectedly, there was little common to their armaments and looks. Most of them were ageless in that way the Mighty were, but there was one looking even older than Rumena and one I'd have called a teenager if not for the too-sharp features. Spears, swords, one had a nifty steel hammer and there was even one wielding some kind of chain with sharp spikes at the end that had to be a nightmare to actually use in a fight. Armour varied from half-naked to a set of full plate in what I was pretty sure was rune-inscribed granite. Tactics were going to be tricky here: the weapons were probably the least dangerous thing about them, but if they still bothered to bring them into a battle it would be with the expectation they'd have some use. The one in plate, which also looked like it'd been made from grey leather left too long out in the sun, was the only one to reply.

"Full account of your deeds will be taken from a follower after the hunt has come to an end, Queen of Lost and Found," the Mighty said. "There is no need to worry they will be forgot after your passing."

"Not exactly what I was getting at," I replied.

There was a soft sound near the back of the roof and I pivoted slightly so that section entered my peripheral vision. My brow rose: Rumena had joined us, making the leap down effortlessly. The Longstrides parted around it, allowing it to stand among the circle surrounding me. Allies? I hadn't thought this lot, or even drow in general, the kind of people to stick to a pact past its immediate purpose being fulfilled.

"You are seen, Rumena Tomb-Maker," the drow in plate said. "Out of respect for your past office, you will not be hunted this night. Depart without strife."

Tomb-Maker, huh. That was the kind of epithet only people you didn't want to fuck with ended up earning. The drow, stooped old creature that it was, straightened its back with a nasty crack.

"Make me," Mighty Rumena said, voice utterly serene.

Damn. Sure, it'd baited me into a pretty bad situation and it was most likely after my head. But I couldn't deny the old monster had *class*.

"Are you sure I can't recruit you?" I felt compelled to ask. "I'll be honest, I would spend good money to see you punch Saint in the face."

"So be it," plated-drow shrugged, flatly ignoring me. "Under auspices red I declare-"

"*Drown*," I shamelessly interrupted, and ripped open my gates.

Three of them shaped like a dome going over all of us. Why not? I had nothing to fear from the waters. And I certainly didn't owe them the courtesy of allowing them to finish whatever murderous ceremonial phrase they'd wanted to speak. It took three heartbeats for the mass of water to hit the rooftop, and by then I was the only one left on it. A thought had the gates closing as the temple under me collapsed, icy waters tearing through the roof with a thunderous crash, and the weight of it had me crushed against the ground beneath. It didn't matter: I formed a globe of ice around myself and gated out heartbeats before some spike of Night ripped through where'd I'd been, leaving Arcadia to tread on the wet grounds outside the temple. I could have gone further out, but the whole point of using the lake-gates as an opening volley had been giving me materials easy to work with. A flick of the wrist had the lakewater turning into mist, billowing out and swallowing our surroundings. I pricked my ears, but could not hear a single one of them moving. Silencing their footsteps was too basic a use of Night for it to have been reasonable to hope otherwise, I conceded, but at least the mist would hinder their vision.

I felt Night flare above and looked up, quietly climbing a large hall's roof to get a better angle, and what I found had me frowning. They'd put us in a box. Using the mist as delineation for the area, one of them had slapped down a rectangular box of roiling Night – with all nine of us presumably inside it. It should be useless, I thought, since I could gate out anytime. But the dawning itch on my skin told a different story. It felt like a ward, or at least something to the same effect. I kept moving, since staying in the same place for too long was bound to get me discovered and then surrounded in swift succession. I glamourised out the sound my footsteps, unwilling to rely on my own limited sneaking abilities to keep me out of trouble, and dropped in a low crouch when I heard the sound of stone shattering in the

distance. I couldn't see anyone, at the moment, so I carefully began heading into that direction to see what'd happened. Had Rumena and the Longstrides begun fighting? I got the answer before I finished making my way there, when a temple to my left was brutally flattened by another massive spike of Night. Ah, they weren't fighting. They were methodically getting rid of anything I could use for cover.

If they kept this up, I'd end up on flat grounds with nothing to manoeuvre around. After that, all they needed to do was get rid of the mist and it was all going to eagerly proceed downhill. Clever enemies were the worst, I thought.

Still, I wasn't without an arsenal of my own. I reached for my domain – not to call it down, but to use the substance of it as a tool. *One, two, three.* I continued forging long chains ending in hooks out of Moonless Night, making them come out of my palms, until I had enough of them for every structure I could make out around me. After that it was only a matter of tossing them at the temples and towers and making the hooks sink into them. I broadened my stance, more out of habit than true need, and after grasping all the chains tightly began to turn. My muscles might be make-believe, nowadays, but the strength was real. With one snap after another I ripped out temples and towers, sometimes mere walls but on occasion the whole thing when the foundation was weak enough. With a grunt I put my whole body into it spinning the entire mass of ripped stone like a giant mace. I didn't need to actually find the drow if I hit *everything*. Tearing through other structures slowed the momentum, but I kept spinning and so did my makeshift weapon. Had I hit any of them? Maybe, maybe not. I wouldn't have been able to feel it if I had, given the weight difference. Given the nature of my improvised weapon it wasn't hard for the drow to guess at my location – there were chains leading straight to it – and that was things got interesting.

Odds had always been low I'd actually kill one of them with the whirl. There'd been another reason for the move, and I showed as much when a pair of Longstrides emerged out of shadows and I picked two chained temples to send smashing down at them. Both dispersed, shadow-illusions broken by the impact, and it was from behind me they struck. One spear from the left, one from the right, and when I attempted to move forward out of their reach I found a large snake of Night striking out. Yeah, they'd definitely heard me complain. And they had a truly terrible sense of humour. I had only a heartbeat to react, my chained weapons too far to recall in time, so I dropped low. The spears and snake followed my descent flawlessly, but that moment of readjustment bought me just long enough to encase myself in ice. It shattered under the spear tips while the snake went straight though, but I'd left a hole at the bottom and turned into mist. I went back into human shape behind the snake, swinging a wall at it that

caved in the shape and broke it apart. Night pulsed like a heartbeat on the other side of the mauled ice structure, and I backed away expecting an assault.

It wasn't, I grasped a moment too late. It was a *beacon*.

The full seven Longstrides were on me in moments, shadow-striding into the scene. The chains were getting too unwieldy for our combat range, so I drew them back into my domain. Just in time for the enemy cabal to prove they'd come by their reputation honestly. The two fighting me hadn't been going at it seriously, I realized. They were just pinning me down until the other hunters arrived – and when they did, the gloves came off. The sheer variety of Secrets caught me off-guard. One turned into a mass of shifting shadows not even remotely humanoid, tendrils and clawed limbs sprawling out. Another knelt and pressed a palm against the ground, Night spreading from it like a tide of rancid oil. One's own shadow slithered out to connect to mine as another touched its shoulder, and immediately I felt my blood turn into a muddy sludge. A ball of shadows formed over my head, casting impossible stripes of darkness down around me, and drow flickered out of those like they were passages. The entire thing had taken, at most, two heartbeats from the moment they'd gathered here. I'd fought heroic bands that were not nearly that skilled at working together. Shit, I wasn't sure the *Calamities* would be that good at it.

If this turned into a brawl I was dead. Winter or not, apotheosis or not.

"Let's try it, then," I said. "Your Night against mine."

Darkness fell over all of us, my kingdom manifest – for I was Sovereign of Moonless Nights, and here even Mighty were but troublesome guests. Cold beyond cold enveloped the Longstrides, coating their bodies with frost as their feet bit into supernaturally pristine snow. Not a speck of light here, though it mattered not to my eyes. Something deeper than vision was my due in here. Their Secrets broke like kindling, hollowed out by Winter, but the drow did not flinch. I'd seen my domain make sport of sorcery and devils, turn men into trifles, yet the seven Longstrides shook it off with seemingly little effort. Even bereft of their Night they moved, weapons in hand, and fell upon me. I could feel my power slithering through my veins, pure and untethered, and words were on the tip of my tongue. I swallowed them, familiar by now with the touch of alienation. It was growing in me faster than I could shunt it off. With flawless timing the seven struck together, but before their blades could bite into me I bit into *them*. There was warmth at the heart of them, flickering candles, and with a pluck of my fingers I smothered the flames. One after another they dropped, puppets without strings.

"Oh, but we are far from done," I murmured as the last fell. "I have a use for you."

If I was forced to use my domain this early, then I would at least get the full value out of it. Silver eyes turned blue, a brilliant droplet spreading and devouring the irises whole. My Longstrides rose to their feet. There was still Night in them, but it was cowed. Tamed by the looming power of Winter holding primacy inside them. How many Secrets would they retain, I wondered? It would be interesting to find out when I sent them out to war. There were still one hundred and seventy three to add to my cohort of monsters, after all. The one wearing plate – *Segur*, my mind whispered – suddenly shivered. Surprise stilled my hand, just as I'd been about to shatter the domain and return to a marred Creation. It was no longer living, I'd killed it myself. So why did it feel cold?

"Glorious," the corpse laughed. "Deeply, unspeakably glorious. You stole half the Garden from their hands, Losara. It is *all there*."

Tendrils of silver spread through blue eyes, clawing back ownership.

"You have no power here, Sve Noc, save that which I grant you," I said. "And I grant you nothing."

Will against will, we struggled. I would have been crushed in an instant, were this Creation. But here she was trying to thread an ocean through the eye of a needle. I drove her back, inch by inch.

"But you did," the corpse said. "You let me in. You gave me an anchor. And so I stand, within and without."

Only the smallest sliver left. She was desperately trying to keep it in her grasp, but she did not belong here. I did not simply rule this place, it was me. My soul, or whatever was left of it, given shape. The dead drow turned to face me, the last pinprick of silver dying.

"Let it be one and the same," Sve Noc laughed. "*All is Night*."

I won and lost in the same moment. Chased her away just as she struck. My world of moonless night screamed, a cut appearing in the endless sky. It spread quick as lightning, splitting the starless firmament in half, and I screamed along my domain at the inhuman pain of it. A touch like fingers whispered through the opening, grasping the sides, and like curtains being opened the sky was pulled back.

I stood kneeling, forced back to Creation, as the whole of Winter was unleashed upon Great Strycht.

It was merciful thing when the darkness took me.

—

I woke up in a monstrous amount of pain, shivering.

My eyes opened to a moonless sky and a scream ripped itself free of my throat. It was wrong, wrongwrongwrong. It should not be there. There was no ceiling behind it, only an endless void that was no longer mine. My limbs were numb from the heinous throbbing that had claimed every speck of my body, feeling nothing but the pain. My fingers clawed at the ground and it gave. Were they bleeding? It was like they'd been scraped raw. I forced myself to sit, but my arms were shaking and I fell back. I swallowed the scream, but my throat bulged and I found myself spewing on the ground. I had to crawl away not to drown in it, nothing but clear water leaving my mouth. But the taste of it... Gods, nothing tasted like that. It was like life leaving my wretched body. I was surrounded, I finally saw, by ice and snow. As if some divine blizzard had ripped through the city, sparing nothing. I could not hear a single living soul. I couldn't... My body seized up and I twisted like a worm against the frost. I could hear only my own breath. I couldn't hear faraway, not anymore. I could no longer sense the heat of living things, or see flawlessly in the dark. *She's taken all of it.*

I was just Catherine Foundling, and might as well have been blind.

I could feel my heart beat, my real heart. My blood flow from my veins. I had never in my life felt so vulnerable as I did then, stripped of every bit of power I'd clawed my way into owning. Made just a bag of blood and meat, one wracked with feverous shivers. The pain was going away, replaced by a cold numbness, and that was when I realized I was dying. Gods, I was tired. I tried to crawl again but my leg flared with agony even through the numbness. My limp, I thought, almost drunkenly. My bad leg. The wound I'd cheated my way out of so many times, but it seemed that dance could only be danced for so long. I fought to keep my eyes open, but the entire world was forcing them to close. I had lost. Some part of me rebelled at the thought. The same voice that'd kept me going through butcheries and catastrophes, through every dark hour I'd ever faced. It shouted, but the sound was dim. Muted. Dying, like the rest of me. The thought came guilty, but it would not go away. It would be a relief, wouldn't it? To sleep. To finally rest. I tried to think of Callow, but found nothing there to make me stand. I had brought so much destruction to my home, every day claiming I was saving it.

I'd given so much, without a single clean victory to show for it.

I wept into the snow, tears and dark laughter choking up my throat. Snot dripped down, to my visceral disgust. How long had

it been, since I'd had *snot*? The thought startled me by its inhumanity. I'd died long before today, perhaps that was the harsh truth of it. My eyes closing here would just be a formality, a final curtain. I buried my face in the cold and waited. No footsteps came. No sharp memory drifted to the surface of my fevered mind. No vision filled my unseeing gaze, some mentor or foe chiding me or raising me up. Not a single damned thing. I was dying, and the world answered with resounding silence. But we all died alone, didn't we? That was the secret at the heart of Winter. I had worn grandiose plans in place of the regalia I disdained, and a single defeat was enough to shatter all of them. Was it like that with everyone? Or had I simply been building on sand all this time? There were no answers to be found, I knew. And the questions rang empty when I asked them. Would they mourn me? *Some*, I thought. *Few*, I admitted after. It would hurt the handful I'd found it in me to love, but that knowledge did not stir me as much as it should have. I was in pain as well, and for all that I had tried to be a better woman in the end my own pain mattered most to me. I'd stood for hours at the edge of the roof, as a child. Back at the orphanage. Because I'd been afraid of heights and hated it. Maybe there had been wisdom in that fear, I now thought. Maybe deep down I'd known there would always be that voice whispering taking the drop, oh so temptingly.

I waited and did not die. My face was warm again, I realized. I'd melted the snow enough I could breathe. I laughed. I couldn't help it. Even through the painful convulsions I laughed, until a spasm had my cheek lying against a snow.

"Do I have to do *everything* myself?" I croaked out.

I fell into another fit of laughter at that. The sound of it was ugly to my ears, but then everything was. Gods, this entire world had gone from a master's work to a child's scribble. It almost felt beneath me to stay in it. But no, they wouldn't get to have that.

"That was your chance," I said, to no one at all.

I was already dead, wasn't I? Or close enough. A goddess had ripped open my soul and let the contents spill out. I was mortal as an insect, and there was no changing the ending striding towards me. I should have broken me, that knowledge. The inevitability of it. But it didn't. It was liberating. There were no *stakes* now. Nothing left to lose. Whether I rose or not would make no difference. So why bother, a voice insisted.

"Why not?" I whispered.

My arms gave again. Twice I fell back into the same patch of ice, stuck there watching it until the pain ebbed low and I could stomach moving again. But I managed to sit the third time, and

that felt like something. My bad leg folded like parchment when I tried to stand and the fall that followed had me weeping like a child for the ache, so instead I crawled in the snow until I reached a broken wall and slowly hoisted myself up. To my hilarity, there were only about four feet of wall left to prop myself against until I'd have to stand on my own.

I had crawled to the wrong fucking wall.

I was choking on a mouthful of laughter – and bile, I was still dying – while considering where I should crawl next when a silhouette walked out of the dark. I couldn't make it out, at first, or hear it move. But eventually the face swam into focus and I found the pale silver eyes of Mighty Rumena watching me.

"Ah, finally," I drawled, regally flopping my wrist at it. "I was getting bored. And crippled, but that one's admittedly not your fault."

Choosing my words with great care, I grinned and met its gaze.

"Take me to your leader," I ordered.

---

*nipi*

Akua might be forging a story for herself with that "friendship" bit. One that makes it hard to keep her in the box. After all friendship is notoriously hard to keep bottled up.

*Andrew Mitchell*

That's a good thought. I think your allusion to an AI in a box is very apt.

*NerfContessa*

It should not have been possible to remove winter from her while still alive.

I call cheating! :p

Though her way of acting is heartwarming

[MiamiMagus](#)

Found this blog completely by accident when looking for another blog. I'm going to start reading this at the beginning. That quote at the very top is awesome! Pleaee keep doing this.



– M

*Anaspides*

Cat's power has changed so much, I wondered where it would go next. I think this has been my favourite chapter so far! What a fantastic story. On to the next chapter!

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## Chapter 77: What Goes Around

*"In trying to beat a fool at her own game, I have only made another."*

– Theodosius the Unconquered, after the Maddened Fields (apocryphal)

"Not to nitpick," I said. "But being carried this way is doing great injury to the inherent dignity of a woman of my station."

Mighty Rumena had, after sundry misadventures, hoisted me over its shoulder and was now lugging me around like a sack of cabbage. I got the distinct impression the old bastard was having a lot of fun with this.

"If I allow you to lean against me instead," Rumena said. "Will you cease attempting to strangle me?"

The drow was a tyrant, truly. It was my Gods-given right as a Callowan to rebel against foreign powers regardless of context or feasibility.

"Yes," I lied.

Mighty Rumena fluidly leapt over a canal, landing on the other side with barely a sound. It jostled my body enough I had to bite down on a scream.

"So," I got out. "We doing this or what?"

"No," the Mighty said. "I merely wanted to see if you would lie."

That prick. I'd gotten my hopes up, thinking of looking for something sharp to stab it with instead of having another fruitless go at strangulation – my fingers were too shaky to have the requisite strength, and to be honest I wasn't sure it actually needed to breathe.

"Fine," I said. "Obviously you're a man – drow, I mean – of deep cunning and perception. I'll level with you, Rumena. I was going to try to murder you again."

"I am aghast at this unexpected turn," Mighty Rumena said.

Oh, so Crepuscular *could* do sarcasm. This was a day for revelations.

"Since murder doesn't seem to be working out for me, I'll try bribery," I continued. "Betray... who is it you're working for at the moment?"

I probably should have inquired as much before beginning the process, I mentally conceded. Hindsight was a harsh mistress, as the effective evisceration of my soul and mantle had made clear.

"Arguably my kind," Rumena said. "Practically speaking, the youngest sister."

"That the murderous one, or the one that's basically suffered a few millennia of torture by Night?" I squinted.

"The former," the Mighty replied.

"That's fine then," I mused. "So, betray her drow ass and I'll give you half of Procer."

"I know of no such place," Rumena said.

"Right, it's pretty recent as far as nations go," I muttered. "Think the central chunk of western Calernia."

"And you currently rule these lands?" the drow asked.

"Sure," I said. "I mean, in a manner of speaking."

Lies were, technically, one of those.

"Fertile fields?" the Mighty asked. "Peaceful neighbours?"

Well, half of that was true. There was that unfortunate thing about the Kingdom of the Dead and the Chain of Hunger bordering it, but nowhere was perfect.

"Absolutely," I answered without missing a beat.

"You are a surprisingly terrible liar," Mighty Rumena said, sounding impressed in the worst way. "How have you managed to survive this long?"

"Good officers, luck and the ability to walk off lost limbs," I replied, more honestly than I'd meant to.

Of course, in a sense I hadn't. Survived, that was. I'd died at First Liesse and then kind of again at the Doom. The whole Winter-eats-your-soul thing had felt in the general wheelhouse of dying, anyway.

"Luck always runs out," Rumena said.

"What a deep philosopher you are," I sighed. "Any more profound truths you'd like to share?"

"You warred against an entity older than the civilization that birthed you," the Mighty said. "Wielding weapons in which it holds superior mastery, following a plan laughably straightforward and fielding armies which owed you no true loyalty. All this, and somehow you believed you would win."

"Ouch," I said, not particularly offended.

I'd already lost, what was there left to be offended about?

"We going somewhere with this?" I asked after a heartbeat of silence.

"Nowhere, evidently," Mighty Rumena said.

The Secret of Scathing Retorts was unfathomably deadly, I mused. The half-blind pieces of meat that were now my eyes took in our surroundings as well as they could as the drow carried me through the ruins of Great Strycht – and there could be no word for it but ruins. Winter had blown through mercilessly, upending temples and halls like children's toys. We must have still been in the central district when it found me, because our surroundings were vaguely familiar. They lay off the canals, at least, since the city looked like it'd been smashed to pieces by an irritated god. In a sense, it *had* been. It wasn't hard to find the dead, though it certainly was to tell which side they'd belonged to. Frozen silhouettes of drow, many seized halfway through a motion, were scattered all over the district. Some had tried to run, I saw. It hadn't done them any good.

"Is everyone in the city dead save the two of us?" I asked.

"You were not so powerful as that," Mighty Rumena said. "Many of those who fought under your banner remained, before they were made to kneel. And Sve Noc preserved her own when the heart of you was ripped out."

"Soul," I corrected mildly. "The soul of me, Rumena. Come on, it's not that complicated a concept."

I was mildly surprised having that ripped open hadn't killed me, but then maybe I shouldn't be. Akua had walked around without hers for years before our little heart-to-hand. She'd also been

soulless in another way entirely long before that, but that was a different story.

"Not complicated," the Mighty slowly repeated. "Are you chiding me for considering the process of apotheosis a complex matter, Losara?"

"I mean, Praesi know about it," I said. "How complex can it really be?"

"I will cherish the memory of our little talks, after your throat is slit," Rumena said. "I believe you might be the single most aggressively ignorant creature I've ever encountered."

I spat out a ball of phlegm and bile, aiming for its leg and missing narrowly. So, interesting information there. I was being carried to a sacrificial altar, which I'd already kind of suspected but hadn't known for sure. Added to the bit about my former forces being 'made to keel', I now considered it a safe bet that Ol' Sve herself had come down for a bit of ceremonial knifework. Strange she hadn't killed them outright, though. Was it because she couldn't, or because she had a better use for them? It'd be a splendid little bit of irony if she ended up using the framework of oaths I'd built as the model for the army she'd be taking to the surface.

"I'm flattered, really, but I'm not in the market for a nemesis," I replied. "There's probably a line and it'd be unfair to all those angry heroes for you to just skip ahead."

"It is admirable that you refuse to compromise your principles even moments away from your unmaking," the Mighty said.

"I can't tell if you're being sarcastic right now," I said. "And I think my hearing might be going, because there's this weird screaming sound that-"

I paused, then swallowed. Oh, so my hearing *wasn't* going. Nice to know. Slightly less nice was the patchwork of rippling Winter I was looking at. Ribbons of shimmering blue storming about uncontrolled, eating away at an obsidian tower like the King of Winter had suddenly said 'fuck this building in particular'. My vision dimmed and I looked away blinking. It stayed dim, like a shadow had been cast over everything I saw.

"You could have told me I'd go blind looking at it," I screamed through the ruckus.

Rumena made me wait until we'd left the immediate area before answering.

"Did you?" the drow curiously asked. "Interesting. It should have driven you mad as well, then, and you sound no less coherent than usual."

"I think we hit the bottom of that barrel a few years back, buddy," I said.

That had been a knot of pure Winter, I thought, and it had been running wild. The power had never done that while I held the mantle. The – I avoided thinking of the word, knowing it would send me into another episode – nothing above our heads was the same as my domain's, so I'd assumed that Sve had devoured the whole thing. Or at least bound it somehow. But this was an interesting twist, wasn't it? Even if was in her belly, it looked like she was having some issued with digestion.

"So, how strong is your boss' stomach?" I casually asked.

"As strong as it takes," Mighty Rumena soberly replied.

"Gods, is that what I sound like when I talk that way?" I asked. "Someone could have told me it made me sound like an asshole. I'd have stopped."

"I assure you, there is no need to rely on specific sentences for that effect to be achieved," the drow smoothly replied.

"So much sass, Rumena," I grinned. "But was that uncertainty I detected? Someone's worried Sve bit off more than she can chew."

"A passing thing," the Mighty said. "In a sense, much like you."

Ah, and there it was. The reason it hadn't just nonchalantly torn off my head back when it'd first found me choking on my death in the middle of a broken wreck. I was still of use somehow. A sacrifice to cement Sve Noc's hold on my domain? I'd earned the mantle through murder, back in the old days of about two years ago. It might be that proper succession required the same deed by her hand.

"So, are we there yet?" I asked.

Rumena sighed, and I took perverse pride in the way I was managing to get under the skin of a creature a few millennia my senior. Unfortunately it then shook me on its shoulder, letting me slip back a little, and the fresh pull on my abdomen had me howling. The throbbing pain brought unwilling tears to my eyes, and to add insult to injury my throat began heaving. The droplet that tipped the cup was that even as I began spewing out clear water and bile the Mantle of Woe fell down over my face, smothering it all over my face. The Mighty left me like that for quite a while, until my stomach felt empty once more, and only

drew me back up when left the district. The vomit-strewn cloak remained draped all over my face.

"That was genuinely cruel," I rasped out.

"Possibly why I enjoyed it so much," Mighty Rumena noted.

It was not far before our magic journey together came to an end, though of course I had no idea. The Mantle of Woe was still covering my face. I was carefully set down on solid ground, propped up against something that felt like stone. My legs didn't pain me at all, which I took as the opposite of a good sign. I was metaphysically bleeding out. Rumena's fingers closed around the hem of my cloak and pulled it back, finally revealing my surroundings to me. It was a hill of barren stone, one that must have once been an island. My Mighty friend was at my side, but we had other company: over a hundred drow were scattered around us, weapons in hand. The rest of the Longstrides? Without my otherworldly senses, I had no way to tell them apart from any other drow. Ahead of me lay a broke stele of obsidian, the symbols on it faded and the better part of it laid down as a makeshift altar. All of that paled, though, in comparison to the silhouette standing over it. A perfectly androgynous face larger than my entire body stared down at me, descending into a neck that melded with the robes of pure Night beneath it. Eyes of unbroken silver shone bright, but it was the hair that drew my attention. Long strands of darkness that went up into the nothing above like puppet strings.

"Sve Noc," I said. "Good of you to finally show up."

I cleared my throat, spat another bit of bile to the side.

"You may kneel," I allowed.

There was a heartbeat of silence, and then I was drowning. Thick, cloying terror buried me – the kind I had not known in ages, that screamed so loud it drowned out every thought. It was a primal thing, old as the nights where mankind had first huddled around fires for fear of what prowled outside. It was, I thought, almost religious. I began laughing in delight.

"That's the stuff," I grinned, body shivering uncontrollably.

"*Gods*, you wouldn't believe how long it's been since I felt this much like a person."

Did she think this would break me? She had *ripped open my soul*. There was not a godsdamned thing left to break. The sea around me ebbed, and still the tinkling pleasure of real emotion stayed in my every extremity.

"Alone and lost," the Priestess of Night said. "As promised, Catherine Foundling."

"Please," I said, waving a shaking hand. "Call me 'Your Majesty'."

My half-blind eyes drifted around her... well body, was the closest word to it. And the revelations of the day continued, for there were threads in her robes that seemed more solid than others. Whatever she was doing, it wasn't finished. Considering the altar in front of me, the shape of the conclusion was rather obvious.

"Queen of Nothing," Sve Noc said. "And so no queen at all."

"Am I?" I mused. "Then why bring me here at all?"

"Tools wear no crowns," Sve Noc said.

"Clearly you've never met Cordelia," I said. "From the fact that my throat has yet to be slit, I take it we've a little while still before we get to the good stuff?"

"Your doom is writ," the creature said.

"Yes yes, very ominous," I snorted. "Rumena, be a dear and find my pipe will you? No point it making this uncivilized."

The Mighty had moved a few steps away from me while I traded barbs with its goddess, but not entirely left. It glanced at Sve and found no answer there – she seemed a little miffed by my refusal to take this seriously – so in the end it strode forward to rifle through my cloak pockets. I took the opportunity to clasp its ringlet tunic and wipe my face somewhat clear of vomit. You know, for appearances' sake. Rumena stuffed my pipe half-heartedly and offered it. I clasped it between my teeth and leaned forward.

"A light?" I asked.

The drow's fingers lit up with black flame and within moments the wakeleaf was burning. Black flame, really? Did every single application of Night have to colour appropriate? There was such a thing as taking an aesthetic too far. I breathed in the smoke with a shiver of pleasure, letting it stream out of my nostrils.

"Oh," I murmured around the shaft. "So that's what it used to taste like. I'd almost forgotten."

To my utter delight, the little moan I let out after made Rumena visibly uncomfortable. I leaned back against my stone.

"I don't suppose any of you folks have a decent bottle of wine?" I called out at the Longstrides. "It's been ages since I could properly enjoy one of those."

There was some confused shuffling, but no answer.

"And they call Callow a backwater," I sighed. "You all make for terrible hosts."

"No guest are you," Sve Noc said. "A bird of misfortune, headed to grim ending."

"Bold words, coming from a woman visibly fucking up her apotheosis," I replied. "How's Winter taste, Sve? A bit too much to swallow?"

It was a true shame Indrani wasn't there to make a ribald joke out of that, I thought.

"All will be Night," the Priestess thundered.

"You're just a pile of disappointments, aren't you?" I said. "At least Rumena knows its way around a phrase. You're just yelling threats and platitudes. It's pretty common with old monsters, you know? You haven't talked like a person for too long, so you don't know how anymore. Even Neshamah has touches of that."

"You think to threaten me with the King of Death?" Sve Noc laughed. "You know nothing."

I pulled at my pipe, eyes almost rolling into the back of my head at the pleasant sensation. I'd become so much less, but what I had left was so much more *alive*. Something as simple as the burn of smoke in my throat felt like the finest of wines.

"I know some things," I retorted mildly, spewing out the smoke. "Like, for example, that Winter is a hard stallion to break in. It's not really meant to *give*, you get me? It's not flexible the way a Name is. Now, if I had to guess, you're too far gone into whatever the fuck you actually are to worry about something as paltry as alienation. So the issue would be that you're just as... static as the power you're trying to eat. You can't change to match it, like I did, so you can't align either. You have to bludgeon it into obedience, and that's proving a little trickier than you'd like."

"Crawling, wretched thing," Sve Noc said. "Still trying to escape your fate even now. Stripped of every ounce of stolen power, tumbling through death's door."

"Oh, Sve," I said gently, a grin tugging at my lips. "You poor thing. It's already too late. You see, this was all part of my plan."

In the absence of an actual scheme, it seemed like I was going to have to bluff a living goddess. Odds were I was going to bite it regardless, but if I was going to die I was at least going to shit talk the opposition on my way out.



"Your deception is feeble," the Priestess said. "Your plans are known to me."

"Convenient, isn't it?" I mused. "That you knew them all. That you crushed me so easily. Almost like I let you."

"Mad and desperate," Sve Noc said. "You resort to flimsy lies."

I inhaled the smoke, closing my eyes, and let it out. The acrid tang stung my nose, beautifully so.

"Why so many warriors, Sve?" I asked, opening my eyes.

"Witnesses, honour guard? Nah, this is best left quiet. Not the kind of knowledge you want floating out there. I think it's a statement of power. A reminder of hopelessness, to break me down. But if that's the case, why *these* warriors?"

I croaked out a laugh.

"If you really wanted to stick it to me," I said, "you wouldn't have used people you already owned body and soul. You would have had my own army standing in submissive silence. But you don't."

I met eyes of blinding silver and smiled.

"I wonder why that is?"

"They have knelt," Sve Noc said.

"I think you broke them," I said. "I think you hurt them. But that you don't own them, not yet. Because this is still my soul, even splattered over the countryside, and you need a little something to take you over the top. Queen's blood, queen's death. A passing of the torch."

I cackled.

"How does it feel, to fall short even after millennia of scheming?" I asked. "It *stings*, I bet."

Gods forgive me, but I had missed this. Teetering at the brink of annihilation, knowing if I was struck down I would not rise again. Dancing with death bereft of anything but wits and lies, knowing the first mistake would also be the last. It was terrible and treacherous, the kind of recklessness that had left a trail of ruins in my wake, but Merciless Gods *I had missed this*. I'd grown dull, under the sway of my mantle, and now I felt sharp again. Maybe I was drunk on the feeling of my own mortality, on the truth that there was nothing left to lose, but I felt like myself again. Finally, just as life left my body.

"And all you fine Mighty," I called out. "Will you just stand there like silent statues as your fates are thrown like dice? Do you not have a stake in this?"

"Be silent, Losara," Mighty Rumena hissed.

"Come on, be someone," I grinned. "Act. Sure, I would have made you servants. For the span of a cosmic breath and no more, but I'll own to that. I never thought much of it, since that thing in front of me has already made slaves of you."

"We are Mighty," one of the Longstrides replied. "Your words are empty."

"That might be true right now," I said. "But will you still be, when she's done eating Winter? Hells, I would have required service for a decade or two but *her*? She'll own you wholesale until the Last Dusk."

Rumena struck me across the face, and the only thing I could think was that it'd just made a mistake. If it'd let me keep talking unworried that would have been one thing, but trying to silence me? That gave my words weight. And theirs was a path of betrayal, wasn't it? They watched for the knife in everyone's hand. Even their own goddess. I couldn't make out what happened, but a moment later Rumena was thrown back and two silhouettes stood between it and me.

"Speak your piece, Losara," one of them ordered.

**"Enough."**

They screamed, the two drow, and fell as Night ripped its way out of their bodies like smoke. The same happened all around me, every Longstride messily collapsing. The tall shape of Sve Noc drifted forward, tendrils of darkness wrapping around my body and dragging me to the altar. She was looming over me in a way that was not physical, her... presence enveloping me whole. As if I was being devoured.

**"Trickery is no match for real power,"** Sve Noc said.

"Then fear me, drow," Akua Sahelian announced, "for I wield the power of friendship."

I turned right in time for the shade, grinning gloriously with half her body emerging from my cloak, to bury her arm into my torso up to the elbow.

I'm placing my bet on Akua being the final boss fight. A couple books later, when all is set and done, she's going to be the 'fate of the world' conflict.

*Cheese*

Mmm. I like the shape of it. "There is no greater foe than one's closest friend". Or something.

*Shequi*

I like Rumena. This story has been needing a Deadpan Snarker and I never realised it until one showed up.

*JunkerZone*

Masego, Robber, and Hakram did deadpan snark pretty well

*Oshi*

All three of whom have been carefully removed from play for the moment. I missed it too.

*stevenneiman*

Human Catherine as well. She did have a few good snarks as the Sovereign of Moonless Night, but not as many as she did as a mortal. I love how she literally gave less than no fucks about getting blasted with mind-rending terror. Puts even her performance with the Saint of Swords to shame, and that was enough to hobble the Saint down to Archer's level.

[HannaB](#)

"I think we reached the bottom of that barrel some time ago"

Catherine is not above self-burns for the sake of a good line and that's what makes her the best at it ♥

*Andrew Mitchell*

Yes!

I love it that she has a pretty realistic perspective on herself.

[HannaB](#)

My forever favorite remains "Gods, is this why Black never accepted my reports without a bottle of wine nearby?", but "we reached the bottom of that barrel a few years back" is a strong contender ♥

*stevenneiman*

Where were those two? I like both, but I don't remember either of them. Personally, my favorite self-burn from her was "My soul is full of zombies. Maybe I do need to make some friends."

*Andrew Mitchell*

The first one is from <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/11/08/chapter-42-plateau/> and the second is from this chapter.

*stevenneiman*

The thing I kinda wonder is if he actually did kill someone to claim their sass. Probably not, given that Sve Noc didn't have it.

[Adrian V](#)

Oh God i am wanting more and more for Cat to not get back her mantle or powers or whatever, i hadn't realized how much she had changed but this chapters brings back the old Cat we loved when starting the guide, she is right she may be less but at the same time she is so much more now (think quality over quantity, although that may not be a perfect comparision), i hope there is some change or mutation to the power, hell wouldn't it be funny if she steals Sve's heart? xD

And maybe i am just grasping at straws but this whole Losara is starting to sound like a posible name, think about it "Queen of Lost and Found" sounds like a name and may be even more fitting for her role int he story than black queen, she is like Sheppard in ME2!!! (the whole finding lost assassins instead of lost puppies xD)

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I'm actually really liking "Queen of Nothing" myself. For somebody who's going to conquer Praes for sure (she knows the song) and probably Procer after but has stated her intent to abdicate her current kingdom, it works. Always the conquerer, always giving the throne to another after. And Regent Vivienne of Callow, Dread Empress Akua of Praes, and maybe even Cordelia of Procer (who in my little ficlet has become the Damned known as The Fallen Prince in the process of shunning the Heroes and their goals to ally with her once enemy), all fully aware that should the accords ever be broken, the Queen of Nothing will come back with the backing of the Sovereign of Moonless Nights and her oath-bound army to see that they are upheld and the offending party educated very thoroughly that they have fucked up.

*HandyCapped*  
*crescentsickle*

That is one of the single greatest lines in this story. It is so maddeningly, terrifyingly wrong, and yet it makes sense.

Akua Sahelian wielding the Power of Friendship to defeat the dread Sve Noc.

*Djinn O'Cide*

Nothing beats "Yoink", but that comes close. By the way, Rumena is now my favorite character in the entire series. Only Archer even comes close.

*stevenneiman*

Yeah, it's a pity he wasn't established in time for the popularity contest. I don't think he'd win, but after this chapter he definitely deserves a chance if there's ever a second contest.

*philosophize70*

The first thing I thought when I read it was: "when did this become a My Little Pony crossover?"

*jonnnney*

Personally I blame the goats

[Euodiachloris](#)

Always a solid move. \*nods sagely\*

*stevenneiman*

It was totally forshadowed. All she wants is power, and she noted that Cat's methods, though occasionally a little twee, were able to actually beat her.

And yeah, I think that's actually my favorite line so far. "Yoink" was pretty good, as was "I hear you want to throw down", but for me at least this blew them out of the water. I was laughing so hard I could barely breathe for a good 30 seconds.

[HannaB](#)

She has also commented that playing hero was surprisingly entertaining.

Akua's going to stick to this side, in this my prediction is certain ♥

*Andrew Mitchell*

Certain? Really? 100% chance, for sure?

Certain enough to stake your whole bank account on it? Your life?

[HannaB](#)

I don't have a bank account with any money in it, so sure!

the life part though, hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

I would like to revise my prediction to "she is getting a redemption arc, but in the middle of it backstabbing shenanigans are fully possible" for clarification

*Andrew Mitchell*

Hahahaha. Perfect! 😊

*NerfContessa*

Indeed. We shall give her a pony name then.

Dusk glimmer?

Midnight sparkle?

:p

[doominator10](#)

This was the hardest ice laughed in a chapter all book save for when Akua borrowed Cat's body. Great job XD.

[HannaB](#)

Akua is wonderful, isn't she just ♥

*Decius*

The last thing Akua is is just.

[HannaB](#)

"Fuck off and die" – Akua, getting really into method acting

*Overneath*

I think that power of friendship line is my favorite one of the whole series so far

*d0m1n1c*

And I thought Storm Surge ended with a sheer cliff.

*Nif*

Well they're pulling a irrant the odly successful as they stated a few chapters back

*Argentorum*

Other fun thing, this proves that Wekesa was wrong about Cat. She's still herself.

Yes the Mantle changed her, but underneath, she's still the same old Cat. If she gets winter back, this time, then she'll be ready for it.

I hope she does. I want to see a Cat that is still herself even in Winter. Here's hoping Akua didn't just kill her and there's some deeper metaphysical bent to the whole arm through the chest thing.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Was she? She implied herself she might have died twice now. At the very least, it seems she likes this version of herself better.

I do think however that she's going to be okay now. I think Akua is doing the same thing Winter King did to her before. She was still mortal at that point. Less power, overall but we knew she was barely scratching the surface of winter so all the tricks she learned she can probably still do, just with a bit more effort needed and a bit less durability and immortality. Which means she won't be able to rely on them as much, which might actually be a good thing considering how it'll force her mind to stay sharp. Akua is really better equipped to handle all the big winter shit anyway. She will make an excellent Sovereign of Moonless night. Best of all, because she's now even more fae-powered then before, her need to obey her current master has only increased, and she probably is what is keeping Cat alive in the bargain which means she's got a pretty good lease on life for the moment.

*matesbe*

That... is an alternative I genuinely hadn't thought of, and it's possible (though if Akua does eat Winter and become the new Sovereign, Cat's going to need to at least pick up a Name to remain competitive in the story).

I still think Cat's going to get Winter back though; otherwise... how's she going to survive an arm through the chest? Also, it's implied that even as she's bantering she's also dying from the way her soul was cut open, just slowly.

*Author Unknown*

Interesting you should mention Cat getting a new name. Squire can't advance while her mentor is still alive and we still don't know what is happening with Black.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Cat isn't Squire anymore. Hasn't been for some time. whatever she does or doesn't become, she's not locked into that.

*stevenneiman*

Not true. Squire traditionally moves on to Black or White Knight, but Apprentice almost certainly has the same tradition with Wizard of the West and Warlock., and look at the previous Apprentice now. And for all that she retained of her lessons from Amadeus, Cat hasn't been anywhere near the track to the Black Knight for a long time. Besides, she isn't even the Squire right now, as whatever was left of the Name seems to have been torn away along with Winter. Otherwise she would have been faring a lot better in the Winter Wonderland, at least until Rumena found her.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

It Cat doesnot become Soverign again, I am 100% sure she'll end up with a name of some sort. 90% sure that name will have "Queen" in it.

*Nairne .01*

Remember that Aqua is basically a projection? Soul-arm through chest doesn't sound as wounding (physically at least). I'm thinking Aqua is giving her back the fragment of Winter, or at least giving her access to it, and via it, the rest of winter.

*Plaguehunter*

Of course there's a deeper metaphysical meaning to this, remember, she's already been technically killed twice and everything happens in threes.

*Oshi*

Yes! Someone else caught on. This is the old pattern repeated. She has died twice now. Each death leading to ever increasing power until she achieves the ultimate gift.

[HannaB](#)



That's also not counting the time Black stabbed her through her chest. Like that was apparently just him being dramatic for the hell of it, but Cat's first gain in power came through at least a symbolic death as well.

I agree with you that this is the third in a pattern though.

[Bart](#)

WTF? 😊

This is a glorious chapter in which I have no idea what is going on but it sounds great and I'm sure it'll all be explained in the end.

So Catherine is back to being a normal human? No powers at all? No Name, no Winter...

And what's up with Akua?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

One of my favourite quotes from this series:

"Who should be truly afraid? The dragon or the peasant with the sword?"

[daegone823](#)

Why because peasant can be gobbled up by dragons

or that dragons can be gobbled up by heroes (archer named especially)

I wonder what that is like being a great and prideful dragon living for hundreds of years seeing the passing of time the rise and fall of empires. Gorging on peasant after peasant, hoarding riches that serve no other use than to cement that you take and keep what you please. Still there is a vein of fear that creeps for each village you destroy for each maiden you abduct all it takes is one soul who feels it is their destiny to destroy you to end you, and they will develop powers that defy you.

Whether it being impervious to injury, an almost impossibly lucky fool that seems to fail his way to success, or a mighty sword forged by something or other that can pierce your scales.

Gives me the creeps TBH.

*RanVor*

I think you've just nailed how being Evil in Guideverse feels like.

[daegone823](#)

I wonder what the Sve Noc is thinking though, like for the longest she had this plan and it was all going well, even the dwarves massacring her people was not really a big problem as she can clearly absorb night from her people remotely.

Then out of nowhere some half god half human thing suddenly pulls the rug from her feet. The conversation where she impersonated Black(dream) even shows that she has considered if she were defeated what would Cat do with her people.

I think the Sve knows her days are numbered even before she initiated the ritual that gave her people the powers of the night. I think that being a villain is not about surviving in this world even if they have technical immortality. I believe that they are given names similar to candidates for campaigns, except more evil. The Sve is so close but her plan has been doomed from the start because her methods are outdated, not practical.

Cat's the new fresh face and the Sve is old news. Below is now backing villains with heroic charm, who can dance on both sides of the line. Cat has proven that adaptability while a weakness when it comes to the power of her name(Squire backfiring during her White Knight battle), allows her to use heroic powers. I mean look at it from the below's view Cat accomplished what the Sve tried in the span of years what took the Sve evil I mean that is god damn efficient even if she had alot of help.

She learns from her failures sort of and from her enemies like how she usurped the forces of a slave army, similar to the White Knight William who took control of Akua slave soldiers. The Sve killing those soldiers thematically has put her as the villain and Cat is the hero, the savior. Even though what she offers is "almost" just as bad.

Still evil just no as evil.

*Author Unknown*

Cat breaks out her most powerful skill: the ability to piss off absolutely anything.

[Euodiachloris](#)

It's both a bug and a feature. 😊

*Barrendur*

\_Oh, yay, great update. That certainly clarified things\_ ... too bad I don't have a font for facetiousness.

[Miles](#)

Apo-Ubua as an ally? Now that would be something to see.

Though the drow follow whomever holds the mantle which is an issue.

*Unmaker*

Sve Noc cannot subsume Winter because she can't change. But Akua has changed, so Akua can possibly wield Winter.

Villain monologues against villains don't automatically incur a story penalty. Thank you for the entertainment Cat. And thank you Rumena for being a good foil.

The fact that Cat believes she has no plan left earlier in the chapter suggests memory tampering. She hadn't forgotten about Akua but she certainly forgot what Akua's part of the plan was.

*stevenneiman*

That would explain why we never heard anything about folly. And it would mesh well with the fact that Akua just popped up, quite clearly up to something.

*Edward Ryan*

i wonder if the dwarfs knew how powerful or even had a vague idea how strong some of the Drow are?

*Andrew Mitchell*

I doubt they knew very much. They hadn't penetrated the Everdark very far IIRC.

*stevenneiman*

The thing that bugged me was the arrogance of leaving intact corpses behind. Sure, they might not have been having much trouble in the early stages of the invasion, but all it would take is one member of a race whose powers lend themselves well to stealth getting behind their lines and staying there hidden for long enough and suddenly they have to do the whole thing over again all at once. Repeat ad nauseum if they didn't learn the lesson the first time.

It's extra baffling because they seemed to have a strong enough idea of Sve Noc's power to suggest that they were well-informed.

*Andrew Mitchell*

That's a good point about the corpses. Maybe Drow can't be made into undead due to Night? Just a guess.

*stevenneiman*

I'm not talking about undead. As long as the Dead King doesn't get involved, Cat is the only one who even uses undead, they aren't nearly as dangerous as the living drow were, and she's closer to being on the dwarves' side than against them. I'm talking about some drow getting behind their lines and absorbing all the Night from all the corpses. They wouldn't need an undead army if they had that much Night. There's been some disagreement about the linearity of Night growth vs. power growth, but even if the growth isn't efficient it's still going to be a headache when somebody gets back there and comes swinging and their supply train with all that abandoned power. What the dwarves should have done was figured out some way to destroy the corpses and render the Night inert, or at least contained.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Ah, gotcha. Thanks for the additional explanation and sorry for misunderstanding. I agree that was (actually, is) a potential issue for the dwarves.

*Lucas*

That was the vanguard, not the army. I guess that they are either too strong/ arrogant to care or it's the army who can do something about the corpses with runes and whatnot

*Decius*

Which is why most of the corpses are encased in obsidian.

*Decius*

One of the themes is that armies of soldiers beat warriors. I bet they have some kind of runic counter to the shadow-stepping, for the dwarven elite who have not yet been shown to take the field.

[Dresden 67](#)

One thing I've noticed is that the Mighty's abilities all seem heavily focused on individual duels or fights between small groups. Some of them are powerful and skilled enough in those areas to pose a threat to Cat. And yet none of them have had any equivalent to Catherine's

mass-destruction capabilities. They had no answer to floods of water or mass illusions.

Which means that their usual tactics are likely very poorly suited to fighting an army of super-heavy infantry backed up by lava shooting siege engines and Named.

*WuseMajor*

That line about the power of friendship....

Honestly, her wielding that is rather akin to Black Mage wielding the power of love

...By which I mean he siphons love out of the universe and turns it into a beam of firey devastation. Every time he fires it the divorce rate increases.

*byzantine279*

I assure you, every time he fires it the divorce rate \*decreases\*. See, it isn't evil for people to part. Forcing them to stay together in spite of their misery on the other hand...

[Aran](#)

"Then fear me, drow," Akua Sahelian announced, "for I wield the power of friendship."

My little pony, my little pony  
I used to wonder what friendship could be  
Until you tore my heart out of me

*burguulkodar*

One of my favorite chapters, because of that last Akua's line.

It was MAGNIFICENT.

*Galileo*

Fuck. What a glorious chapter.

*Joan*

I guess Cutie Marks are kind of like visual Names, aren't they? Of course that makes Equestria an entire society of Named. Maybe Cat should look for an army there.

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## Chapter 78: Comes Around

*"The finest summation of Traitorous's reign I ever heard came from an illiterate peasant from the outskirts of Ater, who described it as follows: 'Like watching a snake eat its own tail, only the tail was fake the snake was an angry badger and also you are poisoned.'"*

– Introduction to 'More Art Than Act' by Hakim of Kahtan, the Haunted Scholar

And so the sound of my fragile mortal shell being ripped into signaled it was time for everyone's favourite Wasteland game: backstab, help or both. Akua had grown on me, rather like the bubonic plague, so I was going to give her the benefit of the doubt and put my money on 'both'. It was mildly surprising she'd stuck around at all, to be honest. I'd expected her to be halfway back to Praes by now, considering I'd lost my leash on her along with my soul. The unsettling sensation of fingers squeezing around my beating heart was coloured by the unspoken acknowledgement this was a dark mirror to Second Liesse's ending. And to think they said Diabolist didn't have a sense of humour. The sheer shock of being torn into this brutally and suddenly was tipping me right over the edge and straight into the grave, my vision dimming, but in the darkness power awaited. Not owned, no. Sve Noc's victory had been too deep a cut for that. But Akua bestowed upon me a chord, an invisible string, and through it my fading senses expanded.

"Both it is," I muttered. "Called it."

Winter as an independent entity was dead. I knew that instantly and instinctively as my mind glimpsed the web of power spread over Great Strycht. There would be no restoration, it was too far gone for that. Sve Noc had clumsily melded Night and Winter where she could, though the merging was far from complete and my old mantle had reacted violently to the attempt. Knots of raging power had erupted all over the city, like too-large insects caught in a web of Night: wherever they stormed they weakened the weave around them. The Priestess had been hammering them into submission, I thought, one at a time. A time-consuming process, and a difficult one – like trying to smooth out wrinkles on steel. I could feel the gargantuan weight of her presence gripping one of the storms, fingers pulling out the threads one after another and releasing them accalmed. *She had barely a sliver of her attention on me*, I thought. Broken thing that I was, I'd been judged harmless and only a cursory eye had been kept on me. Bad form, that. It would remiss of me not to make her pay harshly for it.

"You forced her to act early," Akua said.

Diabolist felt like she was at my side, but she couldn't be. I wasn't really anywhere, practically speaking. Just a ghost haunting the labyrinth, and her barely more than that. And yet if felt like her breath was whispering against my ear, like she was not even an inch away.

"So, the power of friendship," I said. "Feels a bit ungrateful to say as much after such a touching interruption, but we're not really friends. Acquaintances, at most, and that's being generous."

"You break my heart, dearest," Diabolist drawled. "Again."

"And I didn't even need to punch through your ribcage first this time," I replied, genuinely pleased. "I *am* getting better at this."

"So is she," Akua said.

She didn't point – we were presences, not flesh – but like a feather's touch her attention moved towards Sve Noc. My not-eyes followed.

"She wanted to bleed me after smoothing out all the knots," I said. "Like a coronation."

"Baptism in queen's blood, yes," Diabolist said. "Quite properly done, if a mite archaic. Queens are not as easy to acquire as they were in olden days."

"But she doesn't need it," I said, feeling out the web with a thought. "She's already winning, Akua. The Night is absorbing Winter, slowly but surely."

"This situation should feel familiar, my heart," she replied. "You are a claimant once more. The lesser one, certainly, but a claimant still."

"For what?" I asked.

"That rather depends, I think, on which of you successfully presses her claim," Akua said. "Before, I would have wagered it was sovereignty over night. But now... who knows?"

The shade laughed.

"Interesting times, dearest Catherine," she said. "Interesting times indeed."

"Interesting," I repeated. "That's a word for it. Especially considering I don't see your hat anywhere in the ring. This was

your chance to get back on top, Diabolist. There will not be another no matter the outcome."

And if she hadn't stepped in the game would have come to an end. I could still vaguely feel my body in the hands of Sve's manifestation, but she'd yet to kill it. There'd be no point, I thought. What she needed on the altar was *me*, not a mangled empty corpse. If Akua had no chance of claiming this mess for herself I would have called this pragmatism, denying the Priestess her victory at the last moment, but she'd had other options. She could have fled, she could have fought. And yet here we were.

"Am I not in your service?" Akua said. "Bindings are formality, not essence."

"Don't waste our time," I said. "She's nearly done with the knot."

I felt the shade press close to me, almost like an embrace, and I saw Akua Sahelian whole. Not the shade with the bloody hole in her chest, not the semblance of fae I'd turned her into. The same woman I'd met under the Name of Heiress, who'd schemed her way into becoming the Diabolist and vaingloriously raised her banners against the entire villainy of the East. Golden eyes set in a sculpted face, her long tresses falling in a curtain behind her. Adorned in a crimson gown set close against long legs, belted high on her waist in rubies and gold. She'd always been gorgeous. Even when I'd first met her, before I'd learned to truly hate her, I'd thought as much. This was not Akua as she was, but as she still saw herself, and I could not call her anything but the culmination of centuries of Wasteland breeding: as beautiful as she was terrible.

"I have grown tired," she said, "of iron."

"There's no walking back the Folly," I told her. "Not even for this. I'm one life, Akua. That's the weight I have on the scales."

"I consider myself something of a theologian," she said. "And yet I still lack the answer to one question. Perhaps you can answer it for me. Which matters most, Catherine, when it comes to doing good – the conviction or the act?"

There was a beat of silence as the enormity of what she'd just said sunk in.

"You can't be serious," I said.

I was not sure whether to be amazed or appalled by what she was implying. Akua might be the single most amoral person I knew, which was saying something considering I was acquainted with the fucking King of Death. And she was talking of redemption? No, I



realized. Not redemption. *The conviction or the act*, she'd said. I hated to even think it, but it fit with how she'd always done things. I used stories as an arsenal, taking up and discarding what was of use to me, but Akua? She rode them into the storm like a warhorse. It had killed her, in the end, the flying fortresses and the monologues. But before it had she'd matched an entire empire blow for blow.

"But I am," she smiled. "I shall be, Catherine, the most terrifyingly heroic woman in the history of my kind. And in the end, together we will learn the answer to my question."

"It's not the Gods you have to convince," I hissed. "It's me."

"Would you snuff me out for observing your own principles?" Akua asked. "I will do nothing but what you have demanded of me."

"They won't take you in," I said. "You have to know that. You can't *fake* being a good person."

"I have learned much from you, darling one," Akua Sahelian smiled. "I may fail, true. In my hour of judgement I may – most likely will – be unmade and cast into the deepest burning pits. But until then? Oh, what a glorious ride it will be."

She spun away from me, presence parting in full.

"Now, my dear Catherine," Diabolist said, and there was joyous laughter in her voice. "Shall we *save some innocents*?"

I would have argued still. Done something, anything, to deny this. But the last string of Winter was untangled, made docile, and even as the Night spread through it Sve Noc finally turned her whole attention to us.

**"Clever little rats,"** the Priestess of Night said. **"You have earned death at my hand."**

It felt like the tide pulling back before the wave. Something unspeakably massive gathering before release, preparing to crush everything in its path. I called on all that I was, too, but I was no longer Sovereign of Moonless Nights. There were no bottomless depths of Winter to stand behind me, no stolen mantle to make me anything more than I was. In the face of a living deity, I stood a mere mortal – one with a claim, perhaps, but no less frail for it. If she crushed me here, I thought, would die. Unmade so thoroughly there might not be enough of me left for the afterlife. And so we began the dance one last time, for keeps. Winner got to be Queen Bitch of Night forevermore, a victory almost as terrible as defeat. I didn't want it, I realized. I didn't *want* to go back to the thing I'd turned into, that pale imitation of myself. A creature playacting at being a person, more a pack of lies and ambitions than anything remotely human.

I'd feared alienation as the consequence of drawing on my mantle, all the while too far gone to realize I'd already estranged myself from everything that'd made me Catherine Foundling. Better to die than go back to it, I thought. To be nothing at all rather than be *that*. I closed my not-eyes.

"Mortal," I whispered. "To the end, whatever that may be."

A savage joy took hold of me, sweeter than wine, and I almost laughed. Even if it was doomed, even if all was lost – I would not go quietly into the night. I would go out kicking and screaming, making an unholy mess of it. Not-lips splitting into a grin, I took hold of what remained of my mind. *If you are the sea, then I am a needle*, I thought. *Slender and piercing and too slight to catch*. Hold and release, and then the impact of our wills shook the entire web. I went through like a needle through silk, and sunk into darkness. The pressure of it was crushing, a mind so much greater than my own bearing down, and I balked. *I am stone*, I thought. *The pebble beneath the coursing river, smooth and unmoving*. I crashed at the bottom, but there I remained. Unbroken. I could do this, I thought. I was so much less, but what I was could change. Adapt. She was too large to be able to do the same so easily. The sea withdrew and I let out a relieved breath. The web was frittering, I saw. Parts that had been calmed grew riotous as Sve Noc exerted herself against me. Winter was not so easily tamed.

**"Fumbling child,"** the Priestess of Night said. **"You but delay the inevitable."**

"Hells, Sve," I grinned savagely. "That's my life in a sentence."

I had become unto stone, and so she became a chisel. She struck down, lumbering and unstoppable. She had become a chisel, and so I became wind: shapeless, coursing around the might of her. The chisel broke into a storm, taking hold of me, and so I became a bird. I rode the winds, and she turned into a hand. Fingers closed around me, but I was smoke and slipped through them. It was a game of riddles, where the first mistake would be the last. Smoke was inhaled by gaping maw, the maw escaped by a scuttling rat, the rat crushed by boot only for mud to stick at the bottom of the sole. Shape to shape we went, ever changing and never twice the same. I knew, instinctively, that repetition would be barred to me. Always forward, or there could be only death. I had become a snake, coiling around a narrow spike, when Sve Noc screamed. There was a flicker, and I saw her long-haired silhouette again – with Diabolist stabbing away at her neck, dagger in hand. Taking your eyes off the Praesi, huh. Always a mistake, that. Akua was swatted away angrily, her shape shattered by the sheer force of the blow, but I was already moving.

"I am a sword," I murmured. "Sharp and merciless, I *cut*."

My will struck out against hers and finally I drew blood. And here was the pit fight Archer had promised, I thought. Two beasts in a hole, tearing at each other. Devouring. I was to eat what I had carved out, grow stronger from it. Ascend through this hallowed cannibalism and strike again, until one of us had consumed the other whole. That was Below's game, its promised and certain victory.

"Mortal, you meddling fucks," I snarled. "To the end."

I crawled into the gushing wound, spite warming me down to my petty core.

—

"It is forbidden, 'Mina. The vigil must be held alone."

The suddenness of the sound had me twitching. There had been the warm darkness of blood, until I crawled out dripping onto a floor of stone, and immediately the woman had spoken. I rose to my feet, eyes wary. It looked like a temple, that was my first thought. The ceiling was tall and curved, held up by arches and columns. The stone beneath me covered in strange scriptures similar to Crepuscular, but only in part. Older, I decided. What few words I understood among them seemed to be in the vein of astronomy, about celestial orbs and their movements. On all four sides arched thresholds led into nothing: I could glimpse a sea of lights below, and only then did I realized I was standing atop a tower. There were no stairs, no visible way into the room save the arches. Rich laughter drew my attention sharply, and my eyes moved to watch a pair of drow. Both young – *truly* young, not like the Mighty were – and long-haired, though their appearance was starkly sexless. One sat with her legs folded, in the centre of the room, while the other lounged against a pillar. She'd been the one to laugh.

"So many rules," the drow called 'Mina gently mocked. "Why apprentice to the Sages at all, if you intend on following all of them?"

Neither of their eyes were silver, I realized with a start. Both a deep amber, identical in every way. As if sisters. My blood thrummed with excitement. I'd been right, then. It was Sve Noc's soul I had cut open, and it was her memories I'd crawled my way into. And if I got to the bottom, found the right path... My way out. The victory denied.

"We are the enemy of death," the sitting drow replied, almost chiding. "It is great honour to be chosen to stand among those who hold back twilight."

"Shrouded Gods, Andronike," her sister said, rolling her eyes. "You could at least wait until after the ceremony to start with

that. If I wanted to get preached at I'd prostrate at temple like a good little zealot."

"There will be no ceremony at all, Komena, if you are caught up here," Andronike sharply replied. "I will be sent home in disgrace and Mother-

"- will have to take the war oath or be forever disgraced," Komena interrupted. "I've heard that song before, sister. You say that like it'd be such a disaster. I'll be taking the very same oath this year, and it'd be nice to have kin at my side."

The other drow's face softened.

"You know I would follow you," she said. "If I had not been called to higher purpose."

"All hail the mighty Twilight Sages," Komena said, smile too serrated to be genuine. "May we forever kiss the hem of their robes."

"I didn't meant it like that, 'Mina," Andronike feebly said. "There is great honour in war service."

"Just not quite as much as in this," her sister said.

The other drow's eyes tightened.

"You have the talent, Komena," she said. "Our fathers both have sorcerer blood. Do not blame me simply because you never had the discipline to sharpen your skills."

"Much good they will do you, these precious skills," Komena said. "Cloistered in some hidden shrine, debating magic with crazed half-corpses. At least my *lack of discipline* will serve the Firstborn against our enemies."

"Fetching human servants for the rylleh?" Andronike ridiculed. "Squabbling with the nerezim over some empty tunnel? How well you would serve our people."

"How gladly you mock the same blades that keep our mines full, that keep the nerezim from making goblins of us," her sister snarled. "At least we *act*, inglorious as our lot is. Provide for the Empire Ever Dark."

"You talk like a colonist," Andronike said, wrinkling her nose. "The King Under the Mountain will slay us all, every Firstborn must take the oath! There will be peace, sister, as there has been for over a century. War is only ever waged for petty glories."

I coughed into my fist. Well, you couldn't get them all right. Probably the single worst thing she could have gotten wrong, but

in her defence she didn't seem alone in her assumption. If the drow in charge had really all believed that it was no wonder the dwarves had wrecked them in the following wars. That did not sound like an empire ready for a hard fight. The two sisters continued to argue, but I let the noise wash over me. There was something... There it was again. A tremor. I knelt, wincing as my lame leg flared, and pressed my ear against the stone. It came again, louder, and my fingers clenched. Not a tremor, a footstep. And one getting closer. Time to move on, then, I'd learned all I could from this anyway. There was no obvious way out, I thought, save the one I'd rather not take. I breathed out and got up.

"Oh Gods, this better work," I muttered, and took a running leap off the tower.

—

I thought I'd failed, at first, because I stood in utter darkness. But then there was movement, Komana sweeping out her arm and causing globes of glass to light all over the room. She'd gotten older, I saw. There was a nasty scar on her neck, but it was the sharper features and braided hair that drew my attention. She wore armour, too: good steel mail, with pauldrons of sculpted obsidian. The sword at her hip was without a sheath and glinted cold blue. *Enchanted, for sure.* As she began unstrapping her armour I allowed my gaze to sweep our surroundings, reluctantly admitting that the woman who'd become Sve Noc had *taste*. And coin to burn, apparently, because much of the furniture in here was wood instead of stone and that was a rare thing in the Everdark. I froze when she did, only noticing that there was someone seated in the corner. Who it was I could not tell for sure – though I had a decent guess – because they were masked and covered by a thick cloak. It was an ornate thing, the mask. Forged iron, the upper half of it a sun setting while the bottom was half the moon. Komana drew her sword without hesitation.

"I know not your intent, Sage, but I am a jawor of the Southern Army," she coldly said. "I will not be *disappeared* so easily."

The Twilight Sage slowly raised a hand and took off the mask, revealing the very pair of amber eyes I had expected. Andronike hesitated, worrying her lip.

"Mina," she quietly said. "I know we did not part-"

The sword clattered against the ground, and I had to admit I was touched at the sight of Komana embracing her sister without the slightest hint of hesitation. The two drow remained like that for a long moment, and I saw their arms tightening against each other like they were afraid of letting go.

“‘Nike,” the younger sister said, after finally releasing the other. “Gods be kind. I have regretted many things since taking the oath, but none half as much as the last words we spoke.”

“I’m sorry, Komena,” Andronike whispered. “I was too proud to reach out, after. I have sown sorrow where there needed be none.”

The other drow touched her shoulder, almost shyly.

“It does not matter,” she said. “It could have been a hundred years instead of twenty, and still it would not matter. Heart of my heart.”

“Heart of my heart,” Andronike whispered back, voice shaky.

Komena shook herself, as if trying to wake. She smoothed out her already pristine armour out of nervousness.

“I am being a frightful host,” she said. “I have senna, if you would like a drink – or! I have this bottle of this drink they call *wynneh*, from the Burning Lands. Very exotic, you wouldn’t believe how many fingers I had to break to get it.”

Andronike took her sister’s hand and shook her head.

“Sit with me,” she asked. “This is... better spoken sober.”

Komena’s eyes tightened.

“You worry me, sister,” she said. “Are you in danger? I now striking a Sage is sacrilege, but I will not-”

“We are all in danger, I fear,” Andronike croaked. “‘Mina, what I want to tell you, it is a crime for me to speak it. Even if all you do is listen, they would-”

“Heart of my heart,” Komena said, voice like steel. “Your woe is my woe. No soul can change this.”

Her sister smiled, for just a moment, and it felt like dawn breaking over the room. Andronike tugged her down into a seat and they settled together while the Sage sister chose her words. *The ritual, I thought. This is about the ritual when they tried to become immortals.*

“They’re going to kill us all, ‘Mina,” Andronike murmured, sounding genuinely terrified. “The Sages, the elders among them – they’re afraid of dying. The alchemies work a little less every year and their minds have begun to fray. So they now plan a ritual.”

“A ritual,” Komena repeated slowly, trying to understand her sister’s fear.

And failing, though I thought she was a decent hand at hiding it.

"They will borrow from the years of every Firstborn yet to be," the drow said. "They say they have it charted – they've used oracles, the old rites as well – but they're *wrong* Komena. There are too many uncertainties."

"There will be revolt, if this comes out," Komena said face gone grim. "I can reach out to other officers-"

"You don't understand," Andronike said. "They are *proud*. They through it we will all be made immortal. With the turn of the red season they will announce it themselves."

"But you don't believe it will work," the younger sister said.

"All it takes is a single mistake, and our entire people will pay for it," the other drow replied, shaking her head. "There is always a mistake, 'Mina. *Always*."

Her sister slowly nodded, and I watched her thoughts flicker through her face. Hesitation, first, then reproach. And after that only determination, cold and relentless.

"So what," Komena said, "are we going to do about it?"

Pivot, I thought. They were not Named, not yet, but that sentence and that moment were the beginning of a very dark road I already knew the end of.

"In that moment, I loved her more than I have ever loved anyone or anything."

I froze. She'd not made a sound, until the moment she spoke. Not a breath, not whisper of foot on stone. I turned and there she was, standing at my side. The cloak I recognized, for she wore it in front of me as well, but there was no mask now. She had grown, I thought, beyond such petty symbols.

"Strange," she said, head cocked to the side. "That even after all these years, I grieve that more than all the rest."

"Andronike," I said, meeting eyes of pure silver.

"Catherine Foundling," the other half of Sve Noc greeted me calmly. "I believe you were looking for me."

Character contest continues: Hierarch vs Masego and Black vs Ratface. Links to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16945396?fbclid=IwAR34RCp9DQXzkZJM0JEkleqF3\\_hXPQjoDvyEHsH250quzv9p2N1oziP\\_I\\_Co](https://www.strawpoll.me/16945396?fbclid=IwAR34RCp9DQXzkZJM0JEkleqF3_hXPQjoDvyEHsH250quzv9p2N1oziP_I_Co)

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16945399?fbclid=IwAR223q3kq5lMyjYwGy70jFoe530SnbLt2dA7\\_SU\\_wBlF-BqAjg0gcUoyy8c](https://www.strawpoll.me/16945399?fbclid=IwAR223q3kq5lMyjYwGy70jFoe530SnbLt2dA7_SU_wBlF-BqAjg0gcUoyy8c)

### NZPIEFACE

... I've been voting for the top character for a while now.

*stevenneiman*

Honestly, most of these aren't controversial at all.  
My bets: Masego, Black, Vivienne (?), Robber, Hakram (?),  
Cat, Akua (?), Black, Robber, Cat, Black, Cat.  
I'm curious to see whether I even got the ones I'm confident  
in right.

*RanVor*

Yeah, turns out that Guide readers are, unfortunately, very predictable.

*Sulomund*

Just because the destination is assured doesn't mean we can't enjoy the journey.

And besides, there still is the chance for upset. :3

*RanVor*

Theoretically, but it's kinda hard to get enthusiastic when you know exactly when your favorites are gonna lose.

*Jane*

I'm about 50/50 so far; the votes I've lost are... Cordelia, Nauk, Laurence, Sabah, Malicia, Aisha, Assassin, and Eudokia.

*JJR*

The first one was tricky, with neither one showing up. The Hierarch claiming the ranking individuals was Against the Will of the People and Therefore Forbidden. Masego, probably too occupied to even notice such a thing happening. I had to give it the the Hierarch though.



Second one was much easier. Amadeus was always able to play my emotions like a violin.

*mavant*

I'm glad you voted for Hierarch, because I voted for Masego, but I was torn by the decision.

*mavant*

It grieves me to have to vote against Ratface in this. He should have died hereafter. There would have been a time for such a word.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

The bracket chart is at <http://www.bracketmaker.com/tmenu.cfm?tid=470805>.

*Letouriste*

Damn. 4 of my favourite characters at once and I need to choose...

I like black too much so I guess ratface is a no:/  
Hierarch vs masego tho... how could you make us choose, you demon!

Chose masego at the end but broke my heart

*RanVor*

Two of my favorite characters vs. two guys-I-like-but-not-as-much-as-the-other-guy.

Since the Hierarch will obviously lose now (which sucks, but what can I do?), I can only hope that Akua tears Masego apart in the quarterfinals (I'm sorry, Zeze, but it's not my fault you have this kind of opponents).

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"The finest summation of Traitorous's reign I ever heard came from an illiterate peasant from the outskirts of Ater, who described it as follows: 'Like watching a snake eat its own tail, only the tail was fake the snake was an angry badger and also you are poisoned.'"

Bloody hell, that last bit is the most accurate thing about Praes ever said. No matter what, you're always poisoned.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"Which matters most, Catherine, when it comes to doing good – the conviction or the act?"

Fucking hell Akua, you can't be serious.

I read this really interesting suggestion recently (actually, calling it a suggestion would be a bit much) relating to the missionary that died on that island near India. Basically, the idea was "What if he did this as a form of suicide?"

The logic of it went something like this:

As a man who had faith in God, suicide was forbidden and he would be cast into Hell.

There's a group of people in the world who are violent towards all outsiders and do not believe in God. If he was to act as a servant of God and deliver his message and blessings to them, if he were to die during it, he would go to Heaven.

The counter-argument I saw was that God was omniscient and would know about his intentions from the get-go. Quite interesting how I see the parallel here in this story.

[HannaB](#)

This doesn't work because neither the -intent- nor the -result- are positive. "What it looks like he was trying to do" definitely doesn't cut it.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

What do you mean the result wasn't positive?

[HannaB](#)

Well, I mean, the guy died, right? Not achieved his stated goal.

Although I can see your point as well 😊

[NZPIEFACE](#)

The whole point of the hypothetical was that his goal was to die while acting in the name of God.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"I would not go quietly into the night."

"Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

– First stanza of "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas

*Gunslinger*

Most likely that peasant was Traitorous too.

*MetruX*

Exactly what I thought.

*IDKWhoitis*

Otherwise, how the hell did he know about the true nature of the shitshow that was Traitorous?

[HannaB](#)

I do get the impression that the entire continent was sitting with popcorn on that one

*Thea*

No, the Good guys were busy being appalled little drones because he no-sold even their redemptions and angels.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Yeah but this was a peasant. Though I would propose as head canon that while this man was not Traitorous, he had bought shoes from him. The shoes were usually not poisoned. Usually.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Aw crap that was irritant. Dammit.

Okay, head canon revision, Traitorous also made shoes that one time as his cover while working with the rebellion to overthrow Dread Emperor Traitorous. Irritant used a lot less poison so overall is remembered as the better Cobbler.

*JJR*

Did anyone else, when they first read that, think that the so called peasant was actually Dread Emperor Traitorous the whole time. And that last bit was actually him telling Scholar that he was poisoned, as in just now?

Well the guy did manage to write the rest of the book. Maybe Traitorous was off his game that day.

*MetruX*

Traitorous is not know to have killed all who opposed him, he's known to have betrayed them all. Surely he can betray someone and the guy still leave alive.

*Antoninjohn*

No, it was the scholar who was Traitorous

*Jane*

C'mon, people, the answer is obvious here.

The *reader* was Traitorous.

*Traitorous*

i am TRAITORIOUS

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Nah. But he was in your heart, all along. Also he was the paper the scholar wrote on. The paper has been poisoned.

*Aotrs Commander*

I think that one quote from Captain Kirk in Undiscovered Country is appropriate here.

"Spock, you want to know something?, Everybody's Traitorous."

*NerfContessa*

Fitting.

Also nice to see you already posting good comments so shortly after being brought to this marvelous story (from the playground) ^^

*nipi*

Or maybe he assumed the scholars identity afterwards.

*Charles*

"that keep the nerezim from making goblins of us"

Literally or figuratively, I wonder?

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Considering the Goblins were forced to the surface by Dwarves, are small, green, short-lived and an entirely different species I think it's safe to say it was meant as a metaphor for defeat/exile to the surface.

*mavant*

Well, in Arda you can make orcs out of elves with careful torture and selective breeding. I forget if it was Morgoth or Sauron that did so – probably the former.

Maybe in Calernia a similar rule applies for drow and goblins.

What I'm really concerned about are the MIND FLAYERS.

*loimprevisto*

Mind flayers? We can handle that. Aboleths are the real problem...

*daniel young*

Hard to mind control undead though. Be hilarious if the good guys had to ask villains for help because all of there troops kept getting mind controlled

*Cap'n Smurfy*

No. That's silly. The Guideverse is, as the name might suggest, a practical place. Drow and Goblins are in no way related or created from another.

*Gunslinger*

Figuratively I assume as it's stated that the goblin were driven away by the Nerezim.

*danh3107*

I used to hate her, I still do somewhat, but I love Akua fucking Sahelian.

*Gunslinger*

Lots to unpack here but for once I actually believe Akua. Holy hells how did it get to this point!!

The chapter does reveal thought that Catherine didn't plan for Akua's betrayal/help. What then was the Folly in the original plan?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Eh, I've always believed in Akua, you know.

When was the last time she actually betrayed someone?

*JJR*

It kind of seems like she's betraying herself here. The whole, "I tire of iron line." Basically throwing away everything she was taught to believe. To be a hero I think? Not a Hero with the capital letter surely, the Gods above wouldn't have her. But some kind of hero.

*MetruX*

You sure they wouldn't? The Peregrin has done just as bad as her, and he is one of the most pious. To me, what William would do was worse than what she did, and he was never doubted of Heroism. No, the God Above would have her, if she really went that path. But I don't think she will.

### [Dresden 67](#)

No he hasn't. Come on. What the Pilgrim did was horrible, but let's not pretend he didn't save far more lives than he took by stopping Black. The Grey Pilgrim killed two or three thousand innocents as collateral damage to stop a murderous rampage across Procer. Akua murdered a hundred thousand civilians to use them as meat shields in her personal rise to power. The two aren't at all equivalent.

*Jani Nyysönen*

There's a very important difference between what is Good and what is Effective.

Once we accept biological weapons and child murder as acceptable tactics, moral high ground is lost.

Pilgrims side would, probably, be better winners and/or rulers than the villain side, but they have little room to argue about morals to Cat considering the things hey have done.

*RanVor*

B-but muh Greater Good!

### [TeK](#)

And William wanted to brainwash and effectively kill the very same hundred thousand civilians, and use their bodies to throw into the meat grinder against the East. Totally not comparable, how could he.

### [Dresden 67](#)

I'm not talking about William. I'm talking about the Pilgrim. Saying that the Peregrine is just as bad as the Butcher of Liesse is simply ridiculous.

Although now that you bring it up, no, I don't think what William tried to do makes him as bad as Akua. Trying to brainwash Liesse was an unforgettable crime, but at least he wasn't doing it for personal gain, he was doing it to free his kingdom from oppression, and at least some of his victims would have survived. Not to mention the fact that Akua thought it was ok to use

demons that permanently damaged reality. I honestly can't imagine a crime worse than that.

[HannaB](#)

I don't think there was a chance any of his victims would have survived 😡

the problem is that Akua intended to open MORE hellgates than just one and not have them contained by Warlock

Still Water is just the part of her scheme that succeeded

so no, in sheer mass slaughter she still wins out 😡

[Dresden 67](#)

I actually wasn't referring to the Hell gate, I was talking about the four demons we saw her use over the course of the story. You know, the things whose mere presence in Creation permanently damages reality?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

You mean the Demon of Absence that everyone forgot about?

*Aotrs Commander*

Really?

You really can't imagine a crime worse than that?

You can't be trying very hard.

Without even going outside the Guide:

The wanton slaughter of countless thousands if not millions over centuries to win a pissing contest, not to mention the action of creating the stage itself to do that and to cap it all, then punishing the creations you made able to chose for the explicit purpose of facilitating this pissing contest for not not always choosing you AND ALSO for not being perfect?

Or tacitly murdering your entire species future children to attempt to give yourself immortality?

Actually, I would say William is far, FAR, \*FAR\* worse than Akua ever was. Hers was "only" mass

murder, whereas as his was (attempted) mass mindrape/  
soul-crime AND murder (and I rank the former two  
(among one or two other things) as being way more  
heinous than mere death). William might only be only  
"lesser" in the sense that he didn't actually manage  
to do it and only \*then\* if the answer to Akua's  
question is "act" not "conviction."

What we've seen Pilgrim do over the course of this  
story is very likely just the tip of the iceberg. The  
way he treated it seems like this is the first time  
he's pulled that crap. I shudder to think how many  
times he's done similar things over the decades in  
the name of so-called "Good."

*Aotrs Commander*

Dang lack of edit function: Clarification: Akua  
likely would have gone on to be worse than William  
if not prevented; my assertion (if I was not used  
to being able to go back and re-word my posts on a  
second pass and tidy them up!) is that, \*at the  
time of respective deaths,\* I would hold that  
William's (attempted) crimes were worse than Aku's  
actual ones..

[Dresden 67](#)

I was exaggerating a little when I said I couldn't  
imagine anything worse than that. However I do  
think permanently damaging the fabric of reality is  
something truly, objectively evil. It makes things  
worse of absolutely everyone for the rest of time,  
and benefits no one

[Dresden 67](#)

Soul-crime? What on earth are you talking about?

Come on. You can't be seriously arguing that the  
Pilgrim is worse than Akua. You can't just make up  
previous crimes and declare that they make him  
worse. We can only judge them based on what we see,  
and on those grounds Akua is far, far worse.

*Aotrs Commander*

I was referring to William's attempted mind-  
rape[1]; the attack on self/soul, in a such  
permenant way, I find vastly worse than murder.

Though yes, not related to that specific  
instance[2], but I \*do\* find Pilgrim infinitely



more objectionable, vile and loathsome than Akua on \*every single level.\* (Even when Akua was just the antagonist I wanted to see disembowled.)

[1]Or, though I will NOT debate any further than this single in-passing mentioned, because NOT the time or place, physical rape/

[2]That we know of; I would not even be remotely surprised to find Pilgrim lending a hand to Contrition Heroes in the past nor shedding a real tear (as opposed to a self-deluded one of actual, true compassion) over it.

*Aotrs Commander*

Again (dang no edit, fraction of a second too early with click post): clarification footnote [1] should be at the end of that sentence, not where it is, not implying or asserting Willy did that.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

"[A]t least some of his victims would have survived."

I would argue that, philosophically speaking, they would all have died the moment he Contrition'd them. What would remain would effectively not be the same people, but gross parodies of them.

[daegone823](#)

Okay I think a decision would have to be made if you were a citizen.

Is mind rape with holy might attached worse than literal demon rape?

Now I don't care which is more evil one of these outcomes leads to death while the other will leave you with a chance of possible life.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Both corrupt who you are to make a mockery of a person.

One side lies about it; the other wears the grotesque nature of what it has done like a feather boa.

Both are appalling in an "equal and opposite" way, making neither one of them better or worse.

The real question is “is it possible to stop both sides from mutilating the fundamental essences of people in their bids to win this pissing contest of theirs”. Because they’re both treating thinking, feeling beings as NPCs they can use and abuse like young kids mutilate their least important toys.

[TeK](#)

Of fuck that. And Hitler genuinely cared about German nation. Do you hear yourself?

*NerfContessa*

That’s a big IF.

Though it would truly a terrible hero make, our dear Ubua.

*Rook*

I think she might be staying true to what she is, actually. We may all have had the wrong impression of her from the start.

I think She’s not about being a Villain. She doesn’t want to be a Hero now, either. I think her motives, at the very heart of it, are neutral. She just wants to be part of the biggest, most momentous story she can get her claws on.

Think about it. It was always a bit strange why someone clearly much more intelligent than Catherine – let’s be real here, Akua is as smart as she is a total cunt – fully versed in history and the best education money can buy, would so stupidly engage in theatrics known to have miserable ends without fail.

Maybe she was never being stupid, maybe she never really gave a shit about Winning or Evil or Good. Maybe what she wants is exactly what her actions have always lead her towards. That even in the future when Praes and all its works have been reduced to dust, people will still remember that Akua Sahelian existed. Glorious, terrible, and magnificent.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Oh, I see what you mean. She wanted to be Traitorus.

[Luminant Azurefyre](#)

Remember in the earlier chapters back when she was the Heiress? At one point she said something super grandiose along the lines of “I will inherit all of Calernia/usurp the will of the gods.” I don’t remember the exact quote,

but I think you're onto something. At the time I just thought she was being a total idiot but in light of her current character it could just be that she wants to live her life with a bang, even if she goes out early because of it.

[HannaB](#)

Yes!

Akua believed in Old Evil as the most theatric and fun ride she could possibly have. And now she's getting to hitch a ride on something even more amazing.

She's Praesi to the core, and at the core of Praes is the same idea even Black ended up holding on to: you always lose at the end, but the end is not what matters.

She's true to herself, to the herself that said that learning from history did not mean rejecting change. She respected 'iron sharpens iron' because she believed in it and gambled on it, and now that it's lost, it's only natural for her to switch to the other philosophy to follow. Iron sharpens iron on a more meta level.

*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

She wants to take possession of Night.

*Haihappen*

She is not the Hero we need, but the hero we deserve.

She is not a Redeemed Villian, for this trope is full of shit, but more of a Fallen Villian, who "is just tired of that shit"(paraphrase), and decides defy all tropes, to not seek redemption, but a change of pace, to act philosophy, instead of contemplating it.

Difficult to come up with a Name, though, if that was where the journey is going

[HannaB](#)

Yes!

Fallen Villain ♥

[Euodiachloris](#)

More like a Villain who has sauntered vaguely upwards looking for the bar with the best acoustics, stage, selection and karaoke machine set-up. 😊

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Cat's been doing a pretty good job being a hero while still being Evil, and Akua's had a front row seat and is known to be able to learn quickly. To steal a quote from Girl Genius and the character therein that's the most Akualike: "Besides, they always win. There must be SOMETHING to their [heroic] philosophy."

Plus, we know from the last time we saw it from her perspective, Akua finds being a hero refreshingly FUN. And now, as she's reasoned correctly, she's going to be immortally famous. Consider her philosophy before: She truly honestly believed that she'd still die. That she wasn't going to live forever and would be the Empress until the next Akua overthrew her. Somebody who goes into it knowing it ends badly for them is about the ride. Cat may be the first Evil Hero, but Akua will be the first PRAESI Hero, at least since the land and people have been called that. And what she's doing may well save Praesi. That's a pretty good alternative right there, if you are about doing something extraordinary. Plus, she's already gained the unstoppable power of friendship!

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Praesi rainbows and cyanide-laced marzipan fancies! Accept no substitutes! XD

### [James, Mostly Harmless](#)

But Darling, cyanide is so last millenium! Akua would only use a poison that was in season ...

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Some traditions are worth keeping (as a smokescreen to hide the niacin). Also, cyanide enhances the almond-flavour if done right. Plain marzipan or nougat is just boring. 😊

*burguulkodar*

Wtf? I take Niacin (also known as vitamin B3) every day! Have I been poisoning myself?

Are you traitorous?!

### [HannaB](#)

Yes!

TBH, taking a step back, Akua is a fucking teenager. Well, a year older than Cat, so not literally, but like, when she was doing the demon thing at Marchford and setting up Liesse? She was. Everything she did was set up by others

in some way, between Tasia and Malicia. She wouldn't have either gotten the idea or the means of going through with it without horrible adults who should have known better yet didn't.

If anyone deserves a genuine redemption arc and character development, it's her.

### *SilverDargon*

First of all, I think her last betrayal happened when she tried to possess Catherine during the fight with the 10th crusade when she was still knocked out after having her portal Pilgrim'd. Not too long ago at all. Possibly less than half of a year, though I haven't checked the timeline. Certainly no more than a year prior to this.

Secondly, the only reason for this so called, "Change of heart" is because Akua thinks she can get away with it and come out in a better position than before. She says she tires of iron, less because she actually has grown morals, and more because she knows that she has to renounce something about her previous self in order to get on the heroic bandwagon.

Also, from what it sounds like, Akua wants to know if Above would even accept her. She proposes that Above cares more about doing good acts regardless of the intent behind them, as supported by the existence of Hanno, who goes around doing good acts, with literally no personal conviction save service to Above. Catherine thinks that Above cares more about heroic character and convictions than deeds, and that because of that Akua will fail her attempt to become a hero. At least part of her reasoning for doing this is to answer that question.

### *Rook*

I'm on the verge of believing her too. Not because she's likeable, but I think we might have misjudged her base motives from the start.

I think she isn't, at the core of it, all about villainy, or prayed, or team evil. That's a Catherine and Black way of thinking. They're all about the end goal, the practical consequences.

Akua might actually be along the same vein as Ranger or Archer. All about the journey, not the goal. Being all you can be, doing all you can do.

If you look at it that way, it makes sense why she's so completely unafraid of failure, so utterly unconcerned about her previous loss, and why she didn't take the most pragmatic

approach for her personal gain when no one could stop her from doing just that. Because she never cared about winning from the start. She just wants to matter, in the big scheme of things. Go down in the history books as a name no one can forget for a thousand years.

Remember the fourfold crossing? She wasn't Dread empress Powerful, nor was she Dread Empress Diabolical, Wicked, Clever, or Beautiful. She was Dread Empress Magnificent, first of her Name.

Of course she didn't stab Cat in the back, of course she didn't run. Why would she? The possibility of becoming a part of the rise of a new deity is everything she ever wanted. This is her chance.

A chance to be Magnificent.

[HannaB](#)

Yes!

*mavant*

Akua's thing is Pride.

Pride is not a virtue, but it is the parent of many virtues.

[HannaB](#)

Or possibly, Akua's thing is YOLO

*mavant*

Also acceptable. Tbh I just wanted an excuse to use that quote.

[HannaB](#)

It is a good one, and does fit! ♥

*werafdsaew*

My read is that Folly hasn't been triggered yet

*Lark*

Akua as a hero. This will be fun.

It's also delightfully elegant – it seems the Liesse Accords needed someone on the other side of the fence to have a chance, and while I don't doubt Pilgrim and his allies will fight it, "prior nemeses coming to an agreement in the face of a greater threat" has the shape of all sorts of stories to it.

Plans like this are part of what make Akua such a wonderful character to read.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"The Liesse Accords needs a hero to reinforce it as well. So I thought it would be a good idea to get one of the worst villains in modern history to act as that role."

*byzantine279*

More, "So one of the worst villains in modern history thought it would be hilarious if they got to join as a Hero."

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I mean, it is hilarious.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Oh man, yeah. That could work. It's a perfect Yin Yang.

Cat, an Evil Hero that has good intent, and does bad for them.

Akua, a Good Villian that has bad intents, and does good for them.

The Evil one will always hate the Good no matter what, even though she's warmed up to her alot, where the other fondly cares for them despite all the abuse thrown at them.

But what the shit is down and the accords need to be held, both team up and get shit done in glorious snarky flirty fashion.

It's one of the most unstoppable forms the Power of Friendship can take: the dual-foil-at-odds-but-cooperating BUDDY DUO.

They will be unstoppable, at least until one of them finally gets too old for this shit.

*Kirroth*

Akua always wanted to escape her cage and always found a larger one outside. Now she's going to take a turn at breaking out of the cage of "Standard Bearer of Praesi Evil". Best of luck to her with that.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Akua has always been riding the wave of megalomaniac super genius villain. Now she's gotten bored of it.

[Euodiachloris](#)

"I discovered the key to my cage was the ignition key for the electrified bars of the next one. OK – time to try beating the cages to bits with each other, then."

*RanVor*

Truly she has learned a lot from Cat.

*Anon*

And so winter fades – not with a bang but with a weak gasp.

Sad to see the power (seemingly) clumsily go out like this – while it was admittedly too absurd as a power-up, Cat losing in such a half-assed way doesn't necessarily feel better.

Cat's entirely at odds with herself, and self-realization of the mantle's bastardization of her humanity or not, it feels like a tonal shift unearned – especially in the context of the whole conversation with the dead king on being immortal and the like.

And while maybe that's the point, something feels....different here, than in previous books' pivots. And while I can't quite put my finger on a defining specific sentence or idea, it just...feels off, to me.

Cat definitely didn't care for parts of the mantle and how they changed her life, but she seems too....vehement here, about her mortality, and how it (may or may not) ties into her plans, and/or being 'good' or 'evil'.

(Admittedly I can see the over-arching meta-narrative desire to get cat 'Back' to being mortal, but....have to wait and see to be sure)

Nothing about Akua's 'help' feels 'earned' enough to secure Cat's pivot to a claim, here (like, is she REALLY thinking going out with a heroic bang will save her from the gods below?), and for how easily Sve Noc literally tore Cat apart (and Cat's seeming desire to die just recently), Cat coming 'back' in time to stake her claim feels wonky because of it, just because Sve Noc waited to double tap./

And while having a 'reversal' of Cat's playing with her own soul now resulting in her snooping around in someone else's is interesting, I just....I dunno.

Some of it's probably not knowing exactly what parts of 'winter' and/or 'Catherine' are going to result from this (and to be honest, not really sure how the whole Sve Noc claiming winter with night [when previously, it was explicitly stated multiple times that the 'night' was subservient to Winter] even really was



done so neatly as to rip Cat's 'winter-ness' in twain), but even so, I'm past ready to see the Drow business come to a close.

### NZPIEFACE

I honestly think Akua just got bored and wants to have some fun.

*Anon*

I'd believe that if she hadn't already told Cat (while mind-whammied) that she knew Cat made a deal with Vivienne to end Akua's 'life' when she was no longer useful.

So as a bargain to live a little longer it maybe works, but as a pivot I don't see the narrative weight behind it – she's been useful, but even 'faking' a pivot would require some onus I haven't really seen Cat give her.

Certainly not any impression of contrition or repenting.

### NZPIEFACE

Who said she was ever repenting? She said it rather implicitly that she doesn't have any intention of actually being good, just "playing the hero".

*Haihappen*

Her whole argument is the question that, to be a hero, is it more important to "do good" or "think good", conviction versus act. Her reasoning is on the act: It does not matter if I am not thinking "good", if my actions are "Good", how can she be denied the mantle of a hero. It is challenge, something that is outside her "iron sharpens iron" mindset that had been instilled into her since her birth to her death.

I think I have one aspekt of Akua figured out: She desperately wants to DO stuff, SHOW people of what she is capable. She wants to be LOOKED at, it does not matter if people fear or admire her, as long as they need to look upwards.

### HannaB

Yes!

Akua wants to matter and to show off, and she doesn't care if there's a painful demise at the end of the ride. She wouldn't have deliberately modeled herself on Triumphant if she had.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

She outright said she expected some other Akua to come along and kill her some day. I am 100% sure she'd have reinstated a Chancellor knowing that'd be the most likely person to do it. She was going to be Dread Empress Magnificent. She didn't intend to do it all, just to do it all well. Now a new path has opened and she's taking it.

[HannaB](#)

Exactly!

[HannaB](#)

Akua is a villain. A Praesi villain. All of them always know that the end will be terrible. Cat's deal with Vivienne means that it will be a little more terrible than possibly expected, but ultimately, it's still the same deal: paying for everything at the end.

Akua did not make Liesse because she was afraid of paying due.

*Myatt22*

What happens though if she is no longer akua or if she sets herself up as the necessary hero for the accords those are the only 2 ways out of cats and vivs deal that I can see unless of corse it's no longner binding as cat isn't fae anymore

[HannaB](#)

The only narratively valid way out of Cat's and Vivi's deal is to make it so thoroughly obsolete Vivi will take her request back. This isn't about wiggling through loopholes, anymore, this is about changing the tides of stories. Akua always loved the grander approach, after all.

*Jane*

Eh, I imagine she'll walk out of this without too much of a power-down – maybe with a Goddess-on-a-Leash, maybe with the shattered remnants of WinterNight being a less overwhelming power to absorb, or maybe with something from a completely different direction. Losing it *all* just doesn't fit with the tone, plot, or direction of the series, to say nothing of how it would waste the way she'd been studying how to use her power properly.

That said, her vehement rejection of Apotheosis makes sense when she's able to experience mortality again, after months of

having everything around her dulled and her mind made rigid; it's like finally being sober after years of alcoholism. Once you get a taste of what you *should* be, you feel revulsion at what you had been trapped in.

As for Akua, well... She's been building up to this for a while, now, expressing a desire to step away from her old self and embrace a more successful direction. Saving Cat instead of just walking off is the payoff for that, as well as a reflection of the fact that Akua does genuinely like and respect her – at least, as much as Akua can be said to have such feelings for anyone.

As for Sve Noc not bothering to kill her while she had the chance... Eh, she was so trapped in her enforced behaviors, it doesn't seem odd to me. I mean, she couldn't even hold a real conversation anymore, just throw out cliched lines; she really wasn't capable of sensible precautions anymore.

That said, I do feel that the last few chapters could use a bit of restructuring at this point... The flow just feels *wrong* at the moment. We go from laying out an outline of a plan for the big battle, to seeing it start to play out, to a sudden enemy trap, to... Having her soul cut open, taken in front of a goddess as a sacrifice, and a soul battle for their mantles. It's just too abrupt, like this; there should have been an interlude for someone else noting how everything went to hell, to clearly signal the end of the battle and the beginning of the more personal struggle.

But, well, pacing issues are to be expected with the format, which is why I haven't been too critical about the arc as a whole; the editing to make everything flow smoothly is something that can really only happen once a book is actually *finished*.

*mavant*

The usual rule: Spoken plans always fail, unspoken plans always succeed.

The only thing that was weird here is that there WAS an unspoken part of the plan – the details of “Folly” – and yet it still didn't succeed. Unless it did, and memory shenanigans are involved, in which case I guess we'll find out soon.

*Jane*

Maybe I just missed the plan, somehow?... It sounded to me like they were going to gather everyone into the center of the city, and then... Something.

I was kind of expecting that “something” to either happen, or be explained, which is why it took me a while to acknowledge that yeah, that’s probably not going to happen after all.

[HannaB](#)

The ‘something’ was ‘have as many people as possible fight each other instead of Cat’. There were no details, because detailed plans fail.

Tom

Re: the flow of the last few chapters:

Sve Noc’s involvement in the battle was expected after she showed up in Cat’s dream beforehand. Since Sve Noc is at the heart of all this Night business and the Night is kind of critical to the usefulness of Cat’s Drow recruits (not to mention Drow survival as a species?), it makes sense that a tangle with Sve Noc would trump all other engagements. And ultimately some change in the nature of Cat’s powers was expected by the end of this arc because her powers had been relatively static for a while. A straightforward physical brawl doesn’t grant you new powers, plus Sve Noc is kind of a demigod so a straightforward physical brawl isn’t gonna end well, so you need weird mumbo jumbo to sort out the confrontation between Cat and Sve Noc.

So... everything is going according to plan 😊

Jane

Aw, but it was always so much *fun* to note how Cat was a literal goddess (albeit a comparatively minor one), defending her country against petty mortals... Well, at least she should stay sane at the end of this. I did always like the Winter motif, though...

I’m... Going to decline to comment on Akua’s ambitions, here, for fear of my brain blue-screening. I do recall once hearing about a character in a pen-and-paper RPG, though, about a young demon who wanted to try her hand at being Good, despite not understanding what that actually was... I guess Akua might fare a bit better in a world running on Narrativium, though, where holding the proper form of a thing is enough to compel its success. And a lack of Vile feats claiming a price on the soul she does not have, admittedly.

You know, I kind of thought last chapter that this whole thing would lead to Cat becoming “Queen of Nothing” to a goddess no longer living, but finding *something* possessed of a bit of rationality in Sve Noc opens a distinct possibility that Sve might actually survive this somehow. Half of her, at least.

Still, I wonder what the effects of stitching a part of a deity to your cloak does to the cloak...

### NZPIEFACE

Saint of Blades doesn't have a single lick of justice in her, yet she's one of the best heroes around.

Who says Akua can't be like that?

### *Big Brother*

It's kinda like having Divinely Gifted Armour, albeit Forcefully Enchanted instead of Willingly Blessed. And that distinction can cause a MASSIVE difference in power granted by the Armour.

Take a God(dess) of Life. Her Willing Blessing could give extreme regeneration, able to regrow limbs in milliseconds. But Forcefully Enchanting her into the Armour could cause Cursed Immortality, an inability to die, no matter the state of your body. You could live eternally as a severed head if the Armour is an ear or nose piercing.

### *Jane*

Well... On the other hand, Sve Noc *is* an *Evil* goddess; those kind of artifacts usually come with nasty costs attached, like trading away your soul, demanding horrific sacrifices, or stealing your life with every use. Meanwhile, stealing and repurposing things associated with them tend to come without *most* of the drawbacks – though usually with a bit of evil flavor and/or need for self-sacrifice associated with them...

Using the bones of a god tends to be a bit more neutral, but that's just the body; messing around with the soul seems like it would be a different thing...

Hm. A tricky question, though I don't think Cat's aware that her cloak has become an artifact (Akua's binding aside).

### *lennymaster*

She sure as hell knows! She herself mentioned that she noticed how magic just seemed to pearl off of it, like water from a leaf. She even used that effect several times, the last time if I remember correctly during second Liesse.

### *Shoddi*

The cloak becomes wrinkle-free, stain-repellent, water-resistant, reversible... and the pockets become capable of keeping of the souls of your enemies securely tucked away.

### *Jane*

...Wait, that sounds a lot like what Cat's cloak can already do. Is this one of those "You waited too long, so the upgrade is already obsolete" kind of deals?

*Decius*

Stain-repellent, except for bloodstains for blood you are responsible for shedding, which it soaks up, becoming heavier and heavier as it turns red, then black, then green, then Oh My God what color blood do Dwarves even have?

*Insanenoodlyguy*

The demon makes me feel like that one time in Comics when Carnage became good. For those that don't read: Magic Shenanigans made a big Multi-Hero Villian fight result in a mass AOE alignment swap spell both sides got caught up in. Serial Killer Carnage suddenly was filled with a desire to be on the side of good, though didn't actually stop being an insane homicidal manic, which had... interesting results.

<https://imgur.com/gallery/PKSwn>

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"You can't rob a bank if it burns down first."

Um... Is that Cat?

*naturalnuke*

Ooo I think I know where this is going...

*Andrew Mitchell*

Do tell. Please. 😊

*nick012000*

Looks like my prediction of Cat merging with the Sve Noc might be coming true, at least temporarily.

Also, shapeshifting battle! Those are always fun.

*JJR*

Wit repetition explicitly forbidden. So that's why they never just get caught in a loop.

[sugarrollblog](#)

"It's not who you are underneath, it's what you do that defines you"

[HannaB](#)

Exactly!

If Akua manages to not fuck up, she has a genuine chance there.

*Wry Warudo*

So if Winter is gone, what keeps the Hunt bound?

*Anon*

Theoretically, if Winter as an 'entity' is gone and is merged/merging with night, then the hunt has either been forced to join up with whatever other faction the rest of the fae now are, or has been subsumed into allegiance with whatever the winter-night combination is.

Also, they could be running rampant, but Cat seems to have been too completely decimated (and Winter gobbled up too quickly) soul-wise for them to act out the whole 'traitorous opportunists' aspect.

*mavant*

It's unclear whether the Hunt is a bound part of winter; it might just go back to being unaffiliated without a real winter court member to swear to.

[HannaB](#)

It's entirely possible they've sworn to personally Cat and nothing's changed.

let me check

...no, sovereign of moonless nights  
they're sworn to whoever that is  
not to winter, to moonless nights  
we shall see

*Andrew Mitchell*

Great question, and one I'm sure we'll get an answer to.

I can't even remember what have the Hunt been up to while Cat's in the Ever Dark. Are they currently working with Hakram & Vivienne?

[HannaB](#)

With Juniper, I think 😊

[Javvies](#)

Intriguing.

Backstory on the drow and Sve.

"There is always a mistake. ... Always."

This is so very true. And will probably affect Cat's attempt to dodge apotheosis and remain mortal.

Hmmm. I wonder how Cat's new Name/power is going to express itself.

Also ... I'm more convinced than ever that her new Name isn't going to be a title, it's likely to be a variation on her own given name of Catherine Foundling.

Yeah, Akua is seriously going for a redemption play. That's going to complicate things with Viv.

*Daemion*

Redemption stories end in death, usually.

Akua knows her days are numbered and instead of wheeling and dealing, instead of trying to trick and betray... she decided to go out on her own terms. She chose redemption as her way to die because before she does she gets to burn brightly, be a hero, be admired and most likely, make sure she isn't ever forgotten.

Vivienne has nothing to complain about. Cat made a binding promise and now Akua doubled down on it. At this point it would take a miracle for her to survive... and... you need to be a hero for that... oh, I see. Clever girl.

[sugarrollblog](#)

Akua is already dead. Her redemption story will start in death and maybe end with her being alive.

*Novice*

As Akua herself admitted, damnation is far more likely to be her ending than resurrection.

[HannaB](#)

But it's going to be fun along the way!

[Euodiachloris](#)

Go big or go home. That's pretty much always been Akua in a nutshell. 😊

[HannaB](#)

Akua's play here is so blindingly amazing

the practical way to be Evil in this 'verse is to not be, after all



### *Insanenoodlyguy*

Dunno about that, but Cat has proven time and time again that some of the best Evil can be done without all that much evil. The capitalization is important.

### *Kirroth*

I think I'm seeing the shape of things to come. Winter merges with Night and gets passed off to Andronike, who remains an ally. The throne of Callow is abdicated and the crown passed to Vivienne, who also remains an ally. Everything that's been weighing Cat down for all of Book IV is shed and she's free to be herself again. Cue her Pivoting to a new name and going on a rampage with her new sidekick Akua as she upsets the plans of both Above and Below.

This has been the dark period, the middle bit where the protagonist is misled and distracted by a path they're not suited for. Now we're seeing Cat starting to do what she does best again, now that she's rediscovered herself.

### *Aston W*

Kill the Gods and break the storyline?

### *Anon*

Cat made a solemn oath with Vivienne to kill Akua – and while the 'when' of that promise is a little vague, even if Vivienne name-transitions, she sure as shit is not going to be okay with Cat palling around with Akua doing 'heroic' things.

### *HannaB*

Ah, but Akua isn't asking Cat to break that oath. Even if Cat were to shed it with the mantle of Winter and no longer be literally bound, it's still standing between them. After all, Akua surfing on the tsunami of heroism doesn't have nearly as much oomph to it if she does it to save her life/unlife, or even to escape torment. Akua's bet has always been 'bad ending but a hell of a ride before it', and this is basically the ultimate expression of that. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the payoff 😊

### *Xvyz*

Cat can also make it so Akua becomes the Dread Empress of Praes, with that she'll have her own people in places of power for the war against the Gods.

### *Daemion*

I think it needs to be pointed out that Cat never owned or controlled all of Winter.

She took over one half of one of the Fae realms. As mentioned in the story, there are lots more (possibly infinite?). She didn't really earn it or conquer it or claim it, she simply got left with it because she was the last Winter noble remaining. I think that contributed in her never being able to use the power properly.

Which means... the Winter she was using until now was not infinite. It was limited, probably in more ways than one. She had a lot, but it was never without end.

This is supported by the fact that Sve Noc managed to meld Night and Winter. If Winter had been unlimited power, then the Night would have been a drop of oil in the ocean, not something that can be used to take control.

I believe becoming immortal isn't all that difficult, staying yourself and keeping your power intact for millennia is the challenge. Neither Winter nor Night seem to be solution here but perhaps the combination of them does? Maybe with some additional souls thrown in for stabilization?

What I'm most curious about is how Akua becoming a hero will help. She's dead. Just a soul bound to an object and keyed into Winter, which is dead and broken now too. She has no claim to either power and simply no power period. At most she can annoy people but that's already Cat's shtick.

*IDKWhoitis*

There have been plenty of non-coporal entities that have aided heroes in all sorts of stories. Talking Swords, helpful fairies, friendly ghosts. Akua was always powerful and fearful for her mental prowess and story meta-knowledge, not her bench presses, so this is hardly a problem.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Cat did some of her best work when dead. Akua just saved Cat while dead. Don't count em out just cause they stopped having a pulse.

Don't think of Winter as infinite in the omnipotent sense, but rather in terms of stamina. Using winter, while it can cause changes, doesn't wear out winter. It doesn't tire, it doesn't get "drained" merely from use. You can use winter for infinite uses infinite times, up to the whole of winter, and at no point does it lessen in the process. It doesn't have to rest, it doesn't need sacrifices or rituals to regenerate, and giving it to more people actually makes it easier to use. The more

cannibalistic night fused with it should work very well now that it has a sustainable power source.

That does not mean, as we've seen, it can't be hurt or otherwise defeated. Cat, far weaker but more innovative, was able to hurt it. Part of this is the same reason I think she did so horribly with the power: She's a god fighter, ill suited to be a god herself. She fought to maintain what humanity she could even as a self-proclaimed shell of herself (whereas Akua, willing to throw herself into it, did much more much faster). For example, the previous Akua, given the same power, never would have kept having a heartbeat. Cat's an innovative, ever changing person (commented on more than once, both Malicia and Cordelia have only ever been able to fully figure out who cat used to be and keep encountering somebody different the next time), a horrible choice for a mantle that makes one an unchanging part of the fabric of reality. She owned it, but she was one of the most ill-suited people to do so. I imagine she'll still have some measure of power at the end of this, if only in a new name, but what's most important is that we have back a Cat who, even if weaker, is far, far more dangerous.

[HannaB](#)

This!

Catherine Foundling is bloody terrifying, and Winter only dulled that.

[daegone823](#)

Am I the only one that had a flashback to the sword and the stone when Merlin and Madam Mim are having a fight the rules are set out and Mim keeps cheating and turning into predators against the shapes that Mim is. (chicken for caterpillar, cat for a mouse).

Similar to Cat he changes into a small germ that attacks Mim internally like how Cat turned into a small shard and plunged into Sve.

I was dare I say giddy.

[HannaB](#)

Yes!!!

*IDKWhoitis*

I, for one, would happily embrace Akua if she turned her cloak.

Not only because it would shut down potential redemption bullshit from the Pilgrim, but because Akua is one of the most well developed, multi-faceted characters I've read in a while.

I know Viv may never truly forget what happened, but if Akua brings back an intact Cat, she maybe able to forgive. Because let's be real, everyone was worried about Winter Cat, and Cat wouldn't be able to return to Callow without Akua's help. She would have been unmade and ended long ago in the Underdark, especially just now with that Kill Steal from a god.

Also, I'm still hoping for Cat to go after Akua, as insane and unlikely it is to happen.

*Anon*

I'd say Cat's still more likely to go after Vivienne than Akua – not only does she have an actual body, but she doesn't have the emotional guilt of lusting after someone who murdered thousands of her countrymen.

Also, Vivienne was willing to fuck Akua over 'almost' to the point of letting Callow burn by leaving Hakram by himself. She swore a solemn oath with Cat on Akua's eventually being killed off for good by Cat. That isn't really something you walk back.

*IDKWhoitis*

Oh I know Viv is more likely than Akua, but one can still dream.

Also, Akua and Cat have hella a lot of history. The MADE each other, forged their names and positions off of each other. I would also say Akua is certainly more close to Cat than Viv probably will ever be, and understanding on some level what Cat is made of. While her replication of Cat's personality in the Crusdae arc wasnt flawless, she did come a lot closer than Winter Cat did.

*Jane*

You know, with the number of good romance options Cat has, it wouldn't be that hard to make a romance-focused VN as a spin-off of the Guide...

*Jane*

I mean, some might say it's a bit too action-focused for that, but it worked for Hakuoki, no?

(Hit Submit a sentence too early before >\_< )

*IDKWhoitis*

Some of these routes would be one hell of a ride

*Jane*

I can only imagine how much controversy a well-written Cat/William route would create – because people love a good romance, but seeing Cat go Hero for it? It'd be a vicious fight every single time someone brought it up.

Then again, as obvious a spot as he fills, his arc might be too early to appear in a VN... Same with Killian, though it'd feel weird to leave out her one girlfriend who appeared in the work.

I guess it would have to feature Akua, Vivienne, Indrani, Masego, and Hakram. Balance really calls for one more male love interest, but if we're including Akua and Vivienne, it would really have to be post-Liesse, and there aren't really a lot of men who have been that close to her (be it in a positive or negative relationship) after that..

Of course, we could still start introduce them as side-story DLC afterwards – or maybe even go beyond that to include some really eyebrow raising love interests, like Cordelia, Kairos, Malicia, and Larat; characters that don't have even the vaguest hint of a spark implied in their relationship, even with shipping goggles on, but who would no doubt be entertaining to see and explain.

...Aw, now I really want to see such a game 😞 .

### NZPIEFACE

We've literally seen a branching path in this novel before. Why are they all complaining?

### *IDKWhoitis*

I think it would depend on how long or deep one would write it. It could start Pre-Liesse, and then play around with the four storylines that we glimpsed there as potential outcomes that would set Cat on some very different routes.

I wouldn't want Winter Cat to be the protagonist of it, as she's emotionally deep inside. However all that waffling about what to do certainly does remind me of a MC of a VN.

### *Jane*

In terms of structure, I think it would be best if it covered roughly the events of a single book in length, with most of it tied to a common route but with Cat choosing to spend time with a given love interest after every major story beat, where they

talk over what just happened and grow closer to each other; the storyline should split in the final arc, though, as Cat makes some big decision, either concerning the plan or concerning her goals depending on the route, that focuses on the particular synergy she has with the person she's closest to. This should strike a good balance between the romance and an independent plot, I think.

I think if we warped the plot a bit so that Vivienne joins up a bit earlier (or just starts trusting the Woe a bit earlier, though that would be harder), Book Three would be a suitable Cat to adapt – her personality isn't Winterfied, all of the Woe are with her, but things are still in flux enough that their interpersonal dynamics could go in a lot of different directions. It means no Akua (well, it *could* be done in a very different form, I guess, but... Pre- and post-Fall Akua are very different things in this context.), but it would also allow us to include Killian.

*IDKWhoitis*

Personal preference, but I never really liked Killian. Never particularly disliked something, but I kinda always felt they were on the periphery of things. She was Cat's first love, but the way she exited stage left lacked much grief on my end.

I do agree Book 3 is probably the best to adapt, and instead of forcing Viv into the position quicker, we could just slightly augment the ending of Book 3 to make Winter a bit less static and all consuming as we know it. Alienation being always on is what made me dislike Winter Cat, but having more of a gradient on Winter's influence would allow Book 4 events to be part of the plot.

*Jane*

Mmm... It's just that stopping Akua's plot (or not) would make a very tidy ending for the VN, and one that could be adapted to a number of unique routes. If we were to go into Book Four, I can't really think of a good place to end things – and even if there were, it could easily make things too long.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Thing is, Vivienne has no interest in having sex with Cat. Cat seems very sure she's straight and not into girls, which

likely means she's already taken that swing and missed. Akua, on the other hand, has repeatedly expressed interest in having sex with Cat. That puts her ahead by a pretty good margin, especially now that Cat can no longer simply shapeshift into a man if all else fails. I'm not saying she ever would have, but it was theoretically possible before.

[HannaB](#)

I mean, shapeshifting doesn't change your gender. That's not how orientation+gender work. That was never an actually valid option.

So, uh... yeah.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Depends really. I am not getting into trans/generfluid politics or personal identity issues here. Rather just going with something that, problematic or not, has been in stories before.

Namely:

"I am into you. Wanna hump?"

"You are the wrong gender for me to have interest in that."

"I am also a shapeshifter. Bam! I'm now in a body more appealing to you, yes?"

"..." (various levels of interest/horror/revulsion/ here depending on story)

I'm not saying that Cat see's herself as a man, just that she could be one for a night if she wanted to.

[daegone823](#)

Is it possible that in a world where Cat is carving her soul she could consume Akua and have her as some sort of symbiotic component keeping her humanity intact as a sort of life support system for the fragile being that is Cat. We are missing the point that AKua like Cat is breaking away from her bonds and becoming more fluid.

She could died like Cat and be born anew.

She would walk away a ner being muttering "Akua made her mark, it is time Abua no makes hers"

[HannaB](#)

Cat/Akua is approximately 100% more likely than Cat/Vivienne. Because Vivienne is straight.  
And Cat and Akua both have what can only be described as a

crush on each other, and sexual tension has to be cut with a knife when they're up close.

One of these is already canon, the only question is 'will Catherine ever actually SLEEP with her'. The other is one-sided pining after a best friend.

*Daemion*

Cat/Indrani/Masego are the best pairing. Especially if Cat is mortal again.

[HannaB](#)

That is objectively accurate.

However, Cat/Akua remains the best kismessitude I have ever seen 😊

*mavant*

OT3

[Euodiachloris](#)

Looking forward to the day when Akua wags a finger in some Hero's face because, while she, like, totally is on board with the spreading of sunshine and the fostering of puppies, the whole painting smiles on other people's souls Is, like, really bad, you know?

I should know, dude/tte: I was a Villain, remember. I know bad when I see it. \*smile sweetly\*

[HannaB](#)

OH HELL YES.

Akua WOULD be able to lecture heroes on finer points of morality ♥

*Insanenoodlyguy*

"Oh, are we all falling into Evil villiany? Unexpected at this point, but I've been on this horse before. I can teach you all how to do the laugh correctly."

"We are not falling into Evil Villany at all! The angel's benevolent aura wll..."

"Rape souls. It will rape every soul it falls upon. I've mutilated quite a few souls myself, trust me, there's no appreciable difference what way that soul is reshaped. Now your laugh is entirely too soft, so we need to get started right away, if we are going to have you stand on the tallest



tower in the city cackling when your evil plan comes to fruition."

### [Euodiachloris](#)

"I keep telling you, you'll get nowhere until you really work your diaphragm and intercostals."

*RanVor*

Headcanon accepted. Akua's first aspect as a hero would be Criticize.

*Aston W*

Dead King and WB will be in for a shock..

No more god Cat.

*Daemion*

Who is WB?

*Anon*

Wandering Bard.

Honestly, with the way Cat is insisting on staying Mortal, I imagine the Gods below will stick it to her via making her unaging as a last laugh if (when) she wins, even if she doesn't get all the winter-night power.

Unless she manages to somehow pull off the 'gain the power with none of the drawbacks' via having Sve Noc become an ally without one of them dying, but that seems both out of character and not where the story is going – the gods below have too much at stake riding on this.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Evil Named are already relatively unaging. I really doubt she's about to get a heroic name now. But she'll still be just a life-prolonged mortal, and there's a lot of differences there, namely in how easy it is die, and according to cat, how much more you actually live.

### [NZPIEFACE](#)

Evil Named are immortal. Well, none have ever reached the end of their natural lifespan.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Not true immortal, just unaging. In theory immortality is poor by comparison, especially since, as you've said, most don't even live longer than a regular mortal would. Because they are lacking an answer for all those other ways you can die, and are more likely to be introduced to said ways because of their life choices. Named Cat would have died several times during this story arc alone. Winter Immortality picked up a lot of slack.

*RoflCat*

The Wondrous Beard

Which is actually Traitorous disguising as a disguise kit, to fall off the hero's face in perfect moment to reveal them to their enemies.

*Nif*

Wandering bard

[NZPIEFACE](#)

This is getting me thinking, will her new name be "God-Killer" or something?

*Aston W*

You mean God-Brawler.

She punches them until they give up and make a new world.

*SilentWatcher*

That would be terrible. again having Cat Mortal is a mark of bad writing, to make the main character weaker so he can be again in the position of the Underdog. The sword of truth is such an example. Even when she ends up with a god on her leash it would be even worse, because borrowed power is even more unsatisfying to read than no power at all. Also narrative Concerns, everything dangerous, which was leashed, will sooner or later break free.

If she manages to claim everything back, the question remains, if the night part of her power makes her weaker against powers of Above. Winter was not affected before (The undead could not be banished with holy juice)

[HannaB](#)

Don't forget narrative power! If Cat becomes mortal again, she'll get back a lot of oomph she was actually LACKING as a deity.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

What are you talking about? That sword was clearly dangerous and she was right to do what she did to it. It would have killed her. Her cloak just did, since it managed to be a subversion, but it's been clearly stated that magic artificats are a really fucking dangerous thing, at best being unavailable at a time of great need and at worst being the reason for the trouble. A villian wielding an angel-forged sword of a hero that can cut anything? That thing would have killed her during or before Kaleidoscope.

As to her being mortal again: she's never been more dangerous. Weaker is an acceptable trade-off to be more dangerous. That's not bad writing, that's sensible character progression. She never liked Winter. She now has an out, and she's taking it. Whatever she becomes, it's going to be mortal. There's no way she could take it back simply because she wanted to once she became immortal, stories dont' let you take life-altering decisions so easily. But Cat is doing here what she's always done: using the stories to her advantage, including the ones that should be her doom. A great evil has supplanted another great evil and taken the power! But now Cat keeps saying "Mortal no matter what." Even if she takes the power back for herself directly, it will be in some way where she uses it instead of being it.

The key here is to NOT leash it. It's not a leash if the power/monster is okay with what's going on. And how interesting, Cat is making nice with Sve Noc's other half..

[HannaB](#)

n i c e

*Antoninjohn*

When Cat took Winter for the first time the Winter King said that she was apart of the Winter court till "her last dying breath, clawing at the dark", Cat's not going to lose Winter that easy

*Metalshop*

She's literally dying in the darkness here, so if there was ever a time to slip that particular noise this would be it.

*mavant*

Ooohh, GOOD FORESHADOWING

*Nickyd5*

Well that probably wasn't the best decision, in fact I would say it's a stupid one. I mean "mortal to the end" is a nice sentiment

everything, (except not really) but I don't see how all that power she let go was the best decision. Just being nearly human and mortal, isn't going to help her when the grey pilgrim, the sword saint, and everyone else they can gather up, come to kill her, everyone she knows and even remotely cares about, and then proceed to carve up Callow again, because she was too weak to stop them, and because she wanted to feel human again. She was barely strong enough not to die instantly when she first fought the sword saint, and even then she was smacked around like she was an unruly child, and was losing limbs left, right and center, and that was with Winter's mantle, now she doesn't even have that.

This isn't even getting into the fact they have black, the closest thing to father she ever had, locked up and are probably going to execute him soonish, and she will probably be too weak to stop it, and maybe not even get there in time because she maybe doesn't have access to the fay gates anymore. Hopefully she can get some measure of power back, so she can at salvage something from this catastrophe, and remain somewhat relevant.

### *Sablonus*

You're forgetting one it'sy bitsy teeny weeny micromolecular but ever so crucial detail.

Cat's world runs on waves of literal narrative and deus ex machinas out the ass.

### *Jane*

On the one hand, yes, she did give up literally goddess-like power. On the other hand, though...

She realized that she was being far more affected by the principle alienation than she had realized, and that it was dulling her mind – her single greatest asset. When she faces the Heroes, the Gods Above are going to be putting a lead weight on the scales; when she faces the Dead King or Malicia, she'll be facing someone who already outplayed her. Matching power for power isn't how she's going to get through this mess – but that's the kind of thinking Apotheosis *forces* on her.

How much value is there *really* in taking the power to win today's battles when it guarantees losing the war? That's the kind of reasoning that caused her to reject Bonfire earlier, and which justifies rejecting Apotheosis today.

Even if she walks away with nothing but the Drow (who don't *actually* have to follow her if she's no longer Sovereign of Winter, but I'm assuming that's going to be resolved somehow), they have enough tricks to make up for her powerdown – and are diversified enough that Pilgrim can't just knock her out by

disrupting a single (awesomely powerful) spell. It's enough to keep her in the game.

Of course, I expect she'll still walk away with some personal power, somehow, but... Even without going meta, I think from her perspective, it was still the right choice. So long as she has some reason to think she's keeping the Drow.

*SilentWatcher*

Doing the right thing regardless of negative consequences just so she can masturbate to her principles is a hero thing. get over it Cat and grab that power of Damnation

*Insanenoodlyguy*

But doing the smart thing regardless of story impulses (which for Evil's side is always "grab more power") is a Cat thing.

*Aston W*

Take the power but remain in the game.

Cat's insane enough to want to break the game. In Callow. Break Names etc.

That's her purpose as a main character. She IS Meta.

Time for a reset or time skip. Thanks EE.

*Novice*

If this was any other universe I would agree with you but this is a universe run by narrativium. A mortal going against powerful beings can pack a hell a lot more punch than they rationally should have depending on what story is currently running. This arguably can even have a better chance than matching power for power against demigods/minor gods/demons/angels. It's all about the right story, as insane as it is.

[HannaB](#)

Exactly!

So far, Catherine won every time by being /right/. She did the right thing in every major conflict she had (no I am not counting the Lone fucking Swordsman in first Summerholm as a major conflict). She forced out the invasion of Callow despite it being backed up by two strongest heroes the crusade had because of what Tariq and Laurence noticed: she came back at the last moment to help her cornered allies, and it is a hero story, one where the hero wins. She genuinely

WAS defending Callow from a foreign invasion motivated by territorial gain, and that was what tipped the scales.

Refusing to play Below's game here is the only winning move, on the broader game board. The practical way to be Evil is to not be. She was only ever going to pay for gaining power, more and more, and rejecting it gives her back the hold on the 'underdog scrappy orphan' story, which is what had allowed her to grab hold of Winter in the first place, way back when.

*Iconochasm*

There's even a quote about that, from somewhere in the Guide, something like:

"Who should really be afraid, between the dragon and the peasant with a sword?"

[HannaB](#)

You forget that this is a story-driven world.

Between the dragon and the peasant with the sword, who should really be afraid?

*Aston W*

The sword.

*Aotrs Commander*

Problem with Winter was, it was making her Story-vulnerable the more of it she used. I didn't even really notice myself until last chapter how much Cat had become... Slightly less Cat since Winter.

...

Shit.

I just realised the points – the only couple of points – I found myself at odds with Cat were while she was under the mantle; around Second Liesse – and just after Winter unlocked. So now I wonder how much of that was Cat and how much of that was the influence of Story via Winter, unconsciously, before she got bit of a handle on it.

So, er, yeah.

While going back to mortal is not a good move, it may be, ironically, a move which gives her better chances than the alternative. She'll likely have to work harder, though, since she's managed to attract all the attention and there comes a

point all the cunning in the world can't match a certain level of raw force.

Maybe hero!Akua will get WinterNight and be Cat's new attack... I was going to say "dog" but that hardly seems right.

(That'll piss Viv off no end...)

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Except narratively It is exactly what is going to help her with them. You are thinking in terms of a direct fight. This less alienated Cat is likely just going to not have one of those.

*RanVor*

On the other hand, the more Cat tries to avoid the direct confrontation, the more likely she's going to be forced into it. I mean, when was the last time things went the way Cat wanted them to go?

[HannaB](#)

Let's see.

- Callow not, in fact, getting invaded on two ends, as Cat made a truce with the crusaders and Black held the Vales
- the Dead King drawing crusaders away from chipping away at Vales without plunging Cat's narrative karma into negatives by having it be her doing
- the dwarves making an agreement with her to fund her and refuse to sell to her enemies
- the drow actually congregating around her
- Akua's sudden yet inevitable un-betrayal

Catherine has things go her way more often than not when she plays hero, and she plays hero more often than not.

She's only going to get better at it without principle alienation, even if she has to bleed for it.

*RanVor*

Yes, but how many things have gone wrong in the meantime? Cat might usually manage to win at the end, but she never wins cleanly. She might find a way to survive the confrontation, but to outright avoid it? That's not how the Guide works.

[HannaB](#)

True!

And wouldn't that be fun?

*Burdi*

"But Akua bestowed upon me a chord, an invisible string, and through it my fading senses expanded"

i thought it is maybe the key to apotheosis, the secret how akua rip off her own soul yet fully functioned as named with all her aspect intact. (refers to book 2 after first liesse) even masego marveled at her working.

she maybe already learn from the Kabbalis Book of Darkness how to turn herself to an essence with clear mind without dying, she already free of immortal flesh from the beginning minus great mantle of power with immortal existence to anchor her soul (she used obsidian cylinder). neshamah anchor his soul to the hell, cat to winter but still with her mortal body so its incomplete. now she bestowed that to catherine, freed her from her mortal flesh so her apotheosis will full complete.

so the key to apotheosis is get out of your body without dying then bind your soul to something that has immortal existence. Akua taking great risk here, chose to risk brutal dead in the end provided that she got her philosophy answer, trying to free herself from her old cage, live fully and died gloriously

[HannaB](#)

I think it's not a risk, it's a bargain. Akua is not assuming she can slip the noose, she's stepping into it willingly because to her, the payoff is worth the price.

*Nafram*

If this is really a crucible set forth by the Gods Below, then whatever it is that happens, the victor will come out greater than she was before their conflict began (we assume Cat is taking the win here). Even if she remains mortal, she will still be in a more powerful position than before

[HannaB](#)

Definitely!  
Whatever shape that might take 0.0

*SMHF*

It's good point Akua brought up!  
I mean the end goal for Cat is pretty much "World Peace". She just uses Villainous methods to twist people arms to achieve it. But even though World Peace is as heroic a goal as it gets, she's still technically a Villain.  
So who knows, maybe Akua can technically become a Hero by saving puppies all day even though her end goal's gonna be to Rule The World!  
Hey if anyone can do it, it's this crazy bitch!



## HannaB

Is Cat even really going to be a villain after this? Her meta-story already was one of a hero, as Tariq and Laurence had noted, and she's spitting in the face of Below by refusing their bargain, here.

There are two levels on which the hero/villain distinction works in Guideverse. The first is the straightforward magic power one: what empowers you, Above or Below? The second, however, is more powerful: what story are you a part of? What effect are you having on the world? How are people going to remember you? Above and Below are matched in their pissing match, but in the narrative, the hero always wins.

Oh, usually it's the Above's champions that are doing what's right and claiming the hero mantle in the narrative as well. But doing the right thing has been Cat's signature since Marchford (where it did not even give her an advantage as demons don't care about narrative), and so the narrative is backing her.

Akua is hoping to hitch a ride on that as well, and I don't think she's wrong. As long as she stands with Cat, at the very least she'll get a glorious view.

## *KageLupus*

Cat and the Woe have always walked that fine line between sides. For the longest time Cat was simply the Squire, which was repeatedly stated to be a transitional name that could either go Good or Evil. She never actually transitioned into Black Queen as a Name because of Winter fuckery, and while you can argue that Winter is a prototype for Evil I think there is room to argue, especially since she also never fully embraced the mantle.

Same thing with Zeze being the Apprentice. Transitional name that could normally lead to something like Warlock or Good Wizard, but instead he gets to be Heirophant. A Name which is either new or very rare, and which focuses on studying Creation as a construct. I don't really think that it falls into the Good or Evil camps. If Masego had his way he would dissect the Gods Above and Below just to see what made them tick.

Archer, Thief, and Adjutant are all Neutral names as well. Thief hung out with Heroes, but William was an asshole and she readily admits that his plan was as bad as anything Cat pulled off. Archer is here for a good time, not a long time, and the Woe have nothing but interesting fights lined up in their future. And Hakram would follow Cat through every hell and back because he believes in the world she wants to make.

The thing that makes Cat and the Woe so dangerous is that they are actively throwing off the status quo. None of them care about Above or Below, and their Names all reflect that. Cat wants to break centuries of narrative by making Callow truly free instead of a vassal of Good or Evil nations. The simplest way to do that seems to be picking a fight with both sides and then making up the rest as she goes.

[HannaB](#)

Mm!

*Aston W*

+1

*spencer*

This chapter was so well written! The battle of mutual adaptation, the reveal of Akua's redemption push, the dive into Sve's past...

Thanks David!

*Gazing Rabbit*

I would like to remind people that Cat is The Queen of Lost and Found.

Losing her source of power is a recurring theme in this story.

[Antony444](#)

And jsut as I was thinking Cat was on her way to become the immortal Dread Empress Irritant, our beloved author pulls a chapter like this...

Go, Akua and Traitorous!

My God, what have I said?

More seriously, that promises a return to the Cat we loved to support in the first books, the one who killed, betrayed and screwed everyone one way or another.

The Crusaders felt terrified by the Battle of the Camps? I think they may need to change their pants for the woman who was once the Squire is back and ready to kick the teeth of the opposition... Yeah, no wonder there's going to be a battle named the Prince's Graveyard...

Nice twist of preferring mortality over immortality...Catherine Foundling may very well be the first soul to refuse apotheosis and unlimited power, screwing the plans of the Gods Below...

Maybe there will be a new name...like Night Queen...

[HannaB](#)

I'm betting on Queen of Callow: nice, tasteful, accurate and neutral ^^

*mavant*

I have no mouth, and I must grin.

*mavant*

Also, happy to see the riddle game from Sandman played out once more.

*Aotrs Commander*

Oh my fracking Lichmemaster!

Akua IS serious!

\*Ahahahahahahahahahahaha!\*

Wow.

I mean, just wow.

That is priceless.

I have seen people backed into the corner and go "fuck it, Evil."  
(I can even relate to that.)

I have *\*never\** seen anyone just go "fuck it, Good" before. (For a given value of good... Which alarmingly is arguable whether or not it is more or less Evil than the current "Good.")

This is just... Amazing.

[HannaB](#)

I know right!

In a world where Good always wins... there is a pragmatic thing to do 😊

[TheTime](#)

About all that Akua redemption thing – remember Traitorous's law especially the addendum

[HannaB](#)

I mean, we know Akua is capable of genuine affection, between Barika, Zoin and her father. Tasia did her best to destroy that, but Akua has some fight left in her still

*KageLupus*

So, here's a question:

What happens to all of the Drow Cat has been collecting, and especially the ones that she has given titles to? We were told very specifically that they all swore their oaths to the Sovereign of Moonless Nights and not to Catherine Foundling. She had her own long term plan for passing the mantle on but that kind of presumes that the mantle actually exists. Sve Noc seems to have put that presumption on shaky ground. Catherine admits she is no longer the Sovereign and that Winter and Night are currently being melded together. Even if she comes out of this with the full power of the new domain behind her I doubt she could get her title back. And Cat explicitly states she doesn't want to play that game again.

Let's assume that the ending here is Cat staying mortal and freeing the other half of Sve Noc. The new Sve then owes Cat one or something and gives her a contingent of Drow to take back to the surface. That still leaves her titled Drow in a kind of limbo. They swore to obey the Sovereign of Moonless Nights, a title which no longer exists. They also agreed to follow the Liesse Accords, but unless Cat has those written down somewhere that is just a vague future guideline. And even if they are codified somewhere does that really count if they aren't put into practice?

Cat kept her hold on Winter even after that court was dissolved. Would a lesser title like Lord of Silent Steps be able to do the same, or would that power just slip away? Or would the titled Drow keep their power but have it shift around since they were already mixing Winter and Night? It would be interesting to see Ivah become the new highest-ranking member of the Winter Court, just like it would be interesting to see it keep a title but have it change to something else.

Cat killing proto gods is cool and all, but I feel like I have more in common with Masego after this chapter.

*Insanenoodlyguy*

I feel like considering the other power is called "Night" it's ruler still being called "Sovereign of Moonless Nights" could still work and still take. It's conveniently unnecessary to change the title.

*Letouriste*

"You break my heart, dearest," Diabolist drawled. "Again." That was such a clever piece of writing i'm starting to envy you;)

*Kel the Seer*

I am excited to see where this lands for Cat.

Will she remain "mortal" but Named? Maybe the Grey Knight who owes no allegiance to above or below and regularly skews all of their plans?

Will she be forced to once again bind the now larger power of Night-bloated on Winter as a sacrifice to protect something bigger?

I am still rooting for a Queen of Air and Darkness out of this one, though it need not be Cat. Akua could still steal this at a critical and dramatically appropriate point while staying true to herself. I'd also accept a sane Sve with an army of Drow relocating to protect the borders of their new homeland, Callow.

[HannaB](#)

Grey Knight is still not a possible Name on Calernia. And all the other elaborate things aren't something anyone actually calls her.

Queen of Callow, now... 😊

*RanVor*

The thing is, the Queen of Callow is a heroic Name, and that's very bad. How bad? Well, everything-Cat-has-strived-for-since-the-beginning-goes-up-in-smoke bad. To take up a heroic Name, Cat would have to surrender her agenda and subordinate herself to the Gods Above, who are very much anti-Liesse Accords and pro-Let's-have-the-bad-guys-invade-Callow.

*matesbe*

I'm going to theorize that Cat will leave here with a Name like "Queen of Night," or "Ruler of Night," or (less catchy) "Night Queen." I'm not positive by any means, but it would fit. Heck, it might even give her enough of a connection to her last title "Sovereign of the Moonless Night" that the Drow can't just fuck off and leave.

*Burdi*

Or she became The Dark Knight, that will be awesome....first of its Name, because her nature is that martial arts

*Andrew Mitchell*

Or "Night Knight". 🤪🤪🤪

*grzecho2222*

Funny thing that Noc (or Noč or Noć) literally means Night in several languages

*grzecho2222*

And Sve means All

(edit)

*byzantine279*

Yeah, that isn't an accident.

*byzantine279*

My bet: Cat is going to beat the Night-Winter Mantle over the head with a hammer until it gets absorbed into a Name she transitions into.

[HannaB](#)

Oh that would be AMAZING.  
She'd probably have more limited / narratively regulated access to it, but it'll only work out in her favor with how narrativium works in this universe

[ahd](#)

Queen of Air and Darkness. Aspects: Night, Winter, and Rule. (:

[crysjaL](#)

Cat's plan is even smarter than you might think. Exactly how can you justify a crusade against someone who ISN'T a villain? If Cat goes back as a mortal with no name The Grey Pilgrim will be grasping at straws to justify invading and destroying Callow. Every refusal and condemnation thus far no longer has relevance against Cat and her ideals.

[HannaB](#)

Actually, Grey Pilgrim will not just lose his /pretext/ but also his /actual reason/ for opposing her. He wants to support Cordelia, but at this point I think her and Cat are natural allies in this bullshit.

The crusade is collapsing on itself, one way or another, and Cat no longer being a villain will rob it of its last remains of narrative momentum if it even had any left.

*werafdsaew*

Several thoughts:

1. Winter is dead, long live WinterNight.
2. Significant portions of this arc focuses on Cat's increasing mastery over Winter and her new Court of Winter. It would be extremely unsatisfying if all that becomes obsolete, either because Winter knowledge doesn't transfer over to WinterNight, or if Cat never gets WinterNight.
3. Is Cat with WinterNight still SOMN? If not, or if she gets a Name instead of WinterNight, then swearing the oaths to SOMN instead of Catherine Foundling is a huge mistake. Again unsatisfying.

*SilentWatcher*

Yes your speaking my opinion. She cant be mortal again, as mortals dont pick figths with ancient gods after their mortal shell dies.

[HannaB](#)

She can be mortal by definition of 'soft, warm, changeable and breakable' without being a mortal in terms of power at her fingertips.

I'm just saying.

*Nairne .01*

I too would like her to be something that I'd call an "unfettered god".

*fbt*

as much as I like the series, and characters, something has been on the back of my brain lately. Cat isn't particularly brilliant, doesn't make great choices, doesn't have any intrinsic advantage, nor does she create such in any way that can be viewed as a reliably knowable & workable mechanic. She mostly messes up/fails yet comes out more powerful via rationalizations that were not obvious/necessarily true. Over and over. Honestly, it sometimes feels like Cat's only strength is Plot Armor; she benefits for no apparent reason other than because she's the protagonist? Idk, maybe just a mood of mine! I do like the series, and love many of the quieter bits in particular (i'm partial to relationship bits) and snarky interactions. Ignore this freely, I'm probably being an idiot! It happens a lot. It's great writing, and I really do like it.

[HannaB](#)

Oh, you're not wrong!

Cat definitely has gotten through things so far mostly by power of Plot Armor.

Literally.

In-universe.

This is my theory: providence can be granted by Heavens to those who serve them, but it is trumped by the providence granted by the narrative to those who actually really are doing the right thing.

Cat's real power is being on the right side of history, which is how she gathered her allies. Akua here is the purest demonstration of it, changing sides to be on the winning one. She sees Catherine as a hero, and following her as a possible path to redemption, and I don't think it's because she's bad at evaluating stories 😊

### NZPIEFACE

What if she's been getting plot armour from Above the whole time cause she was saving Callow.

### crysjal

That's incorrect. Good does not have any real control over the narrative. Good's supposed narrative strength developed as the "good Good guys beat the bad Villains", who did unquestionably bad things as Villains in this world demonstrably do (flying castles, plagues etc). The narrative doesn't discriminate between sides. The weight of actions can skew the other way as demonstrated by the functionally Evil Cat in book 2 drawing the sword from the stone and getting her resurrection which is established narratively as a reward for "saving the day", as Cat observed, the angels had to give her her resurrection because that is what the Narrative demanded of the angels. This was perhaps ironically because that was how the narrative developed because the angels had done that previously. Above doesn't have any real influence on the Narrative, in fact nobody has demonstrated an ability to change the narrative outside the Bard which is its own entity and has only ever demonstrated the ability to establish narrative weight as she did vs the Dead King.

The higher an entity appears to be in the pecking order of power the greater the power the narrative seems to have on them. It might be that the narrative is in reality a side effect of attempts to prevent the Gods above and below from directly interfering with the world and thus ruin the entire point of the question the world was created to answer.

Consider the Narrative and the providence that surrounds it to be a piece of clay that is slowly moulded over time as different stories (shapes) are pressed into it. Over time it gains a form and structure and as it does so it hardens.



Eventually similar stories are forced to follow the mould instead of shaping it themselves. That is what the Narrative is. The Dead King and Interlocutor commented that the Narrative was not what it is currently back when they started out.

The Black Knight and Cat both use this to their advantage, finding the "shape" of certain stories and trying to manipulate and change them to fit certain narratives which would lead to certain outcomes. For example, the Champion vs the Monster is an ancient story that has been established via many myths and fairy tales such as Heracles, Beowulf and Sigurd. Captain was fighting a figure whose identity and origin embodies those old heroes and so could only lose in that fight once she transformed and became the monster to Champion's well, champion.

[HannaB](#)

Yes, I suppose it's not so much 'heavens granting providence' as it is 'providence normally favoring heavens'.

This supports my point.

*Unmaker*

Refusing a second apotheosis. Spitting defiance in the face of a monstrous evil while fighting the very schemes of the Gods Below. Sounds suspiciously like Good acts. And none of Catherine's Named followers have explicitly Evil names. Going truly Good would be almost impossible, but taking a mostly-neutral Name seems like a possibility. The Gods Below wanted the only option to be who won because that would continue and expand Evil no matter what, but if Cat doesn't take up the mantle of the Coldest Night, there's a whole lot of power out there waiting to be claimed. A new Name that didn't tap that would be surrounded by enemy power. I am looking forward to seeing what happens.

*Unmaker*

Another thought: What is Neshamah going to make of an immortal who gets it taken from them and then refuses to take it up again? He will certainly think less of her, but does the precedent alone give him any sort of fear? When the first god dies, the rest learn fear.

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## Chapter 79: As Above

*"Hubris and wearing a helmet are not mutually exclusive. Here, allow me to demonstrate."*

– Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck

"I'll be honest," I said. "I kind of expected to get to the bottom of memory lane before we ran into each other. You, uh, took me by surprise."

Andronike – Sve Noc's slightly less unreasonable half, or at least that was the hope – did not lean into the feeble attempt at defusing the tension. Fine, I thought, be that way. *We can be all grim about this, and not even mention that right now in a very real sense I'm inside your sister.* There was room for an even filthier joke in there, and really where was Indrani when you needed her?

"I expected you to move from shadow to shadow until you reached Tvarigu," the entity mildly replied. "Not to raise an army of slaves and declare war upon my entire race. This has been, one might say, a year for surprises."

I was really taking a verbal beating on the whole slave thing tonight, huh. Was this what it felt like to be the Akua of a situation?

"Subtle has never been my strength," I admitted. "It was a bad habit even before Winter filled my veins with pure 'walk off dismemberment' juice. Not sure I can shake it at this point."

Or even that I should, to be honest. I'd run into one dead end after another since I started trying to play queenly games with my opponents. It wasn't that I was awful at those – with the Woe at my back, I'd made sport of my opposition within Callow – so much that my enemies were just outright better at them. It was no excuse to cease learning, but on the other hand had it not been a kind of arrogance to believe that with so little schooling I could stand on equal footing with the likes of Hasenbach or Malicia when it came to their preferred methods? My own were brutish and clumsy things, but in the end I'd accomplished more with bastard ways than proper ones.

"It seems like tonight it is your flaw that will be doing the shaking, then," Andronike indifferently commented.

"Night's not over yet," I said.

"Fascinating," Sve Noc said, though she didn't sound fascinated in the slightest. "Even knowing that my sister pursues you, you

would still waste your time on idle banter. You are quite peculiar."

My fingers clenched.

"You're not stopping her," I realized. "Or stopping mind-time, whatever the Hells this is. She's still coming."

"And will annihilate you the moment she finds you," Andronike agreed. "It is inevitable. Even if you flee, eventually there will be nowhere left to run."

"Could you not, uh," I eloquently said, gesturing vaguely.

Silver eyes flicked at me, unamused.

"Why should I?" she replied.

The memory was still unfolding in front of us, the two sisters speaking conspiracy in hushed whispers, but that wasn't the fire I needed to be paying attention to at the moment.

"I want to make a deal," I said.

"So I assumed," Andronike said. "That is usually the way, when one is staring defeat in the eye. What I wonder is why you'd presume I would be willing to indulge you."

"This isn't going to go like you think it is," I said. "If she eats Winter-"

"The sum of your knowledge on this matter is animal instinct and second hand crumbs of understanding from the heir to over a millennium of abject failure," Sve Noc cut in. "While your fumbling attempts to sow discord in ignorance might amuse another, I am not fond of such crude forms of humour."

I grit my teeth.

"First off, Hierophant is a fucking treasure," I said. "Sure he's not perfect, but he's kind and smart as a whip and he tries his best. Don't shit talk my friends, it's rude."

Andronike simply stared at me, then shrugged.

"The hourglass is emptying," she reminded me.

"I'll be expecting an apology later," I said, equally unmoved.

"As for the other thing, it's no secret I'm not the most learned in things sorcery. But you know what I *do* have a knack for?

Stories. And we're treading one right now, Andronike. You want to guess how it ends for the two of you?"

"This is puerile," Sve Noc noted. "You are the one who sought me out for conversation."

"It's been a long my whole life," I grunted. "Humour me."

She did not reply. I sighed and was I about to prod the conversation forward when I felt the reason she'd not spoken up: a tremor shivering across the ground. The other half was catching up.

"We'll finish this later," I told her. "I need to strategically manoeuvre out of here."

There was no open stretch to leap down this time, which complicate things a bit, but the room was splayed before me in full. Including, luckily, the door. I hobbled forward, trying to spare my bad leg, and tugged it open before going into the dark.

—

"Come on," I muttered, limping forward. "Give me what I need."

There was no winning this with power, I knew. The moment I was caught I'd be swatted into oblivion, Andronike watching with mild interest as my soul was obliterated by her incensed sister. Even our thrilling little chase earlier had seen me on the defensive almost the entire time, only Akua's intervention giving me an opening to strike. Even if I returned to the pit fight, even if I somehow managed to defy the odds and devour her before she devoured me, it would be an empty victory. I'd go right back to being an imitation of myself, only with a second kind of poison running through my veins. I needed to mold the situation so that at least half of Sve Noc *wanted* me to win, and so far on that front I was swinging at mist. I didn't have good enough a grasp of what moved the sisters, and it wasn't like idle chatter was going to get me here. Somehow I doubted the legendary power of stilted small talk would allow me to turn this around. Fortunately, I could skip the middle man and have a direct look at their — hers, maybe, for I was not sure if these were shared or purely Komena's — memories. I'd been hoping for another pivot, hard decisions taken behind closed doors, but what I got instead was a battle.

The end of one anyway.

Komena was easy enough to pick out from the rest of the soldiers, as her pauldrons were a different set of sculpted obsidian but the rest of her armour had not changed. She was standing among a small band of drow officers, the lot of them idling behind another drow at the edge of a steep promontory overlooking a city. One I did not recognize, it bore saying. The signatures of drow architecture were there, the bridges and complicated segmentations in height, but it wasn't anywhere I'd been before.

This looked like a victory, I thought, yet the mood among the officers was grim. Unlike any other drow city I'd seen this one had walls – four interlocking sets of them, with tall bastions towering over – and beneath those there was a thick carpet of corpses. Many of them drow, but there was no small amount of dwarves to match them. Given that the city still stood and the likely invading dwarven army was nowhere in sight, the Empire Ever Dark was master of the field. Yet below in the winding city streets I could see soldiers retreating in haste, forcing aside panicking civilians to make their way out faster.

"Jakrin, Soliva," the drow closest to the edge said. "Have your javelineers scatter the crowds of the outer district. The delay is dangerous."

My eyebrows rose in surprise. I knew that voice. Not so long ago it'd been mocking me mercilessly. Under the helm and ornate armour it was difficult to have a look at the drow, but the voice did not lie: I was looking at a younger Mighty Rumena. Was that what it'd meant, when it had said it knew one of the sisters? Komena had actually served under it during the wars? Rumena's orders drew no enthusiasm, but two officers peeled off to see to their ugly duty.

"The rest of you, see to your sigils," Rumena said. "Prepare for the retreat north. Dismissed."

The drow scattered without a word, all save for Komena. She strode forward instead, coming to stand at Rumena's side, and I limped forward to flank it on the other side. The three of us looked down at the city eating itself alive, silent for a moment.

"Great General Who Shook The-" Komena began.

"Enough, rylleh," Rumena tiredly replied. "Today I held command over the single greatest military disaster in the history of the Firstborn. Spare me the titles, they now have the ring of mockery."

"It is not of your making, this war," the woman who would become Sve Noc said. "I was there when you protested the deep raids. As were all the others."

"It might not have been such a disaster, had we kept to the humans," Rumena mused. "But they were too few, too far. We needed nerezim slaves if the hallowing was to happen in our lifetime."

I let out a sharp breath. It'd been the drow that started the wars with the Kingdom Under? Deep raids, Komena had said, and all the greatest of Praesi horrors had been forged of human sacrifice. *Gods, they were fool enough to attack the dwarves for ritual fodder*, I realized.

"We had no idea, did we?" Komena murmured. "What they could bring to bear in their fullness of their wrath."

Rumena stiffened, though not because of her words. It leaned forward, staring intently at the city, and I followed its gaze. It was gazing at some open-roofed temple. The structure was no great wonder, but its floor was glowing red and orange. No, not glowing. Melting. A massive creature with stone-like skin, horned and clawed, ripped free of the floor. Lava poured out in its wake, erupting like a fountain.

"I am told," Rumena said, sounding darkly amused, "they use the creatures to heat their forges. They are not even soldiers, Komena. They are exterminating our kind with *smithing tools*."

Red and orange bloomed over the city, smoke and screams filling the air, and I felt nauseated. Merciless Gods, was this the true face of dwarven warfare? No wonder the drow were still terrified of them after so many centuries. Still, interesting as this was it wasn't getting me anywhere. Even as the two began discussing how much of their army they'd lose in the evacuation, I stepped forward over the edge of the cliff and embraced the fall.

—

"Now this is more like it," I said.

The room was a barely-contained riot of scribbles. Every surface was covered with long equations in numerals I did not recognize and incantations in that near-Crepuscular I'd glimpsed in the first memory. There were piles of some strange string-like parchment scattered over what sparse stone furniture could be found, and Komena was going through one patiently.

"There," she said, handing it to her sister. "The full transcription."

Andronike took it absent-mindedly, a brush wet with red paint twirling between her fingers. On the wall in front of her scattered equations had red lines through them, others hasty corrections. The older sister finally glanced at the parchment she'd been given and frowned at what she found.

"It is as you said," Andronike sighed. "It cannot be sacrifices. It would only worsen the gap."

"It has to be the molten earth currents," Komena said. "When we campaigned against the forest humans, they used the very land against us without relying on their own sorcery. The underlying principles should be the same. If the nerezim can master—"

"We are not the nerezim, 'Mina," her sister replied, sounding irritated. "In theory you are correct but it would take decades

if not centuries of deep study before we could even begin to imitate their mastery."

"We can't wait forever, 'Nike," the other drow reminded her. "If you're right, the tipping point was reached last year. The moment inertia ceases carrying us..."

"I know," Andronike sighed. *"I know."*

The second instance had been whispered and on the wings of it all semblance of vitality left the Sage. She looked afraid, tired, and so terribly young. I could sympathize.

"They're still settling our former colonies," Komena said quietly. "But it won't be long before they start advancing again. They're refused the latest peace offerings."

"We have greater worries than that," Andronike murmured.

Her sister's eyes narrowed.

"You said we should still have five years, before we start dying," she said.

"And that has not changed," the older sister replied. "But the Sages are terrified, 'Mina. They know the consequences of so many lost lives, and they have found no remedy in our lore."

"Then there is none to be found anywhere," Komena said. "Who else is there?"

Her sister looked away.

"'Nike," Komena repeated slowly. *"Who else is there?"*

"They have," the other drow said quietly, "sought the advice of the King in Keter."

"Shrouded Gods," Komena snarled. "Have they gone mad? That thing destroyed an entire human realm."

"And survived," Andronike said. "Conclusion was reached that our kind as a whole can no longer be preserved. Yet the eldest of the Sages believe that is no reason for them in particular to perish."

"How many times can a single band of fools damn an entire race?" her sister cursed. "They have to die, heart of my heart. I know you hesitate but we can no longer mass support in the dark. We must strike before they do."

"If we kill them before we have our remedy, we have slain the Firstborn through them," Andronike said.

"Gods take them all," Komena said, passing a hand through her long hair. "As if they hadn't done enough damage already."

Her sister paused. After a long moment, she put the parchment back onto the stone table and refreshed her brush with red paint from a pot. Striding forward under Komena's bemused gaze, she slashed through another few equations and then from that drew lines leading towards a rare empty spot on the wall. On it she wrote a single word in ancient Crepuscular, and this one I knew well: Night.

"We had never considered it before then," Andronike said. "Neither of us were all that pious, and the Shrouded Gods have even been a capricious lot."

I didn't freeze this time. I'd expected her to show up from the moment I'd realized this particular memory would actually be of use to me. She seemed fond, I noted, of standing at my side. As if we were companions, the two of us watching some play unfold together.

"You needed a miracle," I said. "And the hour had grown too late to quibble as to the source of it."

Sve Noc blinked in surprise.

"An apt summation," she conceded. "We did not grasp the full consequences of the bargain, then. We still believed it was a cure we would wrangle."

"But what you got was a stay of execution," I said. "The Night keeps them alive only so long as you keep feeding it fresh sacrifices."

"As a young girl the notion would have disgusted me," Andronike said. "But we'd both lived through the wars by then. Still, it amuses me in retrospective that it was her who balked at the terms when they were given. She cared for our kind in a way I never truly understood."

"Why tell me this?" I frowned.

She'd not exactly been forthcoming with details so far.

"You do not understand the scale on which we operate, Catherine Foundling," Sve Noc chided me. "How intentions fade in the face of eternity. The unmaking is in the details, you see. Allow me an example. I was of the Sages, and so unlike other drow allowed to learn of their history. They were once a great boon to my kind."

"The same crowd who doomed you once and then tried to have another go at it," I skeptically replied.



"They were necromancers, at their inception," Andronike faintly smiled. "Not for conquest, but for peace and learning. They called on the wisdom of our ancestors, allowing the spirits to speak through them. Death, in their eyes, was the only sin – for it robbed the living of the wisdom of those departed."

I'd seen the later meaning of those words with my own eyes and it had little to do with that gentle sentiment. *Justifications only matter to the just*, I mockingly thought. Sometimes you looked back and wondered what kind of madness had moved your lips.

"You wonder why I burden you with such tedious history, no doubt," Sve Noc said. "I lead to a question – you held great power for years, Catherine. What did you build with it?"

Silver eyes studied me.

"What shape will your creations take, after your passing?" she said.

My lips thinned. Legacy. She was speaking of legacy. And what would mine be? Some things transient, other less so. I had changed the face of rule in Callow, left the old nobility to lie in the grave Black had dug for it, but there was no guarantee it would remain there in the decades to come. Tradition had a stubborn pull on my people. The Army of Callow had learned the Wasteland ways of war, but that was Juniper's work more than mine and without a War College of our own to keep the torch lit the reforms would die with our generation. I'd fought wars, and liked to think most had been worthy of being fought. But that was to preserve, was it not? It was standing still, not advancing. I'd tried to bind more than humans to the Kingdom of Callow, more than born Callowans as well, but the numbers were few. A single goblin tribe, a few legions' worth of foreign soldiers and officers. Not enough, I suspected, to truly change the threads the Callowan tapestry was woven from. Unpleasant as the thought was, perhaps the most consequential change I had brought to my home was receiving the oaths of the Wild Hunt. *And that will die with me*. Andronike, I thought, had been inviting me to ponder how what I'd created would twist and turn with time.

Instead I'd found I had created little and less.

But there was one thing, I thought, that I would count as legacy if I could – though it was so very far from done. One dream I was trying to bring into the world.

"I imagine the Accords will grow warped, in time," I said. "And yet I have faith that even in their worst incarnation they will be better than the current face of Calernia."

"Faith," half of Sve Noc said, "is ever a costly affair."

"Is that how you live with this?" I asked. "You tell yourself you were had, you were beaten, and that's all there is to it?"

"You should choose your words more carefully," Andronike coldly said.

Ah, was that emotion peeking through? Finally we were getting somewhere.

"You seem under the impression I'm afraid of you," I said. "Best discard that, it'll make this easier on both of us."

"Do you believe your little shade will save you?" Sve Noc said. "It has hidden well, but not flawlessly. Whatever her scheme it will end, and there will be no salvation through her bloody hands. Not half as clever as she thought herself to be, in the end."

"Now, there's a lot of harsh stuff to say about Akua Sahelian," I said. "Believe me, I've covered a lot of that ground and I'm still discovering fresh pastures. But I'll say one thing for her: even at her very worst, at least she wasn't a spineless sack of whining like you."

This, I reflected, was not my finest attempt at diplomacy. Well, too late to take it back so I might as well roll with it.

"Are you truly so arrogant as to believe I cannot destroy you here?" Andronike said.

"That's beyond my control," I shrugged. "You're pretty much a goddess at this point, you could snuff me out like a candle at any point and there's nothing I can do about it. But hey, not even an hour ago I lied down to die in the snow. As far as I'm concerned every moment from now on is an unexpected turnout, so if I'm about to be sent Below I might as well speak my mind first. You're getting on my nerves, y'see, because behind all the bluster you're a coward."

"Your opinion is less than dust," Sve Noc frigidly replied.

"So you got screwed by your deal with the Gods Below," I said. "Surprise, who could possibly have seen that coming except literally anyone who ever read a history book not written by the violently mad. Still, I'm in no position to cast stones for bad bargains, given my record, so there you get a pass. Where you *don't* is that over a thousand years have passed and the Everdark is still a murderous clusterfuck. If anything it's gotten worse with the years."

"It is as it must be to maintain the Night," Andronike said. "Every grim beat of it."

"And you're proud of that?" I said. "Of maintaining this? It's one thing to make a desperate mistake, but you've kept it going ever since."

"Until today," Sve Noc harshly replied. "Until you delivered yourself into our hands."

"Can you not learn?" I hissed. "The Gods Below helped you into this mess in the first place and *you're still doing what they want.*"

She rocked back in surprise.

"How do you think this goes for you, Andronike?" I pressed. "They throw two bears into pit, you come out with your teeth red and it's all over? You do this, you give them the victory they want, and they own you all twice over. There's no slipping a noose you tightened yourself."

"The debt-" she began.

"- isn't even the point," I interrupted heatedly. "You think *Winter* is going to make things better? Its fae were almost as bad as devils, Andronike. *Devils.* Let that sink in for a moment. They'll still have their hand up your ass, only this time it's permanent instead of a ritual and you will never, ever be rid of it."

"And being made into your *pets* is better?" she snarled. "An army of slaves to die for your cause, then sent away in some remote corner to rot when the usefulness has passed."

"You're right," I said.

For the second time tonight, I took her by surprise.

"You're absolutely right," I admitted. "If I still bore my mantle I might be ranting about how it's the lesser evil and at least with a leash on you'd be doing some good, but that's honestly disgusting. So is what you made of your people, but it doesn't excuse what I planned to do in the slightest. I was wrong, and it might mean dust to you but I apologize. I treated you like rabid animals in need of shackles instead of a people brutalized by circumstance and I can only be ashamed of it."

"You are mad," Andronike said.

There was an undertone of awe to the statement.

"I am *angry*," I correcting, baring a grin that was all teeth and defiance. "Truth is, Andronike, I've been angry all my life. At the Praesi for owning my people, at my people for being owned. At my father, for being so much less than he could be. At my friends, for even needing someone like me. At myself for the

trail of smoking ruins I've left in my wake. At my enemies, for just *refusing to listen*. I've been angry for so long that without the anger there'd be nothing left of me. It's who I am."

I bitterly laughed.

"And most of all, I'm angry I never left the fucking Pit," I told her. "Because you and I, we're not saviours or monsters or anything half as grand – we're the *entertainment*, Sve Noc. We take out our pain on each other and their tally moves with the groaning weight of the dead."

"There is nothing else," Andronike said.

"There is," I quietly replied. "We don't claw at each other like animals. We help each other out of the pit instead."

Eyes met, silver to brown.

"They can't play shatranj if the pieces don't listen," I told her. "So I could say I want to make a deal, but that's the wrong way isn't it? This isn't a competition, it's not about winning. There doesn't *need* to be a loser."

I offered her a hand.

"You have my help, if you want it," I said. "And there are hardly words for how very badly I need yours."

Slowly, her arm rose. Then she struck like snake and seized me by the throat.

*Damnit Akua, I thought, you broke the power of friendship.*

---

[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[\*erraticerrata\*](#)

First update of the month, so extra chapter in the corresponding tab! This one is titled "Peregrine I", from the POV of the young Grey Pilgrim. Character contest continues, with the extra chapter adding a third matchup to the round: Ranger vs Adjutant, Robber vs Pilgrim, Thief vs Juniper. Links to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16966329?fbclid=IwAR3x27dSnq3zTclLXDAhcVc44\\_Kh-0RWD82h30vZAbl7a7tKJ9N-PJHVBis](https://www.strawpoll.me/16966329?fbclid=IwAR3x27dSnq3zTclLXDAhcVc44_Kh-0RWD82h30vZAbl7a7tKJ9N-PJHVBis)

<https://www.strawpoll.me/16966326?fbclid=IwAR0FM3Bg0PsFnCws04wH73fLJcByEcp0VTeebyGlS7YMr16dQDe-b6uvoWM>

<https://www.strawpoll.me/16966323?fbclid=IwAR0Z37BdZRqwXVeC2lZ9EdYqZf0PcufYI-Tfe-BN-YkgoxmXA86ky4SEoYQ>

[taborask](#)

Where's all the love for Tariq? I feel like this is going to end up as the meme showdown between Hierarch and Robber

*RanVor*

It will not. The Hierarch has already left the contest.

*C\_B*

Hah, that's what you think! That was just the first part of his plan!

*Jonnnnz*

Tariq is at best a hypocrite. He lets people call Cat a butcher for dropping a lake on people in combat where he lasers down the opposition, and then creates a plague that kills over fifteen thousand outside of combat. He is sad about it, but that doesn't change what he does. He is critical when others do bad things, unless they're on the side of Above. He literally refused a deal that gave him everything he asked for because he wants Evil to lose, not just to win. He is Tyrant, only dishonest with himself in a boring way

[HannaB](#)

Tariq didn't refuse Cat's deal out of principle, he was supporting Cordelia.

*Nairne .01*

Which makes it even worse because that would have led to occupation or straight up annexation of Callow (which I suppose he would see as a good thing all things considered because Callow would still be a part of "Good").

[HannaB](#)

Callow is one country. Tariq was talking about peace for literally the entire rest of the continent. Yes, sacrificing Callow for the rest of them is exactly the ugly thing that Catherine's mad at. But sacrificing Procer and Levant for Callow isn't exactly the better answer.

Tariq couldn't see a way he could have acted without breaking SOMETHING, so he stuck to what he saw as the least worst option. That happened to not be the one the protagonist was championing. Doesn't make him despicable.

### *RanVor*

It's not that Callow is to be the Good's meat shield now, it's that Callow has always been the Good's meat shield and is to become the Good's meat shield again. That state of things has been taken for granted by the side of Good for a long time and suddenly everyone is super upset when it's no longer true. Nobody gives a shit about Callow beyond sacrificing it for their own safety, and that's what Catherine is mad at. Or at least that's how I always understood it.

### *Quin*

It's not so much good, but circumstances. If you play by the hero book then tales have weight. Having a princess fighting food good to avenge her people against a terrible evil gives strength. Allying with those who work with evil weakens you.

Cat worked with Black and she is essentially his pupil. Story wise that villain side... Moral wise that's a group that was left to the wolves and doesn't want to be put on the chopping block again just when they gained some measure of freedom.

Story wise the kingdom will get better when the rightful heir retains the throne. All good princess needs is to marry a random noble. Reality wise it's chopped into pieces for her nobles to claim just under a new label for the corrupt occupation.

Story stands strong with placing Callow on the chopping block... This the story bound heroes will hack, slice, and kill... Because they are story bound. The current villains are the exceptions because they do not use stories and tales to guide their blades or dictate their actions.

They learn from their mistakes and strive to do better.  
Something which we see most other groups fail to do...  
As even seeing the trap before them and knowing how to escape... They can't help but follow the story and leap to their doom.

*Jonnnnz*

Except he is ignoring that Villains will continue cropping up, and that Callow left to the will of Above will continue being wartorn as Praes and Procer continually bleed them. His goal is a Hero in charge, and that matters more to him than the sea of corpses that would cause. He is sad about it, but ultimately doesn't care enough to not commit war crimes on par with the worst Warlock unleashed.

*HannaB*

I think the thing is, you're assuming everything Tariq does is a part of some big master plan.

But I think he reacts, not acts. He's kept on the backfoot by all the SHIT going around, and that's where the discrepancy in what he says and does at different points comes from, not hypocrisy.

*MetruX*

You should remember a very nice conversation between Cordelia and Cat. It wasn't too far ago, at Keter, when she remembered it for a simple reason: what is it truly worth if you feel bad but don't change your act? The Peregrin (and I refuse to call him by his "human" name) is not a person, not anymore. He gave his all to Above, so even if he does believe what he preaches, he will never follow it, because as you said he reacts. You know who is always reacting until the final act? Heroes. Controlled by Above. Who are murderous amoral fuckers that don't really care about life, comfort or good feelings, as long as people follow them. So, the true question here is: can you like a willing paw to heartless monsters? If your answer is yes, then feel free to like him. I unfortunately can't.

*RanVor*

Also, Tariq isn't talking about peace for the rest of the continent, just Procer, Levant and Ashur. Even the

Good cities of the League are beyond his willingness to care.

### Styn

Just glad Juniper is making it a close match, most of the jobber characters have made their way out of the contest.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Yes! Juniper deserves to do well. I found this the hardest of the votes so far. And ended up choosing Juniper.

### James, Mostly Harmless

The brackets are at <http://www.bracketmaker.com/tmenu.cfm?tid=470805> .

*Morgenstern*

The “Next” button below the next offers no link to the extra chapter as of this moment.. =/

*Andrew Mitchell*

Here it is: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/12/03/peregrine-i/>

### Javvies

Harsh, but true.

Although, I don't think Akua really broke the power of friendship, Cat's just not quite there yet.

*Morgenstern*

My bet is that Komana listened. And SHE is the one that cared about the drow like Andronike never did... So my call is: Andronike is out to kill Cat, because she is simply arrogantly furious about the names Cat called her, because she would never admit the truth. And it's “surprisingly” \*Komana\* who will come to Cat's rescue and take her offer, even if it means getting rid of the her sister. Because her beloved sister has died long, long ago – and she realizes this, if only now. She simply needed a push, to be able to choose her people over her sister, because all the time she was seeking for a way to keep both. And this is the final straw telling her that this is not possible. She has to choose. And her choice will be her people.

*Morgenstern*



And Cat be damned should she go against what she just said and return to her slaver's ways. She'd suffer an eternity for that.

*taovkool*

Catherine Diplomacy strikes again!

And thus the power of friendship was broken.

*RoflCat*

It's not broken yet, Cath just need to remind herself she's more on the White Devil's school of 'Friendship'

i.e. beat them into a bloody pulp THEN you're best friends, best when giant, strangely non-lethal laser is involved. (rainbow color and exploding spaceship optional)

[NZPIEFACE](#)

OH I COMPLETELY FORGOT ABOUT THE FACT WE HAD EXTRA CHAPTERS ON THE FIRST RELEASE OF A MONTH.

FUCK YEAH.

*Truthhut*

Where is the extra chapter?

*Andrew Mitchell*

Here it is: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/12/03/peregrine-i/>

*Antoninjohn*

Well its not like Cat had a knife in the other hand which she will use to kill Nike and take the night from her corpse, or maybe Cat will skin Nike and wear her skin pretending to be her and then stab Sev

*Dainpdf*

Doesn't really help on the "make half of the Sve want her to win" side. It'd be going back into the Pit.

[ClickPause](#)

She most likely would have beaten Sve within her soul given the time and the Story, but that's not what she wants. That's what Below wants.

*Pipiemman*

Father?

*Daemion*

The Black Knight.

*Bravo*

Black.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

Yup, a loaded word/term if there ever was one

*Letouriste*

Seen her casually say THAT word is a amazing:o

[HannaB](#)

Especially in context of how fucking pissed she is at him ♥

*spk*

First

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Wait. She's the fucking Hulk.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I just realized something. Hakram will be able to immediately tell when Cat ever truly dies.

*SpeckofStardust*

I'm just going to place the bet that she's killing Cat in order to move themselves elsewhere so that the conversation wont get interrupted.

*Xvyz*

It would be too anticlimactic otherwise.

*Xinci*

Well then several excellent things to note this chapter. I was wondering and still am, ways to break the dwarves. The power of the dwarves bathes in earth and fire, so kill their beast, kill their fires and devour their knowledge of movements of the earth if you have Night. That would be the thing to do, to reverse inertia/to get a greater role out of the fight with the dwarves. Turn their knowledge against them with a adaptable force to get new power and new sacrifice. Relying on the beating heart of the

earth and its cycles for power does provide a excellent story for self-destructive revenge too(in the area of blowing up the moon, and becoming it).

I do wonder what they burn for most of their fire(what is fed to their beast, how do those beast go about their life cycles, etc. What makes them strong enough to survive?). At least if one wanted to outdo their doom somewhat and achieve a better purpose. They might have trees and maybe some sulfuric stormy seas down in the depth maybe. Or stolen a spirit of the land and bound it to the deeps.

Coordination to set up greater things definitely seems one of the best results of Below's environmental engineering, at least if one wants greatness out of it. After all that infighting, adaptation, and suffering using all that accrued experience to then coordinate with other subjects gets new, possibly positive results. Indeed working together to get out of their control/box if only temporarily is a great thing to attempt. Only way to get out is to create something new with the weight of all that pain and suffering...together.

Andronike seems to have made one of the saddest and most important mistakes one can make as a villain. Giving up on change, the Gods below so far have shown a fairly good propensity to setting up the environment with opportunities to change ones own society from within and without. The moment one stops, the moment one calcifies, is the moment they must be switched to other targets, generally with bad times for the Villain being moved.

Good also for Cat to realize how little of what she had done has effected the wheel as of yet.

*Dainpdf*

Below wants people in the ring, fighting and fighting but achieving very little besides helping prepare Below's Gu.

*mavant*

Gu?

*Yavandir*

Chinese bug shit you throw everything poisonous into the jar and the last thing standing supposedly eats everything else and is the most poisonous shit

*RanVor*

Praes in a nutshell.

*Dainpdf*

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gu\\_%28poison%29](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gu_%28poison%29)

Guess I shouldn't make vague references without citation.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

Everyone talking about the drow and Gods Below and Cat and whatever, meanwhile I'm just loving that dwarves have domesticated lava lizards. Multipurpose lava lizards. Oh those wacky dwarves, what will they come up with next.

Also damn, the Dead King terrified the drow before the drow as we know them existed. He really is the only human or former human to make it into the big leagues

*Dainpdf*

This side of the sea, at least. And maybe besides the Bard.

[Javvies](#)

I'm not sure Bard truly qualifies as human.

[ClickPause](#)

I picture her as that one immortal chick in Gunnerkrigg Court. Just kinda there, with possibly hidden motives.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Jones?

*Insanenoodlyguy*

Eh, she's the antithesis of Jones. One is stoic, unchanging, true immortal, who intentionally does not pass on knowledge and changes as little as possible, and having been born into her apotheosis and left her with blunted emotions, and just a little incest.

<https://www.gunnerkrigg.com/?p=1117>

The other is a resurrector/body snatcher who's problem is she feels EVERYTHING, who is one of the big game-piece movers. It occurs to me though, through your comparison, that Bard's "die and resurrect" immortality is probably intentionally there to prevent her Apotheosis. She can make so many changes because unlike other immortals she's always changing.

*Dainpdf*

Close enough Neshamah can't find the seams.

*Aston W*

5th rate god on a tiny 12 rate island. That's the Dead King.

This ain't the worldwide yet..

*WuseMajor*

He hasn't made it out of the pit yet, but he has claimed the status of boss monster/epic class piece that you only pull out of the box rarely. Which is something.

*Dainpdf*

More of Cat realizing just how much Winter screwed her mind. And more her realizing how rigged this game is.

I find it nice to recall how she hesitated to bring in the Night back when she first encountered Drow, which shows she at least wasn't *\*that\** far gone yet.

*luminiousblu*

It seems contrived to me, like EE decided Cat was too far gone for his liking and needed an easy way to bring her back. Cat was sliding down the scale of the lesser evil long, long before she became a fae so now this weird about-turn just comes off as forced and completely, utterly unnatural.

Hell, Catherine has always since the beginning thought of herself as a tool to reach a better ending – not in the way Black did, no, but slightly further, because Black didn't truly view himself as disposable – he wasn't a martyr – but Catherine was willing to die for the things she wanted. That she balked at becoming a fae instead of a human seems really off, especially since the most tangible difference – that she had no real sense of taste – can be shrugged off by giving herself the illusion of taste. She can make wings grow out of her back and disappear, I'm not convinced she can't grow herself some human taste buds.

*Aston Whiteman*

EE Reset for Cat.

[HannaB](#)

"Black didn't truly view himself as disposable – he wasn't a martyr"

I'm sorry, are we talking about the same guy?

""Do not try to become me," he said. "I was a tool that served a purpose, and that purpose is coming to an end. This Empire will outgrow me and so will you. To linger beyond that would be to become a crutch, and do disservice to us all.""

(Book 3, Chapter 55 "Reunion", and that's just the literally out loud contradicting quote in his own words)

*luminiousblu*

Black has a huge spergout about how martyrdom is stupid in the very same book, because the thing that distinguishes martyrdom is to die for something bigger than yourself. Black isn't ready to do that, ever, if he dies he dies on his own terms, for himself.

[HannaB](#)

He just counts "for Praes" as "for himself", mysteriously.

Black is just a huge hypocrite is what I'm getting at.

*Dainpdf*

Black didn't see himself as disposable? He had a Thanatos Gambit all set up before Cat denied it! He isn't a martyr, but not because he values his own life that much. He just also doesn't see dying for the cause as particularly noble or deserving of praise.

As for Cat slowly sliding, she has been under fae influence for a very long time. And it is hard to contend that she burned a lot more principles in this meantime than before; also, she doesn't have the excuse of not fully grasping the consequences (as with releasing William) anymore.

Personally, I don't think it was particularly contrived – especially with all the setup regarding Cat struggling with both morality and fighting style.

As for emulating senses... I'd hazard a guess that either Winter refuses to do it, or does it in such a way that ruins it?

*luminiousblu*

>Black didn't see himself as disposable? He had a Thanatos Gambit all set up before Cat denied it!

A Thanatos gambit isn't viewing yourself as disposable, it's knowing that despite your best efforts you might end up dying anyway so you may as well find a way to win beyond it. The man wasn't literally planning to die, he knew (or believed) that he was going to die soon after he fought the White Knight, so he wanted to get what he could out of it.

>As for Cat slowly sliding, she has been under fae influence for a very long time. And it is hard to contend that she burned a lot more principles in this meantime than before; also, she doesn't have the excuse of not fully grasping the

consequences (as with releasing William) anymore. In my eyes, Cat has only been "slowly sliding" to any extent worth mentioning after she took the throne, not during her time as Duchess of Moonless Nights. While this also coincides her ascension as the Sovereign of Moonless Nights, it is at the same time also the time during which she's explicitly managed to shove off most of the principle alienation, has managed to hold back her wroth at Callow getting Callowed about six or seven times, and come up with her precious Liesse Accords. To me, the sliding comes from the fact that she was a sovereign and thus had to do things that sovereigns need to do.

>Personally, I don't think it was particularly contrived – especially with all the setup regarding Cat struggling with both morality and fighting style. The fighting style problem itself was contrived. Cat is shit at using Winter not because she uses too much power but because she doesn't actually know how to use it – Akua all the way back in Kaleidoscope used Winter more effectively than Cat does all the way up to the quadruple abyss gate trick she pulled against the Longstriders, because Akua has imagination and doesn't try to use Winter like it's just a way to augment Catherine's lacking sword skills. She constantly grasps for power but once she gets it she, like always, is terrified to use it for any reason, and that's what frustrates me the most about her. It's not the mark of a prudent ruler, it's the mark of an ineffectual one to hoard power and yet not use it. The only reason she didn't collapse is that she has had the very good fortune to be propped up from all sides by those far more competent and far more comfortable with using their abilities, even during combat. That, to me, has always been her biggest problem – that she has power but she doesn't want to use it even when she should, and that while she chases power she has a tendency to not want to get it the normal way. Black says he's teaching Catherine to kill, but swords of swordsmanship existed for a reason and in the age of killing each other with blades it wasn't for show.

The morality was honestly even worse and it sounds to me hilarious that we went from Justifications Matter Only to the Just all the way back at the beginning of Book 1 to all of this baaaawing about basically nothing. While back then it was quite honestly probably her being an edgy teenager, she's now acting like an innocent kid who's been tossed fresh into the halls of how human power works and is shocked at how disgusting it is, instead of acting like the woman who clawed her way up and has poisoned people to their face without blinking an eye.

>I'd hazard a guess that either Winter refuses to do it, or does it in such a way that ruins it?

I'll wait for a canonical explanation for that but that sounds very, very odd to me. Catherine is the ONLY titled Winter Fae in existence save for those who are her explicit vassals, which sounds a lot to me like a Sovereign of Winter. She might still technically be a Duchess, but an independent duchess in a land with no other titles may as well be Empress. I'm inclined to believe that Catherine, with her trademark lack of imagination, simply hasn't thought of it – she didn't even realize she could grow wings or turn into mist until recently which is ludicrous to me, I mean when someone tells you your body is an illusion and you can do anything you want to it, proven by how you just grow a new arm if your old one gets lopped off, how is achieving flight not the first thing you try to do?

Obviously I understand why EE isn't doing it, the story disappears and that's probably why he's also getting rid of Winter as far as I can tell – if you don't, Catherine quickly becomes a deity and it seems he's not comfortable writing such a story (or is just throwing a curveball). It still doesn't, however, actually justify Catherine's illogical development.

*Dainpdf*

You may wish to re-read the Thanatos Gambit page. You seem to be mistaking it for a Xanatos Gambit where death is one of the outcomes.

Cat *\*thought\** she had thrown off alienation. She still opened herself to a lot of things she would not have, otherwise, including but not limited to attempting to be a plotter and letting Akua live. That she held on this well is testament to the solidity of the patterns her double was pantomiming.

The issue with Cat vs Akua in using Winter is that even Fakerine retained enough narrative awareness to know Winter was a trap. As recently mentioned, Akua rides suhh stories, while Cat uses them. Winter is only a manifestation of that. Remember that Black himself noted that his lack of power may have been more blessing than curse. People who come to rely on raw power always have it fail them in the end.

You say Cat has gone back, but she hasn't. She's just shedding poisonous thought. She's peeling back the blinders Winter and Below have put on her for so long. She already had some that clarity in her, from the beginning.



As for the wings and such, and lack of creativity... Yeah, that's how fae work. Not really capable of creativity. Way back, Cat had the ability for creative power use – exploding goats, for one, or her ability to trick a fae into playing the villain. Winter took that from her, in great measure. And it started from meeting the Winter King – you may recall she felt hatred for the moon as soon as she saw it back on Creation.

*Aston W*

Cat is actually Assassin with a memory wipe. All theories valid. EE makes the rule.

*Flobert*

Just caught up. Amazing chapter as usual.

*IDKWhoitis*

Well, Im a bit confused as to what happened at the end, but at least things are progressing? Like Cat has her foot in the door, and she's done more with less, so it's looking up hill.

I seriously wonder what Archer has been upto while Winter hit the fan.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I think Cat moved too quickly with the conversation and tried to close the deal before Andronike was ready. She's going to suffer a bit more before Andronike agrees to work with her.

*IDKWhoitis*

Or the Sister pretended to be the Nice one to lure Cat in. It's another of the theories I'm running with right now.

*Letouriste*

Same for me:)

*pagesbe*

I'm not sure I agree, because she doesn't need to. The sister's have all the advantages, the only question is when, not if, they'll come out on top. Cat can avoid them temporarily, but she can't fight back. They don't need deception.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Oh, good point. I hadn't thought of that.

*Skaddix*

Plus Nike probably wants something more than a handshake deal.

*Jonnnnz*

Ivah said, at the very start of the arc, that shaking hands is a strange custom. Perhaps it's Drow for something else?

[Antony444](#)

I would argue the Twilight Sages deserved to die ten times over for what they did...God, they raided the dwarves because they wanted sacrifices for their altars? How stupid were they? by comparison, most of the Dread Emperors and Dread Empresses are geniuses...

First rule of warfare in Calernia: don't declare war to the dwarves. Never.

Catherine is really back, and it's good to see her be 'diplomatic' and try to change the rules...pity it didn't seem to work in the end.

And it looks like Triumphant was far from the first to ask for 'help' of the Dead King...

*Andrew Mitchell*

> First rule of warfare in Calernia: don't declare war to the dwarves. Never.

To be fair, this may not have been a rule yet. Maybe the Drow experience was pivotal in establishing the rule?

*magesbe*

Am I the only one who doesn't think that this means a complete breakdown in negotiations? I'm half expecting something like Akua's sudden but inevitable betrayal where this isn't actually a bad thing.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I agree, this can't really be the end. I'm not sure what's going to happen though.

*werafdsaew*

Andronike said that negotiations are for when "one is staring defeat in the eye." So I'm expecting Cat to negotiate successfully on the verge of winning. It's very story-esque, and neatly combines the methods of both Above and Below.

## Cold Cyberia

The whole “I’m finally human and thinking straight” feels... off? Beyond her full fae mode, there wasn’t ever a point where I thought Cat wasn’t herself or was influenced into being more Evil. All of her actions were fairly reasonable and all of the Evil decisions (Dead King, Everdark) were made out of desperation.

One of the biggest complaints about when she broke her soul barrier was that there wasn’t a noticeable change in her behavior. She did it, and remained largely the same. Cat’s making this point of how she can finally think clearly and how her past self was just a construct wearing her face but it falls flat because all that’s different is that she’s mouthing off more now. There’s no real difference that I can see, that can’t be explained by her loosing to Sve and not giving a fuck anymore. And that... well, it’s a problem.

It’s tricky because Winter is supposed to be a slow and insidious killer. There’s not supposed to be a break off point – Catherine is meant to slowly change into a cold and merciless creature. We didn’t get to that point however, so when Cat makes her point it doesn’t feel substantiated by the text.

Maybe I’m just not reading closely enough but I think making a clearer distinction in her thought process between would make that point more believable. EE, If you’ll do an edit after the series is over I would advise for having Cat muse about how she’s falling into particular thought patterns in some of the older chapters.

## HannaB

The difference is not in how her POV is framed, it’s in how she’s looking back on her decisions. She’d been worried the entire time she had Winter that she was losing her grasp of her moral principles because the core thing that drove them was anger, not pragmatism, and she was finding herself left with just that.

Pragmatism accepts the easiest solution it can find. Anger sees new problems to solve. As Catherine expanded her scope of influence – from just Callow to all of Calernia – she would normally have found new things to be angry at, but instead she stuck to just ‘my country, my people, my duty’ because Winter numbed her to everything she wasn’t /already/ passionate about.

Catherine is rediscovering her ability to rage at injustice, and that’s what makes her look back on herself in horror.

Truthfully, the way Catherine was handling the Wild Hunt, or her last round of negotiations with Cordelia, were already

creeping me out. She didn't seem to /care/ the way she used to, not about those she hadn't already declared to be under her protection, and... yeah. That's how Winter rigidity works.

This Catherine is 100000% more awesome than the construct one, and boy is she glad to be back! And pissed. Very, very pissed.

### Cold Cyberia

Cat's always been very Callowan in her outlook and part of that is putting her nation first. As the battleground of the continent, Callow holds a lot of resentment towards other nations and it's especially true of Procer which occupied it for a decent chunk of time after the Third Crusade. The fact she cares about her country first and foremost is completely natural and in-line with her characterization prior to Arcadia arc, it's just more visible now that she's the queen and has to compete on the international stage.

Negotiating with Cordelia is actually a perfect example of how Cat still had a strong moral fiber even when she was a Sovereign. She proposed to abdicate under very lenient terms. She warned Procer about the Dead King's involvement despite the fact they were invading her. Hell, going to Keter was partially so she could limit the number of casualties he would inflict on them.

I don't see how any of it points to Winter corrupting her when by and large, she's been acting like the old Cat.

### HannaB

I've been rereading, and the difference is visible. Cat had been holding onto her morals and principles as she remembers them, but she'd lost a lot of her fire 😡

### *luminiousblu*

We call that growing up the fuck up and learning to do what you can instead of constantly seething at what you can't, in the real world.

If I were angry about everything that would actually make me angry my heart would explode and I'd die having accomplished shit-all. That's exactly what happened to Catherine multiple times had she not been saved by entities and organisations far more powerful than she was.

### *Insanenoodlyguy*

It can be. or it can be alilenation from a creeping eldritch power that consumes all before it into a cold void.

Turns out it's that second one. Cat might well have matured into a similar mindset. We don't know because she became a static creature. Only now when the vine will eventually rot or be severed can it grow and bear fruit.

*Quite possibly a cat*

Winter Cat was basically running head long into Classic Evil Villain territory. I mean, enslave a race? Hijack a vast forbidden power. Hell even handing out titles was bizarre. If she's willing to title people, she doesn't need the Drow desperately.

And it none of the steps seem that bad since it is all bit by bit. Winter is insidious.

But when Cat got a look without Winter all she sees is herself breaking every rule she learned from Black.

[HannaB](#)

"If you can see a hero rising to avenge what you just decided to do, stop and reassess"

*luminiousblu*

"Enslave a race?"

A race quickly going extinct anyway. I don't know how the oaths were actually worded, but it's easy enough to basically make them mercenaries (selling service in exchange for greater power). "Bend the knee or die" is not exclusive to villains, or rather it's exclusive only insofar that heroes are wont to say "just die, whether or not you bend the knee".

"Hijack a vast forbidden power"

Was she actually trying to hijack Night? I don't think she was. She just needed to get rid of Sve Noc, and in the process she'd gain a temporary ally in the Dwarves. The only real problem is she overestimated herself, and Catherine's been doing that long before Winter was a thing.

"If she's willing to title people, she doesn't need the Drow desperately."

Yeah I wasn't sure how that happened since just half a book ago we were talking about how titles weren't happening. Here's the thing though, I'm extremely unconvinced that Winter has magical influence over your brain like that. It's literally just Catherine. We've seen what happens when Winter takes hold, and it doesn't look like what she's doing. If I were her I'd do the exact same thing, hell this entire "make an oath to go and grant free reign to a group of dangerous lunatics to help you in a war you're losing in exchange for

salvation (?)” thing is what Aragorn pulled with the ghosts in Return of the King and I don’t think anyone is going to argue that he’s Evil.

### Javvies

Hang on, there. Aragorn didn’t make the oath – he was the heir of the one the oath was sworn to. The Kingdom of the Dead became that way because they broke the oath they swore to Aragorn’s ancestor (or possibly ancestor’s cousin, depending on the exact genealogy and exactly when the oath was sworn, can’t remember offhand and away from my LotR books). Aragorn gave them a deal to fight in one battle and be released from the oath, being considered to have fulfilled it. And, in the books, that battle wasn’t even the one outside Gondor – it was the one at the mouth of the river – and a couple days before Aragorn got to the Fields of Pelennor outside Gondor; and IIRC, it happens almost entirely offscreen in the books. By rights, Aragorn could, and arguably should, have required the Dead to help him break the Siege of Gondor at Gondor, and even go with on the march to the Black Gate.

### *luminiousblu*

You’re right of course, but my point remains unchanged. Aragorn basically pulled the same trick – an entire group of people with no way out due to old, old mistakes they can no longer undo, and a stranger comes along promising them release in exchange for limited service. I mean alright, sixty years is different from a single battle, but the idea is the same and Aragorn is presented as heroic (and not a little clever) for trying to get them on his side. Catherine doing so might not be HEROIC because of how it happened but I wouldn’t say it’s the same as “enslaving an entire race”.

And anyway Julius Caesar did the same with Gaul and he was a good boy so who the hell cares, this is what war is.

### Javvies

Oh, absolutely. Oath of service for a clearly defined term in exchange for personal benefits? That’s a far cry from Cat being some sort of slaver, even if the magical enforcement of the oaths is a nasty one, even if Cat is taking advantage of the situation to pressure some of the stronger drow in her path to sign on – that’s essentially a variation on a judge giving somebody the alternative to go into the military instead of what the regular options are. Better, really, since real life military service isn’t exactly a lucrative career. Ö

Heck, I'm not actually sure that long term oaths were even being required by Cat in order to go with her and be saved. Oh, sure, following the Lesser Oaths is still a good idea if a drow wanted to follow Cat but not make longer term commitments. They were ... a sort of currency traded for increased personal power.

*RanVor*

I might need to reread to confirm it, but I feel like Cat is being more moral right now than she has ever been since the first chapter. It's as if the pull dragging her towards evil disappeared and she was hurled to the other side.

*luminiousblu*

Which is horrible, because that's not how characters work unless you're trying to write someone who's had a mental breakdown and is hurtling well through schizophrenia. Well, if that's what EE's trying to do it's perfect, but I doubt it.

[HannaB](#)

aaawwwwwwwwwwwwwww

but at the part where Catherine casually said 'mad at my father for being less than he could be' I died I think

*Nairne .01*

This damn cliffhanger. I should have seen it, its not the first time this happens 😞

*RanVor*

You must be mad if you expect a chapter to end in anything but a cliffhanger.

*Nairne .01*

One can always dream, though now that I think about it, cliffhangers are currently the main tool for keeping up hype/interest (in any book).

*SMHF*

I'm gonna be honest, I'm a bit conflicted about the last two chapters...

It's not just the fact that Cat and Sve's confrontation has made the whole gathering an army part kinda pointless... because you

could argue we got a lot of character developments and Drow lore through it and she did force her hand earlier this was than just sneaking her way to Tvarigu.

My problem is this whole "My Mantle made me do it" part... because it goes against a whole book of what I thought was character development.

Assassinating generals... dropping lakes on a bunch of enlisted farm boys... trying to make deal with The Dead King... binding an entire race to her will through oaths are all things the Book 1-3 Cat would've never done (Okay she probably would've minded the first one!), but I thought after the Liesse she's learned that sometimes you have to do something Evil to stop a bigger one from happening...

But now she's saying what she was doing to the Drow was disgusting... I mean forcing the last surviving members of a dying race to throw themselves at The Dead King is a shitty thing to do, I wasn't happy about it then and I'm not happy about it now, but it's stupid not to take precautions when you're bringing a race of people to the surface with more frequent and more literal backstabbing than the Praes nobility!

The entire Liesse Accords is something she came up with while she had her Mantle. Is she gonna realize that's not a good idea either?

Still, it's kinda early to judge since we have couple of chapters to go. So I'm looking forward to see how this wraps up! 😊

[Jani Nyysönen](#)

Not very happy with the recent developments myself either. Might be just my dislike of the "humans are special" outlook we've been seeing, and not really buying that the mantle was somehow making Cat a worse person. This "loose mantle, become human" feels too much like a Deus ex Machina to escape paying the price for the power Cat has been wielding (and pulling back the power levels story is working with to make the struggle easier to write).

Just remembering first Liesse campaign, let alone Cat's first encounter with William, makes it pretty clear that she was never all that nice when pushed, everything she has done so far (except maybe talking to Dead King) has been pretty in line with the character we followed from the start of the story. Even dropping the lake on her enemies was, to me, pretty measured response considering how far backwards she was bending to save the lives of enemy soldiers at the cost of her own.



Cat is fighting people willing to wipe their own villages with plague to win, she is not the heartless monster in this equation, and never has been.

*SMHF*

Yes. The scales had changed so Cat had to change with it... that's kinda the point of character development!

But now she's like... nope! That was all my Mantle!

Don't get me wrong the old crazy Cat is a blast to read (in moderation!) but if she's just gonna be factory resetted after an entire book... then what's the point?!

But like I said story's not over yet, so I'm really really hoping to be proven wrong on this!

*Aotrs Commander*

Of course, this assumes that Cat is, in fact \*correct\* and that she is not, in fact, using the separation from her mantle to (probably subconsciously) blame her actions on it, because (again, subconsciously) it didn't work and she doesn't have that power now and it trying – still – to justify herself \*to\* herself.

Reality probably lies somewhere between the two.

*Albatross*

I'm gonna be pretty upset if she can't follow through with the 'stealing and reselling landmarks' gambit too, that sounds v. fun

*luminiousblu*

I'm honestly tempted to say that she's just running from her actions and like she's wont to do blaming everything on an easy target. People say she self-flagellates a lot and she does, but in Book 1 and early in 2 or so she was actually really good at deflecting responsibility for her actions because she wanted to believe she was actually somehow the good guy instead of just owning up to being the bad guy. I mean even the fact that she thinks she can choose to be the bad guy itself is the hallmark of a bad guy – the entire thing that differentiates the good guy from the bad guy is the bad guy thinks in terms of himself.

[PhadosZahn](#)

This pretty much sums up my hesitation of the past few chapters. I've personally enjoyed watching Cat's development

in this book because she's contending with world changing figures and the large stakes have changed how she looks and reacts to things. I don't even really have a problem with her handling of the Drow (I know that point's been argued back and forth at this point) but these recent chapters feel like EE is walking back on all of that. The fact that we're showcasing how different Mortal Cat is to The Black Queen is interesting and it COULD be a subtle alienation effect of her mantle but...i don't really buy it. All of the decisions she's made thus far feel like a Car that's dealing with continent shifting decisions and is trying to learn the best way to save her people the least amount of casualties. It's the ever slippery slope of moral greyness that she's always been on and I've loved it. I don't want it to be undone 🙄

### *Kirroth*

The biggest difference I can see is that the Sovereign of Moonless Nights thought in terms of Power and Cat thinks in terms of Story.

Take a moment to really look back on it, now that the contrast has been highlighted. Everything the Sovereign did was about using power to force people to do what she wanted. Break the Procuran invaders enough that they retreat, but not so badly they won't negotiate after. Twist arms to get the Accords signed. Recruit muscle from the Dead King or the drow. Even at the very start, when she was going to agree with the Empress about keeping the doomsday weapon around. It was always about POWER and using it to get your way.

Now Cat's back and we can see what that really means. She's already thinking in terms of Story and Pivots again. She's trying to build alliances instead of bullying people into line with force. She takes one look around, sees a people treated unjustly and Gods meddling for their own benefit, and immediately rebels and tries to find a way out.

The hints have been there all along. They were practically shoved in our face by Warlock. The Sovereign wasn't Cat. She wanted to accomplish Cat's goals and valued what Cat cared about, but it wasn't her and didn't think like her.

### *Cassandra Riordan*

I hope if we get to see the Liesse Accords then at least have Masego round up a bunch of sorcerers and write them into the fundamental laws of reality such that they can never be disobeyed. I want Cat to change things, rewrite the nature of reality and permanently end the war between Good and Evil. And killing off the Gods of Above and Below would be a nice side benefit.

### Jani Nyyssönen

I don't really see a way for Cat to beat the Above & Below in a way that does not come off like an asspull, maybe there is, but i'm not really seeing it.

Same for forcing creation to have somekind of inbuilt geneva convention, neither side wants that, and any rule changes Masego can do, someone else can undo.

The way i see it, Cat can't win, can't kill the players, and can't rewrite the rules.

But, if she remains a god, she might become a player, or atleast enforce a no conflict zone in Callow that remains mostly untouched because touching it is too costly for both sides.

Here Cat realized that all the changes she made, are unlikely to outlive her, and she is right in that, partly due to weight of history, but mostly because she has 2 sets of gods enforcing the status quo of constant conflict, and both of those sides are evil (if for different reason and in different ways).

Only real way around this is to not die, and if the price of that is not being able to enjoy narcotics, well, sounds like a pretty small price to me, pick up painting or something to pass the time instead.

### *magesbe*

If you think that the only that the only reason Cat wants to remain mortal is so she can enjoy weed... you really peaced out of this latest chapter. She states explicitly here that Winter had forced her into a different thought process, and she was so affected by Winter that until she was separated from it she didn't even notice there was a difference. Cat doesn't want to go back to being Winter, she feels that dying is better than going back to being only mostly a person.

Whether you feel like this is a compelling motivation is up to you, but don't trivialize it either by saying that clearly the only reason is so she can enjoy smoking better.

### Jani Nyyssönen

Here's the thing, lot of us did not notice any change of the thought process either.

It feels like this comes out of nowhere, the only real change easily noticeable is the ability to enjoy taste and effects of weed.

Her morals did not get worse, she did not become any crueller, she was just as flexible when situation required/ allowed it.

The story failed to emphasize any loss of personhood for Cat sufficiently, yes, she was not as human, mainly because humans get killed when beheaded, but the alienation, beyond inability to enjoy stuff like weed and wine, was insufficiently remarked upon.

Hell, people have complained that Cat remained too human after becoming the Duchess of Moonless Nights, and i'd agree, so this sudden "yay, i get to be mortal, enjoy weed and die" is kinda jarring even if you dislike having the protagonist disempowered.

[doominator10](#)

I wonder what EE is thinking of when he/she/it reads these comments from people unsure of how Cat's been developing. However, I know the truth. Catherine was Dread Emperor Traitorous this entire time! That makes everything she's been going through all part of the plan. It all makes sense! I'm onto you EE.

*Argentorum*

Can't wait for so below. This is gonna be epic.

*Fern*

Has Cat lost her blessed mind? "Oh I fucked up once at playing this smart so I better go back to brawling with every motherfucker in a 8 mile radius" bitch did you forget the part where you nearly died fighting a basic bitch Mighty? One loss does not mean you're on the wrong track, it means you need to adapt your fighting style and information gathering apparatus. Local intel here was on point, you knew about every faction fighting in the city, their short and long term strategic goals, AND you knew your timetable down to the day!! The fact that the Longstrides and the Goddess Apparent came knocking a week early is a failure of intel, not of the method you're using here.

I might be a little mean criticizing her fighting style though. It's been said that the role of named on the battlefield is to fight in the pivot, usually against another named. When you take into account that each side here is deploying a ludicrous amount of named-level fighters, though, that objective becomes a lot harder to achieve. Add into this the fact that there was a huge disparity in Mighty between Losara and Rumena...

Well, it'll definitely be fun to watch how this plays out. This arc has been outstanding so far, so we'll see how As Below goes.

*magesbe*

I'm confused... it feels like this comment should have been written two or three chapters ago. It's not very relevant to the current situation.

*Fern*

““Subtle has never been my strength,” I admitted. “It was a bad habit even before Winter filled my veins with pure ‘walk off dismemberment’ juice. Not sure I can shake it at this point.”

Or even that I should, to be honest. I’d run into one dead end after another since I started trying to play queenly games with my opponents. It wasn’t that I was awful at those – with the Woe at my back, I’d made sport of my opposition within Callow – so much that my enemies were just outright better at them.”

She does follow this by saying she shouldn’t stop learning, so maybe i was a tad off base. Still. she can’t expect to win fights by walking into enemies and left clicking. That’s been drilled into our heads since book 1.

*NotQuiteHere*

I’m confused...what just happened? Why did friendship break? Akua? What?

*Burdi*

i think its just a joke, remember she like to speak to herself with sarcastic joke even when her life at stake

*Follower of Mania*

I just got caught up and wow... just wow.

A+ Catherine for stealing back the power of friendship line.

*Burdi*

at this point, we can’t predict what catherine plan actually is, she is just dancing with the story...maybe she somehow convince andronike and two head fight each other or she somehow eat komena’s memory and gain a bit of power or she pissed andronike so much that she blind (make her see wrong direction) then akua struck or she died and meet below..make some shit deal and go back to creation or they all became four face goddess (unlikely) or sve noc give cat a Name (maybe possible) or cat somehow find a way to instead sacrifice sve noc and all winter night to achieve different ending or she taunt komena and make her so furious then trick her somehow to struck at andronike then destroy her with her guilt.

or black died and she became the black knight then stuck hard with Destroy and became queen bitch of night forevermore. i think its still possible for her to became black knight, she lost Squire name because she became winter incarnate that change who

she is..now she is back free of winter...and she is right now is a claimant one more, what is needed of her is to claim something, just like when she claim the Squire name or claim as heir to king of callow (first llesse) and right now she can't claim anything at all, not winter (because she already lost fight), not night (because it is not hers), not a Name (because what is to claim when she lost soo badly except a Losser)..her only possible claim i think is to became a Savior for sve noc and all the drow so they won't fuck themself twice..but she need to build story first, the ending is maybe she got winter night as passing torch (by tricking them of cource) or became something that unheard of

*Nairne .01*

The thing some other commenters said about the next chapter being named "As Below".

It may be a good prediction, she tried the good hand to make friends and was spurned/wronged even (that may be a stretch). So she will try the evil hand next, that may work, or her evil hand will be the grab from the flank, something extraordinarily evil in its roundabout way that just won't let her grasp the victory she wants, just "a victory".

*Aston W*

I really want Cat to die.

Semi-permanently.

Then EE can write the next level of her meeting Gods Above or Gods Below as she fucks up their game.

It's a drawn out 'Cat Wins again without making much difference' the last few chapters.

Use the power of story to win. Meta Time.

*Aston W*

Pretty sure Cat needs to pull the Good card. Heroes are mortal.

Redemption storyline. You can be insane but Good right?

Look at Saint...elderly creation cutting powers.

Just realized all our comments are food for Gods Above and Below.

We're trapped in the narrative.

*pagesbe*

Honestly, I have a lot of problems with how this arc is going, but since almost all of them are technically fixable depending on

how the next few chapters go, I'm not going to say anything just yet. People can expect a pretty big rant post on the last chapter of the book if it's not cleaned up well though.

[darkalter2000](#)

The next button of this chapter skips Peregrine I, and Peregrine I is also not listed in the chapter list on the side. This makes it very likely that it could be overlooked by anyone who doesn't get email updates.

*magetite*

Sigh,

I know the mantle of winter wasn't perfect for her,

But ripping her down to mortality sucks ass

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## Chapter 80: So Below

*"I speak today not for humble man-eating tapirs but instead for the most ambitious specimens their kind has ever known. Is it not the sacred duty of all Creation to seek to claim the Tower? How, then, could it have been a crime for these tapirs to follow this same dictate by devouring our late Emperor?"*

– From official transcript from the Trial of Unexpected Teeth, opening speech of the defence

"What a silver tongue you have," Andronike said. "But not quite silver enough. Your ignorance shows once more, Catherine Foundling."

I tried to respond 'when does it not?', but I was currently being choked so it came out as more of a plaintive gurgle. So, this was how it ended: literally choking on my own words. Had to give her points for the irony, if nothing else.

"Allow me to educate you," Sve Noc said, and threw me like a bloody rag doll.

*Well, I thought, there's a bright side to this. I'm currently not dead. Or at least not more than I was when this delightful interlude began.* The slightly less bright side was that I was flying through flickering scenes, memories I could only glimpse the barest pieces of, and soon enough I would... *Ah, there it is,* I mused, managing to keep a semblance of mental calm as my leg

snapped and my throat busied itself screaming. That utter asshole, I bet she'd aimed just so my bad leg would be the one getting the worst of the landing. I tumbled listlessly against the floor, my magical journey ending in the close acquaintance of my forehead and a stone wall. Still not dead, admittedly. I wouldn't be in such an excruciating amount of pain if I was. My forehead was going to bruise, if I still had a body by the end of it. I moaned and flopped around until I was looking upwards, feeling out my knee and finding it only mostly broken. Could I still move on that? Maybe. There'd be a lot of howling involved, but it shouldn't be impossible. I still stayed down for a while, lying uncomfortably on the floor.

In the distance people were dying.

"Educate me about that, would you?" I sighed. "Like I haven't strolled through a dozen butcher's yards."

Might as well find out what had her tossing me around, I eventually decided. At this point I'd taken my swing and missed, I might as well die slightly less ignorant than usual. My good leg supported me as I forced myself up using the wall, taking a proper look around at my surroundings. Yet another drow city I'd never seen before, though I had a decent guess as to where we were: I was standing among a city-sized temple carved out of massive stalactites. The streets here were not interrupted by 'canals' that were effectively sheer drops, and hobbling to the edge of one told me there was an *actual* city below. If this wasn't Holy Tvarigu, I'd eat my fingers... again? No, first time. I'd made other people – insofar as fae were people, anyway, – do it, but that hardly counted. I flinched at the vivid memory of it. Gods, I'd made people *eat their hands*. It'd seemed reasonable at the time, and damn me but I could still see the sense in it, but I couldn't remember even hesitating for a moment. Not that hesitation would have made it better, I silently conceded. Cordelia Hasenbach's passing comment had cut deeper than she knew.

What did regret matter, if it changed nothing?

The temple-city was strewn with corpses as far as I could see. Whatever battle had taken place here had ended, or at least near to it, and now this place was little more than a freshly-bloodied mausoleum. By Andronike's passing mercy or a stroke of luck, I'd landed near the heart of the temple. I could only be thankful for that, I thought, as I eyed the mind-bogglingly complex web of stairways and bridges connecting everything. Some ways in front of me a wide staircase progressively narrowed in rising to meet a passage lightly sloped. On both sides it was flanked by a very short wall of painted stone topped by striking sculptures. It was a chain, I thought, as I began the painful climb. At the head of the stairs two androgynous drow of marble painted red and yellow



roared out with curved blades in hand. From their back sprouted more drow in different colours, wielding whips and daggers, and facing those drow in hooded robes offered a supplicant's kneel. The whirlwind of colours and faces and poses continued all the way to the end of the passage, where the heart of the temple-city awaited.

It took me far too long and far too many bouts of yelling to make it up the stairway, but the view when I did was almost worth it. Wouldn't keep me alive, but that was probably asking too much. The riot of vivid pigments should have turned it ugly, but there was something almost hypnotic about the sight before me. More ziggurat than pyramid, though that failed to truly catch the essence of it: it was almost a stairway of giant steps, but a triangular mouth going all the way to the summit struck out from the rest of the structure – which was roofed, at that narrowest point, by some sort of cylindrical tiled pavilion. At the four cardinal directions pale or red stone made up the life and death of celestial orbs: sun on the rise and fall, moon ascendant and passing. It was like looking at a hundred rainbows made into stone and woven into a single tapestry. There was hardly a trace of such wonder left in what I'd seen of the Everdark. The thought shook me out of the trance and I resumed my advance. Halfway through the passage I finally noticed I'd not been alone for some time: hidden among the statues were drow, armed and armoured. They'd been so utterly still I'd never noticed. I continued limping until I entered the heart-temple, and there I found what Andronike had meant for me to find.

Inside were burned made of what must have been all precious materials in existence, from ivory to a massive hollowed out emerald, and every single one of them was wafting thick trails of scented smoke. At the centre of the shivering columns the two sisters were kneeling in front of simple carved piece of obsidian. A star map, by the looks of it. Andronike finished unfurling a large scroll filled with equations and incantations I'd already seen before, then passed her fingers over to smooth it out.

"Ready?" Komena asked.

"How could anyone be?" her sister replied. "Yet here we are."

She breathed in loudly.

"We request audience," Andronike said.

"We request bargain," her sister said.

I hobbled forward with an expectant gaze, strangely eager to see the moment where they'd sold out their race with the best of intentions, but nothing happened at all. Stillness held the room.

"Damn me," Andronike said with quiet horror. "I have killed us all."

Her sister opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted by an unholy ruckus. A dozen burners had been tipped over, by the sounds of it, and for a moment I thought it'd been me. But no – I turned, and there was someone in the middle of a set of spilled burners who'd quite evidently tripped on them. A drow, I saw. It rose hastily, pretending nothing had happened, and retched a little before slapping away the thick smoke.

"Gods," the drow retched again. "That stuff is *foul*."

Both sisters went still.

"O Shrouded God," Komena said hesitantly, but the newcomer's hand rose.

"Give me a moment, girls," it rasped out.

It patted at its dirty robes and produced a flash of polished copper. My heart skipped a beat. The Wandering Bard uncorked her flask and took a deep drink, before gargling it and spitting out the liquor. The sisters traded an appalled look. A little less godly than they'd been aiming for, I supposed. The Bard took another swallow of liquor, wiped her mouth and went looking through the tipped burner before triumphantly snatching out a broken lute. Apparently she'd mistakenly spat some liquor on it, because with a shoddy attempt at discretion she began wiping at the wood with her sleeve.

"Good enough," the Bard announced. "Right, so onto business."

"You are no deity," Komena flatly said.

"Well spotted," Bard cheerfully replied. "And to think they told me you were the stupid one. For the purposes of this conversation, you might consider me an envoy of sorts."

"You claim to speak for the Gods," Andronike frowned.

"Oh, I wouldn't go as far as that," she said. "I've never been quite that much of a fool. But you called and here I am."

"Are you a devil?" Komena pressed.

"Would it matter if I were?" the Bard shrugged. "Regardless, I hear the two of you are looking for a loan."

The sisters stirred, Andronike picking up the scroll she'd unfurled.

"A miracle is what we would bargain for," she said. "The specifics-"

"Are known to me," Bard replied, waving the words away and accidentally sloshing some booze onto the floor.

One of the burners caught fire, and everyone delicately pretended it was not actually happening.

"Even the parts you got ambitious with," she continued, lifting a finger off her flask to wag it chidingly. "Making it reusable? Now now, that's trying to inflate the value. Just because you shove old skills and power into new heads doesn't mean the following deaths are worth as much as the first."

"We sought only to offer the finest possible tribute," Komena baldly lied.

"I can't believe I'm rooting for you right now," I muttered.

Still, if the opposition was the Wandering Bard then 'All is Night' was most definitely the banner of the moment.

"More need than brains, huh," Bard drawled. "No wonder you're in good odour with the old crowd. Still, you two are a little late. They've been a lot more careful about where they put their money since Nessie ate the hand that fed him."

"We offered all we have," Andronike gravely said.

"Yeah, but you don't have *enough*," the old thing said. "I'll level with you two, since you seem slightly less awful than your average drow. This? This whole thing? It's not anybody's plan. No one thought you'd actually fuck up so badly you'd obliterate yourselves. The folks upstairs are watching like hawks, and the other side's wondering if it's worth it to intervene given the... costs of such direct action."

"We offer fair bargain," Komena insisted.

"Fair is for children," the Bard said. "They're not interested in it."

"Yet here you are," Andronike said, amber eyes narrowing.

"Killing the Sages and calling Below in the middle of their seat of power was a nice touch," she replied. "Got you the audience and a consideration. But the terms are going to need to change a bit."

"This is an exceedingly delicate arrangement," Komena said. "We can't simply-"

"You will," the Wandering Bard gently said. "Or you'll die, every last one of you."

"Speak your terms," Andronike replied.

It sounded like a surrender, because it was.

“‘Nike-” her younger sister began.

“We are in no position to negotiate,” the older drow tiredly said.

“Debt isn’t wiped,” the Bard spoke softly into the silence that followed. “The Night will keep you all alive, but you two will need to keep *it* going. And if you stop...”

The ancient entity grimaced.

“Well, they’re not above cutting their losses,” Bard said. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“Should we even bother to accept?” Komena harshly replied. “Or is even that *formality* unnecessary?”

“I wish you wouldn’t,” the Wandering Bard murmured. “There are some things worse than death, and what this will make of you is one.”

She drank once more, then offered a sharp grin.

“But we all know better, don’t we?” she said.

I’d known how it would end from the start. I’d seen what had become of the Everdark and the two sisters, after all. And still, watching the light dim in the eyes of the two true drow in the room, I felt my stomach drop. Was there a single horror in this continent’s history the Wandering Bard did not have a hand in? The thing was, I understood why they’d made this choice. It was uncomfortable to even think it, but if offered the same terms with my own people on the line I would very likely make the same choice. Passing a hand through my hair, I gingerly lowered myself down to the floor while leaning against a pillar. So which part of this had it been that Andronike wanted me to see? Even odds it was either the Bard’s very presence or that threatening little bit at the end. *They’re not above cutting their losses*, the Intercessor had said. Was a gentle way to speak of genocide. Was that what Andronike was afraid of? That the moment she and I made common cause, a snap of the fingers Below would destroy her entire race? *But it shouldn’t work out like that*, I thought with a frown. The Gods were, well, exactly that. All-powerful. They could probably end the Night and likely Winter itself. But there was a story unfolding, and if they did anything of the sort they’d be directly meddling.

They couldn’t do that without opening the door for Above to do the same, and the Heavens should be taking a brutal beating right about now. The Dead King was on the march, the last thing Below would want was Above getting a free swing at him.

"So it's the Bard you wanted me to see," I said, raising my voice.

"The Bard," Sve Noc repeated, walking out from behind the pillar. "What a quaint name. We knew her as the Envoy."

"Neshamah called her the Intercessor," I said. "And I suppose if anyone's got her number it's him."

"The King in Keter wears a crown of lies," the silver-eyed drow replied. "No creature born of this land has ever been half as skilled at the art."

She moved to lean against the pillar I was sitting back against, standing above in both the physical and metaphysical sense. Well, at least *one* of those was new.

"He's her enemy," I said. "Trusting him would be foolish, but he wants her to bleed. That much can be believed in."

"Trust is always foolish," Sve Noc smiled. "It is faith writ small, and almost as dangerous."

"So did you throw me here for a game of riddles?" I drily replied. "Because I can roll with it. The more you make, the more you leave behind. What-"

"Footsteps," the goddess said.

"I might not win this," I reluctantly conceded. "I only know, like, five riddles and that one was the best."

If we made this about bawdy jokes instead my years at the Rat's Nest would finally pay off, though. Worth a try.

"A riddle of my own, then," Sve Noc said. "Why share what can be taken in full?"

I frowned, twisting to look up at her.

"You're not Andronike," I said.

"I never said I was," Komana calmly replied.

"I've been over this with your sister," I said. "But what the Hells, maybe the second time's the charm. Just give me a moment to think of an insult to get you angry before this gets going."

"Your *offer* has been made known to me," Sve Noc contemptuously said. "There is no need to reiterate. I was partial to the notion of immediately crushing you underfoot, but request has been made that you be allowed to speak your piece first."

Well, wasn't that promising. I gazed ahead, honestly at a loss as to where to begin, and only now noticed the memory had stopped. Frozen. Maybe it really was only Komena's memories, I thought. She certainly seemed to have greater control of our surroundings than her sister had. My eyes lingered on the Wandering Bard, the flask halfway to her mouth as she opened her mouth.

"She can be beaten, you know," I said.

"You have not," Sve Noc said. "And yet would demand that we throw in our lot with you."

"I haven't, it's true, but there's a villain down south called the Tyrant," I said. "I have it from two rather reliable sources that he screwed with her plans in a major way last year. It *can* be done."

"I lacked fear, once," Komena said. "As you so foolishly do. I have since been taught better."

"I just heard a woman try to lie to what she knew to be envoy from the Gods," I said. "*Brazenly* so. She had a chance at getting her people out of this mess, I think."

I smiled thinly.

"Now though?" I said. "You won't even try. My opinion might be dross in your eyes, but I wonder what she'd think of you now."

"Petty sentimentality," she mused. "Is that truly the sum of what she brings, Andronike? *This* is what shook you?"

The other sister walked out from behind another pillar, this one in front of me. For terrifyingly ancient creatures, they did enjoy their petty theatrics.

"When have we last been called to account for our many sins, sister?" Andronike said. "There is worth in such a thing, even coming from her."

"That last part was unnecessary," I noted. "I mean, not wrong, but definitely unnecessary."

"If you felt the need for a pet there are better choices," Komena said, eyeing me darkly. "This one has been beaten too harshly to still be amusing."

"I'm not even going to grace that with a response," I indignantly said.

"A goddess has no interlocutors," her sister said. "Only supplicants."

"Judgement only has meaning coming from one worthy of casting it," Komena said. "This one hardly qualifies."

"I'm not going to claim I'm a saint," I said. "And I've definitely crossed some lines, but-"

"Is this where you claim influence by your mantle once more?" the younger sister asked. "You could, at least, attempt a believable lie. 'Nike, she's not even held her half of the Garden for a decade. The drift would be negligible. It was still *her*. The only difference was that she had power enough to cow her foes."

My fingers clenched. I didn't want to believe that, and I wasn't sure I did. But this was the Pilgrim all over again, wasn't it? If there was anyone learned on the subject of mantles in Calernia, it would be the two of them. On the other hand, she'd already confessed she intended to kill me. Believable lies from enemies were a deadly thing.

"Humans are notoriously weak-minded," Andronike replied. "Arguably the ease of their swaying is their defining characteristic as a species."

I grit my teeth. Insulting as this was, I wasn't exactly in a position to contradict her. I only had the one crossbow to wield and it was currently pointed straight at my foot.

"This didn't *have* to get racist," I still protested.

"Then let us see," Komena said, ignoring my perfectly valid complaint, "the stuff Catherine Foundling is made of. Grant me the power, sister. I will not destroy her yet."

Andronike considered me for a long moment, then inclined her head. My mind was racing at the implications. Angry Sve couldn't kill me without Calm Sve's say-so, then. Andronike owned the floodgate even in here.

"Done," she said.

Komena pushed herself up and came to stand over me. Well, it wasn't like I was capable of stopping her. Might as well do what I did best: mouth off to entities beyond my comprehension.

"Please be gentle," I shyly said. "It's my first-"

"No," Sve Noc cut in.

What followed lived up to the word. Before the Battle of the Camps, I remembered, I had gone looking through a Deoraithe soldier's mind for bits of useful information. If it had felt anything like this I owed the man apology and restitution. The sensation of cold fingers prying through my memories had me regretting the jest I'd just made. It was an intrusion, on some

fundamental level, and there was no hiding anything from Sve Noc's piercing gaze.

"There," she said. "We begin with blood."

*For what he said and what he'd done, I'd decided he deserved to die – my hand had done the rest without any need for prompting. Edge parallel to the ground, slicing across the major arteries just like the butcher did it to pigs in the marketplace.*

I gasped out weakly. She'd brought that to the fore, but her grasp had not slackened. I could still smell the blood in the air, the taste of the first life I'd ever taken. I could almost feel Black looking on, face unreadable.

"Humans killing humans," Andronike commented. "Nothing of import."

"A child arrogating powers beyond her due," Komena contradicted her. "The birth of a recurring pattern. And see how quickly it comes again-"

*I let what I'd just done sink in, closing my eyes. With a life spared, I'd just killed thousands. I'd just promised cities to fire and ruin, sown the seeds of a rebellion that would rip the land of my birth – the very same land I wanted to save – apart. But I'd also bought the war I needed. Damn me, but I'd bought the war I needed.*

The Lone Swordsman, granted his life so that I may rise through the deaths it would bring. My throat clogged with old disgust. I'd never gotten over that quite as well as I liked to pretend. I'd just had darker things to my name, usurping the place of that early sin when it came to the litany of my regrets.

"Her own kind, thrown into the flames," Komena said. "There are no similarities, Andronike, only lies she made herself swallow."

"Not done without purpose," I croaked. "Not for the sport of it. Because I thought it had to be done."

"You were wrong," the silver-eyed drow said.

"I was," I got out. "And I will be again. But it still matters. If I stand judgement then judge me for all of it. Not just the parts that suit you."

"Not desperation, sister," Komena said, turning to address our audience. "It was ambition that held the knife. Best not forget that."

"Not always," Andronike said.



*I couldn't beat the monsters by being better than them. I'd never had that in me. Too much impatience, too much recklessness. That was all right, though. There was another way: be the bigger monster.*

Akua on the Blessed Isle, a false victory. The two of us under moonlight, the beginnings of a dance that would see us both spinning for years. The moment I'd first admitted to myself I could live with being a monster if I still won.

"Pride," Komena objected, shaking her head. "Refusal to lose even at the cost of principle. Must I bring out every example of this?"

The duel against the Duke of Violent Squalls, the Arcadian Campaign, Second Liesse. More recent, after that. The Battle of the Camps, Keter. The moment I bestowed a title on Ivah and bound it by oaths.

"Always another sliver shaven off," Komena said. "Another compromise. How long would it take before we became the sacrifice?"

Andronike did not answer. She was, I thought, being convinced.

"This is most irregular."

Both halves of Sve Noc jolted in surprise, and the younger sister's grasp slackened for a moment before tightening twice as hard. I craned my neck to look at the source of the sound and winced.

"Finally you crawl out of your hole, shade," Komena smiled. "I will enjoy this a great deal."

Akua Sahelian stood among us, her scarlet dress flowing down to her feet, and managed to convey utter disdain without ever significantly moving her face.

"There are proper forms to observe, you grasping savages," Diabolist scoffed. "This is not at all how a rigged trial is held. I see an accuser yet no defence – you can, and indeed should, bribe the defender, but you cannot dispense with the office entirely. It is simply not done."

"Sister," Komena began, but the other raised her hand.

"She is less dangerous here than out there, stirring trouble," Andronike said.

"I find the shallowness of your understanding deeply offensive," the shade retorted, wrinkling her nose. "*This* is the finest your misbegotten race has to offer? Even the least of Tyrants would have made matching cutlery sets of you."

"I know you think this is helping," I began, then paused. "Wait, do you? Are you trying to help?"

"You test my patience, shade," Andronike warned.

"You test mine, chattel," Akua replied. "Even a devil is owed an advocate."

Komena laughed mockingly.

"And you would be hers?" she said.

"Why," Diabolist smiled, extending her arms, "I only want to see justice done. Shall we begin?"

There should be a rule, I decided, about last moment rescues not being allowed to make a situation worse.

---

### NZPIEFACE

"How, then, could it have been a crime for these tapirs to follow this same dictate by devouring our late Emperor?"

It's never a crime to kill the Dread Emperor.

### NZPIEFACE

Actually, iirc, there was a bunch of legal mumbo-jumbo later for this case to see if the tapir was legible to be the Dread Emperor, right?

### Javvies

The court found that while the precedent of the sentient tigers meant that the tapirs could be found guilty of committing treason, the tapirs were also ineligible to become Dread Emperor, and as such, could not get out of the treason charge by right of ascending to and claiming the Tower. IIRC, anyways.

### Tohron

I believe the actual verdict was that the tapirs were non-sentient, which meant they couldn't be considered guilty of treason, but were also ineligible for the Right of Usurpation.

*RanVor*

Nope. They were ineligible for usurpation, but that didn't stop the Praesi from executing them for treason.

### NZPIEFACE

"Why," Diabolist smiled, extending her arms, "I only want to see justice done. Shall we begin?"

I can see how this ties in with the quote at the top.

### daegone823

Power of friendship, sacrificial saving of main character, last minute call to arms to defend the underdog(Scent of a Woman Al Pacino look it up) saves Akua is literal taking a squat on the heroic Axioms.

The Gods Above wants these two gone and now. If Cat survives this battle though who could stand against them  
She gets the aid of angels and stopped a godzilla fight between two gods of evil by allying with her enemy.

Above/Bellow must be furious right now. While Black rolling laughter in the deepest depth of Below.

*stevenneiman*

Black is still alive. The heroes took him prisoner for... reasons.

*WuseMajor*

I'm pretty sure the heroes are aware that Black alive and contained means the two main villains they're fighting will do stupid things to rescue him, but Black dead will cause them to lose their shit and do some crazy stuff.

Though, hmmm. If they actually want to destroy Procer, then Black dead would help that wouldn't it?

*Rup*

This is not at all how a rigged trial is held. I see an accuser yet no defence – you can, and indeed should, bribe the defender, but you cannot dispense with the office entirely. It is simply not done.....  
I see that Akua would be perfectly at home in our current legal system

### erraticerrata

Character contest continues: Diabolist vs Hireophant, Cat vs Archer. Links to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16980113?  
fbclid=IwAR1Jv3p0HipJtBihf7tHx8p68rg6nX8nQ5x57y3GMvS3s91EoEEB8UbDRWU](https://www.strawpoll.me/16980113?fbclid=IwAR1Jv3p0HipJtBihf7tHx8p68rg6nX8nQ5x57y3GMvS3s91EoEEB8UbDRWU)

[https://www.strawpoll.me/16980110?  
fbclid=IwAR02kQyImwZAb0awi7kj2br10bqvY3wmpYMS1YS38AP7rC4x\\_vNi503vGLo](https://www.strawpoll.me/16980110?fbclid=IwAR02kQyImwZAb0awi7kj2br10bqvY3wmpYMS1YS38AP7rC4x_vNi503vGLo)

*Andrew Mitchell*

Is it wrong for me to vote before reading the new chapter?!?  
Honestly not sure why I'm fascinated by the contest.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Cat vs Archer  
Akua vs Masego

I kinda want to see Akua vs Cat

*magesbe*

It's going to come down to that, probably.

*Flameburst*

Nah i think ubua will lose to Masego

*RanVor*

Not really, considering that Zeze is winning.

[Barthumphries](#)

I hope we see the whole glorious March Madness face-off after it's done.

*Panic*

This Contest is turning out kind of ehh. Main characters win and the more interesting characters we've seen are pushed out due to not being main characters.

[Screwfloss](#)

Well, that's how popularity contests work. I don't think it's very interesting either, but how else could it have possibly turned out?

*the verbiage ecstatic*

I've been mostly voting for Cat's antagonists over her allies because they're generally great characters and make the story more interesting, but it's been tough. Tariq's defeat was tragic, and unless Akua makes a comeback, my last horse will be out of the race (Masego is great character, but every scene Akua is in is just SO MUCH FUN)

## Styn

I've been more bothered by interesting side characters losing to less interesting side characters just because the winning character had more recent screen time.

*luminiousblu*

Jesus Christ Masego and Akua

*Mawbey*

Closest one I've seen so far

## James, Mostly Harmless

The bracket chart is at <http://www.bracketmaker.com/tmenu.cfm?tid=470805>.

## Switch

Damn. This ones difficult.

## DroughtBringer

Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*taovkool*

So, power of friendship? Is that thing still on right now? I can't really tell.

## NZPIEFACE

It's the power of "justice".

Just very loosely defined justice.

*KageLupus*

Akua just wants to see justice done. But regardless of what Sve Noc decides at the end, we all know how Catherine feels about justice...

*Argentorum*

So it's a rigged trial, but just swung the other way? That would be something.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I **\*\*hope\*\*** so, but we're just going to have to wait and see what happens.

## Javvies

Hah.

Akua Sahelian for the defense. That's going to be a conflicting mess.

The Bard totally needs to go. Perhaps she can't be properly killed, but if you rip her soul (or the equivalent) out and bind it to something, that should take her out of play for a while.

*Skaddix*

The Dead King, Greatest Sorcerer on the Continent had her strapped to a table and couldn't figure it out. So I seriously doubt its that easy to rip out her soul and bind it. The Bard is not normal even compared to other Named.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Good point. Older than the Dead King, too. I'm hoping that Masego is going to be able to do something about the Bard.

*Xvyz*

The Bard is probably a God or an avatar of one.

*SMHF*

Nah, long hours, not a lot of pay. She's middle management, and seeing as how Gods, Angels and Demons aren't too bothered to watch all the creation burn; a very competent one!

*Rup*

..don't remember the exact quote...

In Wildbow's Pact...a lawyer in similar "employ" is threatend with death and replies "my employment contract precludes death"

The Bard is like the Writer's Rep

*Flameburst*

She is probably the Arbitrator of the contest between above and below, charged with keeping it going. In recent years below got ahead so she assists heroes. Back then a power base for below self-destructed, so she acted on belows behalf

*stevenneiman*

I'm not so sure. I think that she's on the side of Above, and so she make sure that things continue along a

path that leads to Good victories. In the incarnation that exists today Sve Noc as it (she? they?) is a kind of Evil which makes for a suitably dramatic story but ultimately stands no real chance of defeating Good, and the Bard knew that, so she nudged things towards the current setup.

Everything the Bard has done so far has been an effort to either keep the stories flowing, foil villains with a chance of accomplishing something meaningful, and prop up villains who she believes will keep to the self-defeating status quo.

[TeK](#)

Nah, she was playing for both sides 'fore Neshie screwed the system.

*stevenneiman*

If anyone can do it, our dear vivisecter of miracles can,

*luminiousblu*

You can't kill the Bard. She's the DMPC, the plot device, the person who moves the McGuffin, the kick to the status quo that has people crying for adventure and for a new party of level 1s to be rolled up. If she loses, that's only if Above and Below think it's time for her to sit out for a while, and she sits out all the time anyway.

*RanVor*

More like nobody has found a way to kill the Bard \*yet\*. Never underestimate the ingenuity of players determined to break the game.

*luminiousblu*

The ingenuity of players has a corollary, which is that it's only relevant for as long as the DM is willing to indulge it.

*RanVor*

I guess you haven't seen much ingenuity, then.

*luminiousblu*

I don't think you get the point, which is that the GM can be caught off guard, but he is also always within his right to say Rocks Fall or even to constantly roll 20s behind his screen and make "judgement calls" that swing things back.

You can't kill a GMPC, it doesn't happen – they're not stated out and even if they were he can just fudge the rolls. The Bard is a classic GMPC, who shows up to drop plot points and begin the main plot and promptly disappears, when you go look for her the GM smiles mysteriously and says "You follow her, but she's disappeared into the crowd."

The main reason you can outsmart the GM is because the GM usually wants to be outsmarted, he's not playing against you or anything, and also because he'd rather not end up with an empty table. You can't, however, "quit" Creation.

*RanVor*

You can't quit Creation, but you can make the gods wish you could. The gods too are bound by rules, and all rules can be exploited, if you know how to do it. Besides, you don't have to fight them – you just need to ruin their campaign beyond repair. If they have to resort to killing you, you've already won.

*Metrux*

Point of interest in this discussion: The Gods are not the GM in this story, as you mentioned, they are also bound by rules, which means they are not omnipotent and can't be the true source of everything, which a GM is. So, what if the Bard works for the game because she's actually working for the GM, instead of the Gods?

*Insanenoodlyguy*

You need to google the story of Old Man Henderson

*broadaxe*

Binding her soul to something seems kinda useless, she is routinely jumping her soul around to different bodies, wouldn't she just jump out of whatever you bound it to? I'd say you'd have to mangle her soul, so that she is essentially dead no matter what body she jumps in to :3

*RanVor*

The word "binding" implies that there would be something making her unable to escape.

*stevenneiman*

I don't think it actually is her soul. I might be wrong, but the sense I got is that the the Name takes the inherited



memories and personality alterations so far that whoever takes on the Name behaves exactly like the original, despite the fact that the soul doesn't actually transfer. You'd need to bind the Name and do it in a way that whatever you bound it to couldn't have the same effect as the normal Bard.

*Na*

I'd gotten the impression that the Bard was literally appearing/vanishing out of nowhere, rather than a Name riding already-extant bodies.

*MetruX*

When she is in the same body, yes, but when she changes bodies, we've seen already the person existed beforehand, and she got all the memories from it. So at the very least she's a body stealer, if nothing else.

[Liliet](#)

Did we see that the person existed beforehand?

*tithin*

not how i saw this chapter going, but that basically confirms my personal theory the bard represents neither above nor below, but both? a sentient mechanism to ensure the story continues for the amusement of the audience (in this case, being the "gods")

*Andrew Mitchell*

I agree. She's a mechanism put in place by Above AND Below to keep the story going.

*Nairne .01*

Like the Hierarch said, "servant of stillness" and all that.

*Cap'n Smurfy*

You know you've hit rock bottom when Akua Sahalan, Diabolist herself, is the one defending your character in court.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Not really. She's known to have a silver tongue even better than Catherine.

*Kennator64*

The only silver in Cat's tounge is fulminated.

*Flameburst*

The defense calls the only character witness: a woman who murdered a six digit figure of civilians!

*Cap'n Smurfy*

I would say that would be considered a flaw, but only because the Sisters would consider her an amateur mass murderer.

*Skaddix*

So the Bard works for both sides as a kinda of Game Master that is interesting.

This might end more equitable then I thought.

*Metrux*

I think you don't understand the work of a Game Master if you think like this. The GM is never working for ANY side, he is there to tell the tales and present the situations, so that the players can better enjoy the game. None of this has anything to do with what Bard does, unless you count her as a pawn to the GM.

*imagesbe*

Akua makes everything better. EVERYTHING.

I know that the pacing hasn't actually slowed down too much... heavens knows there have been several past chapters where almost no actual events happen and it's all setup for the climax, but this bothers me a lot more.

Probably because I've never approached a climax as apprehensive as now. Oh I've been worried about Cat and co, and worried that a character I liked would die, or something bad would happen to them, but this is the first time I'm genuinely concerned for the quality of the story. I think the next few chapters will decide whether the Drow arc more or less works or was a huge waste of time and writing.

*Thea*

While the pacing of the story may not have slowed as such, as you said, you're right that the flow is dead. Akua to the rescue with the power of friendship was amazing. Empowered Catherine giving no shits was surprisingly nostalgic and great writing, too. But that disrupted the flow and it hadn't started up again. It's just crabbing around. Catherine leaving the mantle with the drow wouldn't feel satisfying to me. And we get Akua to the rescue \*already again\*. Matters just ate coming together smoothly, especially compared to previous climaxes.

*Argentorum*

I agree. I think we could have skipped the metaphysical concept battle at least, getting right to memory lane with a rush to the center, maybe. Akua saying she'll meet Cat there. The one thing is I'm not sure the jaunt down memory lane is skipable, it adds so much necessary context, even though it breaks the pace of the climax and sends us back down for a bit before we get to the trial.

*superkeaton*

Oh goody, a trial. This should be amusing.

*Wry Warudo*

Hm I would have thought the memory of Cat bullying a Choir would be significant to Sve Noc, since it shows that she can in fact beat the gods

*matesbe*

Beating a choir isn't anywhere close to beating the Gods Above, in the same way that beating a Demon doesn't mean you've beaten the Gods Below. That isn't to say it might not win her bonus points, but it's not evidence of being able to beat the Omnipotent. More relevantly, it's not even evidence of being able to beat the Bard.

*tithin*

Asides from the fact that this has somehow become a trial with regards to the fate of the Night / Winter mantle vis a vis Cat's actions over the course of the story, the bullying of the hashmalim doesn't matter in this context because the Hashmalim are irrelevant to the drow, they're not a series of beings that the drow have ever interacted with as their stories explicitly avoid heroes.

Laying aside the fact that the distinction has never been made around Hashmalim themselves being gods, or merely extremely powerful messengers thereof.

*MetruX*

1. At the time Drow were in power Villains and Heroes were not even defined as so.
2. The Hashmallins, as all other angel choirs, have been defined as instruments left by the Gods Above, explicitly bound to so much rulings and specific acts, that they can't even be trully considered sentient. So yeah, no gods.

*Skaddix*

Cat only won that cause the Choirs still have to play by the rules of the story and Cat cause Akua was the opposition was the Hero of that story.

That has no bearing on the Gods.

[daegone823](#)

I am so confused what does Cat win if she wins the case, loss equals death.

Does she get her mantle back?

Does she share her body with three souls not including her own?

Does she give the power to this new entity, while she assumes whatever new name?

Now that Cat is humanish again she realizes that she does not want or need power. It was easier to be herself when she had limitations, easier to fight, easier to enjoy life. Now that she can choose what she wants instead of being chained to a mantle since she was the last fae standing.

Cat is still integral to the story unlike the first prince who I realize never attained a name because as the Peregrine and Saint said her involvement is just for appearance sake and that her fight was just a cliff note. Cat is a mover and shaker so she could still attain a name, "Oathmaker".

What does she want from winning the case?

Does she want winter back(a hanging sword for any foe)

Will the dead king still respect her if she gives up the power?

*Andrew Mitchell*

I think we're going to get answers to most of your questions. And some will come in the next few chapters and others may need another book or two. Until then all we can do is speculate; I'll go first.

What does she get from winning? My guess is that she'll get some sort of deal with the sisters that means that the drow will be allies in Catherine's surface battles. In addition, her experience reliving those memories is going to have a big impact. She's going to work a lot harder on not being a monster. I don't think she'll get Winter's mantle back and I don't think she's going to come into a new Name anytime soon.

So that's my speculation. What's yours?

*matesbe*

If she loses Winter and doesn't get a Name out of it... she's useless. She basically becomes unnecessary for Callow. She isn't the best general, she isn't the most charismatic leader (and a lot of her charisma was influenced by her Name), she isn't a great administrator... she's story savvy, but if you're not a Named, that really doesn't mean much. There wouldn't be anything about her that's necessary for... anything. Unless you count loyalty from those who do have power.

It's all about power. Without power, she would never have gotten anywhere, and if she loses it here, on the eve of a war... bad things will happen.

I admit it's a possibility she loses all power... but I would be really pissed off. Like, drop the story for awhile pissed off. After shooting off a rant about how completely unnecessary that would make 60% of this entire arc (because if she's going to lose all power, why would there have been a lot of focus on her learning to use and refine power? And if enslaving the Drow was ultimately not going to matter, why write her fighting her way through cities and not just sneak up to Sve Noc, get caught, and then the same thing happens but in 1/4 of the written space).

Sorry if this is snappy or abrasive, but it's really been bothering me. I keep telling myself it probably won't turn out like that because it would be bad narrative, but I can't bring myself to completely discount the possibility as well, and it's aggravating me.

*burdi*

i think its impossible for catherine to loss all her power, its just not possible

she is one of the great enemy of the heaven, and she is former named, you cant became a named then became nobody.

she is a Villain, her only fate is either turn her cloak or croak/dead, there is no possibilities for her to became normal again

[Jani Nyyssönen](#)

My question is, how does Cat even exist?

Her body was smoke and mirrors, winter made manifest, a physical projection made by her power to a point that she only had heartbeat when she remembered to have one.

Hell, Pilgrim knocking her out after lake drop incident made her body keep reshaping itself constantly.  
What is there left to form a body for her if the power of winter is drained away?  
I may have missed something, but so much of this seems completely coming out of nowhere.

*burdi*

she never loss her body, its just changed by creation because she bore the full mantle of winter so she must not human, creation changed her body to constructure to match it with full mantle of winter her real body still there all this time but this time she really out of her body..gone to mantle of winter night

*medailyfun*

Add here the limp leg 😊

*Rup*

...how about this..  
Sve Noc gets both Night AND Winter..but has to ally with the Black Queen Cat as protector or something

*Enjou*

Cat winning likely means alliance with the sisters in some form or another. My personal guess is that the sisters, along with both Night and Winter, will merge with the Mantle of Woe. This will allow them to empower Cat with the abilities granted by Night and Winter, but without it directly influencing her personality. Part of the merge will include them making oaths to enforce the Liesse Accords. In exchange Cat will have to work with them, because while she's in the driver's seat she can't just outright to ignore them because if she does they turn off the flow of power, and they'll ensure that she doesn't just use the drow as a disposable tool that she can throw away once done with them.

Cat gets her mortality while keeping the power of her mantle, her army of drow, and something that will ensure the Liesse Accords will be enforced once she's dead and gone. The sisters get to ensure that their people won't just be killed off.

The whole arrangement sort of violates the "don't rely on a magical artifact as a villain because it will fail you at a critical moment" axiom, but since the failure in question is related more to the axioms regarding "don't abuse your

chained up monster" and "don't break oaths with the fae" the pitfall can be largely avoided.

As far as Akua goes, she'll likely ensure all the wording is neat and proper. If she survives... well, being forever bound to an artifact that enforces a treaty that is meant to prevent atrocities like the one that she caused would be delightfully ironic.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I like the way you've laid this out.

*Metrux*

It does sound good... For the end of everything in this story. Really can't see any of this happening right now, would simply disrupt everything that is still to happen, in the same way we see animes doing... They tended to be good, then it just became more of the same because power overwhelming, and that is a thing people have already been complaining about the Winter mantle. No, she won't have the two in her mantle, just not happening.

*Novice*

The choir are not the gods.

*werafdsaew*

Ok I genuinely have no idea where this is going.

*nick012000*

>"Pride," Komena objected, shaking her head. "Refusal to lose even at the cost of principle. Must I bring out every example of this?"

There's something to be said for Cat's impressive trail of victories, though. She's never lost a battle so far.

*tithin*

She lost the last one she fought.

*Bravo*

Not if she wins.

*magesbe*

It can be argued that Akua beat her. Temporarily, but to be honest it wasn't her own ability or planning that got her out

of that one. Also, William did kill her. She just didn't stay dead.

*RoflCat*

Well, she was still dead, she just didn't 'stay still' as a dead.

Wil "I killed you!"

\*stab\*

Cath "Still dead, remember?"

*pagesbe*

Willycakes: "I killed you. I cut off your head."

Cat: "Eh, I got over it."

[Liliet](#)

Catherine trusted Black to help her plan out that one. IMHO, if Cat had been planning that one alone, she wouldn't have let an opening THAT big on accident. It wasn't her own ability or planning that got her out of that one, but it also wasn't her own ability or planning that got her INTO that one, so the point is moot. She trusted Black to make a plan that would work... and she wasn't even wrong, in the end, it, er, did.

*Draeysine*

I agree, she has never lost a battle before. At worst she merely took a break in the middle of a few to come back and finish the job.

*Skaddix*

Honestly, EE might actually make a creative ending for this one I fully expected a repeat of the King of Winter and Queen of Summer and Cat leaving with a Slave Army but if she walks out with an Alliance with Sve Noc instead well props that is a more interesting direction. As compared to Cat simply killing Sve Noc adding Night to Winter and leaving with a massive Drow army.

[Jani Nyyssönen](#)

I may have had some, complaints, about last couple chapters, but this, this has been pure gold.

So much for the "Mantle made me do it" defense, self awareness, thy name is most definitely not Catherine Foundling.

And dammit i especially love Akua giving us insight on the role of the defense on Praesi culture.

There needs to be one, you can, and are expected to, pride it, but there must be a defender for the accused, this is a society



that, when seeing their ruler being eaten by man eating tapirs, goes to court over whether or not the tapirs get to be the next ruler.

Seriously, Praesi may be evil fuckers in general, but i love how self aware they are about it.

*IDKWhoitis*

Lawful Evil must follow the letter of the law after all, if not that, why bother with rules and rulers at all? Praes is built upon this rigid hierarchy, and they must follow all the expected forms of malevolence. This is the same empire that has forms to kill bureaucrats and has laws of inheritance regarding undead and claimed souls.

*IDKWhoitis*

So is Akua dragging out what remains of her name now that Winter has subsided? Is the Diabolist about to get a second act? More importantly, we see that Cat is just waiting, and being quiet. Ok, well more quiet, as she lets the chaos between several semi-malicious entities talk it out.

I still don't believe this is a betrayal of Cat, since the "Power of Friendship"™ is still in play.

*burdi*

everything that sve noc said was meaningless, the show of memory just to guide cat's mind, to make her surrender. by making her see in their way, that what they did was not wrong..its just tactic to herding cat to her butcher place like a sheep that is why akua with the power of glorious friendship came to rescue..because its the time, the only condition they can beat the odds.., by compare catherine and sve noc..who is better. without someone to help her, catherine is guaranteed will loss..cant argue for herself, she already loss her words after they showed her their memory .its their plan its akua moment..to show sve noc and below or and above that catherine is better

[Jani Nyyssönen](#)

Catherine has a problem in that she thinks of herself, in some ways, as a good person, that her cause is just, and that she should be better than the worst.

Her claim of "Justifications only matter to the just" is a pretty snappy one, but i don't think she truly believes in it. And here, that is a weakness she can't afford. Sve's will keep knocking her down with all of her more brutal actions taken out of context to try to convince her that she is not a good person (and i'd argue that she is not), that she should not

have power because she can't be trusted to wield it (i think she can).

So here comes Akua, who can argue against Sve's claims, who can bolster Cat's side and argue that what Cat did was necessary and/or justified.

I think the current fight is about willpower and conviction, who truly believes themselves to have the right to rule, to wield power, to win. And Cat has always had self doubts, it's one of the things keeping her from becoming the monster some fear she might be, but here, those doubts can kill her.

But Akua, she is nothing if not certain of herself, here, she is possibly the best ally Cat can have from all those who follow her. Provided she does not stab Cat in the back, which i don't think she will, but is never really certain, this is Akua after all.

[BarthHumphries](#)

Few typos

*Antoninjohn*

Cat has changed the story from one of Moonless Nights vs Drow Night to a trail of justice, Sve Noc may have had "All is Night" to let her win the battle of Nights but Cat has "Justice only matters to the Just" which will let her win now, Sve Noc lost the minute Cat changed the story

*magesbe*

Except does Cat really still buy that? The first quarter of this arc involved her waffling around feeling terrible about herself and what she's done to Callow. That is not the action of someone who feels like she doesn't need justifications for her actions.

[Liliet](#)

Well, Catherine would very much like to be just.

But to get justifications from her, you need to also hop on the just bandwagon...

*agumentic*

"Why," Diabolist smiled, extending her arms, "I only want to see justice done. Shall we begin?"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnmEnjWy288>

I can't wait for more of Akua Sahelian: Ace Attorney.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Akua Sahelian: better at white-infighting than the White Knight.

Because she spins the evidence, doesn't rely on coin flips and always has an angle when she comes charging to the rescue.

*sutortyrannus*

Akua as legal defense really only merits one response:

Hier Kom Groot Kak.

*Andrew Mitchell*

It's great to find out that EE can still surprise me. I was NOT expecting this to become a mock trial with Akua on the defence.

I can't wait to see Akua in action. This is going to be so, so good.

*letouriste*

theories: cat asked akua to do something about sve noc before the battle and we didn't really see what that was yet right?

i guess the plan is still there but cat is clueless about it given she decided to let akua do the plot.

I doubt she planned to lose her mantle but her plans involve a lot of room to improvisation.

the whole chapter was still confusing to me tho

*Andrew Mitchell*

I think all this is being improvised and there is nothing left of Cat's planning. IMO this battle isn't going to be won through force. Now she needs the sisters' willing cooperation.

*Someguy*

>"This is not at all how a rigged trial is held. I see an accuser yet no defence – you can, and indeed should, bribe the defender, but you cannot dispense with the office entirely. It is simply not done."

If a rigged trial involves the Defence being bribed you have already failed. The practice of Law involves the Prosecution & Defence actually practicing with great effort and vigour. The Judge has already been bribed/in bed with whomever profits most from the result, the Prosecution & Defence exist only to practice.

[\*crysjal\*](#)

She's referring to how you hold a "rigged trial". You don't hold a rigged trial without at least providing a defence even if the defence is bribed. It's about appearances.

*Novice*

Which goes back to her whole going through the motions of being a hero without have any heroic motivations/intent.

*NerfGlastigUaine*

The opening quote always mirrors/foreshadows what happens in the story. Thus, I knew after reading the stirring defense of the ignobly executed man-eating tapirs that this chapter would be a gem.

Also, Trial of Unexpected Teeth? Really? You created man-eating tapirs, bragged about it, and asked "who's the real loser here," and they were unexpected?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Shocking, right? I mean, the signage must have been a good 15 metres tall. In night-safety white. And with disco rotating spotlights.

*Rup*

...this name is pure Gold: Trial of Unexpected Teeth

*Nairne .01*

Eh, is Aqua going for "justification matters only to the just"? Does she even know about it? Did Sve get that information yet?

I don't know why but I was under the impression Cat didn't have a third moment like that one with justification yet.

*luminiousblu*

The first time Catherine ever said that line was to Akua.

*RanVor*

Not exactly. She said it after Akua left, iirc.

*Nairne .01*

Uhm, she said it just before she got her resurrection, and that was to the choir. That's why I'm confused.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

She said it to Akua on the Blessed Isle.

Nairne .01

Eh no,

Book 2, chapter 47:

"Repent, Queen of Callow.

I gurgled out a wretched laugh. You can't ever lose, can you? Even when you're beaten I have to become one of yours. I forced myself to remember something else. They tried to struggle but it was just as much a part of me as the rest had been. You don't get to pick and choose what I am. Two silhouettes cloaked in black, standing alone in front of the throne.

We do not kneel.

It wasn't enough. Those were not my words. I had borrowed them, and in borrowing lessened them. They demanded contrition. They demanded justification, for all my many sins. I had none. I clawed desperately into the depths of myself. Looking for something, anything. What I found... was a starry sky, in ruins that moaned in the wind. A dark-skinned girl, tempting me with a way out. Four dead on the floor as she fled. A lesson learned, a question answered.

Justification only matters to the just.

They flinched.

"I swore it," I croaked. "Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation."

I no longer saw a crown on my brow. They hadn't liked that at all, had they? So much for being Queen. The fires withdrew, leaving me empty. Still dead. Unlike their trap of a Name, this I took umbrage to.

"You can't cheat me," I laughed. "You're not the Gods. You're part of the story too. You have to follow the rules."

I opened my eyes, looking up into the perfect blankness.

"And if you won't give me my due," I said. "I'll Take it.""

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Huh, must've remembered wrong.

Well, Akua's not directly quoting it, so I don't really see any big issue with it.

*Aston Whiteman*

Cat dies still.

*mavant*

No, Cat dies moving.

*SpeckofStardust*

"They've been a lot more careful about where they put their money since Nessie ate the hand that fed him."

Best name for the Dead king right here, Nessie.

*RanVor*

What I find interesting here is that Below are somehow not happy with the Dead King. I wonder what they expected from him.

*Andrew Mitchell*

That's an interesting thought. I think Below want the Dead King to be more active and involved because Below (like Above) want the story to ebb and flow. A Dead King who just sits on the sidelines gathering more and more power is wasting story potential.

*RanVor*

Well, I guess that's possible, but it doesn't sound like "eating the hand that fed him".

[Tohron](#)

He made a deal with devils to power his ritual, but then figured out a way to backstab the devils and take over their hell (converting it to his purposes). I'm pretty sure it's the latter part that they're unhappy with.

*RanVor*

Sure, but wasn't he following their own philosophy?

[Javvies](#)

I think it might be more because he doesn't do all that much proactively with all the power he's gotten.

I mean, he's been more or less content to sit there for centuries, if not millennia. Oh, sure, he'll smack down anybody going into his territory, but he's never seriously tried to expand what he controls.

He never finished off the ancient enemy of his people, either, and so the Lycaonese are around.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

Are you suggesting that the gods aren't hypocrites? I find this implausible.

*RanVor*

They could be, if they were stupid and didn't mind losing. Otherwise, I don't think they can afford hypocrisy in this particular matter.

*MetruX*

RanVor, just reread the story. Everything points to the Gods, both Above and Below, to be utterly foolish and filled with hypocrisy. Besides, there's nothing they "can't afford", since they're Gods, and the only reason they can be so foolish in the first place is that they have enough power no one can do a thing about it.

*RanVor*

You're missing one important detail – the Gods Above are watching Below's every move, and would never miss a chance to take advantage of their dumb mistake. And of all dumb mistakes a god can make, punishing its followers for sticking to the principles it taught them is undoubtedly the dumbest.

[TeK](#)

I believe it has something to do with Nessie saying that he is a god.

*RanVor*

Well, but of fucking course it was the Bard. I can't believe I haven't seen it coming.

*Aotrs Commander*

Yeah.

Lets us hope, that if by the end of the series, Cat can't kill both sets of Gods outright, she will at very least, be able to set Bard's conceptual everything on retroactive fire forever...

*broadaxe*

People talking about "justification only matters to the just" you guys realise that just a few chapters ago cat was chidding her self for saying something so stupid as that right? :3

*Nairne .01*

I know.

If we are to believe the queen of Summer and her prophetic naming of Cat's band of misfits then I wonder what kind of Woe will befall Sve and possibly Cat as well (as misery loves company).

*Nairne .01*

P.S.

I still want Cat to ascend to the same level as Neshamah. I do love how she warps stories for her benefit though it would be unnatural for her to keep to a level or two below the DK and Bard.

I admit I love the idea of OP characters my desire stems mainly from that, but I'd also love to prove the Bard wrong and have Cat not "burn out" like she said.

*Aotrs Commander*

Huh. Guess I was right about Cat using the mantle as an excuse to wag her finger at herself. Little bit surprised, but pleased, actually. (Since I am very big on personal responsibility, and one of the reasons I despise the gods, bard and the choirs with a blazing intensity...)

Cat, duck, you kind of need to stop pretending to yourself on a bad day and just run with it and accept you are what you chose yourself to be. Everyone (that matters) will still love you anyway..

*Nairne .01*

Indrani already told Cat about that. Cat is Callowan deep down so up until now, she had to believe deep down that she was doing good.

I think her character development since she became the Squire was more linked to her Name (or in other words the part of her soul that was her Name) and then when it got swallowed to Winter. She became more accepting of cruelty and more radical means even as Squire and it continued when she became the Sovereign. The reason she didn't revert to her old self like this time was because Winter or more likely her domain swallowed her Name (or at least that part of her soul).

This entire arc may basically be an opportunity to reflect on that and maybe start over.

The biggest thing I think both Komena, Andronike, and Cat may be missing at this point is the simple truth that power – no matter its nature – wants to be used.

So if one assumes that whoever gets this pot of dubious gifts



of comingled Night and Winter will be immortal then there will inevitably be a time when they use this power, and in this argument both or one of them is pretending to prove who can use it better (or to do more good) and both or the other is arguing who has more right to this power.

I'm probably wrong or may have expressed myself wrong (or both), but I'd love to see your (all of you) outlook on what we had in this whole arc up until now.

*mavant*

He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind, and the fool shall be servant to the wise in heart. – Proverbs 11:29

Personally I'm delighted to see Akua taking on the role of Clarence Darrow. Let's get this Monkey Trial started!

*Zaver SaintCloud*

What gets me about the last few chapters is that for all the drama & backstory (which are fantastic btw), we must remember that Cat came here for the purpose of securing an army to supplement Callow's forces in the Crusade. Having her walk out of the Everdark with a large contingent of Drow seems almost inevitable, and thus takes away some of the spectacle that is her confrontation with Sve Noc. Though she might also get a few of those Dwarven thrill-seekers to join her, so that's a plus.

*Metrux*

If she gets rid of Sve Noc, she might very well get an army of DWARFS to fight with her. So no, she can leave here without Drow in the end, though would be kinda anti-climatic. Also, if she makes a deal with the sisters, unless it takes them out of the underground and destroys the gloom, those very same dwarfs will come for \*her\*. Yeah, this just isn't ending well for everyone, and your argument... You could say so for any story. We all already know how they end, the MC victorious in some manner, so why bother? Well, because we like the way it is told, the details of the world, the tale itself in how it happens, instead of where it goes. After all, you can enjoy a story you already know, why is it such a different concept to enjoy one still filled with mysteries to unravel?

*naturalnuke*

"Even the devil gets an advocate."

Fair enough.

*RanVor*

Wait a sec. If Cat loses Winter (and, by extension, fairy gates), how the hell is she going to get back to Callow?

*SMHF*

Well Sve'd taught this neat trick to Longstrides that hasn't seen much use yet... so my money's on that.

*broadaxe*

So i was reading some old bits and peices of the guide, to get up to date on Abigale, as i am curious what she has become in cathrines absencens.

When i realised why Cat bound akua, why she kept her around, and in heinsight it is so obvious its kind of astounding. We were all screaming it was a terrible idea becuase she would betray her, take over her body, take over winter, yada, yada. Because, essentially, she would be a treacherous lieutenant, just like Larat. Suddenly neither of them feels nearly as dangerous, one is a danger but 2? Suddenly irritants law just makes it a mere problem. That, i believe is real reason she kept her :3

*RanVor*

My theory is that she intended it to be a fate worse than death. Needless to say, it backfired.

[Jani Nyyssönen](#)

Basicly this.

First binding Akua's soul was a punishment, then she became a dangerous weapon for desperate situation, later a tool too useful to discard, then a treacherous advisor, and now, she's a borderline (untrusted) friend/ally.

I used to hate Akua, she was in many ways the worst example of what Praes was.

But, overtime she grew on me, yes, she was evil treacherous asshole right up until she had he heart ripped out, but afterwards, she did not moan or complain. No matter how much i hated her, Akua accepting her fate, and straightforward and self aware way of dealing with it since has made her possibly my second favorite character after Cat (kinda tied with Thief and Hunter, can't really decide between them).

*Nairne .01*

Hunter was a childish prick, wet with his mother's milk behind his ears and dreams of being a hero when he really wasn't anything special (a sidekick maybe).

[Jani Nyyssönen](#)

I meant archer.

For some reason i keep mixing Archer, Ranger and Hunter.

### Liliet

Akua is absolutely amazing, and yeah, her reaction to losing has made her come pretty high up on the list of my favorites

♥

Amadeus and Masego though. Amadeus and Masego ;u;

### NZPIEFACE

If Ivah could be backstabbing...

*nipi*

Seems to me like the sisters and Cat have done pretty much the same things.

“Хотели как лучше, а получилось как всегда.” (“We wanted the best but it came out like always.”) – Viktor Chernomyrdin

I wonder what the “reasonable” sister is fishing for. Plot armor aside it seems like she is waiting for Cat to realize what she needs to offer to get a deal.

### Liliet

I love you for this translation forever I am going to be using it ♥

*nipi*

“A child arrogating powers beyond her due,” Komena contradicted her. “The birth of a recurring pattern. And see how quickly it comes again-”

Ok its official Cats just ramping up towards becoming OP. Then again we already knew that.

### Jani Nyyssönen

This has become something of a pattern, Cat is taken down by an enemy, enemy fails to immediately utterly destroy her, Cat gets up and becomes even more powerful, defeats her enemy.

It kinda happened with William in their first fight.

It happened with William in their third fight.

It happened with the winter fae (i think, don't have perfect recollection of the fight).

It happened in second Liesse with Akuwa binding her.

It sorta happened when Pilgrim managed to knock her out after the lake thing. Even if the power up was starting to use Akua.

And now it seems to be happening again.  
As long as there is anything left of Cat, body, mind, or soul,  
she is going to get back up, and kick your ass.

*broadaxe*

The pattern of the protagonist :3 also the pattern of a hero  
^^

[Jani Nyyssönen](#)

Or a recurring villain.

*Nairne .01*

"The birth of a recurring pattern. And see how quickly it  
comes again-"

I don't know whether to be impressed or laugh at the  
observation. Isn't that exactly what is happening now?

*Moginheden*

The previous/next links seem a bit messed up here. Normally the  
interludes get put into the order properly. This time the "next"  
button from "As Above" comes directly to this chapter, but the  
"previous" button from this chapter goes to "Peregrine I" also  
the interlude doesn't seem to show in the sidebar chapter list.

*RanVor*

Because it's not an interlude. It's an extra chapter, and as  
such can be found in the extra chapters section. If it was an  
interlude, it would have "Interlude" in the title.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

You know, I've been reading the Tyrant chapters. Absolute joy.

He literally said "We do not go gently into the night."  
"First step always works, so always have a first step going."

His views on villainy are as pure as Akua, and presumably the  
arsenic he employs. It's fucking amazing. And then again, his  
personal philosophy of "Fuck it, I'm dying, let's do this"  
reminds me so much of Cat. He is a madman, the best kind.

I really hope the next book delves into his character more. His  
absence so far has been sorely noted, and it's about time his  
game with Hierarch bore fruit.

*SMHF*

You know. there is a part of me that still thinks this is part of an elaborate plan to force a narrative and Cat had to wipe her memory of the plan since she knew Sve could easily access it...

This whole thing just doesn't add up to how calculated they did everything in the Everdark after the fight with Urulan...

I seriously can't believe they decided to just wing it, knowing Sve was gonna show up.

It's the same reason I'm pretty sure getting caught was part of Black's plan... which is kinda terrifying because it means whatever he's gonna get out of it, was worth half of his legions!

[Liliet](#)

Eh, Black just going "fuck it I don't have a plan" kind of lines up with him breaking Liesse and Empire with it and then giving Cat a knife and going 'just go for it buddy'. He's been in a slow motion mental breakdown, and I think his loss was, in fact, a genuine loss.

Catherine here definitely had more of a plan than we've seen.

I can't wait for it to play out in Sve Noc's favor ♥

[Aran](#)

What did Kairos do to mess with the Bard's plans, specifically? I remember her saying that he "snuck one by me", but what was it?

The one thing that comes to mind is that he made Anaraxes Hierarch and put him in charge of the League, but I'm not sure why that is such a significant move.

[aran](#)

... oh. OH.

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## Chapter 81: Only To The Just

*"Thus the Gods granted us the second boon: beyond the veil of death lies a land of always plenty, which will only be open to the just."*

– The Book of All Things, fifth verse of the second hymn

Why was a trial taking place at all?

I kept my face expressionless even as the question consumed me. I knew why Akua would want one: given long enough, she could probably convince a circle it was actually a square. I also knew why Komena wanted one, or rather didn't. She simply didn't have the power to do anything about it at the moment. What was tripping me up, though, was why Andronike had boarded this ship. She'd already implied Diabolist might be troublesome if allowed to continue whatever folly she'd been up to out there, but that couldn't possibly be enough of a reason to indulge this farce. I gave it better than even odds that Akua had come in here with an exit strategy, a way to flee if this turned sour on her, but why not simply hang me on a crook and temporarily devote their energies to taking care of the Diabolist issue before resuming? There was, I decided, a deeper game afoot. True to form, I was the only player involved unaware of the stakes and the rules. Could I feel out the shape of it by figuring out what the older sister was after? No, I decided after a short beat. Even now she was too hard to figure out. On the other hand, I knew Akua like few others. Her I might be able to use for the purpose. *So, Diabolist, I thought. What are you actually up to?*

"You claimed the role of defender," Andronike said, silver eyes unblinking. "Proceed, shade."

"As a titled noble of the Dread Empire of Praes, Catherine Foundling is owed trial before a jury of her peers," Akua mused. "Yet I suppose you will have to do."

The insult I immediately discarded as unimportant. She'd never been quite as above trash talk as she liked to pretend, a tendency that exposure to the Woe had only worsened. She was establishing my stature as a Praesi noblewoman – which technically was true, since Malicia had years ago titled me Lady of Marchford even though greater titles had since eclipsed that grant – but also recognizing that the older half of Sve Noc had right of judgement over me. One or both parts of that were useful to her purposes, I decided.

"There is no empire here save ours," Komena denied bluntly. "Your laws and dues are of no worth."

*Thrust and parry*, I frowned. Had it simply been an attempt to make Praesi laws apply to whatever the Hells this was turning into? She'd certainly be more familiar with them than anyone else here, and that opened the door to a multitude of exploitable technicalities. But it should have been fairly predictable that wouldn't work, we had nowhere near enough leverage in this to make that hold. My eyes flicked to Andronike's calm face. Arguably no leverage at all, I thought. And yet here we were. She was getting something out of this, something separate from the offer I'd extended. What? The answer to that question was the key to surviving this.

"Then you stand here in your role as shared rulers of the Everdark," Diabolist said. "With all attendant duties and privileges."

I knew that faintly indifferent tone of voice all too well. It was the same she'd used every time she was making sport of me before an audience of fellow Wasteland vultures. She'd laid a trap and Komena had fallen for it. Establishing stakes? If the sisters were here as rulers of their kind, the outcome of this might apply to all drow. Which meant that the outcome of this bad play mattered somehow, there'd be no point in pushing for this if it didn't. I bit my lip. Why would it? We had no way of enforcing anything, the power disparity was to the point of the absurd. It would take something-

"Oh fuck me," I murmured.

-something even stronger to do that. Like a story. Akua was trying to screw them the exact same way I'd screwed *her* at First Liesse. Except this time I was theoretically on her side and essentially blind as to the specifics of what she was trying to accomplish. The moment I opened my mouth to say anything I might very well be striking a match in a munitions warehouse.

"That is so," Andronike replied without hesitation. "I stand in judgement over an invader."

*Think, Catherine. What does 'Nike get out of this? Why does she play along?* This ended either in my acquittal, which I suspected was what Akua might be going for, or in my conviction. Somehow I doubted Diabolist and Andronike were after the same outcome, which meant 'Ol Silver was aiming for the noose. What would she get from it that choking me out earlier wouldn't have accomplished?

"Good," Diabolist smiled. "Now, I believe that assertion was made pride has been her sole master all these years. I would bring evidence to the contrary. Catherine, if I may?"

"Try not to make a mess," I sighed.

*"But that's not why I'm making this decision. There are eight thousand innocents in Marchford, Juniper. I refuse to abandon them."*

Her grip was lighter, I'd give her that much. Maybe as a consequence the memory didn't feel nearly as vivid, and it took me a moment to place it. War council of the Fifteenth, after the demon had slipped the leash in the hills south of Marchford. When my officers had been arguing for retreat west and abandonment of the city. I had not forgot, though, exactly who it was that'd loosed the demon in question. Hard to, when she was the same woman currently speaking in my defence.

"The Battle of Marchford," Akua said. "A choice between pragmatic retreat and principled stand. This too, Sve Noc, is a pattern that must be recognized: holding to loyalties in the face of danger, even when inconvenient."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. Yeah, she was definitely going for acquittal here. Which I supposed might mean being worthy of allying with? At least half of Sve Noc seemed aware there was a story in the works here, and so she might step carefully if Diabolist pulled this off, but even then I didn't see the 'wrong' verdict holding up afterwards. *Which might be what Akua is actually after*, I frowned. Putting at our back a story of the sisters breaking their word, even if it was only implicitly given. It'd been a mistake in thinking to assume that the shade would be after the same thing I was, namely making allies with the pair. Akua Sahelian was a creature who only ever sought absolute endings, be they victories or defeats. And that meant, unfortunately, that putting all my coin on the madwoman trying to fool living gods wasn't an option. I couldn't just lie there like a dead fish and await salvation. Even if she managed to win, it would be the wrong damned sort of victory. Shit. That meant I'd have to handle her, Andronike and Komena at the same time. Each of them after something different and in at least one case what exactly remaining unclear to me. This was going to get trickier than I was equipped to handle.

"Laughable," Komena said. "Is there a single teacher or benefactor she has not turned on?"

I gasped as she riffled through my memories none too gently. The images flickered in quick succession: putting a knife in Black, after the dust had settled on Second Liesse. Coronation in Laure, as good as open rebellion against Malicia. Standing before the Queen of Summer and the King of Winter, unmaking them both by giving them exactly what they wanted.

"All of which betrayed her first, in one manner or another," Diabolist shrugged. "Can you show me a single instance where she was first to wield the knife?"

"And so she is indecisive as well as untrustworthy," Komena mocked. "You dig ever deeper."

"Now now," Akua chided. "Personal attacks are the mark of failed argument. If you've no counterpoint to offer, such flailing only serves to shed further light on your incompetence."

"A single instance taking place prior to the acquisition of her mantle," Andronike said. "Your argument stands, shade, yet not as tall as you would wish. I require more recent decisions. You were yourself instrumental in the enslavement of many of my kind. The matter must be addressed."



I drummed my fingers against my leg. There it was, the hint as to what she was after. Like I'd thought it, was conviction she wanted. So she was on her sister's side. Whatever hesitation I'd sown was gone, they were back to riding the same horse. *No*, I suddenly thought. *They aren't*. Komena might be serving as the attack hound, at the moment, but that wasn't what she actually wanted. If given the power she'd strike us both down in an instant. Andronike's road still ended in my death, presumably, but she wanted to carry out the full farce first. Make it about my being judged and then annihilated. The semblance of justice had some use to her. The whole thing still had the smell of sacrifice to it, but there was a difference between simple victory by strength and the hanging of a villain. The latter had a narrative behind it, and I could only see one use for that: she wanted to ride it against Winter. That was the only reason she'd humoured Diabolist, she wanted Fate to back her claim on my former mantle. And so finally I knew what everyone was after: Akua wanted to trick the sisters to their death, Komena wanted heads for her spikes and Andronike wanted me to walk to the altar willingly.

And I needed to outmanoeuvre the three of them simultaneously, while prone and having my mind ransacked.

"Oaths were taken, this is true," Diabolist said. "Yet willingly, in fair bargain."

"Death or kneeling is no bargain," Komena said. "It is conquest by another name. Most damningly of all, it is *failed* conquest. There is no victory to redeem the outrage."

"Can one be made a slave twice over?" Akua denied. "Were the Firstborn not already owned?"

"Then the offence of theft is to be added to insult," the younger sister replied.

"You concede, then, that the drow were and remain slaves," Diabolist pressed.

Komena hesitated, smelling the trap. I could have taken the moment to try to unfold Akua's latest trick, but there was no point to that. I wouldn't get through this by following her lead. Two outcomes to a trial, conviction or acquittal. That it was rigged from the start mattered little, I thought, it was only playacting to strengthen a story. Could I break this, then? Refuse to recognize the authority of my judge? No, that'd only give Komena what she wanted. Heads, spikes, the usual. It irked me that the proceedings themselves were largely meaningless: it was all just squabbling for the right position in the eyes of the story. Diabolist and Andronike were fighting over the knife they both wanted to wield, the 'being in the right', but I suspected the moment it was clear Sve Noc would not get what she

was after she'd discard the pretence and turn to violence. *You're still trying to win according to the rules*, I remembered, *when you should be trying to win despite them*. Gods, it would be so much easier to be rid of him if his lessons were not so useful. Even now, years later and hundreds of miles away from anything he'd ever seen. As in so many things, Black had the right of it.

Nowhere this 'trial' would lead to suited me, and so there was no need for me to play along with it.

I closed my eyes and the talk washed over me. Komena walked back her first claim, terming her people as servants instead, and Akua argued that servants finding other employment was no crime. They went around in a circle, Sve Noc claiming the service was to Below and so meddling in the matter was blasphemy, Akua arguing that as a villain I was equally in Below's service and so no blasphemy was had. The shade was better at this: they'd put up their soldier against my schemer. And while we were fresh off our wars with Above, they'd been stewing in a hole of their own making for millennia. We had the edge, by the slightest of margins. That edge just wasn't being used for what I wanted. I croaked out a laugh, opening my eyes.

"Do you hear the sound, Andronike?" I said.

There was a pause in the argument.

"Catherine-" Akua began, but I shook my head.

I met her gaze. *Trust me*, I silently asked. *I have taken us from one mess to another, and twice you've had to save my life tonight. Trust me anyway*. Slowly the shade nodded. She had been my nemesis, once. There had been understanding in that as well as hatred.

"I hear a trial," Andronike replied.

"Not me," I mused. "It's just this awful patter I can make out. Click click click. Claws and feet. Four crabs in a bucket."

She eyed me in confusion.

"Ah, not familiar with those I take it," I said. "They're these-"

"I know what a crab is, Catherine Foundling," Sve Noc flatly replied.

"They trap those, in the city I was born," I said. "In cages, then they take them out and put them in buckets. Went swimming a few times when I was a kid, and once I came across this crabber. He'd taken them out of his cage and put them in one of those very buckets. I was surprised when I saw it was just a regular old one

– no trick to it, not even a lid. So I went up to the man and asked why they didn't just escape. You know what he said?"

The drow did not reply.

"A single crab would escape," I smiled. "But when you have more than one? The moment it's about to get out, the others will *drag it back down*."

"This again," Komena sneered. "Is there-"

"Now, all that's left of this one is hunger and hubris," I casually interrupted, jamming a thumb towards the younger drow. "I forgive her for it. And Akua, well, she was raised in a bucket even more vicious than this one. She's still learning to let go of those blinders. You, though? I'm disappointed that at no point you figured out you could simply *ask*."

"Would you like to confess?" Andronike calmly said.

"Click click click," I replied. "You're still acting like the only way you can win is if I lose. We both know that's not true."

"Apotheosis," she said, "cannot be partitioned."

"So that's the pebble in your boot," I snorted. "Gods, you think I *want* to be Queen Bitch of Night? There's not a lot things I'm afraid of, but going back to the mantle is one. It was like having a sieve between me and Creation with only the ugly stuff going through."

"It's a trap, sister," Komena said. "The shade will have its jaws unhinged, lurking behind us."

"Akua Sahelian," I said. "I order you to discard whatever you have wrought."

"We can still triumph," Diabolist quietly said, facing me in full.

"And that's the kind of victory we all prefer, isn't it?" I pensively said. "Complete. Mistress of the field, every opponent ground to dust."

I flicked a glanced at where I'd ripped out her hear, then at the halves of Sve Noc.

"Look where it's gotten us, thinking of compromise as *weakness*," I said. "A shade and half a corpse. The two cannibal goddesses of an endless butcher's yard."

"We are nothing like you," Komena hissed.

"Look at us, you fucking fool," I hissed back. "*Actually look at us.* Is there a single one of us that isn't a monumental failure? I carved open like a pig the only thing I've ever tried to save, again and again. Akua watched every single belief she held to burn to the ground around her before I *ripped out her beating heart*. And you two, Komena, Merciless Gods – even a monstrous thing like Wandering Bard *pitied* you for this."

"And who are you to lecture us?" Andronike said. "Who are you, that your advice should be heeded? By your own lips an admitted derelict."

"I'm not better than you," I said. "That's not what this is about. We could all debate body counts and ruins until the Last Dusk but what would that accomplish? One of us being the worst of the lot doesn't change what's on all our shoulders. Nothing does."

"Desperate," Komena scathingly said. "Running scared. This is no offer, it is terror gilded with false sentiment."

"This is absurd," I laughed. "We're holding a trial over what, my *worthiness*? I am a funeral procession of mistakes and horrors. We all are. Plunder my memories all you like for justifications or blemishes, it doesn't make this any less of a sham. Sure, I'm a monster. What do you care?"

"And you would have us clasp hands in alliance with a monster," Andronike said. "A strange argument you make."

"Like you give a shit about humans dying," I snorted. "Or even about my character, such as it is. I'm not asking you on a moonlit walk for a spot of kissing, Sve Noc, I'm offering you a power stolen through murder to help you cheat the death of your entire race. Again. Why are we still pretending my regrets or principles have any weight on these scales?"

"We would have no guarantees on their end," Akua said, voice blanked of emotion. "No means to ensure they hold up their part."

"It's always the need for control that fucks us, isn't it?" I mused. "It killed the very partnership that dug Praes out of the pit. You and me too, Diabolist. How much could we have avoided if instead of clawing at each other we'd sat down and *talked*? How many tragedies would have never come to pass if we'd just bent our proud necks the slightest bit?"

I looked at the sisters.

"You think I'm a fool," I said. "Fine. My record holds to it. But ask yourselves this: a century from now, while you watch the essence of Winter turn your people into animals despite your best

efforts, will you not regret this even a little? That one moment where you could have done it differently?"

"Different is not better," Komena said.

"It could be worse," I agreed. "I won't deny that. Devouring Winter is an agony assured, but this could turn out worse. It's still a chance, though."

I clenched my fingers then unclenched them.

"It's an unknown," I said. "It's terrifying and dark and it could be the single worst thing any of us has ever done – but it's not impossible to get out of a bucket. You need to own that, deep down. That if we're the crabs we're that because of *fear* and not because there was no other way."

The silence that followed hung heavy over all of us. There was a song in it, I thought. Four monsters assembled in a room that wasn't. Night twofold, harsh and serene. The Doom of Liesse and the Black Queen who slew her. The silver-eyed sisters were mirroring statues of stillness, not a hint as to their thoughts revealed. Andronike eventually let out a breath.

"It burns, doesn't it?" she told her sister. "*Sincerity*. I'd forgotten the taste of it."

"Once more we come to the crossroads, heart of my heart," Komena murmured. "I believed in you then. I believe in you now. But this?"

She shook her head.

"Beautiful words, Catherine Foundling," she said. "Yet still only words. It was no kindness to any of us, letting you speak."

My hands shook. Gambled and lost. All of it. Akua stirred but I leant back against the pillar. Fighting was pointless. I'd asked for a leap of faith from the faithless and received the inevitable from that arrogant roll of the dice.

"Asked," I repeated in a murmur.

Hypocrite to end, was I? Demanding what I would not offer. Was compromise on my own terms even compromise at all, or just victory by another name? For all I'd said tonight, one thing had not changed: I had not learned to lose. I dragged myself up, biting my lip not to scream at the flare of pain.

"Hear me, Sve Noc," I said. "Whatever claim I yet hold to Winter, I pass to you. My crown of Moonless Night, I lay at your feet. I stand before you without power or right to my name, mortal at your mercy."

Two pairs of silver eyes widened. I could feel the crushing weight of them swelling, breaking the memory apart at the seams.

"Help me," I asked, begged, prayed. "Please."

Night fell over me and I breathed my last desperate breath, clawing at the dark.

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### [Adrian V](#)

So the only real thing we know for sure is that she is alive and better than before, but not how much power she has or how it will manifest, she probably is kind of like a glass canon, it would fit her i think since then she would have to think how to best use her power and have the juice to do things.

Another thing is that i read a few comments worrying about how we won't see the rest of the woe in a while but i doubt it will be like that, she may act as their Herald but she won't abandon her firends and people, and she won't just become their lackey, she would kill herself first xD

### [Aran](#)

Did Akua just compliment Catherine? Awww.

### *EgoDucky*

"Blood freely spilled always offers greater power, for it carries the worth of both the blood and the choice"

– Extract from "The Most Noble Art of Magic", by Dread Emperor Sorcerous

### *Sturmii*

"Demanding what I would not offer. Was compromise on my own terms even compromise at all, or just victory by another name?"

Dafug Didn't she offer winter the hole time ?

### *Michael Sanders*

She said she didn't want it back, because it had repeatedly bitten her. That wasn't the same as saying she wanted \*them\* to have it, which she has reason enough to believe will bite \*everybody\* even harder. But in order to quit clawing at each other and climb out of this bucket she's spent so much on painting into a metaphor, she can just. Give it to them. And not incidentally let it bite \*them\* for a while instead.

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## Chapter 82: Thrice Dead

*"Now, luck it always turns. Nothing you can do about that. But that's the trick, you see – wait long enough, and it turns all the way around."*

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

The matron would be asleep by now, she'd hit the brandy pretty hard at dinner: this was as good an opportunity I'd get. I closed the book and snuffed out the stolen candle, ignoring Lydia's theatrical sigh of vindication. I wasn't sure whether she really had so delicate a constitution she couldn't handle a bit of light when she was trying to sleep or whether it was just our shared dislike coming to the fore, but I could hardly care less. She'd leaned not to rat me out after I smeared her sheets with fish guts, if all I had to deal with was a little attitude I'd cope. I passed an affectionate hand over the worn cover of Serapin's 'The Licerian Wars' and shoved it under my pillow, brushing away the few wax droppings on my sheets from the candle before stowing it away under my bed. One of my predecessors at the Laure House for Tragically Orphaned Girls had pried open room between the straw mattress and the wooden frame that was just large enough for it to fit. I slipped on my shoes and snuck out of the room, careful to close the door slowly enough the hinge wouldn't squeak.

The orphanage was dark – every lantern and candle snuffed out the moment the matron went to sleep, to cut on costs – but I knew my way well. It wasn't the first time I snuck out after curfew, though technically speaking I wouldn't even been leaving the House for long. The front door was locked, but only the youngest girls in here didn't know you could force the lock if you pushed at the right angle. I slipped into the street quiet as a mouse, closing the door behind me. I'd taken me a while to figure out how to get up to the roof, though it'd been made much easier after some stall merchant began putting up her folded stall next to the wall. She paid the matron coppers for it, which was a good deal as far as everyone was concerned. I suspected she might be less sanguine about the whole thing if she knew I regularly used her stall as a makeshift ladder. The tricky part was the leap to the left, where I had to catch the jutting masonry or hit the pavement after a hard fall. I turned out lucky tonight, catching it on first try even if my sweaty palms threatened to have me slip loose.

I hoisted myself over the edge of the roof with desperate haste, moist fingers scrabbling over the rough tiles as I rolled like a

sack of cabbage until I was no longer at risk of falling. I remained there a moment, heart beating all too quickly, until I wiped my palms on my trousers and rose into a crouch. No point in standing tall – well, relatively speaking – until it was time. I headed towards the back of the orphanage, since that street wasn't as busy. Not that Laure was after dark, these days. The city guard in this part of the city had started grabbing people out after sunset and putting them in a cell overnight for their own 'safety'. It was an open secret a few silvers would get you out of the situation, which made the whole affair yet another tax in everything but name. Angry as the thought made me, Mazus and his cronies were far beyond my reach. And not why I was out tonight, regardless. I made it to the edge and stood up, clenching my fists. Gods, I was already shaking. I felt sick in my stomach and my legs were jelly. It wasn't even that tall a drop, I knew, and still somehow it felt like a knife at my throat.

"Your hands are trembling."

I yelped and jumped, would have fallen if the woman who'd spoken hadn't caught my wrist at the last moment. Whoever she was she was tall and slender, though in the dark I couldn't make out much of her face. Nothing, really, save for the eyes. A pale blue, almost silvery.

"I'm not a thief," I hastily told the stranger. "I live here!"

"So I assumed," the woman replied, and dragged me out of danger before withdrawing a few steps.

Shit, if this got out to the matron I was going to get it. Already I'd been caught trading essays with Julie, two strikes the same week would have my buttocks tanned for an hour.

"I don't think you're supposed to be up here either," I said. "So let's just call this a wash for the both us, right? I'll go, you'll go. Ships in the night."

"More ironic an offer than you know," the stranger replied. "Sate my curiosity first. You are obviously terrified of heights. Why do you seek out the edge?"

I grimaced.

"Look, it's not exactly illegal to do this," I defensively replied.

Maybe. I wasn't sure, and asking would have raised suspicions.

"I care little for such things," the woman said. "You were asked a question, Catherine Foundling."



Oh, this was bad. She knew my fucking name. It wasn't like there were a lot of Deoraithe bastards in the House if she'd been intending on tattling, but that she actually knew my name was a bad sign all around. My teeth clenched and I reluctantly gave ground.

"It's not about standing," I said. "It's about how long I can make myself stay."

"Yet your fear has not ended, has it?"

I shook my head.

"Maybe I'll always be afraid of it," I said. "But that's not what matters. Every time I come, I stay a little longer."

"It gets easier?" the woman curiously asked.

"No," I murmured. "But I get better at handling it. And one day I'll get good enough it won't matter if I'm afraid."

There was a long moment of silence between us.

"Nature is not so easily overcome," the stranger finally said.

I snorted.

"We're people, aren't we?" I said. "Not beasts. We can learn. It's just hard and unpleasant and never as clear-cut as we'd like."

"But will you?" the stranger asked.

—

Kilian was asleep. The public celebration after the Battle of Liesse had been subdued: there were too many dead people in the city for it to be otherwise. Heiress' devils had slain hundreds before a shouted technicality had turned them irrelevant. Still, in the camps outside the city the Fifteenth had raucously feasted its latest victory. My evening with my lover had been a different sort of celebration, though. I'd died today, and that had lent an urgency to our bedplay that was harsher than our usual fare. She'd understood, though, that it was as much about being alive as it was about pleasure. Kilian knew me better than most, and in ways not even my closest friends did. Still, after she fell asleep I'd remained restless. I padded barefoot away from our bed and poured myself a cup of Vale summer wine, the sweet taste filling my mouth. I nursed the same glass for the better part of an hour, seated by the window. The night was warm, for this time of the year, and in the distance I could see the campfires of my legion. The candles lit suddenly, and that was my only warning Kilian had awakened. She sat up in the bed, face shrouded by shadows and her body only half-covered by the sheets.

"Still awake?" she asked.

"Can't seem to close my eyes," I admitted. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"These things happen," she languidly shrugged.

For a moment, in the penumbra of the room, I thought her eyes were pale blue. It must have been a trick of the light.

"You died today," Kilian continued quietly. "A little restlessness is to be expected."

"All part of the plan," I ruefully said. "Try as I might, I couldn't find another way through."

"There were risks," she said. "If you had not succeeded as taking your resurrection from the Choir, there would have been no salvation."

"But I did," I replied, uneasily.

It had occurred to me that I'd not so much gamble with my life as thrown it away and then gambled on a resurrection. Recklessness ran in my veins, and in the heat of the moment it had all felt right, but in the cold light of the aftermath I was beginning to grasp how close I'd come to disaster.

"If you hadn't," Kilian softly asked, "would it have been worth it?"

I looked at her, blinking in surprise.

"If I'd failed?" I mused. "William would have turned us into Hashmallim puppets or Heiress would have killed everyone in the city. There was no room for mistakes."

"I misspoke," my lover said. "If it had all worked save for the resurrection, would that have been a fair price?"

It was, I thought, a sharp question but not an unworthy one. I'd schemed this with the notion in mind that I should be breathing by the end of it, but there would be fights ahead where I might not have that luxury. If the price for this had been that I'd disappear or return as some undead abomination, would I still have taken the bargain?

"There's about a hundred thousand people in Liesse," I eventually said. "More, with the soldiers that came to defend it. They'd be dead or worse, if I didn't take the bargain anyway."

"Cities can be rebuilt," Kilian said. "Fresh children are born with every heartbeat."

"But I only live once, is that it?" I smiled, looking out the window. "I appreciate the sentiment, I really do, but if all I wanted was to live I'd be a tradeswoman in Laure. Not the Squire."

"There is a middle ground," my lover chided, "between sacrifice and obscurity."

"By taking up the knife, I signed away that kind of thinking," I honestly replied. "The power's not the point, Kilian, it's just a way to handle the responsibilities. To take it but ignore why I did in the first place would make all of this meaningless."

"A fair price, then," Kilian mused, eyes hooded.

"Oh, the opposite of fair," I softly disagreed. "One life against a hundred thousand? That's a steal, by any account."

"I do wonder," she said, and I caught the glimmer of silver in her eyes, "how many times a blade can go through the crucible before breaking."

—

"Victory should taste better than this," I said.

Akua's Folly lay before us in all its raging horror. Masego had warded the surroundings, but there was no hiding the mass of wights still haunting the ruins of Liesse. The bottle of aragh in my hand was no comfort, but at least it was *something*. Anything was better than stillness of the cold I'd used to forge myself anew. I held it up for Hakram to take, but he shook his head. He was impossibly hard to make it out in the dark of night, shrouded in a way my fae sight should have ignored. I was still new to this, though. There might be a trick to it. That I sometimes thought his eyes to be blue was evidence enough either the liquor had struck deep or I was using my not-eyes wrong.

"Two bottles are enough, I think," the orc mildly said.

"A hundred wouldn't be," I shrugged. "But two will have to do. Ratface only has so many on hand, and it will be weeks before we reach a city."

"We lingered here longer than I expected," Hakram agreed. "I would have thought the morning after your conversation with the Carrion Lord would see us march."

"There are still so many things to do," I said. "And it's only the start, isn't it?"

"You have the power to make changes now," the orc said. "Real changes. Necessary ones."

"Do I?" I said. "I could drown bastion in ice with a snap of my fingers, but what does that accomplish? So few of our problems can be solved with strength."

"Yet without it, we would have no right to change anything at all," Adjutant said.

"It's a pretty song," I said. "But it rings false. Having a mantle isn't power, Hakram. It's just a bigger hammer. Gods, I was taught by a man claiming only a speck of what I hold and he terrorized half the continent for decades."

"You are not him," the orc shrugged.

"No," I agreed in a murmur. "No I am not. He would have been appalled by the amount of shortcuts we're going to take."

"Results-"

"Will have diminishing returns," I interrupted. "We don't have the foundation. That's the part that will fuck us. And it's too late to raise it, so we'll have to rely on strength to keep it all together. That makes us fragile in a way I can do nothing about."

"I do not understand your meaning," the orc admitted.

I passed a hand through my hair, except Masego had told me it wasn't really hair anymore.

"The east and the west," I said. "Procer and Praes. The people at the top, they're not there just because they can swing a sword real hard, are they? Malicia and Black won their civil war, but they haven't been knifed since because they have *support*. That's where their power springs from. Cordelia Hasenbach has troubles with her princes, sure, but she's also got a coalition behind her. The weight of customs and laws. Legitimacy, in a word. They all rose up the hard way."

"So did we," Adjutant replied, cocking his head to the side with eerie grace.

I snorted.

"Who's behind us, Hakram?" I said "A handful of Callowan nobles, half-heartedly and for lack of better options. Our army. Malicia will turn on us soon enough, and Black's in the wind. We took too many shortcuts."

"Your reputation has weight with the people," the orc said.

"That's not stable," I said. "Because if a Fairfax makes an unpopular decision, they're still a Fairfax. There's unrest, but it holds together. I'm a godsdamned warlord. I mean, Hasenbach

outright told me didn't she? No one wants to deal with me because I'm essentially a Callowan Dread Empress in their eyes. This is the very thing that'll come around to bite us after the Battle of the Camps: if fear and force and reputation are the pillars of my reign, the moment one of them comes tumbling down it all follows. And instead of recognizing that, admitting my limitations, I'll double down and head for *Keter* of all places."

"Tyrants are rulers as well, Catherine," Hakram reminded me.

"And tyranny is the best I can manage, isn't it?" I said. "Well-meaning, but still that. The thing is, by now I know I'm not good at this. I could barely handle the Ruling Council when it was stacked in my favour with Black standing behind me. And still a month from now I'm going to put on a crown."

Hakram looked surprised at my words, for some reason.

"You would surrender authority entirely, then?" he asked.

"I should never have been queen," I said. "At most a temporary regent while looking for a better candidate. There are things I'm good at, but ruling isn't one of them. I should have put my effort to those instead and left the crown to someone suited for it."

"And what it is that you're good at, if not this?" Hakram pressed.

"Breaking things," I said. "Facing the monsters so that the real work can take place behind me. I should have talked with Cordelia, I-"

My fingers clenched around the bottle.

"- I *haven't* talked with Cordelia at all," I said. "Not yet."

"No," Hakram said in someone else's voice, "you had not."

—

There were some who might have called this a triumph.

It'd been a victory beyond my rights to expect, anyway. Legions of enemy drow, some of the finest Mighty in the Everdark and even the two-faced goddess herself: they had come, and they had died. Great Strycht had died with them, along with too many drow to count. How many of the corpses down below belonged to nisi, I wondered? There were too many dead for most of them to be Mighty, or even dzulu. The way I'd killed Sve Noc... I frowned, unable to remember the details. I must still be digesting the Night, it would take some time before my mind was in order again. Still, the aftermath was clear enough. Streaks of Winter still running wild through a city older than the kingdom of my birth, warbands

of roving blue-eyed dead led by my expanded Peerage stamping down the last of the resistance. I had exactly what I'd come for, didn't I? An entire race made into an army, or close enough. All it had taken was massacre upon massacre upon massacre. If there was any justice in the world my hands would dyed scarlet red, but when had justice last made itself heard? No, down here there was only us – and justice was whatever we said it was.

Archer's steps were light, but not so light that I did not hear or recognize them. Her gait was well-known to me. She stood at the edge by my side, not deigning to sit with her legs dangling in the void like I did. To think I'd been afraid of heights, once. Now I could grow wings with the slightest exertion of will – and there would be more tricks, when the whole of the Night was known to me. Millennia of slaughter in the dark, every ugly parcel made my own. I'd gained more than mere troops by coming to the Everdark.

"Still brooding, I see," Indrani said.

I did not turn to meet her gaze.

"Contemplating consequences," I said. "This was no small thing we did today."

"That's always the way," Indrani dismissed. "There's only one question that matters – now what?"

"Now they take the oaths," I said. "The Mighty, anyway. I'm still debating how many of the dzulu should."

"And we go home," she wistfully said.

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "I made them my responsibility, 'Drani. All of them. I can't just take my army and leave the rest to die by dwarf."

"They can't go to Callow, Catherine," Indrani said. "It would end the kingdom to have that many foreign settlers."

"That was never the plan," I snorted. "Gods, Callow? It can barely even tolerate Praesi and greenskins that fought three campaigns to defend it. No, they need a home of their own."

"Where?" Archer asked, and I raised an eyebrow at her voice.

It had echoed strangely. There were old magics in this place I had barely begun to understand – and perhaps never would.

"If we leave them in the mountains above this, they'll starve," I said. "You saw how they feed themselves – they need lakes, they need fields."

"The Principate of Procer," Indrani said. "That'll be difficult. How much of it could you even take, reasonably?"

"Are you drunk already?" I frowned. "Procer, you tart. And that's a recipe for disaster, anyway. They'd be in constant war with the surviving princes, assuming the additional chaos doesn't just collapse the place and allow the Dead King to roll through it. No, there's only one place that can really work. If we play it right, we can even get most the continent to back us in the war."

"Praes," Archer guessed.

"Keter," I contradicted. "The Kingdom of the Dead."

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"That was in poor taste," Indrani said.

"Think for a moment," I said. "Neshamah just declared war on every Good nation on this continent. Even if the Grand Alliance could beat him – which, to be honest, I have my doubts about – Procer pretty much ends as a nation from the beating it'll take in the process. And even if they do drive him back, as long as he's not *permanently* dead what was accomplished? He'll have lost a few dead heroes, a few undead armies. Nothing he can't grow back given long enough. But this? It offers Cordelia another way. A long-term solution."

I breathed out slowly.

"If the drow settle in the Kingdom of the Dead, they can be the lid on the bottle of awful that is the Dead King," I said. "With the oaths, Procer doesn't have to worry about invasion from the fresh Evil nation at its northern border. And if the drow thrive? All the better. A stronger cork means Neshamah will never be able to get out. Sold like this, if we come to the Grand Alliance when they've grown desperate? They'll sign. Or they'll split, because I don't see the First Prince throwing away half her country no matter what her allies say."

"It is a blighted, poisonous wasteland," Indrani said.

"We have Hierophant," I flatly said. "And the same mages that burned a fucking pass through the Whitecaps. The whole priesthood of the west, too. Hells, we do this the right way we might even get most the heroes on board. There have to be a few of them that aren't useless at everything but killing. We can make the place livable, there's no doubt. Besides, we camped up north and the land there was fine. It's mostly the south and centre that are poisonous. "

"But first we go to war," Archer said.

"As little as we can," I said. "We gate in, bring Black home no matter what he's up to or wants – this is too delicate a situation to let him meddle. Then I go to Hasenbach with the Accords and the settlement plan. I'd rather not twist her arm if I can avoid, but I'll sack cities if I have to. And after that, we make war on the King of Death. All the continent, if we can manage it, against Neshamah."

"Ambitious," Indrani mused.

I paused and turned.

"You're not Archer," I said. "She would have gotten bored halfway through that."

"No," Andronike said. "We are not."

The two of them were standing at the edge, looking down at my... dream? Was I dreaming? I couldn't remember going to sleep. The last thing I could remember, actually, was – *Ibreathedmydesperatelastbreathclawingatthedark*. I shivered. Night had fallen.

"Am I dead?" I softly asked.

"At the threshold," Komena said. "Not quite through."

"Then this was my last conversation," I said. "Would have mouthed off more if I'd known."

"Are you not going to beg?" Andronike said.

I laughed.

"Again?" I said. "The first time didn't work, why would the second?"

"The nerezim are on the march," Komena said. "You struck bargain with them."

"I did," I agreed. "Not that the oath would hold me anymore. We saw to that."

"They cannot be defeated in battle," the younger Sve Noc said. "We have seen this. They have... grown in the years since our last wars. Beyond even our ability."

"Scary talk, coming from a goddess," I murmured.

"And how would you meet this threat, Catherine Foundling?" Andronike asked.

I blinked.



"Me?" I said. "Who would you care what I think? You two rascallions eviscerate me and took my stuff without too much trouble, give or take a few pleas."

"You have proved to possess a form of low cunning," Komena said.

"I'm dying, you know," I chided. "You could at least be nice about it."

"You evade," Andronike said. "Cease."

I waved a careless hand.

"Send an envoy to them," I said. "My read on their whole invasion thing is that they're not really interested in your holdings so much as they are in you not being there to trouble their backs. It's the Dead King they want bottled up."

Two pairs of silvery blue eyes remained fixed on me.

"Make a pact," I said. "They give you long enough to evacuate, supplies to survive upstairs for a few months, and in exchange you go after the Kingdom of the Dead. Given that kind of an opportunity, they might even make a grab for the underground of Keter."

"They have not proved amenable to peace offerings before," Andronike said. "Attempts were made, I assure you."

"Because they can't settle the entire rim around the Kingdom of the Dead if there's a chance their lines will collapse because you hit their back," I pointed out. "If you go upstairs and southwest, not only is that threat gone but you've become their first line of defence against the Serenity. I don't care how much they hate you, they'll *want* to take that deal."

They kept staring at me in silence.

"Dangerous," Andronike said.

"Bold," Komena disagreed. "Unorthodox. She was right, heart of my heart. We have grown stiff."

"And it will get worse," her sister murmured.

I rose to my feet.

"I take it this the end, then," I said, looking up at the darkness above us. "Will you make it painless?"

"You should know better by now," Komena idly said, circling around me.

"We have a use for you, Catherine Foundling," Andronike continued, from the other side.

"If we are to return to the Burning Lands, we will need a guide."

"A herald."

"An anchor."

"You offered an act of faith, Losara," Sve Noc smiled. "It did not go unheard."

Their eyes burned pale blue, almost silver.

"Rise, first among the priesthood of Night, and **wake up**."

—

I opened my eyes, shivering with pain and gloriously mortal.

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*Tab*

This chapter more makes up for how directionless the last few chapters imo. Excited to see where it goes from here.

*Abox*

Am I understanding this correctly: Catherine loses, dies, and is resurrected as a new, mortal 'Sve Noc' while the old Sve Noc ascends to godhood?

[Liliet](#)

A slight terminology correction: Sve Noc does not translate to Priestess of Night directly, so Cat won't be gaining that particular title.

She's going to be the new Priestess of Night now, though, yes



*Stephen M (Ethesis).*

Really enjoyed this.

So there c

[Zim the Vixen](#)

Prediction before the next chapter is posted:

Cat is going to act as herald for peace with the dwarves as her first task in the capacity as priestess of Night.

[Liliet](#)

You called it!

[Zim the Vixen](#)

Ahaha, yeah! :3 It wasn't the most impressive prediction, but I am happy with it.

*Galvador*

Damn i love this series.

[Mental Mouse](#)

On a reread, I noticed an interesting bit at Cat's *last* rebirth: When Winter replaced her heart, he specifically said: "The Court of Winter receives you as one of its own, 'till your last desperate breath clawing at the dark". Well, now.

*therealgridlock*

Almost like the fae could see the future by knowing the past.

They're story incarnate, why wouldn't they already have the end written?

After all, they were annoyed because there was no uncertainty for them.

*Figerally*

Kinda disappointed Cat didn't come out of the Everdark at the head of an army of quasi Named. Would have loved to see everyone's surprised Pikachu face at what they had wrought backing Cat into a corner. But interested in seeing where her new lease on life takes her.

*btnerb*

At times, Cat is accidentally prophetic. From book 3 chapter 19, musing about what the eff the winter king had done to her soul:

"That kind of a gain never came without a cost, and I wasn't sure what I'd be paying with. If I ended up losing my soul because of fae shenanigans, I was going to be pissed. I just knew that stealing it back would be horrendously difficult, and I didn't have the time to spare to murder my way back into a semblance of humanity with all the other things going on."

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## Interlude: Triptych

*"Only one kind of war is ever just, that which is waged on the Enemy."*

– Extract from 'The Faith of Crowns', by Sister Salienta

Harbour duty was the worst, always had been.

Ines had blown three months' pay on the warmest cloak that could be found at market and still she was shivering like a dying calf. The prince had spread talk through the city that with the Kingdom of the Dead stirring awake those soldiers who guarded the harbour would see better pay, but like most princely promises it had come to nothing. Rumour had it the coin had gone into buying the service of every fantassin company left in the north instead, and much as she hated freezing by the docks Ines had to admit it might have been better investment. The Princess of Hainaut was doing the same, it was said, and the mercenary leanings of the fantassins had turned the whole affair into some sordid bidding war. Still, better to be here at home than to have gone south as some of the prince's soldiers had. What word had come back from the crusade's foray into the Kingdom of Callow was the stuff of nightmares. Strange devils riding to slaughter in the night, an endless horde of orcs and heretics that at the corpses of the fallen. Some more fanciful tales as well, of the Black Queen bringing down the sky on the head of the crusaders and making a lake of their blood. Whatever the truth of it, none of those who'd gone south had returned.

For once, she thought, being fresh to the prince's service had been of some use. It also meant Ines was inevitably handed down the shit duties by her careerist noble officers, but cold fingers were better than the grave. She put a spring to her step after clearing Gertrude's Tongue, hurrying towards the bonfire that awaited near the customs house. There she took off her leather gloves and pressed her palms close to the bronze bowl holding the flames, sighing at the warmth seeping into her bones. The pike she'd left to lean against her should have never seen use out of the training yard, and if the Heavens smiled on her it never would. Still, the silence of the night unsettled her. The winds that'd turned her earlier round into a ghastly affair had since died, leaving behind only eerie stillness. Cleves Harbour was lethargic on the best of days, the sporadic ship trade with Bremen and Lyonis the affair only of the prince and the very rich, but now even the fishermen had left. That lot had better read on what took place beneath the waters of the Tomb than

anyone else, it was said. Those among them that did not learn to listen to the sound of danger were dragged into the depths by the foul creatures that were the only true rulers of the lake.

Some nights, Ines wondered why the prince even bothered to assign guards to the harbour. Empty as it was, even if some dead mean took it that would be no great loss. The royals who'd founded Cleves had been a farsighted lot: the harbour was not connected to the capital proper. The thin stripe of docks and shore was walled with an eye at keeping the enemy *inside*, not out, an unspoken admission that if the Dead King raided past the lake there would be no holding it against the Hidden Horror's armies. The slope descending to the shore meant Ines could not even catch a glimpse of Cleves itself from where she now stood, not behind those tall walls, but that part she hardly minded. It would be the hour-long walk back to the barrack of the capital she was not looking forward to, especially since some enterprising noble lad had decided that the length of that trip should no longer be counted as part of guard duty's duration. Ines' only comfort was that if the fucking dead actually showed up, that prick was bound to end up on the bad side of an unfortunate crossbow accident. The lad should have worried less about getting commendations from up high and more about the many people in charge of sharp objects he'd made enemies of.

With an aggrieved sigh Ines put her gloves back on. She'd lingered around the fire as much as she could justify, if the next guard came up while she was still here she'd end up with another black mark on her record. Merciful Gods, though, it was a cold night. And not even winter solstice yet, it'd only get worse. She glanced to the side and upwards, at the slender tower overlooking the waters. She didn't know who Mikhail had paid off to get that particular cushy duty – the guard tower had a bonfire up top, and a seat – but the man could certainly afford it. The Lycaonese immigrant ran a little business on the side, providing hard drink warming the bones to the guards that could afford it. Ines had always disdained the practice, but the thought of the long walk back to the city after her duty had her reconsidering for tonight. Once wasn't going to hurt anyone, was it?

"You still up here, you filthy Bremen throwback?" she called out.

No answer. He must have been indulging in his own wares, which was bold of him. There were only so many times he could bribe his way out of the trouble that'd come down on his head if he was caught. Taking her pike in hand, Ines decided against taking the lack of answer as a sign from Above. The thought of a warm belly had grown on her with the consideration. She strode to the bottom of the tower, finding the door ajar. Sloppy of him, she frowned, even if he was drunk. The twisting stairs leading up to the top were just a brisk walk, but when she came there a cold seized her that the fire could do nothing about. Sergeant Mikhail was there:

throat opened, blood all over his mail. *Oh Gods*, she thought. *We're under attack*. She would have rung the bell the tower had been equipped with for this very reason, but the bloody thing was gone. Ripped off the metal hinges that had held it up. She leaned over the edge, casting her voice.

"Attack," she screamed. "We're under attack!"

There was no answer. She wasn't loud enough, that was why they had the damned bells in the first place. For all she knew, she was the only soldier in the harbour left alive. That would make it her duty to run back to the city, wouldn't it? So that they were warned. It wasn't abandoning her fellows, it was doing her duty. Her hands trembled around the shaft of the pike.

"Damn it," she whispered. "Damn it."

She ran back down the stairs, heading for the nearest tower. There were ten in the harbour, they couldn't have castrated all of them unseen. Her old boots slipped against the frost and she fell, but she grit her teeth and picked up her pike before picking herself up with it. Dodderer's Height wasn't far, and as the largest of the towers it'd have fielded more than a single sentinel. Old, fat ones on the edge of retiring from service but there was strength in numbers. She made it past the jutting empty warehouse that was the Prince of Cleves' personal property and cleared the corner before she saw it. Five corpses, tossed down from the tower onto the pavement below. She glanced up, eyes squinting in the dark, but thank the Gods the bell was still there. Whoever'd done this had not yet ripped it out. Whoever had done this was likely still here, she then thought. Gloved fingers tightened around her pike, she grit her teeth and ran once more. Her attention had been on the tower, though. That was why she missed it.

The undead climbed out of the lakewater, glistening wet under starlight. Rivulets dripped down the bare skull under the ancient helm and it advanced without a word. Ines yelled out in fear, but she'd trained. Feet wide but steady, she struck out with her pike. It pierced through the rusty mail, going straight into the body, and for a moment she tasted triumph. Then the dead thing began pushing towards her through, embracing the impalement. She dropped the pike in ear, immediately cursing herself for it. But it was slower than her, she realized, so she ran for the tower instead of fighting. All she needed was to ring the bell. The door was ajar, she saw, and she slowed to avoid slipping on a patch of ice. Just in time to watch a pair of armoured skeletons walk out of the tower, swords in hand. Blocking the entrance.

"No," she hissed.

What could she do? She didn't even have a — the two undead were smashed to pieces by the same swing of a silvery sword. There was

a man, tanned and wearing plate, who casually brought down a steel-clad boot to smash one of the skulls. The undead she'd fled from was tossed back into the lake by some giant shadow moving quick as lightning. For a moment Ines thought she glimpsed fur and fangs, but what wolf could possibly be so large?

"Ring the bell, soldier," the man in plate said.

His eyes were wreathed with light, she saw as she faced him. No, with *Light*.

"Chosen," she croaked out.

"Go," he said. "Your courage tonight did not go unnoticed."

"They're all over the place," Ines said. "If they're here-"

"Cleves," a woman's voice said, "does not stand alone."

A face of painted stone over a cloak, long tresses swinging behind. Another favoured child of the Heavens, she would put her hand to fire over it.

"It will be a long night," the first Chosen said. "A long month after it, until Malanza arrives. But we *will* hold."

"Ring the bell, soldier," the masked Chosen said. "We will guard you. Tonight, the Dead King learns that dawn is not so easily snuffed out."

Ines straightened her back. She was no proud Lycaonese, to find glory in dying spitting in the Enemy's eye. Just some fool girl someone had shoved a pike in the hands of. But she'd been born in Cleves. The principality of her birth was a bloody mess, and she thought little of the man who ruled it, but that wasn't the point. It was her home. This was *Procer*. They could lose to princes and princesses, they could lose to Arlesites and Lycaonese, but she'd be damned before a fucking undead abomination flew its banner over the city.

She took up a sword from a corpse and climbed to ring the bell.

—

Balasi was allowed into the tent by the sentinels without so much as a second glance.

It still surprised him, this. Had he tried the same with his lover's rooms in Nenli he would have been met at sword point and taken to the city square for a public flogging. Here, though, the campaign had made the king's laws grow lax. He might not be consort in name, but he was in deed and the soldiers acted accordingly. The seeker of deeds had since grown to suspect that this was one of the reason why Sargon had come forward to claim

command over the Fourteenth Expansion. Back home their love would always be an illegal mismatch, but so far away from the Kingdom Under the rules had thinned. Sargon was not sleeping, as it happened. The Herald of the Deeps sat still as stone with his eyes closed as he sought council with the spirits bound to his staff. The Souls of Fire were known to hold wisdom, though a kind narrow in scope. Were they too clever the Kings Under the Mountains would have slaughtered them all, not bound them to the great forges. There would be need to dig deep again, after this land was claimed, to feed the fresh forges being raised. Many spirits would still lie asleep in their beds of molten rock, unknown to the *kraksun*.

"Delein," Balasi quietly said. "There is need of you."

Sargon's eyes fluttered open.

"Balasi," he murmured. "I was far gone, this time. What ails you?"

"Not me," he replied. "All of us. And if that vein is true or hollow has yet to be known."

"Speak," the Herald of the Deeps frowned.

"Our borrowed knife has returned," the dwarf said. "And would now speak with you."

Sargon's beard twitched in surprise.

"The Gloom still stands," he said. "She cannot have been victorious. Are we certain it is the human, and not simply a Night-thing wearing her?"

"I laid eyes on her myself," Balasi said. "She was stripped of power, but it is her. Unmistakeably."

"And the cold spirit?" Sargon asked, leaning forward.

The seeker of deeds resisted the urge to roll his eyes. His lover had fancied the thing since their first meeting, considering adding it to his staff should the human queen be broken. Sargon had mastered the Greed in most aspects of his life, but not this: any interesting creature he encountered he desired for his staff of office.

"Changed, yet still existing," he replied. "You can look upon it yourself when speaking with the human."

"She is not that," the Herald of the Deeps said. "You know this."

"Was not, perhaps," Balasi conceded. "I am no longer certain of that old truth."



That piqued his lover's interest, as he'd intended, and Sargon merely put on a coat before they made their way out. Officer had been ordered to settle the human and her spirit until they were ready to be met, and the two dwarves found them awaiting patiently by a low table. Black kasi had been served, and the Queen of Callow was drinking from her cup with a broad grin. Hairless of the face like so many of her kind, some feeble thing grown even feebler since their last meeting. It had not escaped his notice that she sat in a way that took the weight off one of her legs, as if it were wounded. Or that she'd limped visibly when coming to the camp. The spirit stood behind her, dark and silent. Its face had changed, grown more human. Scarlet eyes had become golden, though no less watchful for it. Sargon's eyes lingered on it with interest, ever eager to get his hands on fresh curiosities.

"Herald," the human said, inclining her head in shallow respect. "Seeker. Good to see you again."

Balasi stood as Sargon sat across the table, only then doing the same. A mere seeker of deeds could not be seated at the same time as the Herald of the Deeps, he thought, bitterness so old and worn it was hardly even that anymore.

"You surprise me, Queen Catherine," Sargon said. "I had not thought we would meet again until our bargain was fulfilled."

And such an advantageous one it had been, Balasi thought. A paltry quantity of gold and a temporary cessation of arms sales to a few human nations, in exchange for a sword pointed at the heart of the Night. Sargon had struck it most willingly, knowing that even if defeated the human would drag many *kraksun* down with her.

"That still holds," the human idly replied. "I'm here to settle some details, as it happens. The Gloom could be gone by the end of this conversation, if it is fruitful."

The dwarf's brow twitched. A bold claim, this. Sve Noc still lived, this was known. Was the human claiming she had bound the old monster to her will?

"Details," Sargon repeated. "Such as?"

"An offer might be more accurate," the human mused. "Sve Noc is willing to cede her current territory to the Kingdom Under, but concessions will have to be made."

Balasi smoothly reached for the blade at his side. He'd let down his guard, when sensing the queen had been stripped of her power. Where before she had been an oppressive presence without even moving a finger, she now felt light as a feather. Nothing more

than a mortal, he'd thought. *So why do you feel more dangerous now than you did before, human?*

"You were turned," he said. "Made into their creature."

The queen made that strange human sound of derision, all nose and doubt.

"I'm really more of an advisor," she said. "We came to an arrangement, that's all. Trust was extended, and part of that is letting me speak for them when it comes to you fine folk."

"You no longer hold power," the Herald of the Deeps said.

"I wield it instead," the human said. "That's quite enough, as far as I'm concerned."

"You fed your purpose to them," Sargon said, openly appalled.

"Purpose was shared," Queen Catherine corrected. "As I would now share a proposition with you."

"There can be no truce with the Night," Balasi said.

"The Night is dead," the human said. "At least the way you knew it. And I am here to speak diplomacy, not theology."

"And what *terms*," Sargon scoffed, "would Sve Noc speak?"

She took out her pipe, taking her time to fill it with herbs. Snapping her wrist, she produced dark flames from the tip of her fingers to light it. It did not feel like sorcery to Balasi's senses, and this was worrying. She puffed at the dragonbone – what a waste, he still thought, to make a *pipe* of that – and blew out a stream of smoke.

"Would you like," Catherine Foundling cheerfully asked, "to make your two biggest problems go at war with each other?"

There was a moment of silence.

"I am listening," the Herald of the Deeps said.

—

Friedrich Papenheim might have been a prince, in another life.

Of those who had both the name and the blood, he was the closest relation to the Iron Prince. He'd served as a trusted lieutenant to Klaus Papenheim for decades as a steward and commander, and few others were as high in the man's council as he. But Old Klaus had made it known he intended to pass on Hannoven to his niece when he died, to make the principality as one with her own. Friedrich had resented this, on occasion, though always half-

heartedly. It was hard to be truly bitter when one lost one's inheritance to the likes of Cordelia Hasenbach. The first Lycaonese to ever rise as First Prince of Procer, the iron-willed daughter of the ancient lines of Papenheim and Hasenbach who'd made the entire south submit to her rule. No, if he was to be royalty but not prince there was none other he'd rather lose the throne to. It would be in good hands, when the time came. Tonight, though? Tonight Hannoven was in his own hands, and it was *burning*.

He'd kept to the old ways. As soon as it was known that the Dead King was stirring he'd expelled every southerner from the city and hung those that refused the order. Every village and town in sight of the waters had been emptied, the spring armories had been opened and the war horns sounded. Every man and woman of fighting age in the principality had been called to serve, to uphold the old oaths. The whispers had passed from mouth to ear, spreading across all of Hannoven. *The dead are coming. Belt your swords, put on your armour, send your children south. The dead are coming.* He'd never been half as proud to be Lycaonese as when he'd watched the full muster of his people spread out like a sea of steel beneath the walls of the city. The watchtowers by the Grave had found the Dead King's host as it crossed, marching under the dark waters with the inevitability of an arrow in flight, but he was no fool to give the horde battle on open field. There could be no victory when every one of your dead turned to the service of the Enemy.

He'd sent riders to the other principalities, Rhenia and Bremen and Neustria. He trusted no sorcery to carry the word when the Hidden Horror itself strode the field. The allies of Hannoven were of the old blood too, and they'd smelled the death on the wind: they would not be caught with their trousers around their ankles like some goat-fucking Alamans. Their armies would already be assembled, and the moment the message arrived they'd sound their war horns to send for full service. But it would be weeks, months before the first reinforcements arrived. The city of his birth was a fortress like few others, but it would not hold forever. And so he'd made the cold choice, as he had been taught from the cradle. Those unfit to fight had begun the march for Bremen with everything they could carry. With them had gone half the muster of Hannoven. He'd sent the young, the skilled, the promising. The future of his principality. With him Friedrich had kept old soldiers past their prime, the greybeards and whitehairs who did not know whether it was winter cold or rattling fang that would slay them. And with those he had fought for Hannoven.

Fifteen thousand against the legions dark and darkly led. They taught the Dead King what kind of people got to grow *old* in these lands. The first wall they lost on the first day, and retreated after setting the houses aflame. They held the second wall for a week, until the dead sent a flock of winged drakes aflight. Wall

by wall they have ground, but never without making the Enemy pay for it. The longer they held the longer the rest of the Lycaonese had to gather their armies, the longer the people of Hannoven could flee without pursuit. They fought for a month and seven nights, dying in the snow as a sea of dead lapped at the walls. Hundreds of thousands, centuries of corpses marching to bring death to all the world. In the end it came down to the Old Fortress, the solitary mountain that had been turned into a castle jutting out from the plains. The dead never paused in the assault, never tired: day and night they came in silent assault, the banner of the Dead King flying tall behind them. It mattered not, for behind Friedrich the banner of Hannoven flew. A single soldier on the wall, grey on blue. Beneath was writ the words thrown in the Enemy's teeth since time immemorial: *And Yet We Stand*.

So they stood, and so they died.

Ground away into nothing by numbers and sorcery their few mages could not match. Dead things that had once been Chosen climbed the walls, the sky grew dark with falling of arrows and behind them drakes stolen from the grave spewed out clouds of poison that burned lungs and skin. Less than a thousand of them left now, and most of them wounded. They'd retreated to the Crown, the very highest point of the fortress that could only be accessed by a few narrow paths filled with murderholes. The dead had been met with streams of burning coals and thrown oil, dwarven engines roaring destruction down passages where there could be had no cover. The Chosen dead pushed through, after the horde withdrew, but they found the passages collapsing beneath them and spiked grids of steel awaiting them when they leapt. Now sorcerers that were little more than grinning skulls pounded away at the defences with foul magics, forcing the defenders to stay behind cover until the next wave of dead was ready for assault. Friedrich passed through the throng of wounded, clasp shoulders and trading grim boasts with what soldiers her had left.

Old men, old women. The last gasps of their generation, dying sword in hand. His eyes grew cloudy with pride. Death came to all, but tonight they would meet it as Lycaonese should. Holding the wall in the face of the Enemy, for the sake of all the world. Friedrich beard was already flecked with blood, and he dipped out of sight when he felt the cough came. It would not do for his soldiers to know he was dying. The wound he'd taken hammering a spike through the head of that last drake had only gotten worse. Poison, he suspected, though it made no difference. None of them would live to see dawn, poisoned or not. He wiped his lips clean of blood and returned to the battlements after the cough had passed. The pounding had stopped, he immediately noticed. The assault was coming. Captain Heiserech sought him out, her worn face seemingly amused.

"Commander," she saluted. "The skulls want to talk. They sent some kind of giant dead. Think it might be 'Ol Bones himself come to pay us a visit."

"Has he now?" Friedrich grinned. "Well, let us see what the Dead King has to say."

Maybe he'd ask for surrender. His people could certainly use the laugh. He wasn't sure who started. It could have been anyone, or half a dozen at the same time. Only a few voices, at first, but more joined until the stone shook with sound.

*"The moon rose, midnight eye  
Serenaded by the owl's cry  
In Hannover the arrows fly."*

The refrain came as a roar of defiance.

*"Hold the wall, lest dawn fail."*

Friedrich Papenheim strode to the very edge of the battlements, where the passages had been broken, and found a horror awaiting on the other side of the drop. It was large as three men, wearing plate of bronze and steel that had been nailed to its frame. Its face could not be glimpsed behind the great helm, but the eyes could. Sunken yellow things, glinting with power. That might be the old bastard himself in the flesh, Friedrich thought. The song echoes from behind him, slipping into the wind.

*"No southern song for your ear  
No pretty lass or merry cheer  
For you only night and spear."*

"A Papenheim," the Dead King mildly said. "I should have known. Your entire line is like a nail that refuses to be hammered."

Friedrich could not deny the sliver of pride he felt at that. He was dying, but he would stand straight in the face of the Enemy. Even if his lungs throbbed with pain.

"In the name of Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West, I bid you to crawl back into the hole that spawned you," Friedrich said. "And to take your horde of damned with you, old thing."

"I rather missed this city," the Dead King said. "You make it harder to take every time, it keeps things interesting."

"And when we chase you back into the dark, claiming it back, we'll raise an eight wall," the Lycaonese replied with bared teeth. "On it will be written: here lie those who broke the back of the Enemy and stand those who will again."

*"Come rats and king of dead  
Legions dark, and darkly led  
What is a grave if not a bed?"*

"You fought well," the Hidden Horror said. "And so were owed the courtesy of this conversation. Should your soldiers wish to take their own lives instead of having them taken, I will allow them the right."

"So that we may rise whole in your service?" he laughed. "I think not. We'll burn, and you with us."

"Once wolves," the Dead King said, almost fondly, "always wolves. What soldiers you would have made, under my banner. Die proud, then, Papenheim. You were an irritation."

*"Quell the tremor in your hand  
Keep to no fear of the damned  
They came ere, and yet we stand."*

The aging soldier smiled.

"We'll be waiting for you at the passes, Dead King," he promised. "With a proper Lycaonese welcome."

"I would expect no less," the Hidden Horror said.

He turned his back on the Enemy and returned to stand with the last of his soldiers, the words in the wind guiding him home.

*"So we'll hold the wall,  
Lest dawn fail."*

When the light of day found Hannover, not a single living soul remained.

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[DroughtBringer](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Go vote everyone! Or else I'll take your socks! (Please excuse the random threat)

SMHF

Exact 50/50 OMFG!XD

Weroxx

We overtook Ward in the Yearly vote count! Congratulations to everyone that contributed, and to EE. I just would like to let you know that you are awesome, and you make me a proud Patreon supporter!

[erraticerrata](#)

Final matchup, save for the bonus one: Cat vs Black. Link to vote below.

[https://www.strawpoll.me/17029118?fbclid=IwAR2QkFHuV7fl82-793HAmpksBhnBARU8RR65I6c38jNilq0\\_Bmse\\_YgdtjM](https://www.strawpoll.me/17029118?fbclid=IwAR2QkFHuV7fl82-793HAmpksBhnBARU8RR65I6c38jNilq0_Bmse_YgdtjM)

*Wry Warudo*

This has been fun. We should do another bracket with Dread Emperors/Empresses, would be interesting to see who would win between Malicia and Triumphant, or between Irritant and Traitorous

*SMHF*

That's be a pain... first we gotta prove none of the other candidates are Traitorous in disguise!

*Decius*

Unmask them all, then you will discover that all of them are Traitorous no longer in disguise!

*stevenneiman*

Irritant is the one disguised as the real Traitorous. Traitorous let him after he offered to make the shoes for the other disguises.

*Michael*

This is the most beautiful comment I have ever seen.

*stevenneiman*

I would say historical figures in general. I'm pretty sure Irritant (or maybe Treacherous) would win though.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine had better win this

but even if she doesn't, I'll know I cast my vote for her ♥

*nick012000*

Is this the last chapter of the book, then, other than the Epilogue?

*Death Knight*

Amadeus for the Win.

*Djinn O'Cide*

Got a link to the brackets somewhere?

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

The bracket chart is at <http://www.bracketmaker.com/tmenu.cfm?tid=470805> .

[tmeenaks](#)

Wait, Robber lost? This is rigged. I thought the goblins were supposed to be the ones rigging this. Who rigged it so Robber would lose?

*Dainpdf*

So, the final bracket...?

It was always going to come down to this, of course. It is wonderfully close to tied, though.

*stevenneiman*

I had not expected that one to be this close. I guess Black has a bigger fanbase than I expected.

*Letouriste*

Fuck! So masego didn't do it?:/ black better to win this grrr

[Liliet](#)

He would have wanted Catherine to win

*RanVor*

It's quite ironic how Cat triumphs in the contest thanks to the opposite of her usual M0.

*Gunslinger*

EE how many chapters left in this book? Also when will the next book start?

*Andrew Mitchell*

Great update! 😊

[DroughtBringer](#)



trip·tych

/'triptik/Submit

noun

a picture or relief carving on three panels, typically hinged together side by side and used as an altarpiece.

a set of three associated artistic, literary, or musical works intended to be appreciated together.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Thanks. That's very appropriate for the chapter.

*KageLupus*

They are also typically tied together by a central theme, in a literal sense. The middle panel is the primary and the side panels are related to it in some manner.

In this chapter, the first scene is of Above sending Heroes out to fend off the Dead King's army. The last scene is Below triumphing against normal humans, and even though it is only briefly mentioned there are Named in that conflict as well.

The central scene is Cat negotiating with the Dwarves to fulfill her promise to Sve Noc. Assuming negotiations go well (and there is nothing to suggest they won't) then this is Cat fighting the Dead King at an oblique angle. The Drow become a beachhead on the surface and the Dwarves are able to fully contain him below ground.

Each scene is told from the perspective of a non-Named character and shows the different ways that the conflict with the Dead King is playing out. Cat represents a middle-ish ground between the other two scenes. The conflict is not direct and the side being represented is not clear cut. Cat might have snubbed Below by breaking their plan to create a new god, and in general by opposing Neshamah, but she is also still using that power to further her own ends. Just because it's filtered through Sve Noc now doesn't really change the overall source.

All in all, this was a really well done chapter. The triptych layout worked really good and there was a lot of ties between each scene. This might be one of my favorites interludes.

*Darkening*

Mm, I'm a sucker for a good last stand. Always fond of folks like the lycanese and the borderlanders from the wheel of time books. And now Cat has priestly powers and can wield dark miracles. Should be interesting to see the extent of that.

*Andrew Mitchell*

My prediction:

Cat can wield ALL the powers of Night (every single trick we've seen the Drow use, and more) but NONE of Winter. Akua will have all of the Winter power.

### James, Mostly Harmless

Cat has truly become an Anti-Hero in power as well as in role. Like Heros, she now wields powers given to her by a Greater Being instead of having inherent powers.

*Rook*

The Night abilities I think will stay ill-defined enough to be something that matches the situation, as far as potency goes.

The amount of flexibility will be essentially infinite, with Sve Noc acting as an intermediary for the thousands of years of experience that Catherine is lacking; but how effective they are and what trick actually comes out will be whatever the story allows or requires at the time.

The smart thing to do here would be to gain familiarity with how wielding Night works but focus on playing the narrative game, the exact same way that the big name players like the Bard, Neshamah, Pilgrim, or Black are already doing. Theoretically whatever it is Catherine now wields through Sve Noc could topple mountains or fizzle against a fledgeling Hero that can only parrot one catchphrase. The key is whether she has enough weight to leverage it toward the former rather than the latter.

*SilentWatcher*

What has more narrative weight, a queen of winter or a slave of night?

*Decius*

Duchess of Moonless Nights, or High Priestess of Night?  
Seems like a small upgrade to me.

*Rook*

Neither, titles mean shit

A two bit warlord of a backwater kingdom a thousand years too young to even be considered a threat to the big boys has little weight in the overall game being played by Above and Below

The lynchpin of a potential war against the dead king, involving every surface nation on Calernia, the dwarves, and the newest deity on the block has a massive amount of weight. Even more if she's actively rallying against the game Above/Below is playing with Sve Noc roped into her line of thinking, same way Hierarch gave the fucking bard a black eye by sheer force of principle as nothing more than a beggar.

She's monumentally more powerful and dangerous right now than before she shed the Winter mantle. The Herald has the right read of it

*SilentWatcher*

Its not Cat thats dangerous its Sve Noc. Cat points at a target, maybe Sve Noc will blast it, maybe she will not, maybe she will blast Cat because the target was shit. Maybe the Combination of Sve Noc and Cat will be surprising, but it still offends me that her significance got reduced to the "pointer" from the "mover" and within the woe from "strongest (maybe together with Masego) to again the pointer ( As she is not the glue of the woe, but Hakram, read extra Chapter Background. She is losing in significance.

*SilentWatcher*

I am rather curious, What will happen when Sve Noc gets affected by the Power you all thought Cat is affected by and just ignores Cats advice or does something different? Will you still be satisfied in her being mortal i wonder.

[Liliet](#)

She was always the pointer rather than the mover, ever since Black gave her a Legion. Hell, she always WANTED to be – she wanted to be the person to curtail abuses, not the person to rule.

I get what you find fascinating and interesting in fiction, but dude, you've picked a REALLY wrong character to look for that in.

*SilentWatcher*

No she was the right character until the last chapters totally spoiled it. She sacrificed to gain power and victories to change the system. She has all the power in the legion as they are under her command therefore an extension of her power. She was never a pointer because she had the power of the squire. Now she

depends on sve noc for power and you people try to magically bullshit into a good thing for her.

### *SilentWatcher*

And answer me this, does cat not need power to curtail abuses? She sold her soul to become a villain to have that power. If she just needed to point instead of juat beating everyone with a stick who disagreed why even become a villain? Why not rise through other means? Is curtailing abuses not a kind of ruling?

### [Liliet](#)

She was going to rise through other means, then Black offered her a shortcut.

A curious quirk of Praesi political system is that getting a Name also gives you political power. Er, particularly if you're the apprentice and chosen successor to the second-in-command of the Empire, that definitely helps.

Either way, Cat didn't agree to Black's offer becuae of the ability to beat up people better than the Name offered, but for the place in the Imperial hierarchy that it would get her.

It was always about positioning, and never about personal power. That's more Akua's thing.

### [Liliet](#)

Yeah, her relationship with the Legion was a lot more straightforward than the one with Sve Noc.

It's still an exploration of the same theme the whole series has: power given, gathering followers, obtaining trust and loyalty, working together with other people.

Literally the second chapter had a conversation between Black and Cat about ruling, and about how Black focused on making sure Callowans didn't actually have a reason to really dislike him.

Cat's greatest victories have always been diplomatic ones (recruiting Juniper, the Ruling Council, the story-driven bullshit that had her beat a demigod in a fight on his chosen grounds as a two-aspected Squire, the unification of Callow when she comes back and finds it on fire, recruiting the Duchy of Daoine

to her side, the marriage of Summer and Winter, the northern Crusade, now this)

(No, Second Liesse doesn't really count as Cat's victory beyond all the prep she did for it, she followed Black's plan and even Akua comments that it was Black wielding Cat as a weapon that beat her, not Cat herself)

*SilentWatcher*

"Cats greatest victories have always been diplomatic ones" HAHAAHA you would call that diplomatic? With juniper she beat all other contenders with POWER. The ruling Council was founded by Blackmailing Highlords and it failed spectacularly. Beating the Duke of violent squalls to the Death? How is it not about Power and the application of it, but diplomacy? The reunification was done by force of arms (flaunting her POWER infront of kegan and the legion commanders) After seconds Liesse she scared Duchess Kegan to make a Deal, how is that diplomacy instead of POWER? Do you know what diplomacy means?

[Liliet](#)

"With juniper she beat all other contenders with POWER. "

I mean... no? It was an entire plot point how her company was objectively the weakest and she got to lv1 with Juniper by playing the rest against each other? Via diplomacy and intrigue and trickery?

And then she still did not have power to reliably beat Juniper, instead she exploited a loophole in the rules and her understanding of what Juniper wanted and her ability to give it to her. Which is also not POWER in the way you mean it because that ability 100% relied on Black allowing her to pick her own senior officers for her new legion.

Oh, the undead suicide goats made a difference and shored her up to prevent defeat. But diplomacy both got her /to/ that point and /from/ it.

"The reunification was done by force of arms (flaunting her POWER infront of kegan and the legion commanders)"

I'm thinking more of what she did in Laure, cleaning up and putting someone competent in charge and making sure there wouldn't be riots, and how it spiraled outwards. But with Kegan and

Ranker too, she offered them something they both wanted (to Kegan, a passage to Liesse; to Ranker, handling the problem of Kegan). It mattered that she had power to offer said passage, but it mattered more that she figured out what Kegan wanted and acted on that realization to ally with her.

*stevenneiman*

No, Cat is definitely the glue that holds together the Woe. Just because Hakram felt it necessary to intimidate Vivi and later try to inspire her doesn't somehow make him the nexus of the team. If he was gone, Vivi would probably still be there. But if Cat was gone, Vivi would have cut her losses and either run or found another heroic band to join. And her having great personal power as the Sovereign of Moonless Night was actually the aberration, as she has otherwise spent every leg of the story with at most moderate power. Her two real advantages have always been competent people at her back (the Woe, the Fifteenth, and even a few members of the Queen's Men) and a knack for twisting stories and agendas to her advantage.

Also, I suspect that she's going to figure out some way to turn the new status as High Priestess of the Night to her advantage. I don't know how, but she convinced Sve Noc to inject pure plot into her veins and she has a history of turning the plot to her advantage.

*SilentWatcher*

No Cat gathered the woe but the Glue is Hakram it was written in the guide in Book 3 somewhere and no amount of bullshit interpretation from you will change that. Cat being the Sovereign was NECESSARY because her opponents had so much more power than her, it needed something to give her a chance. So according to your Logic its better to be a representative of an Empire then the most powerful of the Empire? If so is not the representative of the Dead King the strongest on this Continent? Whats his Name? Does he also have the magic power of BULLSHIT you bestow upon Cat?

[Liliet](#)

Either quote where it says in book 3 that Hakram is the glue of the Woe, or please stop repeating that assertion. It doesn't make any sense and doesn't do your arguments any favors.

*stevenneiman*

Aside from a handful of creative misuses of portals since taking the mantle, Cat has never won a fight she had a real chance of losing by means of personal power. Every other real victory has been through a combination of leadership, high-quality subordinates she can delegate to, her peculiar brand of diplomacy, and clever manipulation of the story and the opponent's objectives. And occasionally taking her opponents by what she's willing to do. In fact, power plays against her objectives.

It's no coincidence there's only one truly Evil being on Calernia who has both had that level vast, direct, personal power and survived for more than about 10 years, and he's considered the equal to the Bard in story-fu. And he was only able to pull that off because he avoided interference for long enough to set up a supportive society that even the most beloved rulers of the real world or the rest of Calernia could only dream of.

[Liliet](#)

Exactly!

*Nauglith*

Black had no titles or power beyond the few minor ones his Name gave him. It's what they represent that matters. Black represented the Dread Empire and leveraged that to punch above his weight. Cat now represents an Empire far more ancient and dangerous than Praes.

*werafdsaew*

She is not a slave; she can leave and stop using the Night/Winter anytime she wants. It's more like a worker/manager relationship. Yes she depends on Sve Noc for power, but Sve Noc also depends on her for direction.

*SilentWatcher*

Where is that written? Do you have access to future chapters or are you just having wishful thinking?

*werafdsaew*

You're the only one who interprets the story this way.

*SilentWatcher*

Look at the facts:

1. Cat is mortal again
2. Cat got resurrected by Sve Noc

3. Resurrections by any other then above have side effects like undeath
4. Cat needs Sve Noc for Power
5. Sve Noc has no reason to listen to Cat

all these Points prove Cat is subservient to Sve Noc. How bad it is we wont know until future Chapters, but how do you prove your point? How can she just leave? how does cat just leaves :” hey you öhh i keep all the power and will use it later too, i got this shithole country callow to look for bye bye. ” Your wishful thinking clouds your mind. You dont want to acknowledge Cat got defeated.

[Liliet](#)

Cat did not strictly speaking get resurrected the way she did in First Liesse because according to what Sve Noc said last chapter, she never died all the way. Resurrections are the province of the Above, but healing is for everyone, as both Masego and the Legion regulations demonstrate. Sve Noc healed Cat back to full health as a normal mortal human being (who also now has a Name probably), not bound her to her service as an undead shade a la Akua.

[Liliet](#)

Sounds about right.

*stevenneiman*

Yeah. It was kinda coolbut also funny how Papenheim was all pride and defiance and the Dead King was just fondly complimenting the defenders of giving him a challenge. It fits with his earlier note that his favorite part of being summoned was the feeling of resistance in a world that he can't casually shape to his whims.

*Matthew*

Ok, Klaus Papenheim is excellent.

*Darkening*

That's not Klaus, he's off leading the armies in the south, this is some nephew or something of his.

*danh3107*

I suspected as much but this chapter made it a bit clearer, the dwarves are either mono gendered or so close in appearance between the two sexes that it doesn't matter. I mean of course the seeker and dwarf named could be gay, but I doubt it.



Also the Greed seems like their racial compulsion to steal, which seems vaguely familiar to the Orc's predatory instincts and berserker fury. There's some part of them that makes them lust for objects not their own.

Fascinating

[Liliet](#)

P sure these two are just gay.

[erraticerrata](#)

Yup.

*danh3107*

Well shit, there goes that theory.

*werafdsaew*

Interestingly only Good nations have issues with homosexuality. I guess Evil is progressive?

[Adrian\\_V](#)

Nope, Callow was pretty open minded i think, although it may have to do with constantly being at war, made them pragmatic enough to adopt a live and let live mentality.

*Darkening*

I read the illegality of their relationship as more of a caste thing than a gender thing, especially with the line about how a seeker of deeds can't sit in the presence of a Herald of the Deeps.

*Vhostym*

I think it was deliberately ambiguous. I initially thought the same, but then realized the lack of specificity, which considering EE seems deliberate. Hopefully book 5 will have more about the dwarves.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I thought it pretty clear: it's a shockingly scandalous class disparity. Hop into bed with whatever gender you please, but make sure your official partner was born from the Right Sort of People!

[Liliet](#)

Good nations have issues with homosexuality???

### [erraticerrata](#)

The issue isn't with the homosexuality (no one in the setting has that, really) it's a status thing. If you go back to the chapter where seekers of deeds were introduced, you'll actually get a pretty good idea as to why Balasi became one.

### [M0och](#)

I am quite excited for the possibilities this plot twist opens up!

### *KageLupus*

"I will murder every giant monster I can find, if it means we can be together."

That is godsdamned adorable

### *KageLupus*

EE already confirmed it, but as an extra point to Good nations also not caring about stuff like that there is a throwaway line in one of Cordelia's interludes about how the main priest spy that she has is trans. The only comment that she makes on it even internally is that his face is more suited to a Simon than a Simone.

### *werafdsaew*

In the Interlude Crusaders chapter Malanza had issue with Arnaud's proclivities:

I read that to mean that she, and Procer as a whole, was homophobic. But perhaps it is something else instead?

### [Liliet](#)

Yeah no, that's definitely not about being gay 😞

### *The0thin*

I believe that's meant to imply sexual assault/coercion.

### *stevenneiman*

I'd sort of figured either something non-consensual, or bestiality. Certainly there's no compelling reason to believe that it's homosexuality considering how little evidence we've seen of homophobia elsewhere.

### [Javvies](#)

I'd presumed it was implying tendencies towards pedophilia and/or other nonconsensual acts. Possibly other forms of sexual sadism.

IMO, bestiality would be considered distasteful and frowned upon, but probably not to the point of thinking the world would be better if he were castrated.

At any rate, I'm pretty sure Malanza's opinion wasn't based in homophobia, especially given her reaction to Cat calling her attractive, and the verbal sparring there where Cat ultimately responded to something Malanza said with something along the lines of having a firm rule against bedding people actively invading her country.

[Liliet](#)

They were, in fact, flirting.

*stevenneiman*

I don't actually recall anyone having hangups with sexuality or gender identity, and only the goblins so far seem notably sexist. I think that Named have a tendency to beat that particular brand of stupidity out of their respective peoples unless it's so ingrained that only one sex can have Names. I remember a discussion of one Dread Empress who literally fired a headmaster of the legion academy for refusing female students.

[Liliet](#)

She defenestrated him 😊

And then Black did that to his contemporary headmistress who refused to admit greenskin students, continuing the proud tradition ♥

*stevenneiman*

Ok, I remembered someone being executed for refusing female students and a headmaster getting lobbed from a catapult, I guess I must have forgot they were separate incidents. My point still stands, that it's hard to have a middle ground of sexism where a woman can become Dread Empress but can't do anything about sexism with their theoretically infinite authority.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Cat has explicitly talked about it ♥

*luminiousblu*

>but I doubt it.

Come on mate the number of homosexuals in this story already is pretty disproportionate compared to the number of canonical couples.

I'm almost at the point where anyone with a companion is assumed to be homosexual until proven otherwise.

[Liliet](#)

Or bisexual, or asexual...

*luminiousblu*

The only bisexual coming to mind is Catherine, who, uh, is basically an informed bisexual since all of her relationships and (save for a few offhanded lines about Ratface and Warlock's toned bodies and at some point boinking a fisherman) lust have been directed exclusively at major female characters. Sure, we're \*told\* she's bisexual but ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Asexuals don't count since I specified 'canonical couples', and asexuals don't have canonical couples more or less by definition.

Na

Er, isn't Masego/Archer kind of a thing?

Sex isn't mandatory for a romantic relationship to exist.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, they're definitely kind of a thing.

A very adorable thing that Catherine doesn't want to ruin, but I'm pretty sure a poly arrangement won't interfere with anything there ♥

(if you're reading this erratic please know i've been screaming about this and am incredibly grateful that you have a canon aro ace character in a relationship like this ;u;)

*luminiousblu*

Sexuality by definition refers to sexual attraction, not romantic attraction. It's right there in the name and trying to argue otherwise is disingenuous. Archer I guess you're right, she'll fuck anything that moves.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani is pansexual or bisexual in an absolutely canon way, too, though you're correct that only Catherine stood tall and actually clarified what she identified as

*stevenneiman*

Archer, Cat, and Akua (and Tikoloshe, more or less by definition) are confirmed bisexual, though for Akua it seems to be more about cultural norms than personal desires.

Aside from Masego, who's obviously asexual, and Wekesa and Malicia, who are confirmed to be strictly homosexual, it's hard to prove that any other character is only attracted to one gender rather than just never having an attraction to the other mentioned on-screen. It's also worth noting that the complaint about Cat being an informed bisexual is only referring to a sample size of two people she's actually slept with during the course of the story. She's mentioned being attracted to tons of other characters of both genders.

[Liliet](#)

I actually have a private theory that Akua might be aspec, aromantic and possibly asexual too, from how... mechanical her descriptions of her sexual conquests have been. "Enjoying sex without feeling any particular attraction to the partner" seems like a Her Thing.

Either way, she's not exclusively attracted to one gender, that's a fact.

*Gunslinger*

She's attracted to plots and power and that's about it

[Liliet](#)

She also has a strong platonic crush on Catherine... which is basically what you said exactly 😊

*Deviant Loader*

With so many people being homo or asexual in this story.

I am actually more surprised that their population was not declining when most people I have seen just adopted children instead.

(I am just joking btw, of course not everyone in the story is like that)

But seriously though, even for a story based world, orphans popping out of nowhere to be adopted seemed to be the staple for many couples there...

Anyway, despite the author's many takes and preferred biasness in this world's settings, many regarding races, gender and sexuality.

At least, the story was still enjoyable to read at times.

*luminiousblu*

There's no reason to hedge your words, it's really goddamn weird. I suppose the apparently widespread availability of healers significantly lowers the death toll from childhood disease but historically the reason (exclusive) homosexuality was looked down on was the fact that if you didn't have kids your tribe would go extinct.

Then again, the world is more or less willed into being by literal gods, and maybe a couple of the more powerful ones are homosexual so there we go.

[Liliet](#)

According to your logic, medieval monks and Catholic priests, who swore a vow of chastity and might have violated it a lot but definitely never were allowed to have a family and raise children, must have been the MOST stigmatized and ostracized people ever.

And yet.

[308924810a](#)

That was a political decision by the pope. The goal was to stop churches from being inherited along family lines and instead allow the central catholic organization to take all of them, without the negative PR that would come from confiscating them.

So they manufactured a religious reason to prevent priests from having heirs of their body, and another religious reason to argue that the property of religious officials who lack heirs of their body should pass to the church upon their death.

[308924810a](#)

Edit: all that said, it's implied that in this setting there are fewer practical barriers to homosexuality and reproduction, and that priests are able to produce a child by two women. The book of all things also seems to be in favor of gender equality and equality of those who are outside of the binary conception of gender.

I'd also be interested to know whether priests are capable of producing children between two men, or whether the lower death rate to disease in a setting with various types of caster is enough to ensure population growth continues even in the face of massive casualties among females, because something has to explain the total gender equality we see in combat roles, and something removing the risk of demographic collapse would go a long way towards thst.

### Liliet

We have Word of God that in lower ranks, gender ratio isn't remotely as equal as among officers. Nobles don't generally need to worry about demographic collapse, no, and so in this setting younger daughters get offloaded into combat roles same as younger sons. Among commoners meanwhile, there genuinely ARE a lot fewer women in combat roles than men. It's just that those who do go there receive no less respect, for reasons that probably start with "magic", continue with "light" and culminate with "Named" lol

### *Ιούλιος Καίσαρας*

I share the sentiment.

I believe it's a testament to the quality of a story (or maybe that I personally just like the messages the author tries to convey 😊) when author's quirks don't make a negative impact..

### Javvies

Hmmm.

An Interlude, but we did get to see more of what happened with Cat. And I'm still unsure about how I feel about her giving up Winter.

Interesting to see some of what the Dead King is up to.

### *Allafterme*

To be fair, Night is more versatile than Winter & we still don't know how many traits the Night inherited from Winter...

### *Belac93*

Sounds to me like she's just got a preference. Tons of bi people swing mostly one way or another.

*stevenneiman*

For me there's something of a sweet spot for the power level I can really enjoy a protagonist being at for a long time. Winter Cat was already pushing that, and she would have gone straight over into boring OP territory for me if she'd mastered Winter as it was implied she was going to.

I much prefer he being cut down a peg and trying to play matador with beings vastly more powerful than her.

*IDKWhoitis*

Man, Dead King is one of the classier villains that I appreciate. Like he knows what the answer will be, and he respects them. I'm half expecting him to start laughing when the Drow come out of the Underdark. He'll probably kill a hefty amount of them, but boy he is going to find that interesting. This invasion of the North is going just as I was imagining, with precision strikes carried out from recon carried out over centuries, massive numbers drowning the enemies, multi-frontal assaults all along the front. I'm kinda rooting for the Horror.

I'm left wondering how long until Cat gets back to Callow, or is she just going straight for Dead King?

*IDKWhoitis*

Wait, FUCK, Catherine learned Magic.

Like not standard magic, and maybe some variation of Named magic, but most importantly she admitted she can WIELD the Sves power. Like oh fuck. Alienation was the greatest limiter on her, and she just got rid of that.

The sheer amount of shenanigans she can now pull with a literal gods power without going all monologue-ly is just not ok. Like Black on steroids. The Gods Above are going to have a proper FIT when they see this shit on the field.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Catherine transitioning from god to priestess was a genius sidestep around her limitations.

*SilentWatcher*

No. She went from God to slave with no control over power. She already had a solution for the principle alienation, namely shunting it of to others. Principle alienation will still be a problem, because she only ever had these problems when using the power, not when simply possessing it. Indestructible construct body traded back for an aching leg and the euphoria when smoking a drug. Truly a good trade,



with no negative consequences at all like saint cutting her head off in 1 second.

### *IDKWhoitis*

It was no perfect solution to alienation, as there was an inherent bias at the core of Catherine, Duchess of Moonless Nights, who could not, would not, grow as a character. She became rigid (and in my opinion, whiny) about her beliefs, for pretty much all of book 4.

Like if you wanted to look at why I hated Book 4 so much, it was Winterized Cat meandering for 80 chapters with very little to show for it and ready to start (whining) monologuing about right and wrong and how she was shit. We only really progressed, in like 3 chapters at rapid pace, when Winter BROKE. Cat is at her best when she's flexible and more tricky than a fox, which she has regained. All that Power from winter would not matter if she got a sword to the back of the head next fight, and it's possible she would, because Cat would NEVER learn at the rate Winter was (limiting) powering her. She was frozen at a specific plot point in time, and was just thawed.

### *SilentWatcher*

What did she do differently in this chapter? She is dealing again with the dwarfs with no idea about their culture and probably getting scammed again. She will continue to whine and complain about past decisions like she did since Book 1. It is part of her Character to reflect on her actions.

It's too early to say she is now trickier without the mantle, as we have seen no difference between Cat now and when she held the mantle. She just enjoys her pipe and has a hurting Leg. Is this a sign of being tricky? No.

The biggest Advantage from a Construct Body is NOT dying when she gets a sword to the back of the head. Now it's even more difficult with a garbage Mortal Body, no more Construct Senses, Reaction Time and Strength. Cat was learning the entire Time, how to fight better with her Powers and Construct Body and she would CERTAINLY become better, as an "Potential" immortal she has enough Time her slowed learning is not a big Problem. Now she is "thawed" and lost her Progress, her Power and has no more "Potential" Immortality (Considering being a villain gives Immortality, but it was her Construct Body which let her survive all her recent Battles). Good Job, now she learns probably more in 10 years than as an immortal in 100 years, but the probability that she will die in the short term is so much greater without being a construct.

### *d0m1n1c*

We still don't know what she can do with Sve's Winter/Night hybrid.

If she can do even half of the stuff we saw the Mighty do with Night in addition to gating, then she's no weaker than she was before. Considering that all the oaths she took as Winter, I'd say she's far more free as Sve Noc's first priestess; Sve Noc is probably bound more by that, than Cat is, but we won't know for sure until the next book.

### Liliet

Principle alienation is not a problem for priests using miracles of their deities. Miracles don't work the same way as directly using your own power. Catherine is as safe from this particular problem as Ashen Priestess was.

Also, remember how Catherine fed a fae their own fingers? That was fucking horrifying and tbh I've been strongly worried about Cat's slow slide down the slippery slope of cruelty and indifference. She was worried about it and she STILL did, because no mental double-checks really worked and Vivienne is actually ironically less idealistic&principled than she is and easily swayed by her charisma.

Winter!Cat was cheerily rolling towards disaster, while Priestess!Cat has an advantageous political position, no principle alienation and like the BIGGEST bragging rights (which matters in a narrative-driven universe)

### *SilentWatcher*

Why was it horrifying? she made an example and she is a villain. what do you expect a pat on the wrist and dont do it again? I see no indication that being a priestess this story will be less a disaster wreck then when she held the mantle. How is she in an advantageous political position??? She is not even in the game anymore, because from being the power she became beholden to 2 dark, murderous goddesses of a traitorous race. Negotiations will be done with Sve Noc not with her. Should she use powers beyond what a mortal can wield, she will still experience principle alienation (thats the very definition). I think you guys misunderstood something heavily in thinking Cat gets Godlike powers without some drawback now she is mortal again. And what in Belows Name does she can brag about? She went and Lost against a God and begged her to help her? She went and Lost Godlike powers? She went and is now a traitorous Priestess instead of a Player? What can she brag about? dying thrice? Its more of a Mark of her bad decisions.

## *Rook*

She walked into the greatest altar to Below ever built, freed it from them by feeding half of Creation Beta into it, and turned it against Below itself instead of letting them win by becoming the replacement.

She's potentially walking out of there having turned what was one of Below's greatest assets since before Callow was a kingdom, into a weapon pointed directly at Below's other biggest asset.

The mantle let her lord over some petty squabbles or fledgeling Named that ultimately don't mean shit. She shed it to start climbing out of the bucket, and have a demigod and an entire race help her fight against the game that's whipped the continent for tens of thousands of years.

At the moment she is possibly in the most narratively advantageous position of any mortal alive, easily rivaling Black or Malicia.

## *SilentWatcher*

Are you sure the drow are freed through her gifting Winter? It is not written. We don't know if there is now a hybrid Power of Night (WinterNight) or not. Below has won because Sve Noc got the Power and they will use it. Is it enough to pay the Sorcerous Debt? We don't know. You are assuming Sve Noc and all Drow will just do whatever Cat says. Maybe it will work for the next war, but after? Why should they give a shit about the Liesse Accords, why should they care about Callow or the debt Malicia still has to pay? Will Cat lose all Power when it's no longer in Sve Nocs interest?

## *Liliet*

"Negotiations will be done with Sve Noc not with her" is contradicted in this chapter. It's literally the other way around: negotiations that would otherwise have been with Sve Noc (or, well, would not have existed at all) are going through Catherine instead.

Soft power is not lesser than hard power.

## *SilentWatcher*

But why could she do Negotiations for Sve Noc? Because Sve Noc GAVE her the right. Do you think Cat can keep it when she fucks up? She is not the one negotiating with Sve Noc. When diplomats meet, is suddenly the

Diplomat of America the President instead of Trump? Are Diplomats the true Power or are they just a replacement because the TRUE Decisionmakers cant be bothered or have other Talents? Cat is representing Sve Noc, she is NOT representing herself in this Meeting.

*d0m1n1c*

"Because Sve Noc GAVE her the right."

In the same way, Cat GAVE Sve Winter; give and take, right?

"Cat is representing Sve Noc, she is NOT representing herself in this Meeting."

Cat is doing exactly the same thing she'd be doing if she had beaten Sve, we know that from Sve's flashbacks, the only difference is that instead of being Winter, she's human agains, which is exactly what she wanted.

I'm pretty sure "human queen making deals for her homeland" is a better role in the story than "eldritch horror lording over it."

You're also forgetting that Cat swore no oaths to Sve; Sve appointing Cat her first priestess is likely as large a leap of faith as Cat giving up Winter, if it's not, then I'd expect significant rebound on Sve when she acknowledged Cat's gift.

[Liliet](#)

There's a bit of a difference between diplomat/president and priest/god.

But there's no point arguing about this now I think. We'll see more next book.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Suggestion: never play Cleric or Warlock in D&D, then. You wouldn't like the awesome cosmic power at the price of either giving your time or soul to the power source. Or your first born, whichever.

Also, don't pick Ghaunadaur/Juiblex as either an indifferent god or patron – and/or both. (Heck, it/they/he might not even notice, and even if it/they/he does, it may not necessarily end badly – well, depending on how you define that. At least it/they/he would find it funny, the enormous troll.)

You'd hate it.

Go Gormauth Souldrinker, instead. ;P

[clintcleez](#)

Yea she lost a lot, including possibly her freedom. People respected her different when she was fae

*nick012000*

She's the Priestess of Night, now. Of course she can use dark miracles. I expect it's probably just an expansion of the same dark power she used back before she got Winter.

*Novice*

I know that when the deed seeker mentioned that Cat looked more dangerous he's most probably referring to the merging of Night and Winter she currently wields, but I like to think it's because Cat has all of her mental faculties back. All of that good ol' low cunning and story weaving goodness.

[DroughtBringer](#)

I think Winter was more directly dangerous, but Cat now? That's a Beast, one that is an apex predator. Very much not something to mess with.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I think she's got ALL Night and NO Winter; and Akua has Winter.

*werafdsaew*

Highly unlike IMO

*haihappen*

Akua the Shade of Doom(TM) with golden eyes? Is she already transitioning into something resembling "good"? The Fairy Godmother of Treachery?

Gold symbolizes "good" things in this universe, right?

Nevertheless I find it improbable and unfitting that The Specter of Lies would wield any Winter power.

Winter is dead. Welcome to The Moonless Night!

(Or "The Long Night", but that may be trademarked)

[Liliet](#)

Golden was the original color of alive!Akua's eyes. This is the shedding of the Winter disguise that Cat made for her.

Which, btw, furthers the idea that no, Akua doesn't get Winter now.

*Decius*

Why would Akua get Winter when Cat ceded it to Sve Noc?

[Liliet](#)

"Low cunning"  
as if Cat ever had any of that

Komena was just being bitter and pompous and refusing to phrase it as "you are more competent at this than we are"

*d0m1n1c*

From Merriam Webster

Low Cunning: clever but morally bad and dishonest methods

I think that describes Cat pretty well.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is pretty bad at lying, though she's good at identifying situations where lying even with her shitty skill will help. She's not a fan of morally bad methods either, and becomes less and less of a fan with character development.

Catherine absolutely shies away from anything that can be described as 'low cunning'. And there's few things more directly opposed to 'low cunning' than the shit she pulled on Sve Noc ("fuck it, this is a gift, have fun") or the deal she's brokering with the dwarves for them – literally she's making peace where none was previously to be had via facilitating discussion and uniting against a bigger, more horrifying threat.

Low cunning, maybe Cat has some of it, but she's shedding it more and more, and Komena definitely doesn't have any evidence of it from what the flashback-conversations were about.

*RoflCat*

No, he's definitely not referring to the power she wields, but rather his intuition told him this human is more 'dangerous' than the Winter Queen he met before.

Because Cat's biggest threat to anything was never her power, it was her ability to take the box and smack people with it. Winter operate inside the box and thus dulled her ability to do that.

So now it's back to stealing boxes and smacking faces.

"What Foundling does isn't thinking outside the box so much as stealing the box and hitting her opponents with it until they stop moving."

– Extract from "A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars", by Juniper of the Red Moon Clan

### [coloursofdespair](#)

Thats very much a very good point. The rules have changed, again, and this time Cat really isn't all that controlled by them anymore

*SilentWatcher*

Why did could she not Steal boxes and smack faces when holding the mantle? She had this thinking outside the box Mindset as part of her Character even before taking the mantle and bearing the mantle "fixes" your Character, it does not change anything about you. If you look at the battle of Camps it was already thinking outside the box when she offered negotiations to Malanza instead of fighting Saint and Pilgrim until she won or lost. Also the decision to go to the everdark is another undeniable Hint she still thought outside the box, as not even Malica, a Grandmaster in sheming, anticipated it.

### [Liliet](#)

She did still have the mindset, but she was worse at actually doing it, because it requires a flexibility of thinking that in Catherine was getting slowly frozen by Winter.

She was also losing sight of her actual objectives, ideals and principles, and because she's a charismatic leader who everyone defers to everyone else has been following her blindly and even Vivienne started approving of horrifying things in the name of utility.

*SilentWatcher*

Maybe she lost a bit of flexibility, but lets not forget Masego, the Hierophant, fresh from witnessing a wisp of a god of above (maybe he even saw his fathers retaliation). His Name is about Gods so there would not be an issue with him helping Cat in some way. Maybe the problem needed Time to fix, but what does she have in abundance if not time as an quasi Goddess with a construct body? Does it Matter if the Liesse Accords get approved in 1 year or in 10 or 100?

Where did she lose sight of her actual Objectives? She

wanted an army to win the war ahead and then Liesse accords. Never was it mentioned she wants suddenly to do something different.

Did you read the first three books of this Story?

Because everytime its not Sunshine and Flowers she loses one principle or a fancy ideal. Its a steady downwards slope since the first chapter, from killing 2

defenseless men to prevent them committing a crime, to killing some servants on suspicion alone and finally forcing the service of an entire Race. Its coming in small steps and not through some magic winter Influence you guys think affected her. I quote again Sve Noc: "She barely held the mantle for a decade, it was still her doing the decisions"

I just feel some people didnt like the Winter motive and think that for some reason Cat as mortal is a step forward, when we go back to the trope of the moronic underdog against the immortal abomination. I sincerely Hope you will be disappointed by how the story unfolds.

[Liliet](#)

Well, the way I've been tracking Catherine's arc (currently on my third attentive reread with liveblogging), she's actually a lot more idealistic now than she was at 15. She's shed some principles but gained others, and she's been actively working to become a better person and make a better world all along. That's literally an objective she has, and having Winter in her was interfering with that.

I love arcs of people becoming better people, and I love this, even if you assign no value to it.

*SilentWatcher*

Is then her being a villain not also a problem to her goal of making a better world?

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's why Catherine was worried about what Pilgrim told her about being an Evil Queen of Callow and has been planning to abdicate and questioning all her decisions and the judgement of everyone around her in a paranoia spiral.

It also opened her up to Below's play here in Everdark with pitting her against Sve Noc, which is why Catherine chose to take the most radical Below-opposed third option she could find.



Catherine being formally a villain is, at this point in the series, the best joke anyone's ever played on Creation. (And Black's the one who played it)

Reminds me of a fairy tale I read as a kid, of a noblewoman selling her soul to the Devil to feed her people through a famine. In that story, when she died angels literally stole her soul away like 'nope this bargain doesn't hold she's ours'. We'll see what happens in this one lmao

*SilentWatcher*

in What way was this opposed to Below? She helped Below win even MORE. Instead of letting 2 pawns fight and let 1 get stronger while the other dies, she managed to empower 1 while still surviving. Below still has an empowered Sve Noc and Cat, who wields Night ( or Winternight or wathever) instead of losing 1, maybe gets even a new Name , Below kept BOTH pawns. Even Cats Plans to strike at the Dead King does not matter to Below.

*SilentWatcher*

Cat is the greatest Champion of Below, she wants to change creation according to her image as it should be. This is Heresy to Above and Preaching to Below. In The Prologue which side wants the souless minions who follow every order and which side wants them to decide themselves?

[Liliet](#)

Below likes strife and dislikes peace. They are Evil, dude, it's not just a label. They like their followers to be fighting each other as much as they like them fighting the Above. The entire Everdark and the horrifying murderfest their culture turned into is testimony to that.

*SilentWatcher*

Bellow is not only Evil DUDE. My point still stands and is true

*SilentWatcher*

Cat did not give Sve Noc her Power to do good, she did it for selfish reasons and the gamble was needed because every other outcome was a loss to her. Are the Liesse Accords not great for Below?

According to Tyrant Good has already won ( when he said he used his wish aspect on bard) so a Ceasefire is good for Below and bad for above. In light of this, cat is a Champion of Below

### Liliet

The exact reason why Cat considered every other outcome a loss for her – including the victory that Akua was gunning for – is because she was trying to do good, not just gather power.

And Above is the side that actually tries to minimize strife and maximize peace. It does that while also waging war on Below, which is something of a contradiction and the reason why Cat can't just stop being a villain and go over to the side that matches her inclinations better.

You do have a point in that Above is winning and stopping the war gives a benefit to Below as well. Once we shift from the point of view of gods to the point of view of mortals though, Catherine's solution is starkly *good* in the lowercase sense.

### *SilentWatcher*

Show me the exact passage where Cat thought : "I do good now when i give up" What is your definition of Good? doing Good? doing Bad with good intentions? wanting Good things but being a monster? All 4 of them are clearly monsters, but with good intentions in some way (except maybe Akua). Cat is not a good person, for all the crimes she will commit and has committed in the past. Why should Above not want Strife when they are winning? They have nearly won so they dont negotiate.

### *RanVor*

Considering that the Heavens are dead set \*against\* Cat, I'd say it's unlikely.

### *SilentWatcher*

Are you using your magic power of Bullshit again? How do you prove she is more idealistic then when she was 15? What principles has she gained? how has she worked to become a better person? In this Arc she considered making a pact with the Dead King ( truly a principled action!) then she tried to murder Malicia and torched some palaces ( Another

glorious example of being a better person according to you) then she went to enslave ( at least similar) a race ( THE EPITOME OF A JUST DECISION). These decisions are prove against your comment, that she is becomming a better person. You also cant blame Winter as Sve Noc stated she did herself the decisions, as she held the mantle no long enough. In your twisted Mind, Cat giving up, making all her sacrifices and crimes to get so far become meaningless, betting on the mercy of Sve Noc, who cannibalized part of her race to save another part, is her becoming a better person? Are you serious? This whole Story is so entertaining, because she becomes more and more evil ,while a having a good goal. Who said this quote again? The Way to hell is paved with good intentions.

### Liliet

Yes, Catherine evaluated giving her power to Sve Noc as a good and ironically Good action, because Sve Noc's goal is to save her race from extinction, and Catherine cares about people even if they are not /her/ people.

Catherine was also worried enough about Callow becoming more Evil than it used to be, which is the kind of abstract worry she would not have had at 15.

She's looked back on her First Summerholm decision to start a war to further her ambition with horror (although imho she was far less responsible for the ensuing bloodshed than her self-blame says, she did make the decision).

The main principle/belief Catherine has gained since then, though, is the ability to trust. Baby Cat was convinced that nothing comes without a price and everything that looked like she might be lucky was actually a trap. Adult Cat... yeah. Did that. Look at her inner monologue (or was some of it not inner? i don't remember) about trust and control and how it always fucks people, and how it was the reason Malicia and Black fell apart.

This is the kind of thing Cat did not understand at 15.

She was willing to start a war to advance her ambition, though.

*RanVor*

I think the Good course of action (at least according to the Above's definition of Good) would be the one that eradicates the drow, but otherwise I agree.

*Skaddix*

I agree mostly with you but Villians last until killed in this world so she has time not infinite but 100 years is doable enough.

*Morgenstern*

Also, more madness of laughing and/or spitting supposedly Super Important People / Gods in the face =P

*Allafterme*

Yup, Masego will throw a fit of EPIC proportions when he realized what he missed

[Liliet](#)

Catherine's going to have hours-long sessions with him of her performing miracles and him writing down observations, I'm calling it now

[sengachi](#)

The Dead King is old school. I can appreciate that.

Also, while my knee jerk reaction is to say "what are you doing you fool?! you're dooming your invasion with this villain speech!", I think it's important to remember that the Dead King knows his stuff. He played the narrative game so well that he bested the Intercessor, and then he added a few millenia of experience and practice onto that. There is no way he doesn't know exactly what the results of that kind of villain speech will be. So he's got to be playing some kind of long game.

Maaybe the game he's playing is just the same game he's been playing all this time, maintaining a stable narrative cycle of invasion and retreat that sees his personal sanctum in the Hells grow stronger each century. But the Intercessor did offer him a real victory this time, on some level. So maybe he's just maintaining a particular pattern for the opening of this war that he's familiar with and knows how to play before moving on to the interesting stuff. Maybe this is a "first step of the plan always works" kind of deal, exploiting a particular narrative to ensure initial victory.

Or maybe he just really does respect these soldiers and wants to honor them by giving them satisfaction and meaning

in their deaths. I don't know, but I love the Dead King as a character and how long I can spend trying to dissect his motives.

Also, holy hells, did anyone else get chills from how readily the Lycaonese completely unmade their lives and went from zero to uncompromising martial law, sacrificing their entire elderly population, and making existential preservation decisions because of a few skeletons hitting their harbor? I know we've seen the Lycaonese talk a big game about how hard they are and how they know true war, but seeing them actually act on that was something else. These folk know exactly what's coming and that's \*terrifying\*. More than anything we saw in Keter, the way the Dead King has shaped these people has made the true magnitude of the Dead King's threat sink in for me.

[sengachi](#)

That was not meant to be a reply to this comment. Ah well.

[Liliet](#)

I'll live with it 😊

"Or maybe he just really does respect these soldiers and wants to honor them by giving them satisfaction and meaning in their deaths." <= I think it's this one, personally.

Villains speeches and other little narrative vignettes like this matter for bending LUCK. Neshamah has spent his entire existence ensuring luck would have no influence on the outcomes of his plans. He can afford to just build the story out of the building blocks he likes, now.

Also, the Lycaonese are terrifyingly amazing, and definitely lend insight into how Cordelia thinks.

*luminiousblu*

I mean the thing with the Dead King is that he's playing the role of the bigger fish who gets called in for assistance. The bigger fish doesn't tend to actually die or get crippled, they just sort of shove off after a while of milling about and causing general mayhem.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

He can afford to actually compliment the enemies just out of genuine admiration for their valor.

He's fairly social and amiable as far as undead abominations go, as we've seen!

*Novice*

Unless of course he's talking to Ranger. Then it's all exasperated sighs.

[Liliet](#)

And her favorite wine!

*IDKWhoitis*

I wouldn't be surprised if he took this opportunity to dig a massive pit in the center of the Procerian cities, place a couple thousand dead with a latent magic trigger, and reseal it. You know, for an advanced wave next time around. He can afford it.

He might also be nice enough to start building foundation for the 8th wall himself, with all that expendable labor. Just to fuck with some heads afterwards or to actually serve as fortifications for his own troops in the long run.

I feel as if there is no conventional long term goals for the Winter King. What is 100 years to an Immortal who can plan better next time.

[Liliet](#)

I think the pit thing wouldn't work for the same reason he doesn't just raise all the graveyards: the dead bodies will decay with time. And if he uses sorcery, a priest or a Named – hell, maybe personally Augur – will catch it.

The wall though lmao I can 100% see him doing that ♥

*IDKWhoitis*

We know he is capable of raising just skelebro, and that this man is prone to experimentation and future planning.

All he had to do is leave a receptacle or trigger device (possibly time delay) and leave the inert bones there. After 200 years, his army automatically rises again with no warning and causes chaos in the enemy back lines.

I can also see this as a reason for Northern Procer to just burn their dead to ashes. We haven't fully covered

Proccers burial practices, but we know the Lycons are really careful about their dead going to the other side, its wouldnt be unreasonable for them just to get rid of their dead wholesale to prevent graveyard raising. It's also possible that the attack on Cleves was done by graveyard raising and other tricky shit.

[Liliet](#)

Good point.

*SpeckofStardust*

The funny thing is that he likely has done that before, and that after this battle settles and he is pushed back they will check for such things.

This after all is far from his first time taking this city after all.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah but nothing says he can't get new ideas that he hasn't tried before and they wouldn't think to check for 😊

*Decius*

Am I the only one who thought that they deserved Goblinfire more than the Lone Swordsman did?  
If you're gonna set your city on fire to spite the invading army, do it right!

Also, it seems like the Dead King could have been much smarter, and just built a wall around the fortress and left enough corpses there to fend off a counterassault. The ENTIRE ASSAULT was about helping the Lycaonese to die valiantly.

*Killian*

I agree that goblinfire would be much preferred. However the problem is that it's GOBLIN fire, as in made by goblins. And the only goblins are in Praesi with a small clan in Marchford.

*SilentWatcher*

Rather good description by the dwarf, a feeble thing grown even feebler

[Liliet](#)

And yet, more dangerous than she was before 😊

*SilentWatcher*

ah i see your point, she lost already everything, her power, her dignity, her freedom and her Construct Body, she already has nothing of personal value left to lose. Of course she is now more dangerous.

*caoimhinh*

Cat is not only mortal, she's lethal. 😊

*Novice*

I genuinely love last stands against the grim darkness. It's why, for all their faults, I'm still a fan of Warhammer both Fantasy and 40k.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Let it be know that the planet broke before the Guard did!

*Novice*

One of the most badass phrase ever uttered in fiction. The Guard, comprised of nothing but normal men and women, armed with what the other factions consider as weak, never fucking broke even with the planet thrown asunder.

Cadia stands!

*RanVor*

Victory for the Warmaster! Death to the False Emperor!

Btw, it just occurred to me that Calernia would feel like home to the Chaos Space Marines.

*Decius*

There was never anywhere to flee to.

*Novice*

The Navy and the Space Marines actually managed to break through the giant Chaos armada in space. It's why Abaddon decided to crash the then compromised Blackstone Fortress, something that is desired by most factions, to the planet itself. There was the Lord Castellan Creed defending the lines buying time for the rest of the Guard to retreat via the Navy while the planet is busy cracking.

So no, the Guard held the line to the bitter end.

[Liliet](#)



Well, this made me cry. Congrats erratic you win I no longer care about the Vales interludes this has overwhelmed it strongly

*nick012000*

Also, that's not the Dead King. Friedrich Papenheim is an idiot: the Dead King was a human, originally, and he certainly wouldn't need to go as far as to \*nail\* his armor onto his body. That's probably just a Named Giant that got killed and reanimated.

*Andrew Mitchell*

I agree that wasn't the Dead King's usual body; but I do think it was the one he was wearing to the meeting.

*byzantine279*

Uh... The Dead King can possess whichever of his servants he feels like. That was him using a convenient body for the conversation. If he had brought his real one there was a risk of a Hero suddenly showing up. They basically grow on trees around things like the Dead King.

*Two* \_\_\_\_

It is a bone golem (or whatever it was) inhabited by the Dead King, so yes, it is

*Skaddix*

I mean its probably similar to Malcia's Ability to possess meat puppets. I agree its probably not his main body but that doesn't really matter.

*Soronel Haetir*

Sweet, as of about 150 votes Black is in the lead!

[Liliet](#)

Have you considered: he would be upset by this development

*RanVor*

I'd rather have Black upset than Cat on the top.

[Liliet](#)

Dude.

0.0

*RanVor*

This entire contest is pretty much analogous to the state of the war between Good and Evil, only with amount of screentime instead of providence. I, much like Black, am offended by this and thus I refuse to vote on the main character out of principle.

*RanVor*

\*for the main character, dammit.

[Liliet](#)

I guess that's kind of fair?

I happen to think that there's nothing /wrong/ with Good reliably winning against Evil, and the actual problem that Black's pissed at is how an entire nation has been written off as Evil and is now consistently getting the shitty end of the stick without Good ever even making an effort to protect or help Praesi civilians in any way.

But yeah, the character contest is kind of a shitty idea in itself.

You know what would be cool? A round robin everyone vs everyone character contest, where literally every pair of characters gets voted on, and then the points are tallied. IMHO this would be a lot more descriptive of how much people actually like which character, because while there would be matchups of purely popular character vs side character, a lot of matchups would be decided by 'between these two characters who are in conflict my preference is X'.

*RanVor*

That's an admirably idealistic view of Black you have, but I must disagree. Black is Evil to the core, always was and always will be. He's just more practical than most. What he's pissed at is that the good guys have advantages he views as unfair. He wants to prove that these advantages can be overcome. It just happens that the best way to do that is avoiding classic villain pitfalls.

Your idea seems really good, though.

[Liliet](#)

Kairos: "it used to be about being right, being fair, but it hasn't been about that in a long time, he just wants to win, but it's the kind of victory that means nothing at all"

^ his comments on how far Black strayed from his original objective aside (although that's also really interesting to explore), the original objective definitely appears to be doing the right thing

More interesting is his conversation with Ranker in "Queen's Gambit: Declined"

"“A better world,” the Black Knight murmured, looking up at stars that were not those he'd been born under. “Oh, I have wondered. What it might mean, what it would look like.”

“We made one,” Ranker said. “It's on fire now.”

“And who set the flames?” he smiled. “Cordelia Hasenbach. Catherine Foundling. Kairos Theodosian. Children, in our eyes. Yet is it not the right of the younger generation to look at the work of that which came before it and judge it insufficient?””

This not only implies he's a big fan of Catherine's 'better world' idea, he also was trying to make one with his friends already.

Oh, he told Cat he was after victories for Evil, but he'd also told Cat that he was going to avoid threatening her to not have her eventually backstab him, and that was literally a goal he was after.

Catherine has commented that he 'was a fundamentally evil man' during their post-Second Llesse conversation, but not only is it a foray into terminology Cat usually doesn't use, not only was Cat freshly be-Wintered and had her judgement stiffened proportionally, it was also right before she yelled at him for destroying the weapon despite her asking him not to, and boy did she change her mind on THAT one, later. She was pissed at him for using her as a tool, and that was a very personal upset.

I have an idealistic view of Black, yes, but I think it's strongly supported by the text.  
(these quotes aren't all I have, just the first ones that came to mind as most directly relevant to the specific topic of conversation)

*RanVor*

You win this round, but I'll tell you this: outside of some really outlandish ideas, the text generally tends to support what you want to see in it.

[Liliet](#)

True!

But man, after Akua with the power of friendship fulfilling my fanfic of her genuinely supporting Cat instead of fucking off / backstabbing her at the first opportunity, and Catherine choosing to fuck the Below in the most radical way possible, I'm feeling adventurous 😊

*SilentWatcher*

How did Cat "fuck Below in the most radical way possible" ? Was it not established that NO matter the outcome of Sve Noc vs Cat Below always wins? it was literally written in the guide itself, so i look forward how you will use your bullshit power to twist facts around.

*RanVor*

"The only winning move is not to play".

[Liliet](#)

An outcome that had one of them actually defeat the other would be in Below's favor.

An outcome where the winning side (which Catherine was, Akua had a plan and an advantage over Komena in the trial) cedes its half of the power to the other without requiring the other to actually win first / bleed for it / cross more lines than the other side in a campaign of escalation?

That's defying the Below, and that was the point of why Catherine did what she did.

Click click click. Crabs in the bucket. And one suddenly pushed the other up instead of dragging it back down.

*SilentWatcher*

When your beloved Character even says: Black is a fundamental Evil Man, you still try to wring the story so Black meets your unrealistic Vision of him. He does "good" things because it is more "practical" than "evil". He was honest to Cat because it was practical and would foster her loyalty instead of doom at her hand. Black is and will stay fundamentally Evil. Who says he cant win his Crusade against Above while helping Cat with

her Vision of a better World? He will probably bet on Cat as his Plan to meld Callow and Praes together has failed due to Malicia.

*SilentWatcher*

Kairos argument with Black was not that Black has suddenly a good Objective, but that Black is not using Evil means to win. You see that clearly illustrated in that interlude Chapter where Kairos faces down an entire Army, as he does not want a victory with the army of Helike but a victory for Below. Again you write Cat got Influenced by Winter. Haha you cant just blame Winter for every decision of Cat which disproves your good image of Cat. She was not influenced by Winter in this way, as firstly she was holding the mantle not long enough and secondly Winter makes you rigid and not suddenly makes you think someone is evil. Where exactly did Cat change her Mind on destroying the weapon? She never changed her mind. You should reevaluate how you see Cat and Black as you didnt understand some things how they where written.

*SilentWatcher*

And it was NEVER a goal of Black to have Cat Backstab him, he knew his plans would carry the risk of making Cat angry and planned for either her as a successor or that she does not kill him. The Act of Cat stabbing him was never the Intention it was a Consequence. The more i dissect your Arguments the more holes i find

[Liliet](#)

There is evidence in the text that Black likely planned for Catherine to backstab him from the start.

The one I found most striking on my recent reread was Black's decision to stab Catherine when sending her into the initial Squire Name vision. Masego later told Catherine that it was entirely unnecessary, and Catherine assumed Black was just being dramatic for the hell of it. But the universe is dramatic as well, and Black stabbing Cat (which she was later angry at him for and called him a jackass and wanted to deck him in the face) made it that much more likely that eventually a mirror event would happen (and it did, just not to death). Black couldn't have not known that. He's the man who taught Catherine to

watch everything she says, he wouldn't make a gesture like that without actually intending its inevitable consequence.

And then we have the part where in the Free Cities when Wekesa made a comment that if Catherine were to backstab Black he'd kill her, and Black's reaction was internal horror and the thought 'how many people he loved he would have to kill before this was over' => instead of going 'well I'll just have to make sure Catherine doesn't do that' (WHICH WOULD NOT BE HARD CONSIDERING SHE ALREADY WASN'T GOING TO AND NONE OF BLACK'S INTENTIONS AT THE TIME CONTRADICTED HERS BADLY ENOUGH TO PROVOKE HER TO THAT DEGREE) he went 'well I'll just have to kill Wekesa'.

Catherine discussed this with him explicitly as well, at the start of their shared journey into Liesse, and the best he had to say was "well, not today".

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

I'm wondering something: why do you still read the Guide, if you've grown so scornful of the direction in which it's heading? Why not cut your losses and spend this time on something else? Don't get me wrong, criticism is great and all, but criticism is not quite the same thing as this pronounced and broadly-encompassing personal dislike for the characters and your fellow readers.

Do you simply want to watch things go the way you're sure they will so that you may gloat? If so, I have doubts as to how satisfying it would truly be, even if your confidence is not misplaced (which I also believe, personally).

[\*Liliet\*](#)

So actually I've reread our debate and I realized that the point I actually disagree with you on is /who the status quo favorite is/.

Not to bring in real life politics into this, but half this comment section is a 'why so many gays' shitshow already, I might as well put in my 5 cents.

Amadeus is a white guy with a 'rationalist' mindset matching the title of the series. He's extremely

charismatic and likable, and what chapters he has are always extremely well-written and memorable.

Meanwhile Catherine is a bisexual woman of color, a female protagonist refusing to conform to widespread ideas of what protagonists should be like or what women should be like.

The idea of her winning a popularity contest over him?

That's the best testament to Guide's writing quality that I can think of, and the biggest "fuck you" to the real world status quo.

I love Amadeus a lot. If I were trying to actually pick which of them I like better, I'd be sitting and staring at the wall forever.

But when I pick which one of them I want to /win/, well,

*RanVor*

Excuse me, what?

*IDKWhoitis*

So Black is Black, lovable monster to the Bone. He is a rigid machine which rails against a rigged game and would rather burn everything to prove a point, rather than surrender. He is still that boy he was 50 years ago, underneath all that sarcasm and experience. And we love him for it.

Cat was assigned the role of protagonist, and as such has a significant amount of Screentime. Book 4 pointed out how stagnant Winter Cat was, and by far, did very little other than bitch about how unfair things were and how she was the worst thing to happen to Callow and her friends.

The difference was that one character owned his imperfections, moved past them, actually changed the face of Calernia irreparably, and is willing to sit quiet until it's his turn on stage. Finding an interlude is a little disappointing, but when Black is involved, it somehow feels better. Meanwhile, reading Book 4, felt like a trudge with Cat, 20 chapters of drow bullshit. I love old cat being back, because she's already moved much faster than winter Cat could in several chapters (sans the whole teleport thing).

But in matters of who our favorite monster is, I'm betting on Black.

*SilentWatcher*

What did move faster? It was just the plot which moved unseen. There is no difference between Cat now and Winter Cat.

[Nguyen Hong Hai](#)

Just compared to GS, Black is pretty GS-san when the dices go too far and dude decided to give the middle finger to the GM.

[OutspanFoster](#)

Who do you think would win, the Undead Horror or the gnomes? Cuz I personally feel like the gnomes are the ultimate power here and have maybe sidestepped the Story somehow

*byzantine279*

The gnomes are one of the enforcers. They keep the level of the story from growing too much, or too quickly.

*Just This Guy, Y'know*

The Undead Horror just did a spot of incredible necromancy and conquered a spot of hell. It's not like he did anything important like develop a fertilizer that can prevent famines (besides blood) or work on a steam engine. The gnomes object to technological progress, not horror and bloodshed and things that make a decent being turn pale.

If he had his undead minions working on the fertilizer thing on his level of hell, they'd invade and wipe that level out of existence. Until then, he's fine.

*IDKWhoitis*

You are also assuming the Gnomes would win. There could have been like 3 wars with the Gnomes, and DK could have edited that history out of his civilian populations memory.

*Decius*

I see no reason why the Gnomes wouldn't consider all of Calernia acceptable collateral damage if they wanted to destroy the Dead King.

*St-just*

IIRC it's not so much the Gnomes have sidestepped the story as that the entire continent the story takes place on is...well, not a BACKWATER, necessarily, but too fragmented to really matter on a larger scale.



The Gnomes, like the Dwarves, are real global powers. Like the whole continent of less racist elves who can still reproduce out there somewhere.

[Adrian\\_V](#)

Quick question, where is the part where the continent of elves is mentioned?

[Liliet](#)

The epilogue of book 1, when Bard tears into the Emerald Swords

[Liliet](#)

oh my god I keep confusing book 1 with book 2

it's probably because Cat didn't die at the end of that one

*SpeckofStardust*

"Not you elves, anyway," the Bard said. "It's why they kicked you out, isn't it? The others. The ones that breed with humans, whose kingdom is larger than this entire continent. Lots of room there, but not enough to fit your opinions about lesser races."- Epilogue Book 2

Bard chatting with a couple of Elves.

*hmmmmm*

The gnomes seem to me to be something like Britain during the South American revolutions of the 18th century, or the USA/France in Africa and the Middle East. They're a foreign power capable of global force projection, and able to topple any conventional government in order to safeguard their dominant position and stabilise the political situation, but without anything to gain from direct occupation or colonisation.

If anything, the gnomes are more hands-off. They bomb nations that invent gunpowder and mechanised agriculture\*, but we haven't seen them bankroll proxy wars or launch surgical strikes for any other reasons.

\* Maybe. This isn't outright stated, but "messing with powders" probably means sulphur/charcoal/saltpetre and the "farming machine" was probably a mechanical reaper or thresher.

[Barthumphries](#)

It occurs to me: I don't think the gnomes can bomb dwarves.

[Liliet](#)

they can't bomb them directly but they could most definitely collapse their tunnels on their heads  
oh, that would also ruin all the surface nations above them, but since when did collateral damage stop gnomes? 😡

*antoninjohn*

I wonder how much Cat will get out of the Dwarfs for solving all their problems for them

*Andrew Mitchell*

Interesting insight that they thought the previous arrangement was such a great deal for them. I hope Cat gets more out of them this time, much more.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine absolutely knew the previous arrangement was a great deal for them. It's why she offered the deal to begin with.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Oh, for sure. But it looks like she left a lot on the table and could have got a lot more out of them. I'm just saying I hope she doesn't leave so much on the table this time.

*Skaddix*

She didn't really have a strong position that time. This time she can solve all their problems for the Dwarves for real without losing any troops and handle the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

She still doesn't have a strong position. A strong position would be "well I can back out of this deal and leave you to it if you don't like it". Catherine needs this deal more than they do.

*byzantine279*

And they would need to fight a god in the fullness of its power, and the dwarf under its direction.

It would not be a fun fight.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, true, the situation did change from their last talk due to Sve Noc being stronger now.

However, Catherine needs to hold on to her earlier deal and what she negotiated for herself out of it, thus she can't really afford to take the hardline stance anyway.

*Decius*

She is offering them a lot of help, but she can't credibly threaten to walk away. She needs this deal more than the dwarves do.

*Someguy*

Correction, this time she came as an Attorney representing Drow interests for Dwarven/Callowan Profit. Unfortunate for Sve Noc that her only advocate in this situation has such a massive Conflict of Interest (Confluence of Interest?).

*Skaddix*

Still wondering what eat the Baby is...still suppose it makes sense for the Woe to have a priestess...the woe now has a Fighter, A Thief, A Archer, A Wizard and Priestess classic party.

Granted Night seems to have quite a bit of Druid or Transmutation in the skill line since they shapeshift a lot.

[Liliet](#)

It probably means 'you have free rein to sack as much of Procer as you want, the pricks had it coming in the Above's opinion'

*Nairne .01*

I mostly agree.

Though how much Cat is a priestess and how much a warlock (in D&D terms I mean) remains to be seen.

*caoimhinh*

Funny how Cat ended up as the Priestess of the group. XD

[Adrian\\_V](#)

That glimpse of Cat's new powers, and i loved the other segments, reminded me of the wheel of time latest 3 books, although i keep expecting Drow to suddenly appear to save the day to the confusion of everyone else xD

I had to read it slowly just to stretch the enjoyment as much as i could, i can't wait for the next chapter whether is the epilogue

or another interlude but i hope we see a little of how the Drow will intervene.

### *HardcoreHeathen*

Erratic, you've demonstrated once more your almost unrivaled ability to craft a moment. The heroics of the Proceran guardswoman and the last stand of Friedrich Papenheim were spectacular. In just a few hundred words each, you introduced a character, gave them an arc, and made me care. Scenes like that are exactly what I think Interludes are for: giving a hint of broader perspective that we can't get from our first-person viewpoint character.

However, I don't think that it's a good tool for showing internal development in the viewpoint character. In my opinion, that's the main benefit of a first-person narrative: you can put us inside Cat's head while she has her emotional arc.

Instead, for the second time in a row, the climax of the arc has abruptly POV-shifted to someone else. The last time it was with the Dead King, where between chapters we went from "we assassinated Malicia and now the Dead King is here to speak to us" to "Athal/Malicia's POV about how the assassination failed and the conversation with the Dead King is already over." Now we've done essentially the same thing, except the climactic gambit from the previous chapter actually ended up working this time.

Both of these moments are hugely important for their respective story arcs. They were massive undertakings that required sacrifice, struggle, and self-doubt, and Cat's response and growth to their outcome is sort of the whole point. You can't really convey that from a completely disassociated perspective.

I also have the sneaking suspicion that, just like with the conversation with the Dead King, we're never going to see the conversation with the dwarves about the new deal. I don't know if that'll be important (certainly the private conversation with the Dead King, the most powerful entity on the continent, seems to have not mattered) but it's another important plot point that isn't going to get covered "on screen."

It's like watching a YouTubers React video, where they're watching what sounds like a really interesting video. Except I don't give a shit about their reactions; I just want to see the video.

### [Liliet](#)

Catherine's offscreen conversation with the Dead King is most definitely a Chekhov's Gun.

And Catherine's most immediate recovery from 'oh god I died AGAIN' is not the most interesting part to focus on. I say this as someone who has started like 5 headfics in her head about the immediate aftermath, and they were all boring / fluff with cuddling and recaps. 90% of what would have been going on would just be spreading information about what happened.

It's not like this is the end of the story. We're going to see the impact on Catherine yet.

This is a zoom out to show the big picture. Yeah, it's a little rushed, erratic did say he didn't initially plan a book break here. But it's necessary.

lol

I actually really enjoy the tomes we get to see Cat from other people's perspectives. I think that's one of my favorite things this story does.

[Liliet](#)

YES.

A feeble thing grown even feebler, yet more dangerous ♥

Catherine's #aesthetic is absolutely wonderful, too, and every time we see her from the side we're reminded of why she is so beloved in-universe ♥

*SilentWatcher*

I agree with your opinion, that we as readers should get more then morsels of these conversations, but it is a great tool to leave it out and let the readers fill these gaps themselves, you will undoubtedly imagine an epic and stirring Plot relevant conversation perfectly suited to your tastes. Some conservative readers may get wet over "character development" some enjoy the "fantastic" part of a fantasy story like myself. in leaving out these conversations EE creates suspense and lets each of us imagine the Talks, without disappointing to much. Also it probably saves time to write.

[Liliet](#)

Oh.

There's an opinion that I 100% share with you. Neat

*Soronel Haetir*

Wow, at 219 votes it's Black by 1 (110 to 109).

*Letouriste*

Black would win easily if he wasn't out of sight since so long. Cat got a few strong chapters in the row just last week so that's not really fair. Still think black will beat her tho

*SilentWatcher*

Cat strong chapters?? Ahaha never will i vote for the mortal morron against the black knight

[Liliet](#)

Ah yes, the guy who is much weaker than all his predecessors and advocates against using your Name whenever you can avoid it. That guy.

*SilentWatcher*

Wrong. Black is powerful in the way he uses his tools with skill and precision. Where Cat needs a hammer, Black just uses a needle. Probably the Needle was crafted out of the Souls of his enemies children and he burned a Church to craft it but the Result was worth it in his eyes. He does not flinch in at discomfort and morality. If there would be Chance he would achieve his plan but had to be a monster with a fae mantle to achieve it, HE WOULD NOT EVEN HESITATE. Lets look at Cat. She threw away her Hammer and now borrows one which does not belong to her. She just cant rid herself of her morality to achieve her goals and all this whining how uncomfortable the mantle of power is and how much better it is to be a crippled mortal. On the other Hand i see Black suffering gladly to ensure his legions can march faster. Cat can not even stomach a bit discomfort for an indestructible Body.

*SilentWatcher*

Considering all the dead heroes Black left in his Wake he is probably the most powerful Black Knight in the history of Praes. What does it matter if he cant flip his hand and a tower crumbles? he dislodges 1 stone and it crumbles from that. This does not work for Cat as she rather uses her fists and gambles for victory (like making a leap of faith in gifting Sve Noc Winter) instead of searching for that 1 weak stone, as it would be not morally acceptable to use that particular poor stone's weakness. Blacks Philosophy is Result is everything that counts, so comparing him to the last Black knight in light of this Philosophy he is more powerful than the last Black Knight.

[Liliet](#)

So, you're definitely not a fan of morality and doing the right thing, huh.

Or building a better world, which is Black's stated goal.

*SilentWatcher*

Black's goal is not a better world. It's winning. Chapter 37 Madman. He said in the epilogue of book 3 he wonders what a better world would look like, but we don't know what his goals are.

[Liliet](#)

That chapter was about how Black was pissed about Praes being stuck in a starvation/war cycle unable to break the pattern.

Oh, he gave a pretty speech. He's great at speeches. And at lying to himself.

*RanVor*

Consider this: I love to read about selflessness and heroism. I'm also a sucker for redemption stories. So this entire thing with Cat becoming more moral is fine and dandy. And yet, if I wanted to read about good people doing good things, I wouldn't have picked *A Practical Guide to EVIL*, would I?

[Liliet](#)

Oh my god I hear you.

The title to the series is the greatest mockery I've ever seen.

I found out I liked it being about good people doing good things more than if it matched the title though ♥

*RanVor*

There'd be no problem if it was like that from the beginning. But the title held for the first book, maybe the second as well, and then started to gradually lose its meaning until it became pretty much hollow. I have mixed feelings about this so far. We'll see what comes from this when the next book starts rolling.

I'll withhold my judgement for now, but I hate it when the show betrays its premise, and I feel like

this may be happening to the Guide right now.  
Nevertheless, it's still an amazing read and I'm  
very glad to have found it.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, on reread I think that was the intended  
premise from the beginning. Black's early  
explanation to Catherine that the most practical  
way to handle an occupied country is to be good to  
its population laid foundation for increasing  
evidence mounting in favor of the theory that evil  
is impractical and the best way to be evil is to  
not be, which the characters promptly set out to  
demonstrate.

Erratic is a troll is all it is 😊

*Skaddix*

I mean Black has been out of sight might be a good thing...Cat  
recent Under Dark Adventures has split the fanbase to a degree.

*Aotrs Commander*

Though it nearly physically pained me to chose between them, a  
long period of introspection and an objective analysis of my  
reactions indicated that I should vote for Cat by the very  
narrowest of margins (and probably all the wrong reasons).

Looking at the tally, is has slipped in her favour. (Perhaps,  
like me, it was a hard decision.)

[Marcus Rendell](#)

Great chapter, although I feel like "the dear are coming" should  
be "the dead are coming".

*magesbe*

Maybe the dead are just very dear to their hearts.

*Decius*

Or the deer are coming. Goats can be dangerous when packed  
with explosives, why not other quadrupeds?

*Nairne .01*

Now imagine DK's army filled with deers or undead deers.

[onedollargum](#)



I got a huge Dark Souls 2 vibe from this chapter. Holding out against the undead on the frozen docks, bargaining with dwarves, consulting souls of fire and regaining humanity.

Loved it!

*LM*

Can we stop making every other character gay? It's growing a bit ridiculous at this point.

*Morgenstern*

That's your opinion and that's fine. But please speak for yourself and not for "all of us".

To juxtapose it with another opinion, I, for one, rather like what EE is doing here, as a juxtaposition to yet another component of our out-of-story reality, especially in that doesn't-matter-to-people-in-world way. I find it a blessed respite in at least one aspect from all the real-world -isms, many of which were perfectly transported and/or even used as hyperboles in-world. If this is about putting up a mirror, the resulting mix is just fine in my eyes.

*KageLupus*

Honestly, it also kind of makes sense. Imagine a world where homosexuality was not a taboo, and from the sounds of it might never have been one. You are going to have a lot more of those couples running around. Between bi and gay both being widely accepted it, it doesn't seem that unreasonable that you'd have something like every other character falling into those relationships.

[Barthumphries](#)

I don't see how it couldn't have some sort of stigma. To continue a bloodline you need an heir, which usually means man and woman. Given that lower class people usually copy higher class, that would mean most would go for a similar relationship even just to continue their own bloodline.

And if that's what most people do, then a homosexual relationship is going to be a bit odd and can't help but carry some sort of stigma.

[Liliet](#)

Don't forget that adoption exists. Communal childcare is a thing for human societies, and it allows – nay, necessitates – that some people not, in fact, have children of their own to instead help take care of the children of others.

See: Wekesa and Tikoloshe.

See also: in this world apparently miracles exist that enable children to be had even with an incompatible genital combination (source: Brandon Talbot's hilariously awkward talk with Catherine in Book 3)

And of course, it's pretty hard for a stigma to emerge when Named set precedent for what is and isn't approved by the Heavens 😊

*caoimhinh*

LM, dude, the protagonist is bisexual, you are a bit too far into the story to complain about gay characters now hahaha.

Besides, it's like one LGBT character for every 20 or more straight characters, take it easy, even the characters in the story don't care about it.

Here it's like: a character is introduced, they are gay, no one makes a fuss, characters do things, move on, plot happens, it has nothing to do with their sexuality, the story goes on, cool.

This matter-of-factly way of taking on the sexuality of characters is actually way better than how so many tv shows and webnovels handle the subject. Here there's no forcing any characters to be gay or twisting plotlines for the sake of having drama about sexuality or any of that ridiculous stuff, everyone's chill about it and it's not plot-relevant; it's just part of what a character is, just like sexual orientation is just a part of what a person is, but it's not the defining trait nor the most important part of who you are.

[Liliet](#)

Can we stop making every other character straight? The entire history of fiction has already done every possible straight storyline 1000+ times, it's growing ridiculous at this point.

*werafdsaew*

Who is this \*we\*, the royal we? Speak for yourself.

[sengachi](#)

Do you get upset and leave comments when every character in a story is (statistically unrealistically) straight? If not, kindly fuck off and take your thinly veiled homophobia with you.

*Gunslinger*

Catherine being so cheery can only mean Archer is still alive.  
One can hope!

Also I'm so happy we got a look at her. I was honestly expecting her to show up only in the next book so it would be a long wait!

[BarthHumphries](#)

Typo thread

an endless horde of orcs and heretics that at the corpses of the fallen

Change at to ate

And several others...

*nipi*

Well I guess it was too early for the Dead King to show that he can imitate Cat and have that giant of an undead stuffed full of explosives.

[Liliet](#)

Goblins make explosives. Praes isn't exactly neighbours with Keter and hasn't exactly participated in the Crusades. It's entirely plausible that the Dead King does not, in fact, have access to any.

[sengachi](#)

Goblins make explosives with hell-based materials. I'm guessing the Dead King has long since reverse engineered and improved on whatever they've got. If he's not using it, it's because he's saving it in reserve.

[Liliet](#)

Long since WHAT?

He hasn't even ENCOUNTERED them.

[sengachi](#)

Uh, what makes you think the Dead King has never encountered goblins? There was a whole secret war when he and Praes duked it out in the Hells. He also could have heard through his spies about goblin munitions. I just can't imagine that the Dead King would be totally ignorant about \*the\* thing that one of the races on Calernia is known for.

Also, let's be real, the Dead King can definitely scry better than Masego's observatory. He probably has a few dozen comparable setups at least. He's probably the single most likely person in the world to know exactly what goblin munitions actually are and how they're made.

### Javvies

Goblin munitions being used regularly/commonly are a recent development. One that is due entirely to Black and the Reforms.

They wouldn't have been used much, if at all, during the Secret Hellwars.

### Liliet

...I forgot about the Secret Wars...

Ok, it's about 50/50 if he has munitions or not, depending on whether the Secret Wars fielded a significant amount

### *Nairne .01*

It could be that he has more knowledge on the munitions the goblins make and knows of some consequences that are either not worth it in his eyes while the matrons either don't know of said consequences or do not care because the munitions are perhaps used only outside of their domain(though that seems unlikely).

### *nipi*

I hope Cat at least got a few good oaths out of her new Goddess.

### *Nairne .01*

The whole thing was about faith / trust.  
Requesting oaths would defeat that.

Freely making them on the other hand....

### *caoimhinh*

Lycaonese are true badasses, that principality should be filled with long bloodlines of Heroic Named. Friedrich's replies to the Enemy carried with them a tone of honor and badassery that even Cat's replies don't have. Friedrich didn't land any sick burn, but his words were... appropriate for the occasion.

The Dead King's comment a confirmation of Lycaonese being descendants of "the People of the Wolf", which is kinda cool,

that whole culture and their descendants have been at war for countless years against the Kingdom of Death. And yet they stand.

On another note, please tell us that Archer is fine, please.

[Liliet](#)

Named are those that stand out. Lycaonese heroes don't stand out, they're exactly the same as every other person there.

Can an entire nation be Named? Not consist of Named, but have a Role as a nation as a whole? 😊

*caoimhinh*

Oh, good point, that might explain it.

Although I think they should have more Named there, I mean, there are bound to be some more extraordinary people than others among the Lycaonese, especially since they should have developed a lot of techniques, weapons, and magic to fight against the Kingdom of Death and the Ratkins (though that doesn't seem to be the case, at least we haven't seen them for now).

It might also be that the Lycaonese Heroes are currently in another part of the continent fighting in another front of the Crusade or on their way back to the principality.

*RanVor*

Procer has few heroes in general, but the ones they have are probably either with the Pilgrim or supporting Cleves and Hainaut, which are less heavily fortified than Hannover.

*caoimhinh*

Also, a point to remember, Lycaonese aren't a nation, they are an ethnicity/cultural group and hold 4 of the Principalities of Procer: Bremen, Hannover, Neustria, and Rhenia, with Hannover appearing to be the most important or at least having the most badass bunch of people XD.

*Novice*

Isn't that what Callow was? A great Good bulwark against the Evil Praes?

[Liliet](#)

...I'm just going to agree with you here ♥ ♥ ♥

*caoimhinh*

Yeah, and Callow has teams of Heroic Named spawning almost every year, which Black has effectively hunted down for 20 years, he even mentioned in early chapters how they are appearing even faster now than before the Conquest.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, they were appearing faster now BECAUSE of the Conquest, as a response to a specific threat.

*RanVor*

Bloodlines are a Levantine thing.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

Read up on the origin of the name "Lycaonese" and the lupine connection turns out to be directly present in it.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lycaon\\_%28Arcadia%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lycaon_%28Arcadia%29)

*Aaron Sofaer*

I love that Cat is back to our favorite version of Cat: hit them with the box, not with your raw power.

The Lycaonese are badass as all hell, holy shit! As mentioned, the way they go from zero to "hold until the last of us is dead" was super well done.

Also, it amazes me that there's always that one person who just really hates it and posts twenty times every two days about how much he hates it. Get over it, dude, the story isn't yours to dictate.

*SilentWatcher*

How does one hit better with a box? with Power. Of course i know the story is not mine, but the comments are here to write our opinion, and i will hit you all with mine until you stop glorifying the Devolution of Cats Power. Please EE show these fools another twist like when Cat first became part of Winter.

[Liliet](#)

omg ok

*caoimhinh*

Skill is better than Power, that has been the point of all the story, one needs to be practical, not overwhelming, in order to achieve a victory. It's the entire reason why Amadeus, the Calamities, and Malicia are a force to be reckoned with, while the crazy Villains with flying fortresses, great rituals, and

armies of monsters could not achieve any lasting victory since the times of Triumphant.

Cat is weakened but that doesn't mean she is weak now, as she put it "I no longer hold the power, but I wield it" so she still has power, probably more than before as she now can use the Night too, but she is no longer bound to it by the rules imposed unto the owners of power (A.K.A the gods and demigod-level beings like the Fae), more importantly, she has a sharper and clearer mind now, she will be more focused and use her power more efficiently.

We'll have to wait until a couple of chapters later to see what exactly her new fighting power is and how it affects her, I wonder about the exact deal she has with Sve Noc, since there lies the nature of her use of power now.

*SilentWatcher*

also you read my comment wrong, i never said Cat needs overwhelming power, But Power makes everything easier like hitting people with the box

[NZPIEFACE](#)

the fuck dude, you were praising black up there for hitting a single brick to bring down a tower up there.

*SilentWatcher*

Do you not understand it? Skill is Power too. With equal tools, Black is more powerful than Cat in every Way as the application of Power is part that Power. Cat needs more Power to smash the Tower as she is not as good in application as Black. If Power is worthless and gets everytime defeated by practical means, why are there so few stories of 1 Unnamed beating a Named? Even Bard is overpowered with immortality, invulnerability, near omniscience. Cat thought herself in a conversation with Pickler, Power can be so overwhelming there is NOTHING you can do to bridge the Gap. Maybe she is no longer rigid as Fae, but principle Alienation will still be a problem as it appears when mortals use Power not meant for Mortals.

*SilentWatcher*

If you look at how she defeated William and Akua at first Liesse, she was practical in using a sword in a stone story and suddenly Creation made her more POWERFUL as she needed that Power to win.

[Liliet](#)

Exactly.

Catherine doesn't need WINTER POWER to win if she's able to bend the narrative so that she has the exact amount of power she needs to win at crucial points.

She was better at story-weaving pre-Winter, because being more rigid story-wise is one of the attributes Winter was forcing on her.

She has all the power she needs, already.

### NZPIEFACE

Dude, cat's strong because she can whack people with a box. Basically no one else can.

*CipherSKT*

First off. A direct address.

Hi. Not sure anyone else has offered but I would gladly edit out typos on ALL the chapters for you Erraticacerrata.

Add in the occasional missing word.

I would suggest someone proofreads the chapter again to make sure I didn't take liberties with the masterpiece

For free (or just a mention lol)

Okay. That said, I know he's busy. Any of you gentlemen know who I can get in contact with to arrange that?

*Samantha*

I'm very interested in this new theme for Cat's evolution.

I see silentwatcher going on above about how this is terrible, cat is now a slave and has lost her power and therefore all relevance.

All I can say, is I think that they'd end up as one of those ranting villains spouting off about power in this setting. You know. The ones with INFINITE POWER that then do nothing and die to a plucky hero?

I always felt, reading this, that the main important themes here are that its not raw personal power that matters.

Its wether you can put your finger on the scales. Wether you can shape the story. Being human grants great advantages in that way. A repeated theme we see mentioned over and over is that the old



monsters get stuck in their ways. The inhuman immortals like Sve Noc and the Dead King and so on.

Cat as a human was always more dangerous than Cat as a demi-fae, because she wasn't limited.

I read the whole transformation with a sinking heart. Even as Cat was drowning armies and crushing enemies under ice and casually backhanding monsters. Not because she was becoming weaker, but because she was giving away her agency. The free will that allowed her to fuck over the system as an underdog every time. She was GAINING problems, rather than surmounting them. She was being pulled into a story. Calcified. Turned static and locked into the pattern in the same way as other old monsters.

People comment that they wonder what new powers she got from Sve Noc and try to calculate if she's gained or lost power... but that's mostly irrelevant I feel.

She's regained her humanity and therefore all her real power. The strength of the underdog. The agency of the weak. The free will of the human.

In this setting, that's a thousand times more important.

Also, importantly, Cat is going to be MUCH happier like this. She hated the principle of alienation and her distance from humanity.

You could look at it like 'CAT IS NOW SUBORDINATE TO SVE NOC' and be unhappy that your power fantasy was thrown aside.

But this was never that kind of story anyway.

And frankly... uh. Well, I mean. Sve Noc made her proclamation about Cat being her high priestess and all that.

Cat meanwhile is probably going to go 'okay cool' and casually walk back off to Callow to get on with things as if nothing has changed.

Some ancient god thing has declared her to be tied to them for all eternity? Swell, but I have a war to win and a people to save. Thanks for the ability to smoke my pipe again, I missed that

As both this interlude and the general themes of the story reveal: Cat may be weaker now, but she's far more dangerous in every way that matters.

(I mean dear god, Black is weak as hell and he's the most terrifying villain in a long time.)

*werafdsaew*

Do we ever find out what was Folly? Or is this a thread that's never going to be resolved?

[Liliet](#)

GOOD QUESTION.

Hopefully in the next book we will?

*Shaerick 68*

Damn, chapters like this make it very difficult to dislike Procer.

[Liliet](#)

There's a difference between the people of the country and the rulers at the top of it.

(Say I, a Ukrainian who has grandparents in Russia)

*Xinci*

This was a nice feeling, though I still feel the undead are so... small for what potential they seem to be able to have given how the DK can craft them.

Still dissapointed in the Dead Kings undead Usage in this war. I like the Wolves, their way of life carries a familiar type of tone to me. Though at times they are weak, duty gives them weight.

General assumption i had would be the Dead king gradually adapting his forces(crafting/remaking undead) to his enemies. Creating different bone structures, vein for liquid, or sacks for gasses to adopt new tactical and strategic purposes.

1. Assumption being that the Dead king can animate and modify organs and bones growth and regulatory functons for his undead. Bone formations can be grown for some excellent resilience for movement

2. General rule for skeletons is they are as strong or stronger than they were when alive but with less weight because no flesh(center points/weakpoints of power vary depending on undead type and sapience). Some key-points would be joints, and going against strong opponents(those who can blow them away due to less weight or break too much of their bone at once, so in this case heroic strength?).

3. Course dont know if we saw his sapient undead in that last fight. But plenty of tactics they could have. Something that doesnt tire can wear heavy armor(can be custom crafted to help the skeleton fit along with being full of liquid or sand to make it heavier and thus harder to push away). That also means each strike or bow fired can be done so long as the bone and magical

"ligaments"(however they exist) can hold.Living bone could be grown for undead potentially given the specimen shown earlier. Cloth and leather can be used to help keep their joints in place, Flammable materials that exude toxic gas can be hold in containers that might be crushed(mix in the right minerals and pressure from their liquid ballast might get a spark going and light em up), or burned in the skeletons(best for heavy/full plate). Maybe something better for underground or open field usage and psychological warfare. Silent army of armored figures surrounded by a mist of toxic gas march quickly and steadily onto the enemy. I am more unsure on group tactics with them though...since we have seen stealth actions but not really how they fight beyond the focus on the \*numberless dead theme\*

Like could he have sent intangible units(wraiths,ghost) to move in past those traps instead of heroes or was the place warded? Dunno might be the small vision here just left a lot to be seen later?

[TeK](#)

I think he is restricted not in the imagination or undead capabilities, but in the narrative apartment.

*Chrischinbrush*

This is honestly the first time I have liked Procer. Spitting in the face of a centuries-old evil, holding fast for the armies to muster, all with the knowledge of an inevitable death. It was truly moving.

*Rup*

...👍...and YET we stand...lest dawn fails...

*Rup*

...absurdly...i heard "the Girl who climbed the Tower" when Ines climbed that watchtower in part 1...dunno why she felt like a micro-Cat...for Cleves..for Cleves...

[TeK](#)

Is nobody going to mention Balrog-powered forges? Ok.

*Andrew Mitchell*

That's a nice connection make. Headcanon updated.

*burguulkodar*

A good ending to this book.

I always knew Cat wasn't fit to Rule. She is a good "black knight", or in this case "Priestess (of) Knight".

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## Epilogue

*"By hook and crook we will all hang, High Lords, from a noose woven of our many loose ends. But cheer up: none are beyond salvation, not even the likes of us. Let us see, at long last, if we can turn back the tyranny of the sun."*

– Extract from the coronation speech of Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

Anaxares pricked his hand and cursed.

Damn needle. It must have been made in Penthes, as wantonly treacherous as the rest of those Wicked Foreign Oligarchs. He wiped off the droplet of blood and got back to the work of sewing back on the bottom of his shoe. Servants kept offering him increasingly perfidious boots, and he was certain the pair made of solid gold had been the result of what passed for the Tyrant's sense of humour, but he'd continued pretending blindness long enough they'd eventually desisted. He would have preferred to go without shoes at all, if he could, as he'd not been granted the right to use the foreign product by a proper committee, but three days of bleeding feet had eventually dissuaded him. He'd bought an old pair with the last silvers from his begging bowl, but the march was using them sorely. Anaxares had grown to hate walking a great deal lately. He'd never done so much of it during his years as a diplomat, and never in a locale so insistently hostile. He'd heard a bush had eaten a soldier, last night, swallowed the man whole when he went to relieve himself. There was hardly a piece of the Waning Woods that was not out to kill everything it saw.

The Hierarch of the League of Free Cities finished sowing his shoes back together at the cost of only minor wounds, which sadly he could not even consider had been taken in service to the Republic. The People had cut him off, sent him adrift. Worse yet, their elected representatives sometimes requested his advice. *His advice*. As if he were not some wretched despot. He'd immediately reported the people involved to the nearest kanenas for treason against the Will Of The People, their horrid attempts to involve a duplicitous Named into the affairs of Glorious Bellerophon marking a dark day. *Advice*, Gods. A dark day indeed. He slipped on his shoes and began looking for an acceptable spot to dig a hole to sleep in. League dignitaries had alleged there was a tent he was meant to sleep in, but he'd closed his eyes and hummed

until they went away. Sadly straying too far from the camp would see him encircled by heavily-armed soldiers keeping a vigil, so he'd have to stay within the bounds even though the very notion made his skin crawl. There was a patch of tepid, mostly dry earth far enough from a fire he wouldn't be implicitly agreeing with its existence, and there Anaxares knelt and drew back his sleeves. He was out of silvers and so could not trade for a shovel, meaning he'd have to dig by hand.

It shouldn't take more than a few hours, he thought.

"O Mighty Hierarch, Peerless Ruler of all the League and its people-"

"How dare you," Anaxares snarled.

The Tyrant of Helike grinned, draped over a Proceran fainting couch held up by a gaggle of chittering gargoyles.

"I come bearing tribute to your greatness, O Sublime One," Kairos Theodosian said, and ordered one of the gargoyles forward.

It presented Anaxares with a shovel. It was, he could not help but notice, made entirely of rubies. That monster.

"I will report this flagrant attempt of bribery to the proper authorities," Hierarch said.

"Which are?" Tyrant said, leaning forward with interest.

"The Tyrant of Helike," Anaxares reluctantly admitted.

"I expect he will chide me most thoroughly," the boy mused. "Rumour is he's a real stickler about these things."

"Why do you torment me so, Tyrant?" he sighed.

"Mostly habit, at this point," Kairos confessed. "It's like picking at a wound, once you start it's nigh impossible to stop."

"I will rise above this nonsense," Hierarch said. "I must see to my bedding."

"Did you notice that half the Bellerophan army is standing guard every night?" Tyrant cheerfully asked. "I think they mistook the Tolesian term for ten with the one meaning a thousand in their manual and they've been standing by the mistranslation ever since."

Anaxares' lips thinned, deeply offended at the insinuation that the Republic could ever make such a mistake. Even if they had, which they had not, it would have been a superior interpretation of the original text and inherently better by virtue of having been voted upon by the People. Naturally, as with all matters

related to military texts, knowledge of what was voted upon would not have been held by the People as it was illegal for said knowledge to be held by any not having drawn the lot of soldiers. This was only right and proper. But he would not correct the Tyrant's blatantly false assertions, it would only encourage the boy.

"Huh," Kairos said. "I thought for sure that would do it. I suppose all that's left is helping you dig your hole."

Anaxares frowned.

"That would taint the work," he gravely said.

Relying upon foreign labour – which was, by definition, the product of tyranny – without official sanction was treason.

"Then I'd pick up the pace then, if I were you," the Tyrant grinned. "We're about to hold a war council and at this point nobody still believes they'll be able to get you into an actual tent."

The Gods were fickle, and so when the other dignitaries arrived the hole was only ankle-deep. Anaxares sat in in regardless, threadbare cloak pooling around him. The usual despots had crawled out of their ivory towers, it seemed. A two-striped askretis from Delos' Secretariat, a preached from Atalante laden with beads, the young Basileus of Nicae and his former colleague Magister Zoe of Stygia. The two grasping Exarchs of Penthes – they had not succeeded at assassinating or disgracing the other, and so now uneasily shared the mantle of Wanton Tyranny – and finally the dignified figure of Bellerophon's senior, and incidentally only, general. Flanked by kanenas ready to execute him at the first sign of treasonous ambition, he noted with approval. The Delosi askretis broke the silence first, sending one of his scribes for ink and parchment.

"The meaning of your metaphor escapes me, Hierarch," he said, eyeing the barely-visible hole curiously. "Could I trouble you to clarify it for the records?"

"It was not as wet as the ground further out," Anaxares explained.

"Ah," the askretis said, sounding enlightened. "And what does the ground stand for? The wetness?"

"Impiety, clearly," the Atalantian preacher said, clutching her beads. "The Hierarch reminds us of the virtue of humility, chiding us for this vainglorious enterprise."

"It is a hole," Magister Zoe mildly said. "That he is going to sleep in. Like he has every other night so far."

"How like a Stygian to grasp the obvious and only that," the Delosi dignitary scathingly dismissed.

"And so I do declare this session of the war council of the League of Free Cities to have formally begun," the Tyrant cheerfully said.

The crazed boy enjoyed these councils so much, Anaxares thought, largely because no one else did. He'd insisted they be held regularly with the full roster of League dignitaries.

"The Glorious Republic of Bellerophon," the general started, and Hierarch murmured 'First and Greatest of the Free Cities, May She Reign Forever' along with him, "would like to formally protest the opening of hostilities in the Samite Gulf."

"The record will show this," the askretis promised with religious fervour.

"I'll start bothering to listen to your people on the subject of fleets when you actually learn how to swim," the Basileus of Nicae retorted.

Anaxares' back straightened with indignation. This was calumny. The knowledge of how to swim had not been restricted in decades – has never been restricted or not, he immediately mentally corrected – though with good reason showing too much eagerness in learning the skill was considered suspicious.

"I've been led to believe this protest comes too late, regardless," the Tyrant of Helike said.

The young ruler of Nicae grit his teeth.

"Allies," he began, "do not spy on each other, Tyrant."

"Spy?" Kairos said, putting a trembling hand over his heart. "Gods, I would *never*. We merely helped your messengers carry their messages."

"Like anyone believes that," the Basileus sneered.

"Anyhow," Tyrant said, "as I was saying – my spies in the Nicaean ranks tell me the Ashuran fleet was taken by surprise while docked in Arwad and torched before the city itself was sacked."

The ruler of Nicae scoffed.

"Our ships withdrew afterwards," he added. "And are now blockading Smyrna. With the loss of their other fleet in the assault on Thalassina, the Ashurans are now effectively taken out of the war."

"Would the Republic care to protest the blockade a well?" the Delosi dignitary asked.

"Instructions will be sought from the People," the Bellerophan general stoutly replied.

And would be received, Anaxares thought, within the next six months after vote was held. Perhaps along with a suggested order of battle, if the message arrived when they'd entered the lands claimed by the Principate.

"That's all well and good, but the Thalassocracy was never our true worry," Magister Zoe opined. "Last we heard the armies of Levant were marching up Procer, in pursuit of the Carrion Lord. They're the ones we're at risk of encountering."

"This was a glorious victory," the Basileus insisted. "Simply because the Magisterium hardly contributed any ships you would-"

"You kicked the Ashurans while they were down, boy," one of the Penthesian Exarchs said, rolling her eyes. "If the Praesi hadn't slapped them around first we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"The foul empress Malicia struck a blow at all children of the Heavens, that day," the Atalantian preacher said. "Let us not celebrate the death of those taken while serving holy purpose."

"Bead-clutcher," Magister Zoe mocked. "Where was this ambivalence when we planned the invasion of Procer?"

"There is no invasion," Hierarch stated.

There was a moment of silence as all their gazes turned to him. Most of them, he realized, had forgotten he was even there.

"As the Principate of Procer is an assembly of grasping despots having forcefully seized land and authority from its inhabitants, legally speaking there can be no such thing as invasion of it," he clarified.

"Hear hear," the Tyrant grinned. "We are *liberators*, my friends. We undertake the gentle – kindly, even – business of liberating all those pretty Proceran cities. Certainly nothing so uncouth as invasion."

Even true words sounded incorrect coming from the boy's mouth, Anaxares thought. After that the council descended into the usual squabbles. The Penthesians wanted the armies of the League to march swifter through the Waning Woods, shaving days off the week remaining until they entered Iserre. Most other commanders disagreed on basis of such haste opening the soldiers to ambush by the creatures haunting the woods, though Magister Zoe was in



agreement with the Exarchs and offered the slave phalanxes as vanguard. As usual, it came to nothing and the dignitaries retreated stewing in the same irritation they had brought with them. The Tyrant made a production of leaving the ruby shovel behind, but eventually followed suit. Anaxares remained in his hole, eyes closed. The visions came to his eyes and ears on the wind, unbidden and unwanted. He could only **Receive** them.

A blind boy treading through a dead city, carrying the deaths with him – lash and ladder, into ever deeper darkness. Armies gathering under mountains, a sea of banners snarling like wolves in the wind. The Augur sitting alone in a frosted garden, spoken whispers still echoing in her ears like a coiling snake. Death marching under water, darkening the sky in flocks, spreading like poison in a legion unending. A grinning woman in the dark smoking a pipe and gathering an army, seen only until pale blue eyes forced the vision to end. Bands of green things crawling out of tunnels swords in hands, silent in the night. A one-eyed orc and a woman dappled with ink, leading an army in flight. But most importantly of all, on some barren shore, a knight in white stood with his sword high. A killer who had taken lives, but never at his own behest. Behind him, looking through a coin, something unfathomable loomed. The Seraphim, Anaxares thought. The Choir of Judgement. The angels who had judged and slain people of the League.

The Hierarch smiled.

For that, they would be judged in turn.

—

Amadeus was bemused.

Upon realizing the depth of his mistake he'd expected swift death to follow, delivered by as many heroes as the opposition could scrape together for a spot of killing on the lake. Part of that had been correct. A band of Named had come after him, girded with Light and wearing the grim rictuses of individuals carrying out a necessary evil – always without the capital, of course, and preferably phrased as the 'greater good' instead. To his continued bafflement, however, they had yet to cut his throat. On one of the rare occasions where he was not put under enchantment to remain inert, mainly when it was deemed necessary that he be fed and allowed to relieve himself, he'd politely inquired to his captors about what kind of second-rate outfit they were running. Really, keeping him prisoner? It was asking for this story to be turned on them, considering the amount of loved ones he still had out there. Unless the Saint of Swords was intent on confessing her deep affections for him – unlikely, since she took great relish in punching him unconscious before enchantments were laid – it was likely someone in the opposition had decided to get clever about this.

Hearing out whatever funeral pyre of a plan was behind this ought to be good for a chuckle or two. He was awakened long enough for half-stale bread to be pressed into his hand, and he was left to eat it with the Saint of Swords standing behind him sword unsheathed. Though damnably hungry, Amadeus threw over his shoulder the stickiest crumbs he could find and smilingly excused it as an ancient Wasteland custom he could not eat without. Everyone knew Duni were an ignorant and superstitious lot, after all. Laurence de Montfort replied by clouting him over the ear, which he took as a moral victory. By the looks of their surroundings, they were still keeping to the countryside and avoiding roads and cities. The temperature had significantly cooled, though that could be the result of the turning season just as northwards travel.

"Drink," the Grey Pilgrim said, pressing the gourd to his lips.

Amadeus did. He'd inhabited this body as Named for so long he'd lost the sense of how long it would take for him to become this thirsty under more natural circumstances, but he suspected at least six hours. After, though, he pursued his curiosity.

"You appear to be carrying me north," he said. "And have been for... a fortnight, at least, likely more."

"That is none of your concern," the Pilgrim said, the Levantine roots subtly affecting his pronunciation of Lower Miezán.

Amadeus raised an eyebrow.

"Are you quite certain," he said, "that you would not prefer to extol your plan to me in great detail?"

He didn't even hear the blow coming. The Saint, he mused when they woke him the following day, did not have much of a sense of humour. He told her as much while picking at his daily bread.

"Think you're funny, do you?" Laurence de Montfort sneered.

He was not, in fact, certain she was sneering. He was facing the wrong way and quite tightly bound, save for his forearms. But given the tone, he would allow himself to presume.

"I have my moments," Amadeus mused. "I did hear this funny jest, from someone very dear to me. It was about this very arrogant woman who had her belly opened and crawled away holding in her guts."

He paused.

"The punchline is that you'll grow old and die, while Hye won't," he helpfully added.

He did not get to finish his bread that evening, by dint of being knocked unconscious. To his amusement, the following night it was another hero standing behind him. The Rogue Sorcerer, he thought, if the old reports of the Eyes had any accuracy to them. Likely the author of the enchantment that kept him slumbering as the others journeyed.

"I've been instructed to put you under spell of silence if you attempt to engage me in conversation," the hero quietly told him.

"That seems unnecessary," Amadeus said. "I am, after all, entirely at your power."

"Pilgrim's orders," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

"That is unfortunate," the dark-haired man said. "It is not too late to save your parents."

No reply was given. Amadeus frowned, then yelled as loudly as he could. None of the heroes breaking their fast so much as glanced in his direction. Ah, already under the spell. He had neither heard nor felt the man cast. Interesting. He truly *was* bereft of even the smallest trace of his Name. He flicked a miffed glance at the ground.

"Before my last stand, truly?" he said. "I could have slain a few on my way down, you cheapskates."

Four more evenings, and not once did the Grey Pilgrim do him the courtesy of a morality debate by the fireside. He could respect the professionalism involved, but it was really quite irksome. Three more after that, and once: the last awakening, to his surprise, was in the middle of the night. Someone had botched their enchantment, it seemed. Amadeus found himself quite tightly constrained: manacles on his feet, ropes on his legs, another set of manacles keeping his hands behind his back and what looked like an enchanted band of middle around his chest. Well, they wouldn't take themselves off on their own. He quietly rolled around until his fingers clasped around a somewhat sharp rock, and he considered the manner in which this should be approached. He'd need to dislocate at least one of his arms, and likely a wrist as well. To slip the manacle he'd need blood to ease the way, and that meant cutting open a vein – though he'd need to be careful not to nick an artery, as he was rather troublingly fragile at the moment. Wound first, he decided. It'd be harder to be accurate with the stone if his arm was already dislocated. Shifting his fingers, he began digging the sharp edge into his skin.

"I'm curious," the Wandering Bard said. "After you slip loose, assuming you can, then what?"

Amadeus sighed.

"Debate is still taking place," he replied, "as to whether I should attempt to steal a horse or shove this humble stone through a hero's eye socket."

"Pretty sure Laurence can outrun a horse," the Bard mused.

"I can't," he quite reasonably pointed out. "Small steps... what happens to be your name, at the moment?"

"Marguerite of Baillons," the Bard replied.

He snorted.

"Alamans, truly?" he said. "Were all the other bodies taken?"

"Hey, if I could pick I'd be a seven foot tall blonde with a miraculous rack and thighs like trees every single time," the Bard said. "Now *that* was a spin of the wheel. They don't make them like that in Levant anymore."

He moved around, trying to sit, but found himself stuck on the ground. Most unpleasant. The Wandering Bard lent a helping hand, dragging him up, and he found himself looking at the abomination's latest form. Slender and dark-haired, loose and going down her back. Smiling blue eyes and heart-shaped lips. A convincing facsimile of life, he would concede. The flask in her hand was already open, and her shoddy lute laying further down in the grass.

"Drink?" she offered.

"Most kind of you," he agreed.

She poured the liquor down his throat until he raised his hand, swallowing a cough.

"Gods," Amadeus got out. "Is that the horrid fermented cherry extract from Atalante?"

"It's just the *foulest* thing, isn't it?" she grinned. "It's like it can't decide whether it wants to be sweets or poison."

"And to think they call me a monster," he muttered. "I've never fed such torment to prisoners."

"Another?" Marguerite offered.

"Might as well," Amadeus said. "I'm not looking forward to opening that vein, this ought to take the edge off."

Another spot of torture later his belly and throat had warmed, at the mere price of the taste of a violently misused orchard taking over his palate.

"So, you might be wondering why I'm here," the Bard said.

"I'm rather more curious as to why none of your fellows have awakened," he said. "Their senses should be sharper than that."

"If they were going to wake, I wouldn't be here," Marguerite shrugged.

"Convenient," Amadeus said.

"Eh," she hedged. "I don't need to tell you how tetchy providence can get. Even with loaded dice you have to roll."

"I take it this a visit in your official capacity, then," he said.

"Surprised, are we?" she grinned, revealing slightly crooked teeth.

"It was my theory that you could only work through Named," Amadeus said. "I find it rather horrifying that you are evidently not so restricted."

While the dark-haired man currently believed himself to be without power – and would comport himself as such – it remained only a theory. There were likely no greater expert on namelore alive than the Wandering Bard, insofar as she was that, and so her confirmation or denial would hold some weight. No overmuch, of course, as she was still a hostile entity. But it would be a useful entry to this running mental tally.

"Still fishing, huh?" Marguerite smiled. "That's not Name so much as it is nature, I think. Needing a plan, always a plan, even if you're screaming inside."

"You praise me overmuch," Amadeus said. "You have, after all, defeated –"

"Warlock's dead," the Wandering Bard said.

He paused. She might be lying. To hurt him, to cloud his... Amadeus breathed in, breathed out. It was set aside.

"Blew up a fleet going out, but that's more than a fair trade," Marguerite said. "Empire's a real mess at the moment, since he vaporized the better part of Thalassina with his last hurrah. Your little friend up high's going spare trying to keep it all together."

"Yet you are here," Amadeus said. "And not there, stoking the fires."

"Catherine got herself killed again," the Bard casually said. "And let me tell you, now *that* was a show. You don't often see that calibre of foolishness slugging it out no holds barred."

His fingers tightened. Breathe in, breathe out. Control. The moment he lost control, the creature would make use of him for whatever purpose she needed. It might be time to consider smashing his head into the ground until he fell unconscious.

"It's fascinating, watching you take that paternal feeling by the throat and just..." Marguerite snapped her fingers, "There goes the neck. Back into the box it goes."

The taunts were immaterial. Useful information could still be had. Amadeus put a tremor to his voice.

"She wouldn't die that easily," he said, making himself look away.

"Glancing away is the part Malicia taught you, isn't it?" the Bard mused. "She's *good*. Must have guessed the eyes would give up the game, it's always the hardest part to master."

The frightful depths of that thing's perception were not to be underestimated, he mentally conceded. She was, after all, entirely right. Cold green eyes flicked back to study her face.

"You're headed for Salia, in case you were wondering," Marguerite said. "They're keeping you in the countryside because Hasenbach knows they have you. She sent half a hundred companies out with orders to take you into custody."

"Did she now?" Amadeus said.

"Second order is to cut off your head the moment they have you," the Bard continued amusedly. "She's not best pleased you're not already decorating a pike. Tariq's going to get an earful."

He'd known there was a reason he liked the woman. She had a good head on her shoulders, to wish the opposite of him.

"I am to be paraded before the crowds, then," he said.

"Nah, they'll get a hero under illusion for that," Marguerite said. "Saint's gonna cut out your soul and have it bound to something, she insisted. They want bait, not to risk a rescue."

Implying that, to the best of the Pilgrim's knowledge, there were still villains in the East he could be considered bait for. He could not know whether or not Eudokia was still with the legions. If she'd judged it feasible he could be reacquired she would have left without a second thought, but in the absence of that Scribe would remain with Grem. Assassin was still in Ashur, presumably, and impossible to contact. That much had been necessary to ensure

the Augur could not interfere. That left Catherine – allegedly dead, though that was admittedly not always enough to stop her – and perhaps Masego. *Unless what the Bard has told me is false*, he thought. *Or what she has shared is true, and the Pilgrim does not know it.*

Too many unknowns for a solid strategic assessment, and no real way to acquire the information he needed through reliable sources. If he had the means, if he could lead a message, *if*. What a bastard word to be curtailed by. Pushing aside the frustration, Amadeus forced himself to consider the conversation through broader perspective. It should not be taking place at all, he thought. He held no Name, commanded no armies and if she had spoken true the Calamities had largely ended as threat. Neither Eudokia nor Assassin could be counted on for independent action, and held highly limited direct martial value besides. His sole remaining worth was as a hostage, and that was not the Wandering Bard's game.

Why, then, was she here?

"There's one part of you that I actually like, did you know?" Marguerite said. "It's also what I hate the most, but it does tend to be that way with villains."

"I make a very good lentil soup," Amadeus suggested.

Behind the pithy words he observed her carefully. Now they entered the field of revelations, the most dangerous part of this dangerous conversation.

"You don't digest defeat," the Bard said. "It doesn't fill your belly, weigh you down. You dissect it, read the entrails like an augury, and then ask yourself – if I could do it again, how would I do it *better*?"

He watched her in silence.

"Even now," she murmured, "behind the eyes there's a few cogs turning. What can I do? How should I do it? And they'll only stop when you die."

"Which," Amadeus said, "looks to be rather soon."

"Nah," the Wandering Bard. "You don't get to be a rallying cry. See, you paid your dues."

His eyes narrowed.

"You're no favourite son, it's true," she mused. "You never played the game the way you're meant to. But you did kill the opposition and tip the scales. They wouldn't cut you loose after that, it's now how they do things."

"I am," Amadeus said, "no longer the Black Knight."

"You don't fit that groove anymore," Marguerite said. "Powerless you ain't, *Maddie*. You know what you are, deep down, you just think it's beneath you."

His fingers tightened under the knuckles were white.

"Claimant," the Wandering Bard said. "You can have your second shot at it, you're owed that. But if you really want it?"

She drank deep, then wiped her mouth.

"Well, there's always a price isn't there?" she shrugged. "So tell me, Amadeus of the Green Stretch..."

She smiled, crooked and wide under moonlight.

"What do you think is right?" she asked.

She leaned forward.

"How far are you willing to go, to see it done?"

He closed his eyes. She was gone a moment later when he opened them, without so much as a whisper. He was silent and still, for a very long time.

*Mistake*, he thought.

---

*fbt*

idk wtf is going on in the chapter, tbh, but i'm sooooo happy for more time with black. I luuuuv him. Still reminds me of a fantasy world version of Avon more than a little, and that's a a good (to me, at least!) thing. Some interesting speculation above in the comments. Waiting anxiously to see where it goes...

*Troy Hunter*

Oh god, I'm not going to have a Practical Guide to Evil over winter break. Kill me now.

*Andrew Mitchell*

Don't worry Troy. There's well over 200 chapters are ready for you to re-read. I'm currently in Book 2, just before (first) Liesse.



## [Adrian\\_V](#)

Man i saw the clock and thought "new chapter of the guide!!"  
until reality came crashing down on me T.T

Erraticerrata have you thought of adding another extra section for trivia and world information, i mean things about the setting that would be good to know but are hard to put in the story like wich heroes/named (i case 1 or 2 weren't strictly heroes) founded the dominion (where Pilgrim comes from) and what are they characteristics for example (of the names) or backgorund tales like how the Thief of Stars got her name.

*Isi Arnott-Campbell*

This is such a good story.

*Just This Guy, Y'know*

I missed it- when did Warlock go boom?

*RanVor*

Interlude: Inheritance.

## [M0och](#)

. A killer who had taken lives, but never at his own behest. Behind him, looking through a coin, something unfathomable loomed. The Seraphim, Anaxares thought. The Choir of Judgement. The angels who had judged and slain people of the League.

The Hierarch smiled.

For that, they would be judged in turn.

Probs one of the best lines I have ever read. It sent shivers down my spine...

*SMHF*

The feeling when u bring up The Guide's page before remembering it's on a break... T\_T

*Owyn Beleforte*

Strange devils riding to slaughter in the night, an endless horde of orcs and heretics that at(missing an e here) the corpses of the fallen

## [crysjal](#)

I've figured out the mistake. The Bard clearly thinks that Amadeus's claim is for Dread Emperor, and pretty much stated it when she says that he had the chance before and didn't take it.

What if she's wrong about that.

[Liliet](#)

Well, I definitely think that's not what he's going to do 😊

the question is, is Amadeus really confident enough of his read on Bard to assume that's a mistake she made?

[Mental Mouse](#)

He's certainly confident enough. Whether he's *right* is another question entirely. 😊

[Liliet](#)

We don't know that he's confident in that. We don't know who the word "mistake" was actually referring to, which is my point 😊

*letouriste*

a war on angel for judgment and a mistake shrouded in mystery.  
way to finish a book!:) )

that last sentence got me all confused but i trust black to manage whatever the shit that was. i stand by my old theories until proven otherwise

[dgj212](#)

N0000000. I just caught up to the story. I literally started two or three weeks ago.

Anywho I like this story as a whole, Catherine is funny, sad to hear about ratface, I am genuinely curious why people are not using Wax Tablets, and I wonder if Catherine will be a chaos knight or some how trap an angel and a devil and create a new choir, one with intention of breaking the deadlock. Being the one that breaks the tie. Neither good nor evil.

*warriormonk19*

I agree that this is an unpleasant development in the storyline for the readers who believe that Cat should have acquired more power by defeating Sve Noc and devouring Night. The vast majority of web fiction deals with 'power fantasies', so it's unsurprising that some of the readers who have grown used to the very specific plot developments are unhappy with this one. Including myself. Furthermore, while I understand moral story erratic is going for with this theme, I do not think it practical.

I'm not an official student of history or even politics, but having a 'bigger stick' mostly ensures your victory, regardless of the 'stories' that may be told about you. Russia invaded Ukraine irregardless of whatever the rest of the world said, for example. Either way, this was Cat's bet to make, that Sve Noc would resurrect her, but I can't help but wonder whether things would have been different if Cat had fully exploited Winter's powers right from the get go. You don't see stories like the one Cat is trying to tell or build in the real world often, and I think for a good reason. Because it doesn't work most of the time. Sometimes more power IS the answer.

Regardless, this isn't the point I wanted to make with this comment. The story will go where it goes, and I'm just here for the ride. The point that I DID want to make was that I doubt that Cat will be able to just wave away opinions or orders from Sve Noc. Sve Noc is now a Goddess(?), one that has combed through the entirety of Cat's soul and granted it life again. She literally owns Cat's life, and that's even without the implications of Cat being a freaking priestess beholden to her. Cat's essentially an apostle, and I have a hard time believing that she's going to have independence from Sve Noc now.

Either way, good luck with the final book captain erratic, I'll be here for the ride.

### *Terion*

I think the reason Cat gave away her power was that she realised that no matter how big her stick was, she was a tool of Below. Hence she decided on a move aimed to outplay them, in a way that minimised the danger to herself.

Don't forget that she has traded a risky personal power that she could not hold on to anyway at that point. For a strategic solution that might actually solve the problem she had before she became embroiled in Drow business.

On another note. The opening quote seems to be missing a word: none are beyond salvation, not even the likes of. Seems to be missing "us"

### *Nathan Fish*

The power of Winter was slowly turning Cat into a Fae. She was learning slower, becoming more tied to stories. If she had leaned into it from the beginning, she would have been powerful, but she might have crossed the point of no return before realizing what was happening.

### [Hydrargentium](#)

I can't take warriormonk19's response seriously, even though I would have otherwise, had he not used the word, "irregardless".



Hg

*warriormonk19*

Damn you got me. Regardless, my points are valid!! (At least, they're my opinions lol)

[clintcleez](#)

I'd have to agree, didn't like the direction cats story took

*Komplode*

Well looks like it's time to re read pgte again

*Scurra*

When's the next chapter btw?

[Barthumphries](#)

I don't know.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

January 14 2019. ee takes a deserved month long break at the end of each book.

*tbarim*

I'm pretty sure the claim Amadeus still has is on the name White Knight.

1. As the Squire, he would have had a claim on both Black and White, (Bard specifically refers to a remaining claim here).

2. Given his goal of proving that Evil can win, and his personality, I could easily see him thinking becoming the White Knight as beneath him.

3. Given how important repeating patterns are in this world, Catherine following in her "father's" footsteps as potential heroes that chose evil instead would be likely.

4. Amadeus's origin story. Farmboy meets a pretty girl in town who then gets kidnapped by a Villain in a Tower. How could he not have a claim on a heroic name?

*Scurra*

except for the part where there is already a white knight and Amadeus is pure evil I doubt he would get a heroic name. His entire personality works against it and he'd probably rather die

### [Barthumphries](#)

It would be just like Amadeus to do what ... whatever name she's going by now just did – pull a heel-face turn. Imagine Amadeus wandering out into the square, Pilgrim and Saint stare at him aghast, and he informs them that he was released by the Wandering Bard as the radiant light of the heavens shines down, anointing him as the Gray Paladin as he summons his Celestial Steed.

If Catherine was an Evil hero for Good reasons why can't he be a Good hero for Evil reasons?

And then as the watching populace and royalty cheer at their new Savior in the fight against the Dead King, et al, he turns so that only Pilgrim and Saint can see him and winks.

### [Miles](#)

Good reasons implies she was an evil hero in service to Good. It just contradicts itself. Her good reasons were not Good, just good.

### *Maginot's Wall*

Has anyone noticed that the Wandering Bard has taken a sort of sinister turn? Acting, with clenched teeth, for the Gods Below in resetting Amadeus's name and releasing him, or in giving the Sisters of Night what they wanted so long ago. Even the two elves she chased off seemed fearful. Maybe she is as much a mortal with apotheosis as the Dead King? Certainly the Dead King's name for her, Intercessor, seems more accurate than to call her a heroine...

### *Maginot's Wall*

And I'm atwitter about the unrealized Goblin rebellion which assassinated Juniper's mum.

### *TheCount*

it could have been Milica as well, but we will know it from an interlude most likely.

### *TheCount*

Malicia\* , i have no idea how i did that....

### [Mental Mouse](#)

The Wandering Bard has always been sinister once you see past the mask. I don't think she's specifically in service to Good, but to both sets of gods. Essentially, she is in service to Story – over the course of the story, she mostly opposes the villains because their leading lights (notably Amadeus and Cat) have been trying quite hard to break free of the stories, and neither side wants that. But now she sees a chance to drag Amadeus back onto the figurative Wheel....

*Aston Whiteman*

Looking forward to the new Book.

Been a while but your votes remain high.

[Adrian V](#)

Soon this horrible time without the guide to guide us will end!! (don't lynch me for the bad pun, i couldn't resist!!)

*Aston Whiteman*

Pun?

*Aston Whiteman*

Reading another web serial makes me understand why EE takes a month away from writing.

It's really needed.

And now for Priestess Cat.

*Aeon*

The way the Wandering Bard mentioned that Amadeus thought the role he had claim to was beneath him made me think that she's nudging him to become Chancellor. The way he sees everything as gears and control would fit.

*papermaster*

Rereading, and it dawned on me only now that Wandering Bard is echoing Black's own words to Catherine when they first met, all the way in Chapter 1. What a set-up. Amazing writing, EE.

---

"Do you know what separates people who have a Role from people who don't, Catherine?" Black asked.

I shook my head.

"Will," he said. "The belief, deep down, that they know what is right and that they'll see it done."

My throat caught. Was he implying what I thought he was?

"So tell me, Catherine Foundling," he murmured, his voice smooth as velvet. "What do you think is right?"

He spun the knife so that the handle faced me, the touch of his fingertips deft and light.

"How far are you willing to go, to see it done?"

I could feel the eyes of the two gagged guards on me, but I ignored them.

---

"Claimant," the Wandering Bard said. "You can have your second shot at it, you're owed that. But if you really want it?"

She drank deep, then wiped her mouth.

"Well, there's always a price isn't there?" she shrugged. "So tell me, Amadeus of the Green Stretch..."

She smiled, crooked and wide under moonlight.

"What do you think is right?" she asked.

She leaned forward.

"How far are you willing to go, to see it done?"

He closed his eyes.

*nasiba*

*\*sigh\**

Ok, I've loved this series and recommended it to several people but seven hells I'm glad book 4 is over. It's been a drag, with Cat's constant moral crisis, whining, moping. And the Drow arc was just tedious and way, way too long. It's the first time I've actually skimmed chapters. I knew Cat was going to lose Winter somehow, it was obviously taking a toll on her, robbing her of her humanity and making her increasingly OP. I was longing for the good old Cat from the first books. I did want her "human" again but not without power. So she had better have plenty after this because philosophy aside, nothing in the story would have happened had she not been a Named and there is no way to sell a believable fight if she doesn't have power to use against her foes, which are the worst yet. She's not sending the Dead King back home with prayers and speeches.

That said, thank god Black is still alive. And to those who have said he could wind up on the side of "good" somehow, it was stated plainly by the Bard that he was released because he had met his "debt" to Below, although they had expected more from

him, but he wasn't free of them because "that's not how they roll". If he takes another Name, he has no choice but to be Evil. I think the "mistake" she made might be that she confirmed to him that she can only meddle with Named or Claimants to a Name and therefore he may refuse it altogether so she can't influence him. Who knows. Love Black, more Black, Black all the time. I can see why he was almost the protagonist of the books, he's such a great character.

[clintcleez](#)

I agree with pretty much everything you said, especially about how boring the last book was and how cat kept flipping back between moral delima outta no where and the fact that she lost a lot of advantages

*Zopilote 506*

MAH BOI ANAXARES IS FINALLY HERE

*BargleNawdleZouss*

I'm re-reading this for like the third time. Do we have any idea who the other two heroes are accompanying the Grey Pilgrim, Saint of Swords, and the Rogue Sorceror in this band of five?

Just curious.

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